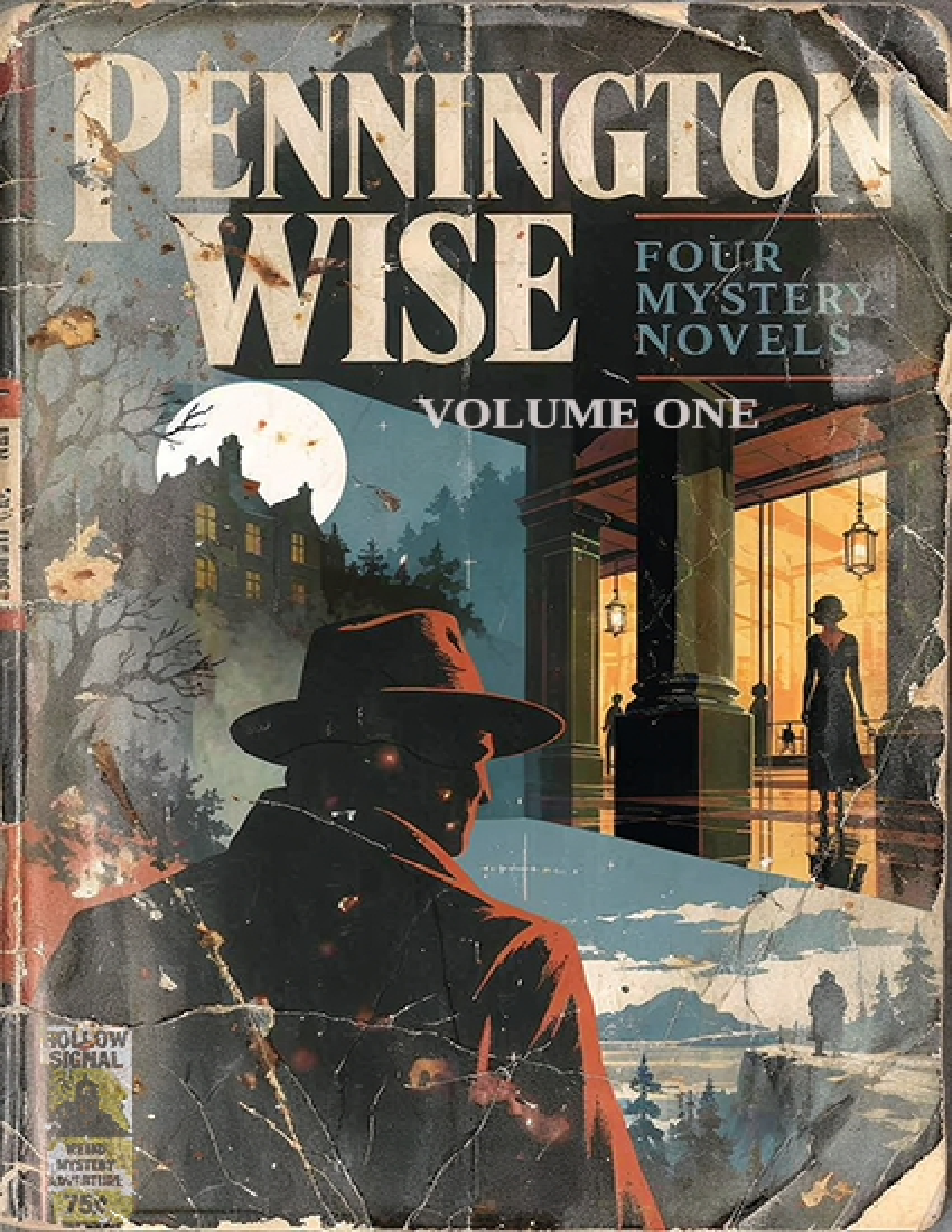
PENNINGTON WISE

FOUR MYSTERY NOVELS

VOLUME ONE



Pennington Wise: Four Mystery Novels

Carolyn Wells

Contents

1. The Room With The Tassels
    1. CHAPTER I Wanted: A Haunted House
    2. CHAPTER II The Old Montgomery Place
    3. CHAPTER III Black Aspens
    4. CHAPTER IV The Story of the House
    5. CHAPTER V Eve's Experience
    6. CHAPTER VI At Four o'Clock
    7. CHAPTER VII The Mystery
    8. CHAPTER VIII By What Means
    9. CHAPTER IX Conflicting Theories
    10. CHAPTER X Was It Supernatural?
    11. CHAPTER XI The Heir Speaks Out
    12. CHAPTER XII The Professor's Experience
    13. CHAPTER XIII Pennington Wise
    14. CHAPTER XIV Zizi
    15. CHAPTER XV Tracy's Story
    16. CHAPTER XVI What Happened to Zizi
    17. CHAPTER XVII Stebbins Owns Up
    18. CHAPTER XVIII Another Confession

2. The Man Who Fell Through The Earth

1. CHAPTER I Moving Shadow-Shapes
2. CHAPTER II Jenny's Version
3. CHAPTER III The Elevator
4. CHAPTER IV The Black Squall
5. CHAPTER V Olive Raynor
6. CHAPTER VI Clews
7. CHAPTER VII Hudson's Errand
8. CHAPTER VIII The Man Who Fell Through the Earth
9. CHAPTER IX The Man in Boston
10. CHAPTER X Penny Wise and Zizi
11. CHAPTER XI Case Rivers
12. CHAPTER XII The Link
13. CHAPTER XIII Olive's Adventure
14. CHAPTER XIV Where is Manning?
15. CHAPTER XV Wise's Pipe Dream
16. CHAPTER XVI The Snowflake
17. CHAPTER XVII Zizi's Hunch
18. CHAPTER XVIII Clear as Crystal

3. In The Onyx Lobby
    1. CHAPTER I Such a Feud!
    2. CHAPTER II A Tricky Game
    3. CHAPTER III The Scrawled Message
    4. CHAPTER IV The Busy Police
    5. CHAPTER V Who Were the Women?

6. CHAPTER VI The Little Dinner
7. CHAPTER VII Enlightening Interviews
8. CHAPTER VIII Julie Baxter
9. CHAPTER IX The Library Set
10. CHAPTER X Seek the Women
11. CHAPTER XI The Old Feud
12. CHAPTER XII One Woman and Another
13. CHAPTER XIII Motives
14. CHAPTER XIV Penny Wise
15. CHAPTER XV And Zizi
16. CHAPTER XVI Testimony
17. CHAPTER XVII A Woman Scorned
18. CHAPTER XVIII Fitted to a T

4. The Come Back
    1. CHAPTER I The Prophecy
    2. CHAPTER II The Labrador Wild
    3. CHAPTER III The Snowstorm
    4. CHAPTER IV The Prophecy Recalled
    5. CHAPTER V Madame Parlato
    6. CHAPTER VI Strange Revelations
    7. CHAPTER VII The Tobacco Pouch
    8. CHAPTER VIII Blair Knows
    9. CHAPTER IX Investigation
    10. CHAPTER X Evidence

11. CHAPTER XI Carlotta and the Board
12. CHAPTER XII Wise and Zizi
13. CHAPTER XIII "Labrador Luck"
14. CHAPTER XIV A Prophecy Fulfilled
15. CHAPTER XV An Interview
16. CHAPTER XVI Zizi's Opportunity
17. CHAPTER XVII The Heart Helper
18. CHAPTER XVIII The Confession

The Room With The Tassels

Carolyn Wells · First published 1918

CHAPTER I
Wanted: A Haunted House

"BUT I *know* it's so,—for Mrs. Fairbanks saw it herself,—and heard it, too!"

The air of finality in the gaze levelled at Braye defied contradiction, so he merely smiled at the girl who was doing the talking. But, talking or silent, Eve Carnforth was well worth smiling at. Her red hair was of that thin, silky, flat-lying sort, that spells temper, but looks lovely, and her white, delicate skin, —perhaps the least bit hand-painted,—showed temperament while her eyes, of the colour called beryl,—whatever that is,—showed all sorts of things.

Then from her canna-hued lips fell more wisdom. "And Professor Hardwick believes it, too, and he's—"

"A college professor," broke in Landon, "don't try to gild *his* refinement! But really, Eve, you mustn't believe in spooks,—it isn't done—"

"Oh, but it is! You've no idea how many people,—scientific and talented people,—are leaning toward spiritualism just now. Why, Sir Oliver Lodge says that after the war great and powerful assistance will be given by spirit helpers in matters of reconstruction and great problems of science."

Milly Landon's laugh rang out, and she politely clapped a little, fat hand over her mouth to stifle it.

Milly Landon was an inveterate giggler, but don't let that prejudice you against her. She was the nicest, dearest dumpling of a little woman who ever giggled her way through life. And as hostess on this present Sunday afternoon occasion, she sat, one foot tucked under her, on the davenport in her long, narrow parlour, on one of New York's East Seventieth streets.

It was a parlour like thousands of others in the city, and the quartette of people talking there were much like the people talking in those other parlours, that Sunday afternoon. Their only superiority lay in the fact that they constitute part of the personnel of this absorbing tale, and the other people do not.

Milly and her very satisfactory husband, Wynne Landon, were affably entertaining Rudolph Braye and the herein-before described Eve Carnforth, two pleasing callers, and the talk had turned on psychological matters and then, by inevitable stages, to the supernatural and spiritualism.

"It is all coming in again," Eve declared, earnestly. "You know it was taken very seriously about thirty or forty years ago, and then because of fake mediums and fraudulent séances, it fell into disrepute. But now, it's being taken up in earnest, and I, for one, am terribly interested."

"But it's so old-fashioned, Eve," and Milly looked at her guest in disdain.

"It's gammon and spinach, that's what it is," declared Landon, "very rubbishy gammon and a poor quality of spinach!"

"Queen Victoria didn't think so," Eve informed them. "She may have been old-fashioned, but she believed thoroughly in the

spiritual reappearance of her friends who died, and especially took comfort in the communion and visitation of her dead husband."

"It's this way, I think," offered Braye; "it seems to me it's like that old 'Lady or the Tiger' story, you believe or not, according to your character or disposition. You know, it depended on your own nature, whether you think the Lady came out of the door, or the Tiger. And so with spooks, if you want to believe in them, you do."

"Don't say spooks, please," begged Eve; "say phantasms, or even ghosts."

"Is that the usage in the best mediumistic circles?" and Braye smiled. "Well, I think I could more easily believe in a spook than a phantasm. The latter sounds so unreal, but a good honest Injun spook seems sort of plausible."

"They're all unreal," began Landon, but Eve interrupted. "They're not unreal, Wynne; they're immaterial, of course, but that isn't being unreal. You have a real soul, haven't you, although it is immaterial? and I suppose you don't call your mind material, even if your brain is."

"Now you're quibbling, Eve," and Landon grew a bit more serious. "When I say unreal, I mean imperceptible to the senses. I hold that a departed spirit cannot return to earth and be seen, heard, or felt by mortal human beings. All the stories of such things to the contrary notwithstanding. If you or any one else has power to show me a visible spook,—I beg pardon, phantasm,—I'll be glad to see it, but I'm from Missouri. I

wouldn't be a bit afraid of it, but I'd have to be jolly well convinced of its integrity. No faked-up spectres would go down with me!"

"But how can you know?" asked Milly. "I'd be scared to death of one, I'm sure, but if Wynne wants to see one, I do. Let's all go to a séance, or whatever they call the things. Shall we?"

"No, indeed!" cried Eve. "Professional séances are always fakes. And I don't aspire to *see* one. If we could get some messages from the beyond, that would satisfy me."

"Get messages how?" asked Braye.

"Oh, by a Ouija board, or some such way."

"Ouija!" derided Landon; "that's the biggest fraud of all!"

"Only in the hands of frauds. If we tried it here by ourselves and if we all trusted each other not to stoop to deception of any sort that would be a fair test."

"I'd like that," and Milly giggled in pleased anticipation. "That wouldn't frighten me, and I'd promise to play fair."

"There'd be no reason for not playing fair," said Eve, seriously. "We're not a pack of silly children who want to trick one another. If we could get together some evening and have an earnest, serious test, I'd agree. But not if there's to be the least suspicion of anybody trying trickery."

At this point two more callers arrived, and Milly jumped up to greet them.

"Mr. Bruce!" she exclaimed, "how nice to see you! And Vernie, —my goodness, how you've grown!"

"Indeed, yes," and Vernie Reid, a most lively and energetic sub-deb of sixteen, darted from one to another, greeting all with interest.

"Hello, Cousin Rudolph, what are *you* doing here? Mooning after Miss Carnforth, I s'pose. Dear Mrs. Landon, let me sit here by you. I want to show you my graduating gifts."

"Oh, yes, you've just had commencement, haven't you?"

"Yes, and Uncle Gifford gave me this heavenly wrist-watch, and my respected Cousin Rudolph, over there, sent me this pendant. Isn't it stunning? Oh, I had beautiful presents. I'd like to graduate every year!"

"Aren't you going to school any more at all?"

"Dunno yet. Uncle Gifford says I am, I say I'm not. It remains to be seen. Though I don't mind confiding to you that I usually get my own way. And, too, out in Chicago, you know, we're not such terrible highbrows. Something tells me my schooldays are over. I think Uncle Gif needs the pleasure of my society at home. And, too, I want to get acquainted with Cousin Rudolph. Until this week I haven't seen him for years."

"He isn't your cousin, Vernie."

"Same as. He's a son of Uncle Gif's half-brother, and I'm a daughter of Uncle's own sister, so it sort of evens up. Anyway, I like Cousin Rudolph, because he's such a good-looking young man, and he's promised to take me round New York some. That's why I'm so jealous of Miss Carnforth or any other girl."

Vernie was so pretty that her chatter amused the whole crowd. She was brown-haired and brown-eyed, and somewhat of a

browned complexion, by reason of much tennis and outdoor life at the school from which she had just been graduated. And after a summer spent among the Eastern resorts, she and her Uncle were to return to their Chicago home, where they had lived all of Vernie's orphaned life. Gifford Bruce idolized the girl and though often short and crabbed in his manner to others, he was never cross or stern to his dead sister's child.

"What were you talking about when we came in?" Vernie asked, smiling at Milly. "You were all so in earnest, it must have been something important."

"Of ghosts," answered Braye, looking at the pretty child. "Do you enjoy them?"

"Oh, don't I!" cried Vernie. "Why, at school we just ate 'em up! Table tippings and all such things, as soon as lights were out!"

"We don't mean that sort," said Eve. "We were talking seriously."

"Count me out, then," laughed Vernie. "Our ghosts weren't a bit real. I did most of 'em myself, jogging the table, when the others didn't know it!"

Eve's scarlet lips came together in a narrow line, but the others laughed at Vernie as she babbled on.

"Yes, and we tried the Ouija board. I can make it say anything I want to."

"Good for you, Kiddie," cried Braye, "I believe I like your notion of these things better than the ideas of the psychologists. It sounds a lot more fun!"

"And comes nearer the truth," declared Mr. Bruce. "I've looked up these matters and I've read all the best and most authoritative books on the subjects. There are many writers more diffuse and circumstantial, but Andrew Lang sums up the whole situation in his able way. He says there are no ghosts, but there are hallucinations. And that explains all."

"It doesn't to me," and Eve's beryl eyes took on a mystic, faraway look. "I, too, have read a lot of books—"

"Scientific or psychic?" interrupted Mr. Bruce, acidly.

"Psychical and Theosophic—"

"Rubbish! The Theosophic bunch have been in the discard for years."

"That's what I say," put in Milly, "the whole business is old-fashioned."

"It isn't a question of fashion," and Gifford Bruce spoke assuredly; "the subject is one that recurs in waves, as many such things do. Why, there have been ghosts and haunted houses in people's imagination ever since there has been man and a house for him to live in. Some are spoken of in the Bible, the primitive Australians had legions of ghosts, the awful Dyaks record them, and there is scarce a castle or palace of the middle ages that hasn't its Woman in White, or a Little Gray Lady or the Man in Black. And in an old Egyptian papyrus, there's an account of a defunct lady who insisted on haunting her husband to his great distaste."

"My goodness, Uncle Gif, you do know a lot about it!" and Vernie went over and sat on the arm of his chair. "Tell us more.

I like this sort of ghost stories better than the fool stunts we did at school."

"I'm not telling ghost stories, child, I'm only declaring that ghost stories are merely *stories*, and in no case a true relation of happenings. Lang investigated thousands of cases, and in ten out of every eleven, he states, fraud was proved."

"Quite so," said Eve, "and it is that eleventh case that interests the real thinker, the true inquirer."

"But the eleventh case was simply not proven, it never has been shown that it was really a ghostly visitation."

"But they do say, Uncle Gifford," observed Braye, "that the very fact of the frauds being perpetrated proves that there was something to imitate. If no spirit had ever returned to earth and made itself manifest, no one would have thought of pretending that one did."

"Nonsense and super-nonsense! Why, Rudolph, perpetual motion is not a real thing, but how many times has it been pretended! You don't remember the Keeley Motor, but that deceived thousands into believing that perpetual motion was at last discovered, but it wasn't; and that fraud doesn't prove that perpetual motion, without adequate cause, exists."

"Here comes Professor Hardwick," exclaimed Milly, "splendid to have him come just now! Sit down, Professor, and get right into the game. You know all these people, except this angel child, Miss Vernie Reid."

"I am an angel," declared Vernie, "but I'm no child! I've just graduated with honours and diplomas and lots of presents.

Now, I'm out in the great world, and glory, but I love it! But don't mind me, Professor, go right on and tell us all you know about ghosts and ghostesses."

"Bless my soul! I don't know anything about them."

"Well, do you believe in ghosts?"

"What do you mean by ghosts? How do you define a ghost?"

"Ah, there's the rub," said Landon. "These people are all talking at cross purposes. Mr. Bruce means a scarecrow phantom rigged up in sheets, Miss Carnforth means a supernatural being of some sort, but I take a ghost, in the proper sense, to mean the visible soul of some one who has died."

"What do you mean by visible soul? Disembodied?"

"No," considered Landon, "I suppose I mean clothed in a body, —that is an apparent body."

"And raiment?" asked the old Professor.

"Yes, certainly. I never heard of a nude spook!"

"Then your visible soul is concealed by a body of flesh, and clothes, of fabric, or, at least, apparently so. The soul, I take it, would show but low visibility."

"Good, Hardwick!" cried Mr. Bruce. "Give them a jolt, they need it,—talking such rubbish!"

"Rubbish, Bruce? What do you mean by rubbish?"

"Why, all this ghost gabble—"

"How do you know it's rubbish? Have you personally disproved it? Do you mean intentional rubbish? Are they talking deceptively, or are they themselves deceived?"

"By the Lord Harry, Hardwick, I had forgotten you were such a stickler for words! I must choose my diction carefully. Do you, then, believe that so-called supernatural appearances are caused by psychical influences or are hallucinations of the senses? There, I think I've put it clearly."

"Fairly so. But I can't answer clearly. I never express an opinion on a grave question—"

Milly's hand flew up to her mouth to repress an involuntary giggle. "A *grave* question!" she exploded. "It surely is."

The Professor looked at her thoughtfully. "It is," he went on, "and it is no laughing matter. As I was saying, I never state an opinion without being sure of my facts. Now, I've had no experience, personally, with supernatural matters, and so am unfit to discuss them. But, I admit I should be very glad to have some such experience. Yes, I certainly should."

"Really," and Eve Carnforth looked interested. "I can arrange it for you, Professor Hardwick."

"No, no, my dear lady, I do not mean that I want to go to a séance, where the so-called medium throws flowers and things out of a cabinet, or toots trumpets and bangs cymbals! No, thank you, I've seen such often."

"What would you choose as an experience?" asked Landon.

"I'd like to go to a house that is reputed haunted, and in circumstances that preclude all possibility of fraud, see the haunting spirits or hear them, for myself."

"Me, too!" cried Vernie. "Oh, I do think that would be the rippingest fun! If you ever do it, Professor, mayn't I go with

you?"

"I'll go along," said Eve. "Wouldn't that be a splendid proof! To have such a scientific and open-minded man as the Professor, and a few others who are in earnest and anxious to learn. You couldn't go, Mr. Bruce. You are too sceptical."

"I'm just the one you need," he laughed. "A balance wheel to keep you enthusiasts straight. But haunted houses are not to be found on every bush in America. If we were in England now,—or Scotland."

"They do have some over here," Landon asserted. "I read of one recently, and I've heard of others."

"Let's find one," suggested Eve, "and spend our summer vacation in it! Wouldn't that be a lark?"

"Oh, do!" exclaimed Vernie. "I'd just love it! May I go, Uncle Gifford? Oh, please let me."

"Only if I go myself, child. The spooks,—I beg their pardon, phantasms, might carry you off. I'll have to go along to rescue you."

"Phantasms don't carry people off," said Eve, contemptuously. "And though I'd like to consider this plan, I'd only do so, if we were all in earnest as investigators, whatever our opinions may be."

"Come on, let's go," said Landon. "I think it a great little old scheme. Make up a party, you know, but every one who joins must promise to be earnest and honest. Must promise to do nothing to fool or mislead the others, but keep a fair and open mind for any developments. Of course, there won't be any

developments, but we can have a jolly time and we can have wild discussions."

"Wynne would rather have a discussion than eat," said his wife. "I'll go, and I'll be the housekeeper and chaperon of the crowd, if, as Wynne says, there'll be no developments. I'd love the outing, and I think this a splendid party to belong to. And let's take Norma Cameron. She's a sensitive, or whatever you call it, and she'll help you out, Eve."

"Why make the party any larger?" asked Eve, a little petulantly. "The crowd here now seems just right and congenial and all that."

"Why lug in Norma?" said Braye, smiling. "I don't know said Norma, but I agree with Eve that the party here is just sort of complete."

"Yes, I will take Norma. The poor child never gets an outing, and she'd just love this chance."

"You talk as if we were going to a summer resort," said Landon. "In the first place, Milly, I doubt if we can find a properly haunted house in a pleasant locality, that is for rent."

"Of course we can't," declared Mr. Bruce. "The whole scheme is idiotic. But if you can work it out, Landon, I'll go along, and take this little piece of property." He looked smilingly at the eager-eyed Vernie. "She's due for some fun after her school work, and if she likes this stunt, let's try to put it over."

"How would you set out to find a house?" asked Braye.

"Advertise," said Landon, promptly. "I know a firm of real estate agents, that I'll bet could manage it in short order. Say we

try it?"

"I'm going to take Norma," insisted Milly. "Mayn't I, Wynne?"

"Take anything or anybody you wish, my cherished one. But then, oughtn't we to have another man?"

"Yes," said Milly, decidedly. "I hate a bunch of hens, without plenty of menfolks about. Who knows a nice, good-natured, all round adaptable dinner man?"

"I know just the chap," said Braye, "but he's a minister. Or, at least, he used to be. But he's an awfully good fellow, and most agreeable parlour company."

"What's his name?" asked Landon.

"Tracy. I met him first in Chicago, some years ago, and I've always liked him."

"All right, if Milly asks Norma, you ask your friend, but it's a case of first catch your house!"

"It's got to be a nice house, and fairly comfortable," Milly stipulated, "or I won't go."

"It's got to have a well-authenticated ghost, or I won't go," laughed Braye. "I don't believe in the things, but I'd like to have a chance to hear their clanking chains, or whatever they perform on."

"I'll go just for the fun of the thing," said Vernie, "and if we do catch a ghost, so much the better!"

CHAPTER II
The Old Montgomery Place

AT the Fisher and Hibbard Real Estate and Country House Agency, Wynne Landon had a spirited interview with their Mr. Fisher, and finally induced that somewhat unwilling gentleman to advertise for a haunted house.

"It's a purely business matter," Landon argued, "and if you're any sort of a live agency you ought to do your best to get for your clients any such peculiar domiciles as they may desire."

"I understand that," patiently explained Mr. Fisher, "but it's such a crazy thing to do. How would a dignified firm like ours look advertising for a house warranted haunted?"

"Don't use your own firm name, then. Have answers sent to a fictitious address. Oh, you can manage it, Fisher. I don't mean you can surely get one, but you can manage to try. And if the house is pleasant and attractive, it doesn't matter, between you and me, if there isn't any ghost, after all. But I want a *bona fide* story. I mean, I don't want a house that the owner pretends is haunted, just so he can rent it. It must be a well-known legend or ghost story connected with the place."

"There are plenty of such," and Fisher laughed. "I've struck them occasionally, and because of that well-authenticated story, known to all the neighbours, I couldn't rent them. To have one asked for is a new experience here."

"Well, I've told you the whole state of the case. You see why we want it, and though the ghost part is the primary factor with some of us, my wife and I care more about a pleasant setting for a month's house party."

Landon's personality went far toward gaining his end, and Mr. Fisher promised to do what he could. As a lawyer of fine standing, and a man of ample means, Wynne Landon was a desirable man to please, and the order was taken.

And when, a few weeks later, word came that a possible opportunity had offered, Landon telephoned for Braye to go with him, and they went to investigate it at once.

"It's this way," said Mr. Fisher to the listening men. "There's a big house up in Vermont,—in the Green Mountain region, not so very far from Manchester. But it's a lonely locality, quite high up, and near a lake."

"Sounds fine so far," commented Landon; "go on."

"A man named Stebbins is the owner. I haven't seen him, but here's his letter. Read it, you'll get the idea better than I can tell you." So they read:

"Fisher and Hibbard:

"Dear sirs:

"I've got a house, and it sure is haunted. It's up here in the mountains, and it's a good house, and a big one, but in some disrepair. Leastways, things is old-fashioned, and not, as you may say, up to date. But nothing ornery. All high-toned and proper, only old and somewhat wore out. It's the old

Montgomery mansion, built along about 1700 and something. But it's been added to since, and it's a sort of mixed up architecture. About forty rooms into it, I should judge, though I ain't never counted them. And most of them haunted. But they ain't no use going into particulars unless somebody really wants to rent it. I've tried nineteen years, and nobody'll take it, cause it's so lonesome like. It's called Black Aspens, mostly I guess, cause the thick groves of aspen trees all around look black at night, and Lord knows it's a fit place for ghosts. Anyway it's haunted and I can swear to that. But the story of the haunt I won't set down until I hear from you again. But you can take my affydavy it's a real haunt and there's a real reason for it.

"Yours truly,

"Elijah Stebbins."

"Sounds good to me; what do you think, Rudolph?" said Landon.

"All right, if it's genuine. Some of us ought to go up there and size it up before the whole crowd goes. Think so?"

"Yes, unless we can get a photograph, or some sort of a plan of the place. And, you know, Braye, I don't care such a lot about a ghost, if we can get a good intelligent crowd of people together. That's the only sort of vacation I care for. I wouldn't give a picayune for a month in a big summer hotel, or a little summer boarding-house, where you may meet good talkers and you may not. But with Eve Carnforth and Norma Cameron and the Professor and, pardon the bouquet, you, I foresee some good

old chin-chins. And, add to this, picturesque, even wild mountain scenery, I somehow think we're in for a good time."

"I agree. Wish Uncle Gif and Vernie weren't going, though. He's a dictatorial old chap, though a good sport, and as to Vernie, I don't think it's the right place for a flapper."

"Oh, it won't hurt the kiddie. She's a mighty sensible little piece and she's ready to eat up experiences. She may as well be with her own people."

"That's just it. She's lived nearly all her life alone with Uncle, and he isn't enough people for her. She ought to have a woman to look after her, now she's out of school."

"Well, what's the matter with Milly? For this trip at least. Milly loves the little girl, and will have a good influence over her."

"That's right as rain, but I'm not sure Eve Carnforth is desirable company for Vernie."

"Oh, Eve isn't a bad sort. And with her strict Uncle, and you and Milly and me to look after the child, Eve can't do much to counteract."

"She probably won't do anything. It's all right, Wynne. Now shall we decide to take this Montgomery place?"

"Oh, no, we can't decide positively. I'm pretty sure we shall take it, but I think we ought to call a confab of the whole bunch to discuss it."

Meantime, Eve Carnforth was talking it over with Milly Landon.

"I adore the plan," Eve said, "except your insistence on taking Norma Cameron. I don't like her, Milly, and you know it."

"Now, Eve, cunnin' little cherub child, don't let the greeny-weeny-eyed monster claim you for his own! You know perf'ly well," Milly giggled, "that you don't want Norma along, because you think she will attract Friend Braye."

"Why, Milly Landon! What nonsense! I don't care two cents for Rudolph Braye—"

"Oh, I don't mean romantically, but I do know you want to be top of the psychic heap, up there, and you think little Norma will get ahead of you in phantasmagoria, or whatever you call it."

"No, it isn't that; but Norma does think she knows it all, and she puts on such airs about her clairvoyance, and calls herself a sensitive and all that."

"Well, let her. You can hold your own; and, too, Eve, if we carry out this scheme, I think we ought all to pull together, and help each other. And we can't do that, if there's antagonism or rivalry. Now, can we? And if you're in earnest, as you've always insisted you are, you ought to be glad of any help Norma can give. She feels that way about you. When I asked her to go, she was delighted that you were to be in the party, because, she said, you were so interested and so well up in all these things we're going to discover."

"I suppose I am silly. I may as well confess I'm not sure of Norma. She wouldn't be above pretending she heard or saw things, even if she didn't."

"Fiddlesticks! There won't be any pretending! Or, if there is, it'll be discovered right straight off. Why, Wynne is terribly in

earnest,—about having it all fair and square, I mean,—and so is the Professor, and I'd like to see any one fool Gifford Bruce! And little Vernie is a real wideawake. There won't be anything doing that that child doesn't know, if it's fraud or foolery! Don't you believe it, my dear. Norma Cameron won't pull any wool over anybody's eyes in our party. No, siree!"

The crowd came together that night to discuss the house that had been offered, and to come to a decision.

Norma Cameron was present, and her manner and appearance were so exactly opposite to those of Eve Carnforth, that it was small wonder the girls were not congenial.

Norma was blonde, and had what her friends called a seraphic countenance and her enemies, a doll-face. For Norma had enemies. She was prominent in war relief work and public charities of many kinds, and it is seldom possible for such a one to go through the world entirely peaceably. But all conceded that her doll-face was a very pretty one, and few who criticized it, would not have been glad to wear it.

Her golden hair was softly curly, and her sky blue eyes big and expressive. But her complexion was her greatest beauty; soft as a rose petal, the pink and white were so delicately blended as to make a new observer suspect art's assistance. A second glance, however, removed all such suspicion, for no hare's foot could ever have produced that degree of perfection. Her softly rounded chin, and creamy throat were exquisitely moulded, and her usual expression was gentle and amiable.

But Norma was no namby-pamby character, and her eyes could turn to deep violet, and her pink cheeks flush rosily if she ran up against unjustice or meanness. That was why her career of philanthropy was not always a serene path, for she never hesitated to speak her mind and her mind was of a positive type.

Always outspoken, though, was Norma. No slyness or deceit marked her procedure, never did she say behind any one's back what she would not say to his face.

And this was the principal reason why Norma and Eve could never hit it off. For Eve frequently carried tales, and sometimes denied them later. Milly, however, was friends with both girls, and secretly hoped that if they could all get away together, the two warring natures might react on each other for good. Then, too, both were immensely interested in psychics, and if they were rivals in this field, so much better chance for all concerned, to find out the things they were to look for.

"I think," said Norma, at the confab, "it would be better for two of the crowd, say, Mr. and Mrs. Landon, to go up first and look at the house. It sounds fine, but it may be impossible. So, why get us all up there, only to come home again?"

"I don't think so," said Eve, promptly, while Milly giggled to hear the two begin to disagree at once. "I think it would be a lot more fun for us all to go and see it for the first time together. Then, if it isn't livable, we can all come back, but we shall have had a sort of picnic out of it, at least."

"Yes, I think that, too!" put in Vernie, who was beside herself with joy at the outlook. "Oh, what a gorgeous party it will be! Do we go in the train, or motors or what?"

"Hush, Vernie," said her Uncle, "we haven't decided to go at all, yet. Where is this place, Landon?"

"The post-office is East Dryden. The house is about a mile further up the mountain. I fancy it's a picturesque sort of a place, though with few modern appointments. Fisher got a little more data, somehow, and he says it's a hodge-podge old pile, as to architecture, as it's been rebuilt, or added to several times. But I don't care about all that, I mean, if we don't like the appointments we needn't stay. What I want is the ghost story. Shall we send to Stebbins for that before we take the place, or go on a wild goose chase entirely?"

"Oh, let's start off without knowing anything about it," and old Mr. Bruce's eyes twinkled like a boy's at thought of an escapade.

"Good for you, Uncle!" and Vernie shouted with glee. "I didn't know you were such an old top, did you, Cousin Rudolph?"

"Well, I've known him longer than you have, Flapper, and I'm not so surprised at his wanting a sporting proposition. But, I say, Milly, if we're going to take Tracy, you people ought to see him and give him the once over first. Maybe you won't like him at all."

"Oh, your friends are sure to be our friends, Rudolph," said Landon, "but telephone him to run up here, can't you? It's only fair to let him in on the planning."

Tracy came, and he made good at once. His ministerial air was softened by a charming smile and a certain chivalry of address that pleased the women and satisfied the men.

"What about servants?" he asked, after the main details had been explained to him.

"That's what I'm thinking about," said Milly. "I don't want to take our servants, they'd be scared to death in such a place, and, too, we can't go ghost hunting under Charles' nose! He'd sniff at us!"

"Right you are!" agreed Landon. "Charles is one estimable and valuable butler, but he's no sort to take on the picnic we're out for."

"Don't let's take any servants," suggested Eve, "but get some up there. Natives, you know."

"That would be better," said Mr. Bruce. "Then, they'll be used to the place, and can tell us of the legends and traditions, you see."

"You're poking fun," said Eve, reproachfully, "but it's true, all the same. Do we go in motors?"

"I think so," said Landon. "Two big cars would take us all, and we can leave our luggage to be sent up if we stay."

"Of course we'll stay," asserted Milly. "I love that old house already, and if there's no ghost at all, I'll be just as well pleased, and I'll stay the month out, with whoever wants to stay with me."

"I'll stand by you," said Norma, "and I'll own up that I don't really expect any spectral manifestations up there, anyway."

"It matters little what you expect," and Professor Hardwick looked at her thoughtfully. "We're going investigating, not expecting."

"Don't you expect anything, Prof?" asked Vernie, gaily.

"What do you mean by expect, child? Do you mean wish or think?"

"Gracious, goodness, Professor! I never know what I mean by the words I use, and I never care!"

Professor Hardwick's hobby was the use of words, and rarely did he fail to question it, if a word was misused or uncertainly used in his presence. But he smiled benignly on the pretty child, and didn't bother her further.

Finally, the men drew together to make up the budget of necessary expenses and the women talked clothes.

"Smocks all round," said Norma, who loved the unconventional in dress.

"Not for me!" said Eve, who didn't.

Milly giggled. "Let every one wear just what she chooses," she settled it. "I'm at my best in white linen in the summer time, but what about laundry? Well, I shall leave two sets of things packed, and then send for whichever I want."

Norma, uninterested in clothes, edged over toward the men. Though a friend of the Landons and acquainted with Professor Hardwick, she had never met Braye or Tracy before.

Both succumbed to her sure-fire smile, but Tracy showed it and Braye didn't.

"Sit here, Miss Cameron," and Tracy eagerly made a place for her at his side; "we need a lady assistant. How much do you think it ought to cost to provision nine people and two or three natives for a month?"

"It isn't a question of what it *ought* to cost," returned Norma, "but what it *will* cost. But in any case it will be less than most of us would spend if we went to the average summer hotel. So why not just put down some round numbers, divide 'em by nine and let it go at that?"

"Fine!" approved Landon. "No food dictator could beat that scheme! I wonder if ghost-hunters are as hungry as other hunters, or if we'll be so scared we'll lose our appetites."

"I have a profound belief in ghosts," Norma asserted, "but I shall only indulge in it between meals. Count me in for all the good things going, three times a day."

"What do you mean by profound?" asked the Professor; "deep-seated or widely informed?"

"Both," answered Norma, flashing her pretty smile at the serious old man. "Profundity of all kinds is my happy hunting-ground, and on this trip I expect to get all the profundity I want."

"And I'm the girl to put the fun in profundity," cried Vernie, coming over to them. "My mission is to keep you serious people joyed up. Mr. Tracy, your profession won't interfere with your having a jolly time, will it? No, I see it won't, by that twinkly little smile."

"You may count on me," said the clergyman a bit stiffly, but with a cordial glance at the girl.

"And I can wind Professor Hardwick round my finger," Vernie went on, "for a companion on a gay lark, I don't know any one better than a dry-as-dust old college professor!"

The object of this encomium received it with a benignant smile, but Gifford Bruce reproved his saucy niece.

"I'll leave you at home, miss, if you talk impertinences," he declared.

"Not much you won't, my bestest, belovedest Uncle! Why, I'm the leading lady of this troupe. And I expect the spectre will appear to me first of all. That's my motto: 'Spect the Spectre!' How's that? Then the rest of you can inspect the spectre!"

"Vernie! don't be so excruciatingly funny," begged Braye, while Milly Landon giggled at the pretty child, whose charm and sweetness took all rudeness from her foolery.

"Perhaps we ought to call in an inspector to inspect the spectre," contributed Landon.

"There, there, Wynne," said Braye, "we'll take such stuff from an ignorant little girl but not from a grown-up man."

"Ignorant, huh!" scorned Vernie. "I'll bet *you* couldn't have passed my examination in psychology!"

"Perhaps not," admitted Braye, "but after this trip of ours, we'll all be honour men."

"I want it thoroughly understood," said Mr. Bruce, "that I range myself on the side of the sceptics. I don't want to sail under false colours and I wish to state positively that there are no ghosts or

phantasms or any such things. Moreover, I announce my intention of fooling you gullible ones, if I can."

"Oh, that isn't fair!" exclaimed Landon. "I don't believe in the things either, but I want an honest test. Why, you take away the whole point of the experiment if you're going to put up a trick on us!"

"No, no, Bruce," said the Professor, "that won't do. Come, now, give me your word there'll be no hocus-pocus or I refuse to go at all."

"If it's any sort of a real test, Hardwick, it oughtn't to be possible to fool you."

"That's true," said Eve; "and I'm not afraid of any tricks. If they are tricks, I'll know it—"

"I too," said Norma. "I'm sensitive to all psychical manifestations and if I can't tell a real phantasm from Mr. Bruce's tricks, I deserve to be fooled."

"I think it's a good thing that Mr. Bruce warned us," observed John Tracy. "It puts us on our guard. But I think the rest of us ought to agree not to do anything of that sort. We can expect and discount Mr. Bruce's little game, but if others are going to do the same, it seems to me the game isn't worth playing."

"Right you are!" declared Landon, and forthwith everybody present except Gifford Bruce solemnly pledged his or her word to do nothing tricky or fraudulent, and to preserve an open-minded, honest attitude toward any developments they might experience.

"And with eight argus-eyed inquirers watching him, Mr. Bruce can't put anything over," opined Landon, and the others agreed.

CHAPTER III
Black Aspens

THOUGH mid-July, it was a chilly dusk through which the two motor cars ascended the last stretch of mountain road toward the old Montgomery mansion. The sun set early behind the Green Mountains and the house, half-way up an eastern slope, appeared faintly through the shadows.

To the right, tall forest trees waved their topmost branches with an eerie, soughing sound, or stood, menacingly silent, in black, sullen majesty. Beneath them a tangled underbrush gave forth faint, rustling hints of some wild life or suddenly ceased to a grim stillness.

Then the road lay through a thick grove of aspens, close, black and shivering as they stood, sentinel like and fearsome, only dimly outlined against the dark, clouded sky. Once in the grove, the shadows were dense, and the quivering sounds seemed intensified to a muttered protest against intrusion. A strange bird gave forth a few raucous notes, and then the dread silence returned.

A quick, damp chill foreboded still water and the road followed the margin of a small lake or pond, sinister in its inky depths, which mirrored the still blacker aspen trees.

Suddenly, in a small clearing, they came upon the house. In the uncertain light it seemed enormous, shapeless and beyond all words repelling. It seemed to have a personality, defiant and

forbidding, that warned of mystery and disaster. Aspen trees, tall and gaunt, grew so close that their whispering leaves brushed the windows, and crowded in protecting, huddled clumps to ward off trespassers.

No lights showed through the deep caverns of the windows, but one faint gleam flickered above the entrance door.

"Whew!" cried Landon, jumping from his seat with a thud on the stone terrace, "I won't go through that woods again! I'll go home in an aeroplane,—and I'm ready to go now!"

"So am I," said Milly, in a quivering, tearful voice. "Oh, Wynne, why did we ever come?"

"Now, now," cheered Braye, "keep your heads, it's all right. Only these confounded shadows make it impossible to know just where we're at. Here's the house, and by jinks, it's built of marble!"

"Of course," said the Professor, who was curiously feeling of the old ivy-grown stone, "this is the marble country, you know. Vermont marble was plenty enough when this house was put up."

"Let's get in," begged Vernie. "It isn't as much fun as I thought it would be."

They went, in a close group, up a short flight of broad marble steps and reached a wide portico, in the centre of which was a spacious vestibule indented into the building, and which stood within the main wall. Though the walls of the house were of marble, those of this vestibule were of panelled mahogany, and the entrance doorway was flanked on either side by large

bronze columns, which stood half within and half without the mahogany wall.

"Some house!" exclaimed Tracy, in admiration of the beautiful details, which though worn and blackened by time, were of antique grandeur. "These bronze doors must have come from Italy. They're marvellous. I'm glad I came."

"Oh, do get in, Wynne," wailed Milly. "You can examine the house to-morrow. I *wish* we hadn't come!"

Landon was about to make search for knocker or bell, when one of the big bronze doors swung open, and a man peered out.

"You folks here?" he said, a bit unnecessarily. "Bring another lamp, Hester."

"Yes, we're here," Landon assured him, "and we want to get in out of the wet!"

"Rainin'?" and the man stepped out of the door to look, blocking all ingress.

"No! that's a figure of speech!" Landon's nerves were on edge. "Open that door,—the other one,—let us in!"

"Go on in, who's henderin' you?" and the indifferent host stepped out of the way.

Landon went in first and Braye followed, as the others crowded after. At first they could see only a gloomy cavernous hall, its darkness accentuated by one small lamp on a table.

"Thought I wouldn't light up till you got here," and the man who had admitted them came in and closed the door. "I'm Stebbins, and here's the keys. This is the house you've took, and Hester here will look after you. I'll be goin'."

"No, you won't!" and Landon turned on him. "Why, man, we know nothing of this place. You stay till I dismiss you. I want a whole lot of information, but not till after we get lights and make the ladies comfortable."

"Comfortable! At Black Aspens! Not likely." The mocking laugh that accompanied these words struck terror to most of his hearers. "Nobody told me that you folks came up here to be comfortable."

"Shut up!" Landon's temper was near the breaking point. "Where's that woman with the lamps? Where's the man I engaged to look after things?"

"Hester, she's here. She'll be in in a minute. Thorpe, that's her husband, he's goin' to be a sort of butteler for you, he can't come till to-morrow. But Hester, she's got supper ready, or will be, soon's you can wash up and all."

Hester came in then, a gaunt, hard-featured New England woman, who looked utterly devoid of any emotion and most intelligence.

Stebbins, on the other hand, was apparently of keen perceptions and average intellect. His small blue eyes roved from one face to another, and though he looked sullen and disagreeable of disposition, he gave the effect of one ready to do his duty.

"All right," he said, as if without interest, "I'll set in the kitchen and wait. Hester here, she'll take the ladies to their rooms, and then after you get your supper, I'll tell you all you ask me. But I

rented this place to you, I didn't agree to be a signboard and Farmers' Almanac."

"All right, old chap," and Landon smiled faintly, "but don't you get away till I see you. Now, girls, want to select your rooms?"

"Y-Yes," began Eve, bravely, and then a glance up the dark staircase made her shudder.

"What we want is light,—and plenty of it," broke in Braye. "Here you, Hester, I'll relieve you of that lamp you're holding, and you hop it, and get more,—six more,—twelve more—hear me?"

"We haven't that many in the house." Dull-eyed the woman looked at him with that sublime stolidity only achieved by born New Englanders.

"Oh, you haven't! Well, bring all you have and to-morrow you manage to raise a lot more. How many have you, all told?"

"Four, I think."

"Four! For a party of nine! Well, have you candles?"

"Half a dozen."

"And three candlesticks, I suppose! Bring them in, and if you're shy of candlesticks, bring old bottles,—or anything."

"Good for you, Braye, didn't know you had so much generalship," and Gifford Bruce clapped his nephew on the shoulder. "I'm glad I don't believe in ghosts, for every last one of you people are shaking in your shoes this minute! What's the matter with you? Nothing has happened."

"It was that awful ride through the woods," said Vernie, cuddling into her uncle's arm. "I l-like it,—I like it all,—but, the

local colour is so—so dark!"

"That's it, Kiddie," said Braye, "the local colour is about the murkiest I ever struck. But here are our lights, hooray!"

Hester brought two more small hand lamps, and after another trip to the kitchen brought six candles and six battered but usable candlesticks.

A candle was given to each of the four women, and Norma politely selected the oldest and most broken holder.

"Land sake!" exclaimed Stebbins, coming in, "you goin' to use *that* candlestick? That's the very one the murderin' woman used!"

With a scream, Norma dropped it and no one moved to pick it up.

"Get out, Stebbins!" roared Landon, "you queer the whole business."

"I'll take this one," and Mr. Bruce picked up the old brass affair; "I'm not afraid of such things. Here, Miss Cameron, take mine, it's new and commonplace, I assure you."

White-faced and trembling, Norma took the cheap crockery thing, and shortly they all followed Hester up the stairs to the shadows of the floor above.

The place was silent as the grave. Hester's slippered feet made no sound, and a voluntary scraping of Tracy's shoes stopped as soon as he realized its enormous sound in those empty halls. A multitude of doors led to rooms in all directions, there seemed to be no plan or symmetry of any sort. The candle flames flickered, the small lamps burned with a pale sickly light.

Hester paused midway of the main corridor.

"What rooms you want?" she asked, uninterestedly.

"Give me a cheerful one," wailed Milly. "Oh, Wynne, let us take a little, cozy one."

"Of course you shall," said Braye, kindly. "Hester, which is the pleasantest room in the house? Give that to Mr. and Mrs. Landon! And then we'll put all you girls near them. The rest of us will camp anywhere."

"Let's all pretty much camp anywhere till to-morrow," suggested the Professor. "I'd like to select my room by daylight."

"I've made up some of the rooms, and some I ain't," volunteered Hester.

"Then, for Heaven's sake, show us the made-up rooms, and get out!" burst forth Landon. "I wish we'd brought our maids, Milly; that woman affects me like fever and ague."

But after a time they were assigned to various more or less inhabitable bedrooms, and as quickly as possible, all reappeared in the great hall below, ready for supper.

The dining room, toward the back of the house, was not half bad, after all the available lights had been commandeered for the table.

"You knew there were no electrics," said Braye to Eve, who was bewailing the fact.

"Of course I did, and I thought candles would be lovely and picturesque and all that; and kerosene gives a good soft light, but—well, somehow,—do you know what I thought as we came through that dreadful wood?"

"What?"

"Only one sentence rang through my mind,—and that was,—The Powers of Darkness!"

"That isn't a sentence," objected the Professor, a little querulously, and everybody laughed. Also, everybody blessed the occasion for laughter.

But Eve went on. "I don't care if it's a sentence or a syllogism, or what it is! It just rang in my ears. And I tell you this whole place is under the Powers of Darkness—"

"Do hush, Eve," pleaded Milly. "I was just beginning to pull myself together, and now you've upset me again!"

"But Milly,—"

"Let up, Eve! For the love of Mike, let up! You're enough to give anybody the creeps." Landon glared at her.

"It's only a question of light," Tracy broke in, in his pleasant way. "Now, we've light enough for the moment, and to-morrow we'll make this the house of a thousand candles and a hundred lamps, and a few lanterns if you like. Incidentally, Friend Hester makes first-rate doughnuts."

"Aren't they bully!" chimed in Vernie. "I've eaten six, and here goes for another."

"Lucky they're small," said her uncle. "But seven doughnuts are enough to make you see the ghost of old Montgomery himself!"

"And all the Green Mountain boys," added Tracy, who was determined to keep conversation away from fearsome subjects.

By the time they had finished the meal, every one felt more at ease, Landon had recovered his poise, and Milly her cheerfulness.

"Now, then," the Professor asked, as they left the table, "shall we explore the house to-night—"

"Lord, no!" cried Braye. "Leave it lay till daylight. Also, don't quiz old Stebbins as to who's who in Black Aspens! Let's turn on the Victrola and dance, or let's play poker or sing glees, or anything that's a proper parlour trick. But nothing, I insist, pertaining to our mission up here. That'll keep."

"As you like," and now Landon could smile. "And you mollycoddles may pursue those light-minded pleasures. But I'm going to have it out with Steb, because I want to know some several Laws for Beginners. But, don't let me interfere with your plans. Go ahead, and have play 'Hide and Seek All Over the House,' if you choose. That used to be my favourite indoor game."

"Oh!" squealed Vernie, "what an awful suggestion! In this house!"

"I move we hear the story of the house to-night—Right now," said Eve.

Milly clasped her hands over her ears, instead of, as usual, over her mouth, and cried, "No! I forbid it! Don't let 'em, will you, Wynne?"

"Seems to me," remarked Mr. Stebbins, "you folks don't know your own minds! You want a ha'nted house, then when you git it, you're too scared to hear the story of the ha'nt."

"I'm not scared," asserted Norma, "but somehow, a ha'nt sounds so much worse than a haunt. Doesn't it, now?"

"It sure does," agreed Braye. "A ha'nt is concrete, while a haunt is abstract."

"Good!" and Hardwick nodded approval. "Now, I suggest that we look around a bit, get the general lay of the house and then all go to bed early. A good night's sleep will put our nerves and muscles in condition again. I'm delighted with the place, and I foresee a first-class vacation ahead of us."

"I wish it was behind us, and we were just starting for home," murmured Milly, but Eve reprimanded her.

"Don't be a spoilsport! I like the place too, Professor, and I'm going to investigate a little. What room is this?"

Eve's graceful figure crossed the great square hall, where they were all standing about, and paused at the closed door of a room just at the right hand as one entered the house.

"Why, it's locked!" she exclaimed. "That won't do, Mr. Stebbins! This whole domain is ours, now, you know. Open this door, please."

Eve wore the light gray skirt of her travelling costume, and a thin sheer white silk blouse, whose V'd neck fell away from her long, slender throat. Her hand on the door knob, she suddenly turned her strange beryl eyes toward Stebbins, her face turning whiter and her thin lips redder as she gazed.

"This is the room—isn't it?" she breathed, and her hand slowly fell from the knob and hung loosely at her side.

"Yes, ma'am," replied Stebbins, stolidly. "How'd you know?"

"How could I help knowing!" and Eve's voice rang out like a clarion. "I see it! I see it all!"

She rushed across the hall and fell trembling on a settee. Tracy flew to her side, and took her hand.

"There, there, Miss Carnforth, brace up! We're all right here. Nothing can hurt you."

"Beats all how she knew!" muttered Stebbins. "You see that's the room—"

A cry from Milly stirred Landon to action.

"Drop it, Stebbins," he said, and took a step toward him. "None of that to-night. We do want your haunted house, but the long journey up here, and your confounded negligence in the matter of lights and servants and general good will, has got on the ladies' nerves. Beat it now, to the kitchen, or wherever your quarters are, but you stay here to-night and be ready to report in the morning. You hear me?"

"Yes, sir," and shrugging his shoulders, the man disappeared among the shadows in the back of the hall.

The great main hall was so large that the lights they had were all insufficient for illumination. There seemed to be innumerable doors and openings of side corridors, also a second staircase, far behind the main one.

"Here's a good-looking room, let's go in here," said Tracy, stepping through some old, faded draperies to the room on the left of the hall as one entered the house.

Hardwick followed, and the others with lamps and candles pushed in. It was a large, dignified apartment, evidently a

parlour or ballroom of the old mansion. The furniture was of old, carved rosewood, its upholstery worn, but fairly decent. Oil portraits were on the walls and massive ornaments of imitation bronze stood about, showing white here and there where the coating was chipped off.

Yellowish onyx vases graced the mantels, and the windows were hung with heavy rep curtains which, however, veiled no lighter ones.

"Ghastly!" cried Norma.

"What do you mean by ghastly?" began the Professor, and Tracy laughed.

"She didn't mean it at all, Professor," he said, "Miss Cameron meant to say hideous. Now, don't ask me what I mean by hideous, just look at the interior decorations here and draw your own conclusions as to my meaning. But though not to be called æsthetic, this furniture is fairly comfy. The springs of this sofa are intact,—come sit by my side, little darling." This last to Vernie, who was wide-eyed and alert, lapping up these strange, new impressions.

"All right," and she flung herself down beside him. "You're a real comfort, Mr. Tracy,—you're so,—so—unministerial!"

"Thank you, my child. One needn't carry one's pulpit voice into social life."

"Oh, I don't mean you do or say anything that a man of your calling oughtn't to, but you're so nice about it."

"I think so too," chattered Milly, "I do think a clergyman with a sense of humour makes a fine combination."

The mental atmosphere gradually lightened and when Landon suggested they all retire, it was a composed and merry hearted group that obeyed the summons.

When twelve sonorous strokes boomed from the tall clock in the upper hall, the men beneath the roof of Black Aspens were all sleeping more or less soundly.

Milly, with only occasional little quivering shudders, slumbered in Landon's arms. Vernie slept with the sound dreamless sleep of youth.

But Eve and Norma were wide awake, and unable to close their eyes.

In adjoining rooms, the communicating door ajar, they could hear one another toss restlessly, but they said no words.

Norma's blue eyes were wide open, her thoughts rambling over the strange surroundings in which she found herself, and her mind leaping forward, speculating on what might happen.

Eve, her long, glittering eyes half closed, listened for any sound; her nerves alert, her thoughts darting from material things to the supernatural, every muscle tense with a nameless apprehension.

More hours were rung out by the old clock, and at last dawn began to creep in at the deep narrow windows of the old house.

With a shrug and a stretch Vernie awoke. Drowsily, in the half light she tried to make out her surroundings, and then, suddenly remembering where she was, she dove her head under her blanket, in a quick rush of fear. Then curiosity conquered, and she came to the surface again, and looked

about. The light, growing gradually stronger, showed the appointments of the room, the ugly old four-poster bedstead, of light wood,—apple or hickory,—the heavy rep lambrequins, that seemed to be a feature of the house, and the scantily appointed dresser, on which, the night before, she had set her extinguished candle.

Shadows still lurked in the corners of the room, still hung round the draperies and furniture, yet through the gloom Vernie saw something that made her eyes stare and her flesh creep. Clenching her hands till her sharp nails bit into her palms, she gave a shriek that rang through the silent house.

CHAPTER IV
The Story of the House

FROM their nearby rooms Eve and Norma rushed to Vernie's room.

The child was huddled beneath the bed clothes and at their entrance shot her head out, crying wildly, "Look! look! the old candlestick!"

Milly came running, in dressing-gown and slippers, and from distant regions came the voices of the men.

"What's the matter?" asked Gifford Bruce. "Wasn't that Vernie's voice?"

"Yes, Uncle Gif," Vernie called out. "Oh, did you do it?"

"Do what?" and in his hastily donned bath robe, old Mr. Bruce appeared.

"Why," and Vernie was calm now, "there's that old candlestick, the one the—the murderer used—on my dresser! Last night I had a little china one!"

"What are you talking about—a murderer! Wake up, child!"

"I'm not asleep. But I see, now. You had this old one, Uncle Gif, and, you know you said you were going to fool us if you could, and so you sneaked it in here to pretend the haunt did it!"

"What! What nonsense! I did nothing of the sort!"

"Who did, then? You know you had this one last night."

"I certainly did. Wonder what's in my room now."

Mr. Bruce ran back to his room and returned with the little china candlestick Vernie had carried to her room the night before. They had certainly been exchanged during the night.

Everybody stared at the two candles, so worthless in themselves, but so inexplicably transferred, if, as he declared, Gifford Bruce had not exchanged them.

"Of course I didn't do it," he repeated, angrily. "I did say, in fun, that I meant to trick you, but when I saw how nervous and wrought up all you women were last night, I wouldn't dream of doing such a thing! Why, Vernie, I think too much of you, dear, to add to your fear or discomfort in any way."

At last everybody concluded it was the work of some one of their number, and there were varying opinions as to the identity of the perpetrator of what must have been meant for a joke.

But at breakfast time the matter was discussed very seriously and each avowed in all honour that he or she knew nothing of it.

"I can speak not only for myself," said Professor Hardwick, gravely, "but for Mr. Tracy and Mr. Braye. They would have had to pass my door to move around the halls, and I was awake all night, looking and listening, and I know they did not leave their rooms."

"I speak for myself," said Gifford Bruce, haughtily. "I declare on my oath that I did not leave my bed. Somebody exchanged those candles,—but it was not I."

The Landons spoke for each other, and no one, of course, could suspect Wynne or Milly. And naturally, the two girls, Eve and Norma, would not go to Mr. Bruce's room to play a trick like that.

"I don't mind now," said Vernie, "when it's all light and cheerful and you're all around me, and the breakfast is so good and all. I think it's the beginning of these experiences we came up here to look for. Why are you all so surprised? Because I had the first party?"

The merry-eyed girl was unafraid now, but Hardwick shook his head.

"I don't like it," he said. "We can't investigate if there's a trickster among us. You didn't do it yourself, did you, Vernie?"

"No, Professor," and the pure truthful gaze of the brown eyes left no room for disbelief. "Honest, I didn't. But," she laughed mischievously, "if I had, I should *say* I hadn't!"

"Vernie! This won't do!" and Eve glared at her, "You little minx, I believe you did do it!"

"Don't you look at me like that, Eve Carnforth! Stop it! You scare me." Vernie fairly cowered before Eve's basilisk eyes. "I believe *you* did it!"

"There, there, girls," broke in Tracy, with his gentle smile, "don't get to hair-pulling. If we've all finished breakfast, let's now hear the story of the house, and then we can tell if its patron ghost is the sort given to exchanging bedroom furniture o' nights."

"Yes," agreed Norma, "I'm crazy to hear the story. Where's Mr. Stebbins, does anybody know?"

"I'll dig him up," Landon assured them. "Where shall we congregate?"

"In the drawing room," said Milly, "that's the only room I'm not afraid of."

"I'm fearfully afraid of that!" said Tracy, in mock terror. "Those rep lambrequins get on my nerves!"

"Aren't they awful!" and Norma laughed. "They don't frighten me, but they jar my æsthetics terribly."

"No," said Elijah Stebbins, firmly, as the conclave began, "not in that there parlour. Here in the hall. You folks want this house, you want the story of this house, now you sit here to hear it."

"Very well," said Braye, agreeably. "Just as you say, Mr. Stebbins. Now begin at the beginning, but don't drool too long a spiel."

The whole party grouped themselves in the great hall, and for the first time began to take in the details of its appointments. Though in disrepair as to walls and cornices, the lines of its architecture were fine and it was of noble proportions; the staircase was beautifully planned; and the wonderful bronze doors, which they had not examined the night before, were truly works of art.

"The old Montgomery who brought them doors from Italy, pretty much built the house behind 'em," Stebbins volunteered, "and them colyums, of course, come with the doors. They're

some valu'ble, I'm told. You see, the doors is the same outside and in, and the colyums is, too. Well, then, he had the vestibule of murhoggany, to sort o' set off the bronze, I s'pose, and the rest of the walls is marble,—solid old Vermont marble, which Lord knows was to be had for the pickin', up here."

"Get along to the story, Steb," urged Landon.

"Yes, sir. Well, the Montgomery that built this house,—though, it was part built before, he added on to his father's house,—well, he was a daredevil, and a tyrant. Little mite of a man, but full of the old Nick. And, as those little men will do, he married a reg'lar Hessian of a woman. Big, sort o' long and gaunt, they say she was, and a termagant for sure! She led him a life, and also, he led her one. For he was a terror and so was she. What he lacked in size he made up in temper, and she had both. Well, here's the story.

"He took sick, and she nursed him. They didn't have trained nurses and specialists in them days. Now some says, he was jest naturally took sick and some says, that she give him slow poison. But, be that as it may, one night, she give him prussic acid, and he died. She threw a shawl over her head, and ran screamin' to the village for the doctor. I s'pose remorse got her, for she confessed, and said 'I killed him! I killed him! At four o'clock I killed him!'

"She went crazy, they say, then and there. Well, the doctor he said he'd come right away, but she ran home first. And he followed's fast's he could, and—when he come, here was the woman,—and she was a washin' the dead man's lips,—she said,

to get the smell of the bitter ammonds off,—you know, prussic acid is for all the world the smell of bitter almonds. The doctor, he found the man was really dead, and he was for havin' her arrested, but she was so plumb crazy, he decided to take her to an asylum instead.

"He had to go off to get help, and he left her,—here alone in this house with the body. They was in that room," Stebbins pointed to the room with the locked door, at the right hand of the hall as one entered, "the room with the tassels, it's called."

"Why is it called that?" broke in Eve, whose piercing eyes were fairly glittering with excitement, "what sort of tassels?"

"Great heavy tassels on the curtains and lambaquins, ma'am,—want to see it?"

"Not now," ordained Landon, "the story first."

"Well," resumed Stebbins, "they was in that room, the dead husband and the live wife, when the doctor went away, and because he knew she was out of her head, he locked 'em in. And when he came back—she was setting there, just where he'd left her, still in a dazed sort o' stupor, and—the corpse was gone."

"Gone! where?" rasped out the Professor.

"Nobody knows. Nobody ever knew. It had just disappeared from off the face of the earth. The doctor and the village folks all agreed that it was sperrited away. 'Cause that woman,—she couldn't get out o' the doors to cart it off, and she couldn't 'a' got out of a winder with it, without showin' some signs, and if she had, what in the world could she 'a' done with it? It wasn't buried nowhere around, and if she'd 'a' threw it in the lake,

s'posin' she'd got out a winder, how'd she got in again? Anyhow, that's the story, and they all said she was a witch and she bewitched the body away, so's the doctor and sheriff couldn't smell the prussic acid on it and hang her for murder. They searched and searched but they couldn't find no signs of her havin' even moved outen her chair. She sat there like a dead woman herself, when the doctor left her and likewise when he come back."

"The tale is very circumstantial," observed Gifford Bruce, a bit drily.

"I'm tellin' it as I've many a time heard it, sir," said Stebbins, a little resentfully. "This here story's been common talk around these parts a many years, and I ain't one to add to nor take from it."

"Go on," commanded Landon, briefly.

"They put her away, in a loonytic asylum, and she died in it. They never found hide nor hair of the dead man, and the place fell to some kin that lived down Pennsylvania way. They come up here for a while, I b'lieve, but the ha'nt scared 'em off. It's been sold some several times and at last it fell to my father's family. Now it's mine, and it's a white elephant to me. I can't sell or rent it, and so you folks may well believe I jumped at the chance to have you take it for a spell."

"We haven't heard about the haunt yet," said Norma. She spoke quietly, but her lips quivered a little, and her fingers were nervously picking at her handkerchief.

"That," and Stebbins looked even more sombre than he had, "that's my own experience, so I can give it to you first hand.

"I come here to live, 'bout ten years ago, and I was plucky enough to hoot at ghost stories and tales o' ha'nts.

"So I set out to sleep in that—that room with the tassels,—out o' sheer bravado. But I got enough of it."

The man's head fell on his breast and he paused in his narrative.

"Go on," said Landon, less brusquely than before.

Milly stirred nervously. "Don't let him tell the rest, Wynne," she said.

"Oh, yes, dear. Remember, this is what we're here for."

Most of the men shifted their positions; Hardwick leaned forward, both hands on his knees. Gifford Bruce sat with one arm flung carelessly over his chair back, a slight smile on his face.

Braye was beside Norma, and watched alternately her face and Eve's, while Tracy was holding Vernie's hand, and his gentle calm kept the volatile child quiet.

"I see it all so plainly,—that first night—" Stebbins said, slowly. "*First* night! Land! there never was another! Not for me. I'd sooner 'a' died than slep' in that room again!"

"See a ghost?" asked Bruce, flippantly.

"Yes, sir," and Stebbins looked straight at him. "I seen a ghost. I'm a sound sleeper, I am, and I went to sleep quiet and ca'm as a baby. I woke as the big clock there was a strikin' four. It was that what woke me—I hope."

"Is there—is there a bed in that room?" asked the Professor.

"Lord, yes, it was them folkses bedroom. In them days, people most always slep' downstairs. I come awake suddenly, and the room was full of an icy chill. Not just coldness, but a damp chill—like undertakers' iceboxes."

Vernie shuddered and Tracy held her hand more firmly. Landon slipped his arm round Milly, and Eve and Norma glanced at each other.

Gifford Bruce replaced his sneering smile, which had somehow disappeared.

"It was winter, and plumb dark at four o'clock in the morning, but the room was full of an unearthly light,—a sort of frosty, white glow, like you see in a graveyard sometimes.

"And comin' toward me was a tall, gaunt figure, with a shawl over its head, a white, misty shape, that had a sort of a halting step but was comin' straight and sure toward that bed I was lyin' on. I tried to scream, I tried to move, but I couldn't,—I was paralyzed. On and on came the thing—halting at every step, but gettin' nearer and nearer. As she—oh, I knew it was that woman—"

"I thought it was a man who was murdered," put in Mr. Bruce, in his most sardonic tones.

"So it was, sir," Stebbins spoke mildly, "but it was the murderess doin' the ha'ntin'. I s'pose she can't rest quiet in her grave for remorse and that. She came nearer and—and I saw her face—and—"

"Well?"

"And it was a skull! A grinning skull. And her long bony hand held a glass—a glass of poison—for me."

"Er—did you take it?" This from Bruce.

"No, sir. I swooned away, or whatever you may call it. I lost all consciousness, and when I come to, the thing was gone."

"Ever see her again?" inquired Mr. Bruce, conversationally.

"No, sir," and Stebbins eyed him uninterestedly. It was impossible to annoy the story teller. "No, I never *seen* her."

"Heard her?" asked Braye.

"Yes; many's the time. But—I ain't never slept in that room since."

"I should say not!" cried Eve. "But I will! I'll brave the phantasm. I'd be glad to see her. I'm not afraid."

"You needn't be," said Mr. Bruce, with a short laugh. "You won't see anything, Miss Carnforth. I'd be willing to try it, too."

"What other manifestations have you experienced?" asked Braye. "What have you heard?"

"Mostly groans—"

"And hollow laughter," interrupted Bruce. "Those are the regulation sounds, I believe."

"Oh, hush!" cried Eve. "Mr. Bruce, you drive me frantic! I wish you hadn't come!"

"I don't," declared Bruce. "I think it's most interesting. And do I understand, Mr. Stebbins, that this charming lady of large size and hard heart, carried usually that candlestick that I made use of last night?"

At last Stebbins resented Bruce's chaff.

"So the story goes, sir," he said, curtly. "And many's the time I've known that candlestick to be moved during the night, by no mortal hand."

"Look here, Uncle Gif," said Braye, good-naturedly, "you don't want to get yourself disliked, do you? Now, let up on your quizzing, and let's get down to business. We set out for a haunted house. I, for one, think we've got all we came after, and then some! If the ha'nt began moving her candlestick around the first night, what may she not do next? You didn't do it, did you, Uncle?"

"I've told you I didn't, Rudolph, and I again repeat my word. But it was scarcely necessary for me to do it, when such a capable spook,—I mean, phantasm is regularly in attendance."

"Now, I've told you the tale," and Stebbins rose, and shook himself as if he had done his duty. "I ain't nowise responsible for your believin' it. What I've told you is true, so far's my own experience goes; and what I've told you hearsay, is the old story that's been told up in these parts by one generation after another, since old Montgomery's day. Now do you want to see the room with the tassels?"

"I don't!" cried Milly, "I can't stand any more."

"You needn't, dear," said Landon; "suppose you go out on the terrace and walk about in the sunlight. You go with her, Vernie, you can see the room, later on."

"I'll go too," and Tracy tactfully offered his escort. "The tassels will keep. Come on, Braye?"

"No; I'll see the show through. You can look after the ladies, Tracy."

So the others crowded round Stebbins, as he prepared to unlock the door of the fatal room.

"'Tain't no great sight," he said, almost apologetically. "But it's the ha'nted room."

Slowly he turned the key and they all filed in.

The room was dark, save for what light came in from the hall. All blinds were closed, and over the windows hung heavy curtains of rep that had once been red but was now a dull, nondescript colour. There were more of these heavy, long curtains, evidently concealing alcoves or cupboards, and over each curtain was a "lambrequin" edged with thick twisted woolen fringe, and at intervals, tassels,—enormous, weighty tassels, such as were once used in church pulpits and other old-fashioned upholstery. Such quantities of these there were, that it is small wonder the room received its name.

And the tassels had a sinister air. Motionless they hung, dingy, faded, but still of an individuality that seemed to say, "we have seen unholy deed,—we cry out mutely for vengeance!"

"It was them tassels that scared me most," Stebbins said, in an awed tone. "I mean before—she come. They sort of swayed,—when they wasn't no draught nor anything."

"I don't wonder!" said Braye, "they're the ghostliest things I ever saw! But the whole room is awful! It—oh I say! put up a window!"

"I can't," said Stebbins simply. "These here windows ain't been up for years and years. The springs is all rusted and won't work."

"There's something in the room!" cried Eve, hysterically, "I mean—something—besides us—something alive!"

"No, ma'am," said Stebbins, solemnly, "what's in here ain't alive, ma'am. I ain't been in here myself, since that night I slep' here, and I wouldn't be now, only to show you folks the room. I sort of feel 's if I'd shifted the responsibility to you folks now. I don't seem to feel the same fear of the ha'nt, like I was here alone."

"*Don't* say ha'nt! Stop it!" and Eve almost shrieked at him.

"Yes, ma'am. Ghost, ma'am. But ha'nt it is, and ha'nt it will be, till the crack o' doom. Air ye all satisfied with your bargain?"

No one answered, for every one was conscious of a subtle presence and each glanced fearfully, furtively about, nerves shaken, wills enfeebled, vitality low.

"What is it?" whispered Eve.

"Imagination!" declared Mr. Bruce, but he shook his shoulders as he spoke, as if ridding himself of an incubus.

There was a chilliness that was not like honest cold, there was a stillness that was not an ordinary silence, and there was an impelling desire in every heart to get out of that room and never return.

But all were game, and when at last Stebbins said, "Seen enough?" they almost tumbled over one another in a burst of relief at the thought of exit.

The great hall seemed cheerful by contrast, and Landon, in a voice he strove to make matter-of-fact, said, "Thank you, Stebbins, you have certainly given us what we asked for."

"Yes, sir. Did you notice it, sir?"

"What?"

"The smell—the odour—in that room?"

"I did," said Eve, "I noticed the odour of prussic acid."

"Yes, ma'am," said Stebbins, "that's what I meant."

CHAPTER V
Eve's Experience

The investigators had investigated for a week. They were now having tea in the great hall, to whose shadowy distances and shabby appointments they had become somewhat accustomed.

Kept up to the mark by the Landons, old Jed Thorpe had developed positive talents as a butler, and with plenty of lamps and candles, and a couple of willing, if ignorant maids, the household machinery ran fairly smoothly. Supplies were procured in East Dryden or sent up from New York markets and by day the party was usually a gay-hearted, merry-mannered country house group.

Every day at tea-time, they recounted any individual experiences that might seem mysterious, and discussed them.

"It's this way," Professor Hardwick summed up; "the determining factor is the dark. Ghosts and haunted houses are all very well at night, but daylight dispels them as a sound breaks silence."

"What about my experience when I slept in the room with the tassels," growled Gifford Bruce.

Braye laughed. "You queered yourself, Uncle Gif, when you announced before we started, that you were not bound to good faith. *Your* ghost stories are discounted before you tell 'em!"

"But I did see a shape,—a shadowy form, like a tall woman with a shawl over her head—"

"You dreamed it," said Milly, smiling at him. "Or else—"

"Milly daren't say it," laughed Eve, "but I will. Or else, you invented the yarn."

"If I'm to be called a—"

"Tut, tut, Mr. Bruce," intervened Tracy, "nobody called you one! Playful prevarication is all right, especially as you warned us you'd fool us if you could. Now I can tell an experience and justly expect to be believed."

"But you haven't had any," and Eve's translucent eyes turned to him.

"I have," began Tracy, slowly, "but they've been a bit indefinite. It's unsatisfactory to present only an impression or a suggestion, where facts are wanted. And the Professor says truly that hints and haunts are convincing at night, but repeated, at a pleasant, comfortable tea hour, they sound flimsy and unconvincing."

"What did you think you saw or heard?" asked Norma, with a reminiscent, far-off look in her eyes.

"Every morning, or almost every morning, at four o'clock, I seem to hear the trailing robes of a presence of some sort. I seem to hear a faint moaning sound, that is like nothing human."

"That's imagination," said Braye, promptly.

"It is, doubtless," agreed Hardwick, "but it is due to what may be called 'expectant attention.' If we had not connected four o'clock with the story of this house, Mr. Tracy would not have those hallucinations at that time."

"Perhaps so," the clergyman looked thoughtful. "But it seems vivid and real at the time. Then, in the later morning, it is merely a hazy memory."

"You know Mr. Stebbins said that every one who died in this house always died at four o'clock."

"I know he *said* so," and Braye looked quizzical.

"Oh, come now, don't doubt honest old Stebbins!" and Eve frowned. "We must believe *his* tales or we'll never get anywhere. I'm going over to East Dryden to see him to-morrow, I want a few more details. And, it seems to me, we're getting nowhere,—with our imaginations and hallucinations. Now, to-night, I'm going to sleep in the room with the tassels. I've no fear of it, and I have a deep and great curiosity."

"Oh, let me sleep there with you! Mayn't I, Eve? Oh, please let me!" Vernie danced about in her eagerness, and knelt before Eve, pleading.

"No, Vernie, I forbid it," said her uncle, decidedly. "If Miss Carnforth wants to do this thing, I have nothing to say, but you must not, my child. I know you people don't believe me, but I surely saw an apparition the night I slept there, and it was no human trickster. Neither was it hallucination. I was as wideawake as I am now—"

"We know the rest, Uncle Gif," and Braye laughingly interrupted the recital. "Stalking ghost, hollow groans, and—were there clanking chains?"

"There were not, but in its shrouded hand the spectre held a glass—"

"Of prussic acid, of which you smelt the strong odour! Yes, I know,—but it won't go down, old chap—"

"The prussic acid won't?" and Landon chuckled.

"Nor the tale either," said the Professor. "It's too true. The shawled woman filled the specifications too accurately to seem convincing."

"You're a nice crowd," grumbled Mr. Bruce. "Come up here for experiences and then hoot at the first real thing that happens."

"All your own fault," retorted Norma. "If you hadn't advertised your propensity for fooling us, your word would have carried weight."

"All right, let somebody else sleep in that room, then. But not Miss Carnforth. Let one of the men try it."

"Thank you, none for me," said Braye. "I detest shawled women waking me up at four o'clock, to take my poison!"

"I'll beg off, too," said Tracy. "I wake at four every morning anyway, with those aspen boughs shivering against my windows. I'd trim them off, but that doesn't seem like playing the game."

"Wynne shan't sleep there, and that settles *that*," and Milly's grasp on her husband's coat sleeve was evidently sufficiently detaining.

"That leaves only me, of the men," asserted the Professor. "I'm quite willing to sleep in that room. Indeed, I want to. I've only been waiting till I felt sure of the house, the servants and—excuse me, the members of our own party! Now, I've discovered that the servants' quarters can be securely locked off, so that

they cannot get in this part of the house; I've found that the outside doors and the windows can be fastened against all possibility of outside intrusion; and, I shall stipulate that our party shall so congregate in a few rooms, that no one can—ahem,—haunt my slumbers without some one else knowing it. I'll ask you three young ladies to sleep in one room and allow me to lock you in. Or two adjoining rooms, to which I may hold all keys. Mr. Tracy, Mr. Bruce and Mr. Braye, I shall arrange similarly, while the Landons must also consent to be imprisoned by me. This is the only way I can make a fair test. Will you all agree?"

"Splendid!" cried Eve, "of course we will. But, Professor, let me try it first. If you should have a weird experience, it might scare me off, but now I am brave enough. Oh, please, do that! Let me lock you all in your rooms, and let me sleep in the room with the tassels to-night! Oh, please say yes, all of you! I *must*, I must try it!" The girl looked like a seeress, as, with glittering eyes and flushed cheeks she plead her cause.

"Why, of course, if you want to, Miss Carnforth," said the Professor, looking at her admiringly. "I'll be glad to have the benefit of your experience before testing myself. And there is positively no danger. As I've said, the locks, bolts, and bars are absolutely safe against outside intrusion, or visits from the servants. Though we know *they* are not to be suspected. And as you are not afraid of the supernatural, I can see no argument against your plan."

"Suppose I go with you," suggested Norma, her large blue eyes questioning Eve Carnforth's excited face.

"No, Norma, not this time. I prefer to be alone. I'll lock you and Vernie in your room; I'll lock Milly and Wynne in their room; I'll lock you four men in two rooms, and then, I'll know—I'll *know* that whatever I see or hear is not a fraud or trick of *anybody*. And I think you can trust me to tell you the truth in the morning."

"If there's anything to tell," supplemented Braye. "I think, Eve, as to ghosts, you're cutting off your source of supply."

"Then we'll merely prove nothing. But I'm determined to try."

Again Vernie begged to be allowed to share Eve's experiences, but neither Mr. Bruce, nor Eve herself would consider the child's request.

"Every one of us," the Professor said, musingly, "has told of hearing mysterious sounds and of seeing mysterious shadows, but,—except for Bruce's graphic details!—all our observations have been vague and uncertain. They may well have been merely imagination. But Miss Carnforth is not imaginative, I mean, not so, to the exclusion of a fair judgment of what her senses experience. Therefore I shall feel, if she sees nothing to-night, that I shall see nothing when I sleep in that room to-morrow night."

"I am especially well adapted for the test," Eve said, though in no way proudly, "for I have a premonition that the phantasm will appear to me more readily than to some others. Remember, I knew that was the haunted room before we had been told. I

knew it before we entered the house that first night. It was revealed to me, as other things have been even during our stay here. You must realize that I am a sensitive, and so better fitted for these visitations than a more phlegmatic or practical person."

"What else has been revealed to you, Eve?" asked Braye.

"Perhaps revealed isn't just the word, Rudolph, but I've seen more than most of you, I've heard voices, rustling as of wings, and other inexplicable sounds, that I know were audible only to me."

"Lord, Eve, you give me the creeps! Finished your tea? Come out for a walk then. Let's get off these subjects, if only for half an hour."

That night, Eve Carnforth carried out her plans to the letter.

Gifford Bruce, and his nephew Braye in one room; the Professor and Tracy in another, were locked in by Eve, amid much gaiety of ceremony.

"Set a thief to catch a thief," Braye declared. "Tracy, look after the Professor, that he doesn't jump out of the window, and you, Professor, watch Tracy!"

"They can't jump out the windows," said Eve, practically, "they're too high. And if they could, they couldn't get in the tasseled room. Those windows won't open. And, too, I know the Professor won't let Mr. Tracy out of his sight, or *vice versa*. Rudolph, you tie your uncle, if he shows signs of roving."

Eve's strong nerves gave no sign of tension as she completed all her precautionary arrangements. She locked the doors that

shut off the servants' quarters; she locked the Landons in their room, she locked the door of the room that Norma and Vernie occupied, and at last, with various gay messages shouted at her through the closed portals, she went downstairs to keep her lonely vigil.

She did not undress, for she had no intention of sleeping that night. A kimono, and her hair comfortably in a long braid were her only concessions to relaxation.

She lay down on the hard old bed, and gazed about her. A single lamp lit the room, and she had a candle also, in case she desired to use it.

The light made strange shadows, the heavy, faded hangings seemed to sway and move, but whether they really did so or not, Eve couldn't determine. She got up and went to examine them. The feel of them was damp and unpleasant, they seemed to squirm under her hand, and she hastily dropped them and returned to the bed.

There was an uncanny, creepy atmosphere that disturbed her, in spite of her strong nerves and indomitable will.

She had locked the door, now she arose and took the key out and laid it on a table. She had heard that a key in a lock could be turned from the other side.

Then, on a sudden impulse, she put out the lamp, feeling utter darkness preferable to those weird shadows. But the darkness was too horrible, so she lighted the candle. It was not in the historic old brass candlestick, but in a gay affair of red china,

and the homely, cheap thing somewhat reassured her, as a bit of modernity and real life.

She listened for a long time, imagining sighs or sounds, which she could not be sure she really heard. The whispering aspens outside were audible, and their continued soughing was monotonously annoying, but not frightful, because she had accustomed herself to it.

At last, her over-wrought nerves wearied, her physical nature refused further strain, and Eve slept. A light, fitful sleep, interspersed with waking moments and with sudden swift dreams. But she kept fast hold of her perceptive faculties. If she slept and woke, she knew it. She heard the aspens' sounds, the hours struck by the great hall clock, and the sound of her own quick, short breathing.

Nothing else.

Until, just as the clock tolled the last stroke of four, she heard a low grating sound. Was some one at the door? She was glad she had taken out the key.

The candle still burned, but its tiny light rather accentuated than lifted the gloom of the shadowy room.

Slowly and noiselessly the door swung open, inward, into the room. Eve tried to sit up in bed, but could not. She felt paralyzed, not so much frightened, as numbed with physical dread.

And then, with a slow gliding motion, *something* entered,—something tall, gaunt and robed in long, pale-coloured draperies. It was unreal, shadowy in its aspect, it was only

dimly visible in the gloom, but it gave the impression of a frightened, furtive personality that hesitated to move, yet was impelled to. A soft moan, as of despair, came from the figure, and it put out a long white hand and pinched out the candle flame. Then, with another sigh, Eve could *feel*, in the utter black darkness that the thing was coming to her side.

With all her might she tried to cry out, but her vocal cords were dumb, she made no sound. But she felt,—with all her senses, she *felt* the apparition draw nearer. At her bedside it paused, she knew this, by a sort of sixth sense, for she heard or saw nothing.

Then, she was conscious of a faint odour of prussic acid, its pungent bitterness unmistakable, though slight.

And then, a tiny flame, as of a wick without a candle, flashed for a second, disappeared, and Eve almost fainted. She did not entirely lose consciousness, but her brain reeled, her head seemed to spin round and her ears rang with a strange buzzing, for in the instant's gleam of that weird light, she had seen the face of the phantom, and—it was the face of a skull! It was the ghastly countenance of a death's head!

Half conscious, but listening with abnormal sense, she thought she descried the closing of the door, but could hear no key turn.

The knowledge that she was alone, gave her new life. She sprang up, lighted the candle, lighted the lamp, and looked about. All was as she had arranged it. The door was locked, the key, untouched, upon the table. Nothing was disturbed, but Eve

Carnforth knew that her experience, whatever its explanation, had not been a dream.

When her senses had reeled, she had not lost entire control of them through her physical fear, she had kept her mental balance, and she *knew* that what her brain had registered had actually occurred.

Alert, she lay for a long time thinking it over. She felt sure there would be no return of the spectre,—she felt sure it had been a spectre,—and she was conscious of a feeling of curiosity rather than fright.

At last she rose, and unlocking the door, went out into the great hall. By the light of her lamp, she looked it over. The carved bronze doors between the enormous bronze columns, were so elaborately locked and bolted as to give almost the effect of a fortress.

The windows were fastened and some were barred. But all these details had been looked after in advance; Eve gazed at them now, in an idle quest for some hint of hitherto unsuspected ingress.

But there was none, and now the clock was striking five.

She went slowly upstairs, unlocked the various doors, without opening them, and then went to her own bedroom.

"What about it?" cried Norma, eagerly, running to Eve's room.

"A big story," Eve returned, wearily. "But I'll tell it to you all at once. I'm going to get some sleep. Wake me at eight, will you, Norma?"

Disappointed, but helpless, as Eve closed her door upon the would-be visitor, Norma went back and told Milly, who was waiting and listening.

"I don't like it," Norma said, "for by eight o'clock she can cook up a story to scare us all! I think two ought to sleep in that room at once."

"Go to bed," said Milly, sleepily. "And don't you suspect Eve Carnforth of making up a yarn or even dressing up the truth! She isn't that sort."

As to Eve's veracity, opinions were divided.

She told the whole story, directly after breakfast, to the whole group, the servants being well out of earshot.

She told it simply and straightforwardly, just as it had happened to her. Her sincerity and accurate statements stood a fire of questions, a volley of sarcastic comments and a few assertions of unbelief.

Professor Hardwick believed implicitly all she said, and encouraged her to dilate upon her experiences. But in nowise did she add to them, she merely repeated or emphasized the various points without deviation from her first narrative.

Norma and Braye went for a walk, and frankly discussed it.

"Of course, Eve colours it without meaning to," declared Braye; "it couldn't have happened, you know. We were all locked in, and Lord knows none of us could have put that stunt over even if we had wanted to."

"Of course not; that locking in business was unnecessary, but it does prove that no human agency was at work. That leaves only Eve's imagination—or—the real thing."

"It wasn't the real thing," and Braye shook his head. "There ain't no such animal! But Eve's imagination is—"

"No. Mr. Braye, you're on the wrong tack. Eve's imagination is *not* the sort that conjures up phantoms. Vernie's might do that, or Mrs. Landon's,—but not Miss Carnforth's. She is psychic,—I know, because I am myself—"

"Miss Cameron,—Norma,—" and Braye became suddenly insistent, "don't *you* sleep in that infernal room, will you? Promise me you won't."

"Why?" and the big blue eyes looked at him in surprise. "As Sentimental Tommy used to say, 'I would fell like to!' Why shouldn't I?"

"Oh, I don't want you to," and Braye looked really distressed. "Promise me you won't—please."

"Why do you care? 'Fraid I'll be carried off by the Shawled Woman?"

"Ugh!" and Braye shivered. "I can't bear to think of you alone down there. I beg of you not to do it."

"But that's what we came for. We're to investigate, you know."

"Well, then promise you won't try it until after I do."

"Trickster! And if you never try it, I can't!"

"You see through me too well. But, at least, promise this. If you try it, don't go alone. Say, you and Miss Carnforth go together—"

"Hello, people," and Vernie ran round a corner, followed more slowly by Tracy. "We've had a great little old climb! Hundreds of thousands of feet up the mounting side,—wasn't it, Mr. Tracy?"

"Thar or tharabouts," agreed Tracy, smiling at the pretty child.

"And Mr. Tracy is the delightfullest man! He told me all the names of the wild flowers,—weeds, rather,—there weren't any flowers. And oh, *isn't* it exciting about Eve's ghost! I'm going to ballyrag Uncle Gif till he lets me sleep in that room. He'll *have* to give in at last!"

"Don't, Vernie," begged Braye. "What possesses all you girls! I wish we'd never started this racket! But you mustn't do it, Kiddie, unless, that is, you go with somebody else. But not alone."

"Why, Cousin Rudolph, what are you afraid of? Are you a mollycoddle?"

"No, child, I'm afraid for you. A shock like that, even an imaginary fright, might upset your reason and—"

"Fiddle-de-dee! my reason is deeper rooted than that! Come on, Mr. Tracy, I'll race you to that big hemlock tree!"

The two started off, Vernie's flying legs gaining ground at first, over Tracy's steady well-trained running step.

CHAPTER VI
At Four o'Clock

THE game grew more absorbing. Most of the party managed to store up enough courage by day to last well into the darker and more mysterious hours. It was at four in the morning that manifestations were oftenest noticed. At that hour vague moanings and rustlings were reported by one or another of the interested investigators, but no human agency was found to account for these.

Many plans were tried for discovering the secret of the room with the tassels, but all scrutiny failed to show any secret panel or concealed entrance. Indeed, their measurings and soundings proved there could not possibly be any entrance to that room save the door from the hall.

Eve and Norma believed thoroughly in the actual haunt of the woman who had poisoned her husband. They had no difficulty in swallowing whole all the strange noises or sights and attributing them to supernatural causes.

Not so Gifford Bruce. He still held that it was all trickery, cleverly done by some of the party, but as this was so clearly impossible, his opinion carried no weight.

Professor Hardwick was open-minded, but exceedingly alert of observation and ready to suspect anybody who would give him the slightest reason to do so. Nobody did, however, and the weird sounds continued at intervals. The other men were

noncommittal, saying they hadn't yet sufficient data to base conclusions on.

Milly was nervous and hysterical, but controlled her feelings at Landon's plea, and awaited developments with the rest. Vernie was merely an excited child, gay with youthful spirits and ready to believe or disbelieve whatever the others did.

Soon after Eve's experience, which no one, unless Gifford Bruce, doubted, Professor Hardwick slept in the haunted room. He had no results of interest to report. He said he had lain awake for a few hours and then fell asleep not to waken until daylight. If the Shawled Woman prowled about, he did not see or hear her. This was disappointing, but Tracy tried with little better success. In the morning, after a wakeful but uneventful night, the clergyman found the old battered brass candlestick in the room.

It had not been there the night before, and he had locked the door as the others had done. This was inexplicable, but of slight interest compared to a real haunting.

"You might have made up a ghost story," Braye reproached him, "as Uncle Gifford did, and as Miss Carnforth—didn't!"

The last word was distinctly teasing and Eve frowned gaily at him, but did not defend herself. She knew her experience had occurred just as she had told it, and, deeply mystified, she was earnestly and eagerly awaiting more light.

One day Braye found it necessary to go down to New York for a couple of days on some business matters. Before leaving, he

made Vernie promise she would not sleep alone in the haunted room while he was gone.

"I forbid it, child," he said. "Uncle Gif is so easy-going that I've no doubt you could wheedle permission out of him, but I beg of you not to. You're too young to risk a nerve shock of that sort. If you want to try it with Miss Carnforth or Miss Cameron, all right, but not alone. Promise me, Flapper, and I'll bring you a pretty present from town day after to-morrow."

Vernie laughingly gave the required promise, but it did not weigh heavily on her conscience, for no sooner had Braye really gone, than she confided to Mr. Tracy her indecision regarding the keeping of her word.

"Of course you'll keep your promise," and Tracy regarded her seriously. "Nice people consider a spoken word inviolable. I know you, Vernie; you like to talk at random, but I think you've an honourable nature."

So Vernie said nothing more to him, but she confided in Eve Carnforth her intention of sleeping in the Tasseled Room that very night.

Eve did not discourage her, and promised to tell no one.

The plan was easily carried out. As it was understood no one was sleeping in the haunted room, no special precautions were taken, save the usual locking up against outside intruders. And after the great locks and bolts were fastened on doors and windows, it would have been a clever burglar indeed who could have effected an entrance to Black Aspens.

The evening had been pleasantly spent. Some trials of the Ouija board, a favourite diversion, had produced no interesting results, and rather early they all retired.

At midnight, Vernie softly rose, and went downstairs alone in the darkness. A night lamp in the upper hall gave a faint glimmer below stairs, but after the girl turned into the great hall the dark was almost impenetrable.

Feeling her way, she came to the door of the room, softly entered it and walked in. Passing her hands along the walls and the familiar furnishings she found the bed and lay down upon it. Her heart beat fast with excitement but not with fear. She felt thrills of hope that the ghost would appear and thrills of apprehension lest it should!

She had left the door to the hall open, and though it could scarcely be called light, there was a mitigation of the darkness near the door. A not unpleasant drowsiness overcame her, and she half slept, waking every time the clock struck in the hall.

At three, she smiled to herself, realizing that she was there, in the room with the tassels, and felt no fear. "I hope something comes at four,—" she thought sleepily, and closed her eyes again.

One—two—three—four—boomed the hall clock.

Vernie opened her eyes, only half conscious, and yet able to discern a strange chill in the air. Between her and the open door stood a tall gaunt shape, merely a shadow, for it was too dark to discern details. Her calm forsook her; she shivered violently,

unable to control her muscles. Her teeth chattered, her knees knocked together, and her hair seemed to rise from her head.

Yet she could make no sound. Vainly she tried to scream, to shriek,—but her dry throat was constricted as with an iron band.

Her eyes burned in their sockets, yet she was powerless to shut them. They seemed suddenly to possess an uncanny ability to pierce the darkness, and she saw the shape draw slowly nearer to her.

Clutching the bedclothing, she tried to draw it over her head, but her paralyzed arms refused to move. Nearer, slowly nearer, the thing came, and horror reached its climax at sight of the face beneath the sheltering shawl. It was the face of a skull! The hollow eye-sockets glared at her, and lifting a deathlike hand, with long white fingers, the spectre told off one, two, three, four! on the digits. There was no sound, but a final pointing of the fearsome index finger at the stricken girl, seemed a death warrant for herself.

The thing disappeared. Slowly, silently, as it had come, so it went. From nowhere to nowhere,—it evolved from the darkness and to the darkness returned.

Vernie didn't faint, but she suffered excruciatingly; her head was on fire, her flesh crept and quivered, she was bathed in a cold perspiration, and her heart beat madly, wildly, as if it would burst.

The vision, though gone, remained etched on her brain, and she knew that until that faded she could not move or speak.

It seemed to her hours, but at last the tension lessened a little. The first move was agony, but by degrees she changed her position a trifle and moistened her dry lips.

With the first faint glimmer of dawn, she dragged herself upstairs and crept into bed beside Eve Carnforth.

"Tell me," begged Eve, and Vernie told her.

"It was a warning," said the child, solemnly. "It means I shall die at four o'clock some morning."

"Nonsense, Kiddie! Now you've come through so bravely, and have such an experience to tell, don't spoil it all by such croaking."

"But it's true, Eve. I could see that awful thing's face, and it counted four, and then beckoned,—sort of shook its finger, you know, and pointed at me. And—oh, I hardly noticed at the time, but it carried a glass in its hand—it seemed to have two glasses —"

"Oh, come now, dearie, you're romancing. How could it have two glasses, when it was shaking its hand at you?"

"But it did, Eve. It had two little glasses, both in the same hand. I remember distinctly. Oh, every bit of it is printed on my brain forever! I wish I hadn't done it! Rudolph told me not to!"

A flood of tears came and Vernie gave way to great racking sobs, as she buried her face in the pillow.

"Yes, he was right, too, Vernie; but you know, he only wanted you not to try it because he feared it would upset your nerves. Now if you're going to square yourself with Mr. Braye, you can only do it, by not letting your nerves be upset. So brace up and

control them. Cry, dear, cry all you can. That's a relief, and will do you a heap of good. Then we'll talk it over, and by breakfast time you'll be ready to tell them all about it, and you'll be the heroine of the whole crowd. It's wonderful, Vernie, what you've got to tell, and you must be careful to tell it truly and not exaggerate or forget anything. Cry away, honey, here's a fresh handkerchief."

Eve's calm voice and matter-of-fact manner did much to restore Vernie's nerves, and as she looked around the rational, familiar room, bright with sunlight, her spirits revived, and she began to appreciate her rôle of heroine.

Her story was received with grave consideration. It was impossible to believe the honest, earnest child capable of falsehood or deceit. Her description was too realistic, her straightforward narrative too unshakable, her manner too impressively true, to be doubted in the least degree or detail.

Gifford Bruce laughed and complimented her on her pluck. Mr. Tracy reproved her for breaking her word to her cousin, but as he was in no way responsible for Vernie's behaviour, he said very little.

Landon scolded her roundly, while Milly said nothing at all.

The whole affair cast rather a gloom over them all, for it seemed as if the spectre had at last really manifested itself in earnest. An undoubted appearance to an innocent child was far more convincing than to a grown person of avowed psychic tendencies. Eve Carnforth might have imagined much of the story she told; her 'expectant attention' might have exaggerated

the facts; but Vernie's mind was like a page of white paper, on which the scene she passed through had left a clear imprint.

That night Vernie herself got out the Ouija board and asked Eve to help her try it.

"No," was the reply. "I'm too broken up. And, too, the people don't believe *me*. Get your uncle or Mr. Tracy or some truthful and honourable person to help you."

It embittered Eve that her earnestness and her implicit belief in the supernatural made it more difficult for the others to look upon her as entirely disingenuous. She resented this, and was a little morose in consequence. Norma Cameron, herself an avowed 'sensitive,' had had no spiritistic visitant in the haunted room, and Eve thought Norma had doubted her word.

At last after trying all the others that she wanted, Vernie persuaded good-natured Mr. Tracy to move Ouija with her, and the two sat down with the board between them.

Few and flippant messages were forthcoming, until, just as Vernie had laughingly declared she would throw the old thing out of the window, a startling sentence formed itself from the erratic dartings of the heart-shaped toy, and Vernie turned pale.

"Stop it!" ordered Tracy, "I refuse to touch it again!"

He removed his hands and sat back, but Vernie, glaring at the letters, held it a moment longer. "To-morrow! it says to-morrow!" she cried. "Oh, Eve, I told you so!"

"What, Vernie? What is it, dear?" and Eve Carnforth came over to the excited child.

"Ouija, Eve! Ouija said that to-morrow at four, two of us are to die! Oh, Eve, you know every death in this house has occurred at four o'clock in the morning! Mr. Stebbins said so. And now, two of us are to die to-morrow!"

"Nonsense!" cried Mr. Tracy, "don't listen to that rubbish! The Ouija ran off its track. Maybe Vernie pushed it,—maybe I did."

"Now, Mr. Tracy, I *didn't* push it, and you needn't try to make anybody think *you* did! You never'd push it to say a thing like that! Why, it spelled it all out as plain as day! Uncle Gifford, do you hear! Two of us to die to-morrow!" Vernie's voice rose to a hysterical shriek.

"Hush, Vernie! Hush, child. I'll take you away from here to-morrow. We ought never to have brought you," and Gifford Bruce glowered at the others as he clasped the sobbing child in his arms, and took her from the room.

"You're right," agreed Mr. Tracy, "and Braye was right. He said a fright or shock would upset that child's nerves completely. But she must have pushed the board herself. It flew round like lightning, and spelled out the message, just as she said. I tried to steer it off, but she urged against me. I felt her doing so. I don't mean she made up the message to create a sensation, but I think the ghost last night affected her as a warning, and her mind is so full of it, that she unconsciously or subconsciously worked up that 'message.' At any rate, I've had about enough of this, if she's to be here. It isn't right to frighten a child so, and Vernie is little more than a child."

"That's so," said Norma, thoughtfully. "I've had enough, too. If the rest of you want to stay on, I'll go down to New York to-morrow, and take Vernie to stay with me for a while. We'll go to the seashore, and I'll see to it that she has no psychic or supernatural experiences."

"Why, Norma," and Eve looked surprised, "I thought you were so interested in these things."

"So I am, but not to the extent of so affecting the nervous system of a sweet, innocent child, that it may result in permanent injury."

"She's all right," said Gifford Bruce, returning, alone. "It's hysteria. I think I'll take her back to town to-morrow or next day. There's something uncanny up here, that's certain. I didn't take any stock in the experiences of you people, but I can't disbelieve Vernie's story."

The party broke up and all went to their rooms. There was no volunteer to sleep in the haunted room that night, and every one felt a shivering dread of what might happen at four o'clock the next morning.

Not one admitted it, but every one secretly shuddered at thought of Ouija's message.

And when, as the hall clock rung out its four strokes the next morning, and nothing untoward happened, every one drew a long breath and soon went to sleep again, relieved, as of a heavy burden.

Gaily they gathered at breakfast, daylight and good cheer reviving their spirits.

"But Ouija is henceforth taboo," said Mr. Tracy, shaking his finger at the now laughing Vernie.

"For little girls, anyway," supplemented Eve.

"Little girls are taboo, also," declared Gifford Bruce. "I can't get off to-day, for I want to see Rudolph on his return, but to-morrow, I pack up my Vernie child and take her back to our own little old Chicago on the lake. These Aspens are too black for us!"

"Now, Uncle, I don't want to go," and Vernie pouted prettily. "And sumpum tells me I won't go," she added with a roguish glance at her uncle, whom she usually twisted round her rosy little finger.

But he gave her a grave smile in return, and the subject was dropped for the moment.

Soon after noon, Braye came up from the city, and listened, frowning, to the tales that were told him.

"You promised me, Vernie," he said, reproachfully.

"I know it, Cousin Rudolph, but you see, I've never kept a promise in my whole life,—and I didn't want to break my record!"

"Naughty Flapper! I won't give you the present I brought for you."

"Oh, yes you will," and so wheedlesome was the lovely face, and so persuasive the soft voice, that Vernie, after a short argument, seized upon a small jeweller's packet and unwrapped a pretty little ring.

"Angel Cousin," she observed, "you're just about the nicest cousin I possess,—beside being the only one!"

"Doubtful compliment!" laughed Braye. "Any way, you're the prettiest and naughtiest cousin *I* own! As a punishment for your disobedience I challenge you to a round with old Ouija to-night! I'll bet I can make it say something more cheerful than you wormed out of it last evening."

"All right, we'll try it," and Vernie danced gaily away to tease her uncle not to take her home.

A little later, Milly, as housekeeper, discovered some serious shortage in the commissariat department, and Braye offered to drive her over to East Dryden, marketing.

They started off, Milly calling back to Eve to preside at the tea-table, if she didn't return in time.

"All right," agreed Eve, though Vernie vociferously announced her intention of playing hostess in Milly's absence.

The shoppers had not returned when old Thorpe brought in the tea-tray.

"You can pour, Eve, and I'll pass the cakies," said Vernie, who was in high spirits, for she had partially persuaded her uncle to remain longer at Black Aspens. He was just phrasing certain strong stipulations on which his permission was to be based, when the tea things arrived.

They were, as usual, in the hall, for though they sometimes suggested the plan of having tea out of doors, there was no cheerful terrace, or pleasant porch. The hall, though sombre

and vast, had become more or less homelike by virtue of usage, so there they took their tea.

Mr. Tracy, always graceful in social matters, helped pass the cups and plates, for no one liked to have the old Thorpes about unnecessarily.

"No tea for me, please," declared Norma; "I think it upsets my nerves,—"

"And that is not the thing to do in *this* house," laughed Landon. "This is mighty good tea, though,—didn't know anybody could brew it as well as Milly. Congratulations, Eve."

"Thank you," and Eve's long lashes swept upward as she gave him a coquettish glance.

"Referring to that matter of which we were talking, Hardwick," Gifford Bruce began, "I—"

Even as he spoke, the clock chimed four, and, as always, they paused to count the long, slow strokes.

Then Bruce began again: "I think, myself—"

A strange change passed over his face. His jaw fell, his eyes stared, and then, his teacup fell from his hand, and he slumped down in an awful—a terrifying heap!

Landon sprang to his assistance, Norma ran to him, while Tracy, with a quick glance at Vernie, flew to the child's side.

"What is it?" he cried to her, "what's the matter, Vernie?" He slipped an arm round her, just as, with a wild look and a ringing shriek, the girl's head fell back and her eyes closed.

"Oh," cried Eve, "*what* has happened?"

"I don't know," and Tracy's voice shook. "Help me, Miss Carnforth—let us lay her on this sofa."

Between them they carried the girl, for she was past muscular effort, and as they placed her gently on the sofa her eyes fluttered, she gave a gasping sigh, and fell back, inert.

"Oh," cried Eve, "she isn't—she *isn't—oh*, it's just four o'clock!"

Landon ran to Vernie's side and felt of her heart.

"She is dead," he said, solemnly, his face white, his voice shaking; "and Gifford Bruce is dead, too. It is four o'clock!"

CHAPTER VII
The Mystery

IN the panic-stricken moments that followed the realization of the double tragedy, the natural characteristics of all those present showed themselves. Eve Carnforth, strong and calm, suddenly became self-appointed dictator.

"Lay Mr. Bruce flat on his back," she called out, as she darted upstairs for her room, and returned with smelling salts, ammonia and such things.

Tracy, also capable and self-possessed, took a vial from her and held it before the face of the stricken child, while others strove to bring back to consciousness the motionless figure of Gifford Bruce, now stretched on the floor.

"It's no use," declared Landon, flinging the beads of sweat from his forehead, "they are dead,—both of them. Oh, what *does* it mean?"

Norma sat in a big chair, her hands clutching its carved arms, and her face stony white. She was using all her will power to keep from utter collapse, and she couldn't understand how Eve could be so natural and self-possessed.

"Brace up, Norma," Eve admonished her; "here, take this salts-bottle. Now is no time to make more trouble!"

The brusque words had the effect of rousing Norma, and she forced herself to rise.

"What can I do?" she whispered.

"Do!" cried Eve, "there's everything to do! Some one telephone for a doctor!"

"I—can't," Norma moaned. "You do that, Professor,—won't you?"

"Oh, I can't!" and Hardwick fell limply into a chair. "I—I'm all upset—"

"Of course you are, Professor," said Tracy, kindly. "I'll telephone, Miss Carnforth. Do you know the village doctor's name? Of course,—it's too late—" he glanced at the two still forms, "but a physician must be summoned."

"No, I don't know any name,—call Thorpe, or Hester."

Tracy rang a bell and Thorpe came shuffling in.

At sight of the tragedy, he turned and ran, screaming. Hester came, and proved the more useful of the two. Her stolidity was helpful, and she told the doctor's name and number.

"Dead, ain't they?" she said, with a grieved intonation that robbed her words of curtness. "What happened to 'em?"

The simple question roused them all. What had happened? What had killed two strong, well, able-bodied people at the same moment, and that the very moment said to be fatal in that dread house?

"I believe," said the Professor, dropping his face in his hands, "I believe now in the supernatural. Nothing else can explain this thing."

"Of course not," and Eve solemnly acquiesced. "There is no possibility of anything else. What could kill them, like this, at once, and at four o'clock exactly, except a supernormal agent?"

"But that seems so impossible!" and Tracy's practical, matter-of-fact voice did indeed make it seem so.

"What else *is* possible?" broke in Landon. "It isn't suicide, it isn't murder. It isn't death from natural causes,—at least, it can't be in Vernie's case,—I suppose Mr. Bruce might have died from heart disease."

"That's why we want a doctor," said Eve. "We can judge nothing until we know the immediate cause of death."

"I wish we were in the city," Tracy said; "the doctor will be nearly an hour getting here, I suppose."

"Did you tell him all?" asked Eve.

"No, I didn't. It didn't seem wise to spread the news in that way. I told him to get here as soon as he possibly could,—that it was a matter of life and death."

"Which it certainly is," murmured Norma. "Oh, Eve, what do you really think?"

Eve Carnforth looked at the other girl. Eve, so poised and collected, strength and will power written in every line of her face,—Norma so fragile, and shaken by the awful scenes about her.

"I don't know what to think," Eve replied, slowly. "There's only one thing certain, Vernie received a warning of death,—and Vernie is dead. Mr. Bruce received no definite warning, that I know of, but he may have had one. You know, he said he was visited by the phantom, but we wouldn't believe him."

"That's so!" and Tracy looked up in surprise. "We never quite believed Mr. Bruce's statements, because he scorned all talk of

spirit manifestations. If he really did see the ghost that night that he said he did—"

"Of course he did," declared Eve. "*I* believed him all the time. I can always tell when any one is speaking the truth. It's part of my sensitive nature."

Wynne Landon stalked about the hall like a man in torment. "What shall I do with Milly?" he groaned. "She and Braye will be back soon,—any minute now. She mustn't see these—"

"They ought to be placed in some other room," said Eve, gently.

"One mustn't touch a dead body before—" began Professor Hardwick, but Tracy interrupted him. "That's in case of murder, Professor," he said; "this is a different matter. Whatever caused these deaths, it wasn't by the hand of another human being. If it was fright or nervous apprehension, those are to be classed among natural causes. I think we are wholly justified in moving the bodies."

After some discussion, Landon and the Professor agreed with Tracy, and with the help of Thorpe and Hester, the stricken forms were carried out of the hall, where the group so often forgathered.

"It is better," said Eve, "for we need this hall continually, and if we don't move them at once, the doctor may forbid it, when he comes."

By common consent, the body of Gifford Bruce was laid in the drawing room, on a large sofa, and Vernie's slender figure was reverently placed on the bed in the room with the tassels.

"No spirit shape can frighten her now," said Norma, weeping bitterly, as Thorpe and Hester carried the dead girl in. Then both doors were closed, shutting off the silent figures, and those who were left felt a vague sense of relief.

"Now we can break it to Milly more gently," said Eve. "Clear away that broken cup, Hester, and make some fresh tea, I'm sure we all need it."

On the great rug the damp spot remained where the spilled tea had fallen, and Eve ordered a smaller rug placed over it.

Braye and Milly came in laughing.

"We've bought out the whole of East Dryden!" Milly exclaimed, "and what do you think? We found some fresh lobsters, still alive and kicking,—and we commandeered them at once. What's the matter with you people? You look solemn as owls!"

"Come up to your room, Milly, to take off your wraps," and Landon took her arm to lead her away.

"Nonsense, Wynne, I'll throw them off down here. I'm thirsty for tea."

"No; come on, dear. Come with me."

Awed at his tone, Milly went with him, and they disappeared up the staircase.

Then Professor Hardwick told Braye what had happened. The others had begged the Professor to do this, and in a very few words the tale was told.

"It can't be!" and Braye rose and walked up and down the hall. "I wish I had been here! Oh, forgive me, all of you, I know you

did all you could,—but—restoratives—"

"We did," said Eve, "I ran for sal volatile and such things, but you don't understand,—it was instantaneous,—wasn't it, Mr. Tracy?"

"It was," replied Tracy, gravely. "Mr. Bruce was speaking, naturally and normally. He paused when the clock struck,—we 'most always do, you know, it's a sort of habit."

"We have to, really," said Norma. "That clock strikes so loudly, one can't go on talking."

"And then," began the Professor, "he was talking to me, you know, and I was looking straight at him, his face changed in an instant, his fingers spread, as if galvanized, his teacup fell from his hand, and in a moment, he was gone! Yes, dead in a second, I should say."

"And—Vernie?" Braye spoke with difficulty.

"I chanced to be looking at Vernie," said Mr. Tracy. "The outcry concerning Mr. Bruce made us all look toward him, and then, a sudden sound from Vernie drew my attention to her. She gasped, and her face looked queer,—sort of drawn and gray,—so I sprang to her side, and held her up, lest she fall. She was standing, looking at Mr. Bruce, of course. I felt her sway, her head fell back, and then Miss Carnforth came to my assistance, and we laid her quickly down on the sofa. In an instant, the child was dead. It is incredible that it should have been a case of sudden fright that proved fatal, and yet, what other theory is there? It couldn't be heart disease in a child of sixteen!"

"No," mused Braye, "and yet, what could it have been? I won't subscribe to any supernatural theory now! It's too absurd!"

"It's the only thing that isn't absurd!" contradicted Eve. "Remember, Rudolph, Vernie had the warning—"

"Warning be hanged!" cried Braye, explosively.

"But think," went on Eve, gently, "the phantom told Vernie she would die at four o'clock—"

"Four o'clock in the morning, Vernie said! If I had thought of four in the afternoon, I wouldn't have gone out!"

"Nobody knows that the message said four in the morning. Vernie told me about it many times, and she only said *four*. You know, the phantom spoke no word, it merely designated by its fingers,—one, two, three, four! Also, Vernie said it carried two glasses of poison."

"But *they* weren't poisoned!"

"No; that was merely the symbol of death. Also, Rudolph, remember the Ouija board said two would die at four. You can't get away from these things!"

"That confounded Ouija performance was on one of the nights I was in New York! I wish I hadn't gone! But Vernie promised me she wouldn't sleep in that room. I was a fool to believe her. You see, Eve, I feel a sort of responsibility for the child. Uncle Gif was so easy-going and indulgent,—he was no sort of a guardian for her, now she was growing up. I planned to have her put under the care of some right kind of a woman this fall, and brought up properly."

"I know it, Rudolph; you were very fond of her."

"Not only that, but I appreciated what she needed, and I meant to see that she got it. Oh, Eve, I can't realize this thing."

Doctor Wayburn came in. It was plain to be seen the man was scared. In his years of country practice he had never run up against anything tragic or thrilling before, and he was overwhelmed. With trembling step he entered the room of death, and first made examination of the body of Gifford Bruce. It did not take long. There was no apparent cause for death. No symptoms were present of any fatal disease, nor, so far as he could see, of any poison or wound of any sort.

"I cannot say what an autopsy may divulge," declared the frightened practitioner, "but from this superficial examination, I find no cause of dissolution."

Then he crossed the hall, to the room with the tassels.

Braye followed him in, Eve also. The Professor and Tracy stood in the doorway, but Norma remained in the hall, her face buried in some sofa cushions.

"No apparent cause," the Doctor repeated. "This child was in perfect health; I should say fright *might* have killed her, but it doesn't seem credible. I know of no cause of any sort, that could bring about death in an instant of time, as you report."

"Maybe not an instant," corrected the Professor, carefully. "As I look back, I should judge there was at least a half a minute between Mr. Bruce's first symptom of unease, and his falling to the floor."

"So with Vernie," said Eve, thoughtfully. "I saw Mr. Tracy go quickly toward her; I followed immediately, and I'm sure there was nearly a half minute, but not more, before she gasped and died."

"It's hard to judge time on such occasions," said the Doctor, looking sharply at Eve.

"I know it, but I was very conscious of it all, almost clairvoyantly so, and I can assure you it was not longer than a half minute in either case, between the state of usual health and death itself. Is there any cause or agent that will work as quickly as that?"

"I know of none," replied Doctor Wayburn, positively.

"There is none," Eve assured him. "These deaths were caused by supernatural means, they were the vengeance of certain Powers of Darkness."

"Oh, come now, Eve," expostulated Braye, "don't get off that stuff to the Doctor. Keep that for our own circle. You know these fatalities *couldn't* have been caused by a ghost!"

"What, then?"

"I don't know. Fright, perhaps, or over-apprehension because of the warnings. Auto-suggestion, if you like, and so indirectly the result of the spooks, but not the direct work of a disembodied spirit."

"It *was*, all the same!" and Eve left the room and went to sit by Norma.

But the girls were not in sympathy. Their conversation resulted in disagreement, and, at last, in Norma's bursting into

tears and running upstairs.

She sought Milly, and found her prostrated by Landon's news. But she was trying to be brave, and earnestly endeavouring to preserve her self-control.

"I know every one thinks I'll go to pieces," she said, pathetically, "and make more trouble for you all,—but I won't. I've promised Wynne I'll be brave and if I can't keep quiet and composed, I'll stay in my room, and not upset the crowd."

"You're all right, Milly," Norma reassured her, "you let yourself go all you want to. Don't overdo your restraint. I'll look after you."

"Yes, do, Norma. Don't let Eve come near me. I can't stand her!"

"Why? You mustn't be unjust to Eve. She behaved splendidly at that awful time."

"Yes, I know. But if it hadn't been for Eve we never would have come up here at all."

"Oh, Milly, that isn't fair! We all agreed to come here. It wasn't Eve's doing any more than mine!"

"Yes, it was. But, look here, Norma, tell me truly. What do *you* think killed Mr. Bruce and Vernie?"

"I don't know, Milly, dear. You know I do believe in psychics and in spiritism and in the return to earth of the souls of people who have died, but—I *can't* believe that any such spirit would kill an innocent child, or a fine old man. I can't *believe* it!"

"But why not, Norma? If you believe in the return to earth of good spirits, why not bad spirits, as well? And if so, why couldn't they kill people, if they want to?"

"You sound logical, Milly, but it's absurd."

"No, it isn't. You and Eve believe in good spirits and in their power to do good. Why not, then, in bad spirits and their power to do evil?"

"Let up, Milly," begged Landon, who stood near by. "She's been going on like that, Norma, ever since I told her. Can't you explain to her—"

"Explain what?"

"Lord! *I* don't know! But make her see how impossible it is that the ghost of that woman who killed her husband here so long ago, should have any reason to do away with two modern present-day people!"

"But I *want* to think so, Wynne," and Milly's eyes stared with a peculiar light. "I'd rather think they were killed by that ghost than by a person,—wouldn't you?"

"What do you mean, Milly? Murdered?"

"Yes, Norma. That's what it must have been, if not spirits. They had no mortal disease, either of them."

"Don't mention that before any one else," admonished Norma, very seriously. "There are other explanations, Milly. Many deaths have been brought about by sudden fright or by continuous apprehension of imaginary danger. Vernie had been warned twice. True, I didn't think of four in the afternoon, but doubtless she did, and maybe, seeing the sudden attack of Mr. Bruce, so startled her that she thought of the four o'clock doom and gave way herself."

"She might give way to the extent of fainting, or a fit of hysterics," admitted Milly, "but not to the extent of dropping dead! It's unthinkable,—it's unbelievable—"

"It's almost unbelievable that they should *be* dead," Norma said, softly, "but as to how they died, let's not speculate, dear. I suppose we must have a doctor up from New York,—what do you think, Mr. Landon?"

"Eh?—oh, I don't know,—I'm sure I don't know."

"But you'll have to take charge, won't you?" asked Norma. "You two are really the heads of this house—"

"All I want is to get away," moaned Milly. "When can we go, Wynne?"

"I don't know, dear. Say, Norma, won't you take Milly down to-night? I can't leave, of course, but I daren't keep her here, lest she go to pieces. You take her home,—there's a train in about an hour."

"Oh, I can't. I want to stay here. Send Eve,—no, she's no good,—perhaps Mr. Tracy will take Milly down. He's awfully kind, and ready to do anything."

As Milly declared herself now willing, the three went downstairs. They found the others in the hall, the Doctor still there, and the tea things still about. Norma gave Milly some tea, and took some herself.

"I'll have to call in the coroner," Doctor Wayburn was saying; "it isn't apparently a murder, and yet it's a mysterious death,—they both are. Yes, the county physician must be summoned."

The Doctor had gotten over the first panic of surprise, and began to feel a sense of importance. Such a case had never come near him before, and the whole affair gave him a pleasant feeling of responsibility and foreshadowed his prominence in the public eye.

The suggestion of a coroner was resented by all who listened, but the Doctor's word was law in the case, so they unwillingly consented.

"I think I'd better go down to New York to-night," said Braye. "There are so many things to see to, so many people to notify, the reporters to look after, and—undertaking arrangements to be made. Unless you want to go, Wynne?"

"No," said Landon, "it's better for you, Rudolph. But I wish you'd take Milly. Take her to her mother's and let her get out of this atmosphere. Will you go, Milly?"

"I did want to, Wynne, when I was upstairs. But, now, with people all about,—if Norma will stay here, too, I'd rather stay with you. When are *you* going down, Wynne?"

"I don't know, dear. We'll have to see how things turn out. Well, you go ahead, Rudolph, you'll have to hustle to get over to the train. And there are a few matters I wish you'd look after for me."

The two men went off to discuss these matters, and then Doctor Wayburn, who had been telephoning, announced that the coroner could not come until the next day, as he was in another township attending to some duties.

"And I'm glad of it," said Eve, "for we've had enough excitement for one day."

And so, by ten or eleven o'clock, the house was locked up and the members of the household gone to bed, all except old Thorpe, who sat in the great hall, with the two doors open into the rooms where the still, tragic figures lay. Before him, on a table, Hester had placed coffee and sandwiches, and the old man sat, brooding on the awful events of the afternoon.

CHAPTER VIII
By What Means

The night was full of restlessness. Tracy and Professor Hardwick, in their adjoining rooms, were the only ones in the wing that had the night before also housed Braye and Gifford Bruce.

"Shall we leave the door between open?" Tracy asked, more out of consideration for the Professor's nerves than his own.

"Yes, if you will. And don't go to bed yet. I can't sleep, I know, and I must discuss this thing with somebody, or go mad!"

"All right, sir," and Tracy took off his coat and donned an old-fashioned dressing-gown.

Hardwick smiled. "That's the first ministerial garb I've seen you wear," he said. "I'd pick that up for a dominie's negligé every time!"

"I'm rather attached to the old dud," and Tracy patted it affectionately. "Queer, how one comes to love a worn garment. No, I don't wear clerical togs when off on a vacation. I used to, till some one told me it cast a restraint over the others, and I hate to feel I'm doing that."

"You'd never do that, my friend. You've a natural tact that ought to carry you far toward general popularity. But, tell me, as man to man, how do you size up this awful mystery?"

"I don't know, Professor. At times my mind's a blank,—and then, I get a hint or,—well, I can't call it a suspicion,—but a

thought, say, in one direction, and it's so fearfully absurd, I discard it at once. Then comes another idea, only to be dismissed like the first. What do you think?"

"I am a complete convert to the supernatural. You know, Sir Oliver Lodge and many other scientists only believed after they had had undeniable personal experience. Now, here were warnings,—definite, positive prophecies, and they were fulfilled. What more can any one ask?"

Tracy mused over this. "I know that," he said, at last, "but I can't quite swallow it whole, like that. Do you mean there was no physical cause? Such as fright, expectant attention,—"

"Expectant attention is a fine phrase,—much like auto-suggestion. They are all right as far as they go, but they can't go to the extent of killing people. Then again, suggest even a theory, even a possible means of the death of those two by any human agency. Murder is out of the question,—suicide even more so. And they had no desire to end their lives. A young girl, happily looking forward to gaiety and pleasure,—a man in the prime of life, hale, rich, prosperous—no, they had no wish to die!"

"True enough; but I can't quite see it. Why did the spirits want to kill them? if spirits did kill them?"

"For interfering with this haunted house,—in a frivolous and flippant way. I've always heard that departed souls bitterly resent scoffing, or merely curious investigation."

"But why choose those two? Or Vernie, anyway? Perhaps Mr. Bruce was needlessly sarcastic and sceptical."

"So was the child—"

"Oh, but in such an innocent, harmless way! However, Professor, I've nothing to offer in place of your argument. My creed does not admit of my subscribing to your theory, but I confess I'm unable to suggest any other. As you say, it couldn't have been suicide, and there's no possibility of foul play."

The two men talked on, or sat in silent thought, far into the night. The clock struck twelve before they at last retired, leaving open their communication door, and securely locking their hall doors.

Less than an hour later, a slender white-robed figure tiptoed from one of the bedrooms and looked over the banisters. Peering down through the darkness, the dim outline of old Thorpe's form was visible. He was huddled in his chair, his head fallen forward on the table. Softly returning to her room for a wrap, Eve again stealthily came to the staircase, and sat down on the uppermost step.

Later still, another door silently opened, and a pair of surprised blue eyes saw Eve sitting there. Suppressing a startled exclamation, Norma scurried back to her room, but Eve did not hear her.

Milly was wakeful and restless. Several times she declared she heard sounds, but when Wynne wanted to go and investigate, she refused to let him do so.

The house surely seemed haunted. The aspens brushed against the windows with their eternal soughing, their leaves whispering,—hissing creepy secrets, and their branches tapping

eerily on the panes. The halls were full of shadows, vague, indistinct, fading to nothingness.

At four o'clock the great clock tolled the hour, and every one in the house heard it. No one was asleep, every heart was beating fast, every eye wide open, every nerve tense.

But nothing happened; no shriek rent the silence, no unusual or terrifying sound was heard.

Relieved, some went to sleep again, some tossed restlessly on their pillows until rising time.

At breakfast all looked haggard and worn. The day was cool and pleasant, the dining room bright with sunshine, and old Hester's viands most appetizing.

Thorpe had closed the doors of the rooms given over to the presence of death, and as the various members of the party came down the staircase quick apprehensive glances were followed by a look of relief.

Elijah Stebbins came while breakfast was in progress, and at Milly's invitation took a seat at the board.

"Well," he said heavily, "you folks wanted spooks, I hope you're satisfied."

"Don't use that tone, Mr. Stebbins," Landon reproved him. "A dreadful thing has happened. I cannot think it is by supernatural causes nor can I see any other explanation. But that is no reason for you to speak flippantly of our investigations of your so-called haunted house."

"No offence meant," and Stebbins cringed. "But I'm thinkin' you folks had better go away from here, or there's no tellin' what might happen."

"Do you know anything about the mystery?" Professor Hardwick shot out the question so suddenly that Stebbins jumped.

"No, sir, of course I don't, sir! How could I?"

"Then why do you warn us off the premises?"

"I don't exactly do that, but I'd think you'd reason for yourselves that what happens once can happen ag'in."

The dogged look on the man's face seemed portentous of evil, and Milly began to cry.

"Oh, take me home, Wynne," she begged; "I don't want to stay here!"

"Come with me, Milly," said Eve, and rising, she led Milly from the room.

It was shortly after that the coroner arrived.

"I don't want to see that man," said Stebbins, "him and me ain't good friends," and rising quickly, the owner of the house fled toward the kitchen quarters, and spent the rest of the morning with the Thorpes out there.

Doctor Crawford, the county physician and coroner, was a man of slow speech and dignified manner. He was appalled by the circumstances in which he found himself, and a little frightened at the hints he had heard of ghostly visitations.

Indeed, that had been the real reason for his delay in arriving, —he had not been willing to brave the darkness of the night

before. This was his secret, however, and his excuse of conflicting duties had been accepted.

The whole party gathered in the hall to hear what the newcomer had to say.

Eve and Milly returned, the latter, quivering and tearful, going straight to her husband's side, and sitting close to him.

Norma was pale and trembling, too, and Tracy's watchful eye regarded her sympathetically, as he led her to a seat.

Eve, self-reliant and calm, flitted about incessantly. She went to the kitchen and talked over household matters with Hester, for Milly was unable to do this. Then, returning, Eve went into the drawing room, and after a few moments returned, closing the door again after her. Then she stepped into the room with the tassels. She was there longer, but at last came out, and locking the door behind her, retained the key. No one noticed this but Norma, and she kept her own counsel, but she also kept a watchful eye on Eve.

Even before he went to look at the bodies of the two victims of the tragedy, Doctor Crawford asked some questions.

His slowness was maddening to the alert minds of his listeners, but he methodically arrived at the facts of the case.

"I am told by my colleague, Doctor Wayburn," he said, "that there is no mark or sign on the remains to indicate the cause of death. There will, of course, be need of autopsies, but for that I will await Doctor Wayburn's return. He will be here shortly. Meantime, I will inquire concerning this strange information I

have received, hinting at a belief in—ahem—in spiritualism, by some of the people here present. Is such belief held, may I ask?"

"Perhaps belief is too strong a word," the Professor volunteered, as no one else spoke, "but I may tell you that we came here to this house for the purpose of investigating the truth of the story that the house is haunted."

"And have you made such investigations?"

"We have tried to do so. The results have been mysterious, startling and now,—tragic,—but I cannot say we have proved anything, except that supernatural influences have most assuredly been at work."

"I am not willing to accept such an explanation of two sudden deaths," Crawford said, in his dignified way, "at any rate, not without a most exhaustive investigation into the possibility of their having been brought about by natural agencies. Let me take up first the case of Mr. Bruce. Was this gentleman in robust health?"

"Entirely so," said Landon, "so far as we know. It is not inconceivable that he had some heart trouble or other malady that was not noticeable, but of that I cannot say positively. It seems to me, Doctor, you would better look at him, you might note some symptom that would enlighten you."

Crawford shuddered perceptibly, but tried to hide his disinclination. Though accustomed to gruesome sights, his dread of the supernatural was such that he feared the proposed examination. However, ashamed of his hesitation, he rose, and asked to be shown the body of Gifford Bruce.

Landon started to officiate, but Milly's detaining hand held him back; the Professor made no move, but Eve and Tracy started simultaneously to rise.

"I'll go," said Eve, a little officiously, and Tracy sat down again.

She led the way to the big drawing room, where the remains of Gifford Bruce lay, and stood by while Doctor Crawford looked down at the still, white face.

A long time they stood there, no word being spoken. Then Eve said softly, "Don't let your disbelief in supernatural powers blind you to their possible reality. There are many matters yet unknown and spiritism is one of them. Remember that we who are here gathered are sensitives and psychics. We are prepared for and expect experiences not vouchsafed to less clairvoyant natures,—though we did not look for *this!* But I beg of you, sir, to realize that there are things of which you have no cognizance, that yet are real and effective."

Doctor Crawford looked at the speaker. In the partially darkened room, Eve's strange eyes glittered with an uncanny light. Her face was pale, and her red hair like a flame aureole. She took a slow step nearer to the doctor, and he recoiled, as from a vampire.

"You are afraid!" she said, and her tone was exultant. "Do not be afraid,—the phantasms will not hurt you if you do your duty. Unless you do your duty—" she stretched her hand toward him, and again he drew away, "the phantasms will *haunt* you—*haunt* you—*haunt* you!"

Her voice fell to the merest whisper, but it thrilled through the room like a clarion note to the shocked ears of the listening man.

Against his will her eyes held his; against his will, without his volition, he whispered, "What is my duty?"

"To declare,—to declare in accordance with your own conviction, in proof of your own belief,—that these two deaths were the direct result of a supernatural power. What power, you know not, but you do know—remember, you *do* know, that no mortal hand brought the tragedy about, either the hands of the victims themselves or of any one else."

Fascinated, frightened, Crawford stared at this strange woman. He had never before encountered such a face, such a sinuous, serpentine form, a personality that seemed to sway his very being, that seemed to dominate and control his whole will power, his whole brain power.

"Don't misunderstand me," Eve went on, "don't think for a moment, I am advising you wrongly, or with intent to deceive. Only, I see you know nothing of occult phenomena, and moreover, you are even ignorant of your own ignorance of them. Therefore, seeing, too, your quick appreciation and perceptive faculty, I warn you not to ignore or forget the fact that these things exist, that unseen powers hold sway over us all, and they *must* be reckoned with."

The flattery was subtle. More than the words, Eve's glance implied a keen apprehension on the part of the doctor, which,

as he didn't possess it, seemed a desirable thing to him, and he gladly assumed that he had it.

"And now," Eve said, as they left the room, "do you want to go to the other room—the room with the tassels?"

"No—please, not now," and Crawford shuddered, for he had heard much of that room. Also, he was desirous of getting back to more normal associates than this strange being, and he resolved to leave the examination of the other victim until the return of his fellow physician, who at least was practical, and an unbeliever in spooks.

Shaken by the whole episode, Doctor Crawford concealed his disquiet by a manner even more slow and deliberate than usual. He said no word of Gifford Bruce, but announced his desire to ask a few general questions concerning practical matters.

"Where is your home, Mr. Landon?" he inquired, and then asked the same question of each.

He learned that they were all residents of New York City, except Mr. Tracy, who had lived in Philadelphia, but was contemplating a move to New York.

"I have had a call to a pastorate there," Tracy stated, "and it seems advisable to me to accept it."

"Mr. Bruce lived in Chicago, did he not?" went on Crawford, "and Miss Reid, also?"

"Yes," said Landon, "but Miss Reid had been at school in Connecticut for the last three years. She was graduated in June, and her uncle and guardian, Mr. Bruce, came East for the

occasion. They concluded to spend the summer with us, intending to return to Chicago next month."

"Mr. Bruce was a wealthy man?" inquired the questioner.

"Yes;" answered Landon, "not a financial magnate, but worth at least two million dollars."

"And who are his heirs?"

The question fell like a bombshell. It had not been thought of, or at least not spoken of, by any of the party. The bareness of it, the implication of it, gave a shock, as of a sudden accusation.

"I hadn't thought of that," Wynne Landon said, slowly.

"But you know?" queried Crawford.

"Of course I know. Unless Gifford Bruce left a contradictory will, his estate must revert to Rudolph Braye, the son of Mr. Bruce's half-brother—"

"Why, Wynne," interrupted Milly, "you're a cousin."

"I am," and Landon flushed unaccountably, "but I'm a second cousin. Braye would inherit, unless a will made other proviso."

"Where is Mr. Braye?"

"He went to New York last evening and has not yet returned."

"You expect him soon?"

"This afternoon, probably. Of course, he has realized that he is the heir of a great fortune, but naturally he would not discuss it last evening, when we were all so alarmed and excited over the awfulness of the situation."

"Was Mr. Braye present at the time of the—tragedy?"

"No;" Landon stopped to think. "He wasn't. Where was he?"

"He was with me," said Milly. "We went in his car to East Dryden. We went to the markets and did some other shopping at the stores."

"And when you returned it was—all over?" Doctor Crawford looked gravely at her.

"Yes," said Milly, "we were both away, and oh, I am so glad! I couldn't have stood it!"

She broke down and sobbed in her husband's arms, but Crawford went on asking questions.

"The autopsy will show," he said, "but I will ask if any of you can show cause to suspect that a poison of any sort could have been administered to the victims of this disaster."

"Not possibly," said Professor Hardwick. "We were at tea, and had all been served from the same teapot and from the same plates of cakes. I can affirm this, for I've thought over every moment of the occasion. Mr. Bruce had taken part of his tea, and had eaten part of his cake,—"

"Are you sure of this?" the coroner interrupted.

"I am sure that he sat next to me, that he was talking to me, and that he received his tea at the same time I did. We sat stirring our cups, and nibbling our cake as we discussed a matter in which we were both interested. Less than a half minute before that man died, he was as well as he had ever been. The scene is perfectly before my eyes. He held his cup and saucer in one hand, his spoon in the other,—when I saw his eyes open queerly, his face change to a clayey gray, and his fingers relaxed, letting his cup fall to the floor. I set down my

cup quickly and sprang toward him, but in an instant it was all over."

A hush fell on the group as all remembered the details, so exactly as the Professor had related them.

"And the young lady," said Crawford, at last, rousing himself from thought, "did she too drink tea?"

"No," said Eve Carnforth, musingly. "I remember I was just fixing Vernie's tea. She liked it sweet, and I was adding a lump of sugar when the commotion began."

"I noticed Miss Reid first, I think," offered Tracy; "at least, I happened to look toward her when Mr. Bruce fell forward in his chair. She made a slight sound, as of horror, and when I glanced her way, she looked so stunned I thought she was going to collapse, so I stepped across toward her. As I did so, she looked suddenly very strange, and I feared she was ill,—aside from her shock at sight of Mr. Bruce. I grasped her by the shoulders just as she was about to fall. She cried out as if in pain, and then Miss Carnforth came to my assistance, and we laid the child on that sofa. In an instant, she, too, was gone."

"She had taken no tea?"

"No," said Eve, positively. "Nor any cakes. As a rule, the elders were served first and Vernie last. So there is no chance of there having been poison in the tea or cakes,—nor could it be possible, anyway, as we all ate them,—didn't we?"

Every one present affirmed that they had partaken of the tea and the cakes, and declared they were both harmless and just such as they had had served every afternoon since their arrival.

"That settles that point, at any rate," and the coroner nodded his head. "There can be no question of poison after what you've told me. Unless, either or both of them took poison themselves or gave it to the other intentionally."

CHAPTER IX
Conflicting Theories

IN the kitchen the discussion was going on in less guarded terms.

"It's murder," Thorpe declared flatly. "No spooks ever killed off those two people in a minute, just like that!"

"Murder, your grandmother!" snorted Stebbins. "Who done it, and how? I ask you that! Those folks came up here to hunt ghosts, and I should say they found 'em, good and plenty! You know's well's I do, this house has always been ha'nted, ever since that woman killed her husband in that very room where the little girl's lyin' now. I wouldn't go in that there room for a fortune, I wouldn't!"

"Now Eli, don't be foolish," and Thorpe shook his head. "How could a spook kill two folks at onct,—right out in the open, as you may say?"

"For that matter, how could anybody murder two people at once? Nobody was around but their own crowd, and that lot of people ain't for murderin' each other! I know that!"

"It was spooks," declared Hester, with an air of settling the matter; "I've smelled 'em of late. That smell of bitter almonds is been in the air a heap, and I ain't had none for flavourin' or anything. Land, I'd never flavour a cake with that! I put vanilla even in my 'Angel Food.'"

"I've smelled it too," spoke up Nannie, a helper of the older woman's; "when I've been a-dustin' round in that there ha'nted room, I've smelled it—not strong, you know, but jest a faint whiff, now'n then. I skittled out 's fast's I could, I kin tell you!"

"Nope, you're all wrong," insisted old Thorpe. "'Tain't spooks, it's murder. That's what it is."

"Who done it, then?" demanded his wife.

"That I dunno. But I have my s'picions. How,—I dunno, either. But that's neither here nor there. Murder's been done, but I'll bet that mutton-headed Crawford ain't got brains enough to see it."

"He ain't got brains enough to go in when it rains," agreed Stebbins, "but you're 'way off, Thorpe, a surmisin' murder. Why, jest f'r instance, now, how *could* it 'a' been done?"

"Now how can I tell that!" Thorpe spoke with fine scorn. "I don't know all the goin's on of them hifalutin folks, but if you'd heard 'em talkin' 's much as I have, you'd know that they're up to lots of things such as us ignorant people don't know nothin' about."

"They do talk awful hifalutin," corroborated Hester. "I've heard 'em say things that hadn't no meanin' whatsoever to me, and yet they was plain English too."

"Well, if you ask me," and Thorpe looked important, "I'd jest say keep your eye on one of them women."

"You mean that red-headed varmint, I know," said his wife. "Well, she's a handful, all right, but I don't believe she'd go so far's to kill anybody."

"You don't, don't you? Well, she'd go just so far as there was any goin' at all,—an' then she'd go right on. Oh, I kin read character," and Thorpe plumed himself so evidently on his mental powers that Stebbins snorted outright.

"You're, a hummer, you are! I s'pose you're clairvoyant, yourself! Well, let me advise you to keep your trap shut about Miss—that lady you referred to. This is my house, and those are my tenants, and I won't stand any talk from *you* about 'em."

"That's right, Thorpe," admonished his wife. "Mr. Stebbins, he's right. An' he's right about the ghosts, too. Why, I happen to know that the spooks warned that little Reid girl she'd die at four o'clock, and die she did, jest at four! Can you beat it? Spooks? Why, of course it was spooks! What else?"

"Yes, and the message was that two of 'em 'd die, and two of 'em did," added Stebbins. "How could any mortal human bein' bring that about? I ask you?"

"Land! I don't know! I told you I didn't. But," and Thorpe wagged his head positively, "it wasn't spooks."

The same questions were being discussed in the hall by the ones more intimately interested.

Doctor Wayburn had arrived, and he and Crawford were shut in the drawing room endeavouring to wrest from the unknown, the secret of Gifford Bruce's death.

The little group, still gathered in the hall, were talking earnestly of the immediate future.

"It's so pathetic," Norma was saying, "that there are so few to mourn for poor little Vernie. That child had actually no relatives but her uncle and Mr. Braye."

"Wynne is a sort of a cousin, too," put in Milly, "and indeed, Norma, I feel as sorry as if Vernie had been my own sister."

"Oh, I don't mean that,—of course, we all feel that way. But, she was so alone in the world. Mr. Braye is terribly broken up. He loved her—"

"Not only loved her," said Eve, "but he was ambitious for her. He wanted her put in care of a capable woman this fall, and brought up properly. Mr. Bruce was no sort of a guardian for the child—I mean he was all right, of course, as a legal guardian, but he was no man to have charge of her social and home life."

"He knew that," said Landon, "he told me he meant to have Vernie properly chaperoned and all that, this winter. She was a dear kiddie."

"Oh, she was," and Norma wept afresh.

"I am a complete convert to spiritualism, now," said the Professor, gravely. "I've thought over these things very deeply, I've considered every possible aspect of the case, and there is no explanation of those two mysterious deaths, except supernormal forces. It is no use to shirk the supposition of murder, indeed we must consider it very carefully, but it is out of the question. Nobody could have compassed those two deaths in an instant of time, however secret or subtle the methods. Do you all agree?"

"Of course," said Eve, positively, and Tracy added, "That is undeniable, Professor, foul play *was* impossible. But, moreover, there was no one here present but our own party. I can't let the implication pass that it could have been in the heart of any one of us—"

"Nonsense!" interrupted Hardwick, "that's absurd, Mr. Tracy. When I speak of murder, it is in the abstract, and because it is right that we should consider the matter from every angle. We must even think of suicide, and of—"

"Suicide is as absurd as murder," said Landon, indignantly. "But what other atrocity had you in mind?"

"Don't lose your temper, please," the Professor said, mildly. "I am obliged to preserve an impersonal attitude, or I can't think at all! The other thought is, that one of the victims killed himself *and* the other one."

"Please, Professor," said Eve, "at least confine yourself to rational common sense. But since you raise this absurd theory, let's settle it once and for all. Could Mr. Bruce have willingly killed himself and Vernie?" she asked of them all.

"No!" replied Landon. "Mr. Bruce was fond of life and he adored that child! Cut that out!"

"Then," pursued Eve, "could Vernie have killed herself and her uncle?"

"Rubbish!" cried Landon, "don't say such things, Eve. Professor, are you answered?"

"And remember," put in Tracy, "the two were the width of this hall apart. What means could have been employed?"

"What means were employed, anyway?" said Norma. "Oh, what did kill those people?"

"The utter absence of any material means proves the fact that it was supernatural," declared the Professor. "I only mentioned those other theories to prove their absurdity. Now, as I say, I am a convert to spiritualism in all its form and phases. How can one help being after this? And I, for one, desire to stay here for a time and I feel sure that the departed spirits of our friends will communicate with us."

Milly shuddered at the idea, but Eve's wonderful eyes glowed with a sudden anticipation.

"Oh, Professor Hardwick!" she exclaimed, "how splendid! Will you really stay here a while? Will you, Milly? I can't stay unless you and Wynne do. Will you stay, Norma? and you, Mr. Tracy?"

"Oh, I can't!" Milly moaned. "I needn't, need I, Wynne?"

"No; darling, not if you don't want to. I can't see, Eve, why you wish to stay here. It gives me the horrors to think of it. And if you really expect spiritual communications from Vernie or Mr. Bruce, you can receive them just as well anywhere else."

"Not just as well," demurred the Professor. "The conditions here are ideal for investigations. We haven't taken it up seriously, you know.

"But, Miss Carnforth, can't you ask some other friends to come, if the Landons prefer to return to New York? I don't doubt you know the right ones, who could chaperon you, and also take an interest in our work."

"Yes," began Eve, thoughtfully, and then Stebbins came into the room.

"The doctors through yet?" he asked; "what they found out?"

"No, they're not through yet," answered Landon. "Sit down, Stebbins, and talk a little bit. I wish you'd tell us of anything you know of your own experience, not hearsay, mind you, that has happened in this house, that can truly be called supernatural."

"Well, that ha'nted room,—"

"Wait a minute," interrupted Landon, "don't tell us anything about that haunted room that you don't *know*, personally, to be a fact."

"I know it's ha'nted," asserted Stebbins, doggedly. "I've slept there and I've seen ghosts spookin' around in it."

"Do you think there are really such things as ghosts?"

"I know it."

"And do you think they could be responsible for the death of Mr. Bruce and Miss Reid?"

"I know it. That Thorpe he says it's murder, but he can't guess how it could be. That fool of a Crawford, he don't know nothing, of any sort. Wayburn, now, he's a fair doctor, but, good land! what can they learn from a post-mortem? Those people was warned, and them warnin's was carried out. What more is there to learn?"

"Well and clearly put, Mr. Stebbins," commented the Professor. "No elaboration of phrases could state that more succinctly. They were warned,—the warnings were carried out. That is the whole truth."

"But granting that," said Norma, "and I'm willing to grant it, why did the spirits want to kill Vernie? A lovely, innocent child couldn't have incurred the wrath of the spirits to that extent."

"They ain't no tellin', ma'am, what them ha'nts will do." Stebbins spoke heavily, as if burdened with fear. "Now I leave it to you folks. Ain't you smelled prussic acid around?"

"I have," said Norma. "And I," added the Professor. "I know it was not brought here by any of our party—"

"Nor not by the cook," said Stebbins. "Hester, she's leery of that bitter almond flavourin' and she don't never use it. Well, don't that smell prove somethin'?"

"It isn't actual proof," and Tracy looked thoughtful. "But it is an inexplicable odour to hang round an old house."

"'Tain't inexplicable if it's due to the ha'nt," urged Stebbins. "And that's what it is due to. Why, that smell's been said to be round here ever since the time of the Montgomery murder."

"What's wrong between you and Doctor Crawford?" asked Eve, suddenly. "You say yourself you aren't good friends."

"No, ma'am, we ain't. It's a sort o' feud of long standin'. They ain't no special reason, jest a conglomeration of little things. But one thing is 'cause he makes fun of the spooks here. He don't take no stock in such things, and nobody can make him. Thorpe, now, he don't neither. He sticks to it Mr. Bruce and Miss Vernie was murdered."

"By what means, does he think?" asked Eve, quickly.

"Well, that he don't know. But murder he says it was, and that he sticks to, like a puppy to a root."

"Get him in here," said Landon, abruptly, and Thorpe was summoned.

"Yes, sir," the butler averred, on being questioned. "I'm willin' to go on record as a disbeliever in spooks. They ain't no such things. I don't deny I've been some scared up hearin' you ladies and gentlemen talk about such matters. But I don't believe in 'em and I never will. Them two pore critters was done to death, but I'm free to confess I can't see how."

Professor Hardwick looked at the speaker. "As Mr. Dooley observed," he said, "your remarks is inthrestin' but not convincin'. My man, if there is no possible way that murder could have been done,—and we in here are agreed on that point,—what is left but the inevitability of supernormal agents?"

"Your long words gets me, sir, but it don't make no difference. It wa'n't spooks."

"He's hopeless," said Tracy. "Let's ask him other things. Thorpe, my man, have you never seen any circumstance or occurrence in this house, that you couldn't explain by natural means?"

"I ain't never been in this house, sir, except as I came here to buttle for you folks. Mr. Stebbins, he give the job to me and my wife, 'cause we're honest, hard-working people, and he knew he could trust us not to tattle or tell no tales of your goin's on. He says, 'Thorpe,' says he, 'they're a queer lot what's comin' up here, but they're my tenants, and I don't want 'em bothered none by gossip and tale-bearin' to the village.' Ain't that right, Mr. Stebbins?"

"Just so," said Stebbins, calmly. "Them's just about my very words. You told me, Mr. Landon, that you were a crowd of spook-hunters, and so it was up to me to spare you all the annoyance I could. An' well I know how the villagers gossip about this here house, if they get a chance. So, with the Thorpes at the head of things and a couple of good close-mouthed girls for helpers, I 'llowed you'd not be troubled. And you ain't been,—up to now. But this thing can't be kept quiet no longer. Of course, a thing like this is more or less public property, and I can tell you, there'll be plenty of curious villagers up here to the inquest and all that."

"Inquest!" cried Eve, "what do you mean?"

"Jest that, ma'am. That dunder-headed coroner, or county physician as he really is, he's set on havin' an inquest,—says he's got to. Well, I don't know much about law, but if they can ketch and hang a ha'nt, let 'em do it, say I!"

The arrival on the scene of the two doctors cut short further discussion. "There is a strange condition of things," Crawford began, addressing himself to Wynne Landon. "We find decisive, though very slight evidence that Mr. Bruce died from poison."

A hush followed, as his stunned hearers thought over the grave significance of this statement.

"Poison?" repeated Landon, dazedly. "What sort of poison? Who administered it?"

"As I said," resumed the coroner, "it's a strange case. The poison found is the minutest quantity of a very powerful drug, known among the profession as strychnine hydrochlorate. This is so

deadly that a half grain will kill a man instantly, or in a few seconds. But my colleague and I have agreed that since it is impossible for this to have been administered at the moment of Mr. Bruce's death, it must be that he had taken it in cumulative doses, and the result culminated in his sudden death."

"Why would he take it?" cried Milly.

"Where could he get it?" asked the Professor. "Such a drug is not available to the general public, is it?"

"It is not, sir, but whoever gave it to him, must have procured it somehow. Those questions are for the future. We are just learning the facts. The results of our tests prove positively the presence of that particular poison. There is no doubt of that."

"But wait," and Eve fixed her compelling eyes on the coroner's face. "Remember, Doctor Crawford, though you may not believe in the occult, other and wiser minds do. I wish to remind you, therefore, that we who believe these deaths were caused by supernatural agency, believe also that the powers that compassed the deaths are able to make the deaths seem attributable to natural causes, whether poison or anything else."

"Eve!" exclaimed Milly, "that is going too far!"

"Not at all!" said the Professor. "Miss Carnforth is quite right; and indeed, logic must prove that if a phantasm can take away a human life it can also produce effects that resemble conditions brought about by human means."

"I repeat," the coroner interrupted, "these things are beside the question. We are conducting an autopsy, not an inquest, at

present. I am giving you my report as a medical man, not as a member of the police force. Those other matters will be considered later. We have completed our examinations in the one case, we will now proceed to the case of the other victim."

"They killed each other," Thorpe broke in, nodding his head in the positive manner he affected. "Leastwise, one of 'em killed both; and of course, Miss Vernie, she wasn't no murderer!"

"Wait till you are called upon to testify, my man," and Crawford glowered at the forwardness of the old butler.

"There'll be testifyin' on both sides," volunteered Stebbins, speaking a little belligerently.

Crawford turned on him, and it was easily seen that enmity existed between these two. "You, 'Lijah Stebbins, keep quiet," he admonished, "there's them that says you know too much about these doings, anyhow."

"What do you mean by that?" Stebbins' eyes glowed with anger.

"Nothing now, and maybe nothing at any time. But you'd better lie low. You might be unduly suspected of ha'nting your own house!"

To the surprise of all present, Stebbins turned a chalky white, and whimpered a little, as he said, "I don't know what you mean,—I ain't done anything."

"See's you don't!" advised Crawford, enigmatically, and then the two doctors started to go on their second gruesome errand.

"This door's locked," announced Doctor Wayburn, trying to gain entrance to the room with the tassels.

"I have the key," said Eve Carnforth, slowly, and, with a white face, she offered it to the men.

"What are *you* doing with it?" asked Landon, in amazement.

"I d-don't know," and Eve showed great nervousness. "I think I feared some one would go in there."

The others looked at her curiously, for the white face was pallid and the scarlet line of her lips was thin and straight.

An exclamation from Doctor Wayburn claimed their attention, and speaking from the doorway of the room with the tassels, he said:

"There is no body here."

"What!" cried several at once, and crowded to the door.

"Absolutely none," repeated the doctor, and Professor Hardwick pushed his way past the two medical men and entered the room.

"It's gone!" he said, reappearing, "Vernie's body is gone!"

"Impossible!" cried Landon, "what do you mean? Why, we've all been right here all the morning! How could it be gone?"

"See for yourself," and Hardwick stepped aside.

There was no denying the fact. Scrutiny of the whole room showed no presence of the cold, still form that had been reverently laid on that bed. Everybody entered and peered around, fruitlessly. They shook the heavy hangings and looked behind them, but to no avail.

Vernie's body had utterly disappeared!

CHAPTER X
Was It Supernatural?

LATE that afternoon Braye returned from New York. He looked weary and exhausted, as if under hard and continuous strain.

Norma and Eve had both been watching for him from different windows and met on the stairs in their sudden rush to meet him in the hall.

It was easily apparent that both girls desired to see him first and tell him the further awful development of the disappearance of Vernie's body.

"What!" he exclaimed, "more horrors! Wait a minute, till I get off this dust coat."

Before Eve or Norma could say more, the others, hearing Braye, came trooping to the hall, and all began to talk at once.

"I can't understand—" and Braye wearily passed his hand across his brow,—"tell me all that happened after I left last evening."

"Nothing especial," said Tracy, quietly. "We all went to bed early, at least, we went to our rooms. Professor Hardwick and I sat up half the night, talking. But we left Thorpe on guard in the hall here, and of course, it never occurred to any of us there was need of further precaution."

"Nor was there," said Eve, fixing her great eyes on Braye. "Nobody could possibly come in from outside and take that

child away. The house is too securely locked for that, as we all know."

"Why should any one want to?" queried Braye, his face blank with amazement.

"No one did want to,—no one did do it," returned Eve. "You must admit, Rudolph, that the whole thing is supernatural,—that—"

"No, Eve, I can't do that." Braye spoke positively. "When I'm up here with you psychists, and in this atmosphere of mystery,—and Lord knows 'Black Aspens' is mysterious!—I get swayed over toward spiritualism, but when I go down to the city and talk with rational, hard-headed men, I realize there's nothing in this poppycock!"

"Oh, you do!" and Eve's penetrating glance seemed to bore into his very soul, "then, pray, how do you explain the fact that Vernie—isn't there?"

"I don't know, Eve,—I don't know. But some fiend in human shape must have managed to get into the house—"

"And get out again?" said Tracy, "and carry the body with him, —when Thorpe sat right here in the hall—"

"Where was Thorpe?" asked Braye, suddenly.

"In a chair there, by that table," and Eve indicated a position well back in the great hall.

"Then he couldn't see the doors of both rooms—" began Braye, but Professor Hardwick interrupted: "Nonsense, man, both doors were open, if any move had been made, Thorpe must have heard it."

"Both doors open," said Braye, "Norma, you said they were closed when you came down to breakfast."

"I asked Thorpe about that," said Tracy. "He told me that at daybreak, or soon after, he closed the doors, without looking in the rooms. He was scared, I think, though he won't admit that. He says, he thought the ladies would be coming down and the doors better be closed."

"That's all right, but it's strange that he didn't glance into the rooms."

"I don't think so," said Landon. "Thorpe was in charge, but he had no reason to think there had been any disturbance, and he is pretty well scared up over the whole matter. And I don't wonder."

"Nor I," said Braye. "It's all inexplicable. What's Crawford going to do next?"

"I'm not sure," said Tracy, "but I think he'll hold an inquest. Of course, *he* thinks it's a case of murder—"

"How absurd!" cried Eve. "What more does the man want in confirmation of the supernatural? First, those two deaths, impossible of human achievement, and now, the taking away of poor little Vernie, in circumstances that deny any mortal hand in the matter!"

"If that's true, Eve," Braye spoke in a matter-of-fact tone, "it will do no harm to let the coroner proceed along his own lines. He can't convict a murderer if there isn't one,—and if there is one, we all want him convicted, don't we?"

"Of course," said Landon, "but suppose they pitch on an innocent man?"

"It's *all* supposition," declared Braye. "I never heard of such a moil! I can't see how it *can* be murder, or body-snatching, yet I can't stand for ghost-work, either. Say it's murder,—where's a motive, for anybody?"

"I think you ought to know, Rudolph," Eve said, slowly, "that that Crawford person asked who would inherit Mr. Bruce's money, and—"

"And we owned up that you were the next of kin, old chap," put in Landon, smiling grimly. "Any remarks?"

"Don't be flippant, Wynne," said Braye, seriously, "of course, I've thought of that. I can't very well be charged with the murder, as I wasn't here at the time, but I do feel deeply embarrassed at the thought that I am, without a doubt, the next heir. That can, I suppose, draw suspicion on me, as I may be said to have motive. But I am not afraid of that, for there's no possible way I could have turned the trick. But, if it *was* murder, if there's the slightest indication of foul play, I'm ready to devote all of Uncle Gifford's money, if need be, in bringing the criminal to justice."

"Of course, there's no sense in tacking the crime on you, Braye," and Landon sighed. "If it was a crime, and if anybody here committed it, they'll more likely suspect me, for I'm the next heir after you, and if I could despatch two intervening heirs, I could also bump you off, I suppose."

"Don't talk like that, Wynne," implored Milly. "It's not like you, and I—"

"I'm only preparing you, Milly, dear, for what may come. That mutton-headed coroner can't rest till he fastens murder on somebody,—and it might as well be me."

"I want to go home, Wynne,—I want to go back to New York," and Milly began to cry.

"You may, dear, just as soon as you like. But I must stay and see what happens up here. For me to run away would be, to say the least, suspicious."

"Talk sense, Wynne," broke in Braye; "I wasn't here, you know, when those two people died. Tell me again, just where were you all?"

"Mr. Bruce and Professor Hardwick sat in those two chairs, confabbing," Wynne explained; "I was passing things round, so was Mr. Tracy. Eve was running the tea things, Vernie was jumping about here and there, and Norma,—where were you, Norma?"

"I was near Mr. Bruce and the Professor, listening to their talk," she returned. "I was greatly interested. Mr. Landon had just given me a cup of tea, and I was sipping it as I listened. There was nothing wrong about the tea, of that I'm certain."

"Of course there wasn't," agreed Braye, who had heard the scene rehearsed many times. "There's nothing wrong anywhere, that I can see, except that a dreadful thing has happened, and we must find out all we can about it. I've been to see Uncle Gif's business friends, he has a few in New York, and

they're flabbergasted, of course. One of them, a Mr. Jennings, is sure it's a desperate murder, cleverly contrived by some people in Chicago, who are enemies of Uncle's, and who, he says, are diabolically ingenious enough to have brought it about. He holds that Vernie's death was accidental,—I mean that they only intended to kill Uncle Gifford. I can't believe in this talk, for how could it have been brought about? But Jennings thinks it was through the servants,—and that they're really enemies in disguise."

"Why, they're all natives of this section," exclaimed the Professor, "how could they be implicated?"

"I told Jennings that, but he thinks they've been bought over, or —oh, Lord, I don't know *what* he thinks! I don't know what to think myself! There's *no* solution!"

"Don't think now, Rudolph," and Eve came over to his side, and took his hand in hers. "You're all tired out, and I don't wonder. Let's have tea,—we mustn't dread tea because of its associations,—if we do that, we'll all collapse."

With a determined air, Eve went away to order tea served as usual, though Milly had declared she never wanted to have it in that hall again.

But Eve's idea found favour with the rest, and they gratefully accepted the refreshment, which, until that awful afternoon, had been such a pleasant function.

"We must settle some things," Braye said, looking at Landon. "I arranged to send the bodies to Chicago,—of course, I didn't know—"

"Isn't it terrible!" exclaimed Norma. "What shall you do now?"

"I think I'll send Uncle Gif's body, at once, and hope to find Vernie's later. It *must* be found—" Braye looked about wildly. "I wish I had been here last night! Oh, forgive me, I'm not casting any hint of blame on you others, but,—well, you know I wasn't here when—when it happened, either, and I can't sense it all as you do. Professor Hardwick, what do you think about it all?"

"I'm an old man, Braye, and I've had wide experience, also, I'm a hard one to convince without strong and definite proof, but I'll state now, once for all, that I'm a complete convert to spiritism and I believe,—I know,—these deaths of our friends were the acts of an inimical spirit, a phantasm, incensed at our curiosity concerning the occult, and our frivolous attitude toward the whole subject."

"You really believe that, Professor?"

"I really do, Braye, and moreover I am convinced that the disappearance of—of little Vernie, is the work of the evil spirit. What else can explain it?"

"Nothing that I know of, but I can't swallow the idea of a disembodied spirit making off with a real, material body! I *wish* I'd been here! Didn't *anybody* see or hear *anything*?"

"No," declared Landon, but Norma gave a quick glance at Eve, who returned it with a defiant toss of her Titian-coloured head.

"Why do you look at me like that, Norma?" she asked, shortly.

"Why do I?" Norma repeated in a soft significant tone. "I think you know, Eve."

"Well, I for one, shall stay up here for a time, and see how matters go on," said Braye, with sudden determination. "Who else wants to stay?"

"I do," said Professor Hardwick, "I think we've by no means seen the last of the manifestations, and though I feel there is a danger, I am ready to brave it for the sake of investigating further."

"I don't want to stay," and Milly shook with nervous apprehension. "Can't we go home, Wynne?"

"Very soon, darling. You can go at once, and I'll follow as soon as things are adjusted up here. I think none of us ought to seem to run away."

"Certainly not," Tracy agreed, promptly. "The whole affair is so astounding, I can scarcely get my wits together, but I see clearly, no one must leave this house, until we are all exonerated from suspicion."

"Not even me?" asked Milly, tearfully.

"That's for you and Mr. Landon to decide," returned Tracy, gently. "I'm not dictating, not even advising, but I have strong opinions on the subject. What say, Braye?"

"I quite agree with you, Tracy. But, I'm sure if Mrs. Landon prefers to go down to New York and stay at her mother's no one could possibly object."

"But I don't!" Milly surprised them all by saying, "if you put it that way,—if it's cowardly to go away, I don't want to go. I want to stay, if Wynne does, and if Eve and Norma stay."

"That's my brave girl," and Landon smiled at his wife; "I'll guarantee that Milly won't make any trouble, either. Once she's awake to a duty, she's bold as a lion. Now, see here, if Crawford stirs up suspicion of any of us, we'll have to deal with him pretty roughly, I fear. He's a pig-headed sort, and he will move heaven and earth to gain his point. Moreover, we can't expect him to subscribe to spook theories, any more than those men Rudolph talked to in New York. One has to go through some such experiences as we have, to believe in them. You, Professor, would never have been convinced by hearsay evidence, would you?"

"No, sir, I would not! It took these otherwise inexplicable happenings to prove to me that there is but one way to look. Even a coroner can't produce a human criminal who could kill those two people the way they were killed, and who could get into and out of this house and take a human body with him! The thing is preposterous!"

"You know the doors and windows were all locked?" asked Braye, thoughtfully.

"I looked after them, myself," said Landon. "I always do. After the last one goes upstairs for the night, I invariably look after the locking up. And the house, properly locked, is impregnable. The servants' quarters are shut off and locked; there is absolutely no way of getting in from outside."

"Going back to Jennings' theory," mused Braye, "could we suspect old Thorpe?"

"Not for a minute," declared Landon. "And, too, he wasn't in the hall when they died. No, I'd trust Thorpe as far as I would any of ourselves. But, there's Stebbins. I've never felt sure that he's entirely trustworthy."

"Even so," said Braye, "he wasn't here when—when they died."

"No, he wasn't. I can't see any way he could have arranged things unless he poisoned the cake—"

"Rubbish, Wynne!" cried Eve, "you know we all ate that cake. Do be rational."

"But Mr. Bruce was poisoned, Eve, we can't get away from that."

"Of course he was," broke in Hardwick, "and doubtless Vernie was too, but it was not done by human agency."

"Well, there we go, reasoning round in a circle," murmured Norma; "I think our talk is useless, when we surmise and speculate about it all. Let us decide on our immediate plans. Shall you send Mr. Bruce's body to Chicago, and stay here yourself, Rudolph?"

"Yes, as I look at it now. I can't see anything else to do."

Nor was there anything else to do.

For Doctor Crawford persisted in treating the case as a criminal one, and requested that all concerned remain at Black Aspens for the present, with a hint that unless they did so, the request might become a command.

"Then you think the two people were murdered?" asked Landon of the county physician.

"I don't say that, for sure; but when a man drops dead, and a trace of poison is found in his stomach, it looks mighty like an intention of death on some one's part,—maybe the man himself. There's a show of suicide, you know."

"But Gifford Bruce never would commit suicide!"

"If only those committed suicide who are expected to do so, there'd be mighty few of them. Now, I hold that poison was taken into Mr. Bruce's stomach while he was eating that cake, or whatever he did eat."

"We agree to that," Landon spoke slowly, "but some of us think the poison was put in by supernatural means."

"Now, ain't that nonsense,—for reasonable, rational men!" and Crawford's fine scorn nettled Landon.

"Professor Hardwick doesn't think it nonsense," he returned.

The two were alone, Crawford having asked an interview with the man who had rented the house.

"Professor!" and Crawford fairly snorted. "For fool theories, commend me to a college professor. They can't see two inches either side of their noses!"

"We have had reason to believe in spiritual manifestations," went on Landon.

"Yes, and who gave you those reasons? Who rented this house to you folks, for the sole purpose of supplying you with a ha'nted house! Who knew that ghosts must be forthcoming, if you folks was to be satisfied? Who performed ghost doings himself, in order that you might not be disappointed?"

"What are you implying? That Mr.—that the owner tricked us?"

"That's for you to find out. You came up here to investigate, as I understand it. Well, why *don't* you investigate? You swallow all them ghosts and ha'ntings, and never look around to see who's fooling you!"

"But, Doctor Crawford, what you insinuate is not possible. All the strange things we have seen or heard have occurred at night, or,—yes,—occasionally in the daytime, but always when Mr. Stebbins was at his home in East Dryden."

"How do you know he was?"

"Why, he has never been to the house at all, except two or three times on commonplace errands, since we've been here. The supernatural manifestations we have observed had no more to do with him than they had with you!"

"That's as may be. Only I advise you to investigate with a little common sense and not too much blind faith in your spook visitors. Now, Mr. Landon, I take it you're boss around here."

"I'm responsible for the house rent, if that's what you mean."

"Well, that'll do. Now, sir, there's got to be an inquest. I expected, of course, to hold it on the two bodies, but since one's gone, we'll have to do what we can without it. I don't deny that this case is beyond all my experience. I've sent for a detective from New York, and I'll get all the other help I need. But I'm all at sea, myself, and I make no secret of that."

"I thought you suspected Eli Stebbins."

"Not of murder! No, sir! Me'n Eli, we ain't good friends, haven't been for years, and I wouldn't put it past him to play ghost to

scare you city people, but murder! Land, no, I wouldn't ever accuse Eli Stebbins of goin' that far!"

"Have you any definite suspect?"

"I don't say as I have, and I don't say as I ain't. Truth is, I'm all afloat. I don't know which way to turn. Every thing's so awful unbelievable,—as you might say. Now, there's them two Thorpes. Good, steady-going New England people, they are, and yet, if I had any reason to suspect 'em, I can see myself doing so. But, land, there ain't a shred of evidence that way. Why, they wasn't even in the room when the two of 'em died!"

"Wait a minute, Doctor Crawford. Nobody was in the room at the time of those two deaths, but our own party. You don't suspect one of us, do you?"

"No, Mr. Landon, I don't. You ain't a gay crowd, nor yet a fast or a common crowd. You're all high-toned, quiet, law-abiding citizens,—as I size you up. To be sure, decent citizens have committed murder, but I can't connect up any one of you with crime in this case. I know Mr. Braye will inherit the money that old Mr. Bruce left, and I know that you're related there, too, but I haven't seen one iota of reason to suspect any one of your crowd. If I do, I'll let you know mighty quick! Nor can I hang it on the Thorpes; nor yet on those girls they have in to help. And that's what the inquest's for. To bring out, if possible, some evidence against somebody, so's we can get a start."

"I fear you can't get that evidence, Doctor, for if there were any we would have found it ourselves. You have my good wishes,

for if it is a case of murder, committed by a living, human villain, we most assuredly want him apprehended."

"He will be, Mr. Landon, take it from me, he will be!"

CHAPTER XI
The Heir Speaks Out

THE days that followed were like an awful nightmare to the people most interested. But at last the inquest was over, the body of Gifford Bruce had been sent to Chicago for burial, and a strange quiet had settled down upon the household at Black Aspens.

No new facts had transpired at the inquest. Though the police tried hard to fasten the crime on some individual, there was no definite evidence against any one. All those who had been present at the mysterious death hour, told their stories straightforwardly and unshakably. All agreed as to the circumstances, all remembered and related the story of the Ouija board, which foretold the death of two of the party at four o'clock.

"Who was pushing that board?" the coroner asked.

"Miss Reid and myself," Tracy spoke up. "We had been playing with it for some time, and having had only uninteresting and trifling results we were about to lay the thing aside, when the message came that two of us would die the next day at four o'clock. Miss Reid seemed frightened, but I thought at the time she had spelled out the message, herself, to get up a little excitement. However, I took the board away from her at once, feeling that she was carrying a jest too far. I think now, that she was innocent in the matter—"

"Well, I don't," said the coroner. "If that girl made up that message, she had a reason. Probably she was responsible for both deaths."

"Impossible!" cried Tracy, shocked at this theory. "Why, she was but a child, she had no thought of suicide or—or murder! If she faked the message, it was merely in fun, and because she had tried all evening to get some message of interest. It is quite possible she made up the message, but it is not possible that she did it otherwise than as a jest."

"A gruesome jest!"

"As it turned out, yes, indeed. But either it was in jest,—or—the message was from a supernatural source."

Tracy's eyes were deeply sorrowful, and his face expressed a sort of awed wonder, that made many who were present, think that after all there might be something in these occult beliefs.

But not so the coroner. He refused to consider the Ouija message with any serious interest, and continued to ply his witnesses with questions both pertinent and wide of the mark.

Elijah Stebbins was put through a grilling inquiry. His manner was that of a guilty man, but no proof of crime could be found in connection with him. The day and hour of the two deaths, he was proved to have been at his home in East Dryden, beyond all doubt. Even granting that the Thorpes, one or both, were in his employ, there was no reason to suspect them. If they had put poison in the cakes or in the tea, it must have been done in the kitchen, and therefore would have affected the whole supply. Suspicion must fall, if anywhere, on the members of the house

party who were present at the hour of four o'clock on the fatal day.

But these, as has been said, gave so clear a statement of the actual happenings at that hour, that there was no loophole for suspicion to enter. Moreover, the fact that the deaths occurred simultaneously, and just at the foretold hour, seemed to preclude all possibility of any human means being employed. It did look like a supernatural occurrence and many who would have scorned such a belief, were inevitably led to agree that no other theory could explain it.

Yet the coroner and his jury were unwilling to admit this, and the verdict was the one most frequently heard of, murder by a person or persons unknown.

Indeed, what else could it have been? A coroner's jury can't accuse a nameless ghost of two murders, by poison. They pinned their faith to that poison, discovered in the stomach of the body of Gifford Bruce. They assumed that Miss Reid died from the effects of the same poison, but how administered or by whom, or what had become of the body of Miss Reid, they had no idea. But of one thing they were sure, that all these things, and all parts of the complicated crime, were the work of human hands and human intelligence, and that for the reputation of their village and their county and their state, the murderer must be discovered and brought to justice.

But how? How find a criminal who gave no signs of existence, and who was, by those most closely concerned, denied actual existence?

The detective, one Dan Peterson, proceeded on the theory that a closed mouth implies great secret wisdom. He said little, save to ask questions of everybody with whom he came in contact, and as these questions merely carried him round in a circle back to his starting point, he made little progress.

There were also, of course, many reporters, from the city papers, and these wrote up the story as their natures or their chiefs dictated. Some played up the supernatural side for all it was worth, and more; others scorned such foolishness, and treated the affair as a desperate and unusually mysterious murder case. But all agreed that it was the most sensational and interesting affair of its sort that had happened in years, and the eager reporters hung around and nearly drove frantic the feminine members of the house party.

At last, Norma and Milly refused to see them, but Eve Carnforth continued to talk with them, and imbued many of them, more or less, with her occult views.

"There's something in what that red-headed woman says," one reporter opined to his fellow. "She puts it mighty convincing,—if you ask me."

"Yes, and why?" jeered his friend, "because she's the man behind the ghost!"

"What! Miss Carnforth! Guilty? Never!"

"I'm not so sure. You know as well as I do, that spook talk is all rubbish, but she's so bent and determined to stuff it down everybody's neck, I think she's hiding her own hand in the matter."

"You do! Well, you'd better think again, before you let out any such yarn as that! Why, she's a queen, that woman is!"

"Oho! She's subjugated you, has she? Well, look out that she doesn't convert you to spookism,—you'd lose your job!"

Other curious people journeyed up to Black Aspens for the pleasure of looking at the house where the mystery was staged. If allowed to enter they walked about, open-mouthed in admiration or wonder.

"Stunning hall!" exclaimed one young man, a budding architect, who examined the old house with interest. "Look at those bronze columns! I never saw such a pair."

"I've heard the first Montgomery brought those from Italy or somewhere, and put up a house behind 'em," volunteered another sightseer. "Ain't it queer, the way they're half in and half out of the front wall? Land! You wouldn't know whether you was going to school or coming home!" and the speaker laughed heartily at his own wit.

But at last, the sightseers were refused admittance to the house, and the remaining members of the party gathered in conclave to decide on future plans.

Professor Hardwick was the one who showed the calmest demeanour.

"If there was a chance of a human being having committed these crimes," he said, "I'd be the first one to want to track him down, and send him straight to the chair. But nobody who has thought about the matter can present any theory that will account for the human element in the cause of the tragedy.

Therefore, feeling certain, as I do, that our friends were killed by supernatural influences, I am ready to stay here a short time longer, in hopes of convincing the authorities up here that we are right. Moreover, I planned to stay here a month, and we've been here but little more than a fortnight."

"I'm willing to stay for the same reason, Professor," and Eve Carnforth's strange eyes glowed deeply. "I too, know that no living beings brought about the deaths of Mr. Bruce and little Vernie, and I will stay the rest of our proposed month, if the others will."

"I am ready to stay," said Milly Landon, quietly. "I've gotten all over my hysterical, foolish fears, and I *want* to stay. I have a good reason, and if I hadn't, I'd be willing to stay to keep house for the rest of you."

"Let's consider it settled, then," said Landon, "that we stay a couple of weeks longer. The astute detective, Mr. Peterson, thinks he can round up the villains who did the awful things, and if he can, I'm ready to appear against them."

"We're all ready to do that," agreed Mr. Tracy, "and I'll stay a week or so, but I want to get away by the middle of August."

"That's nearly two weeks hence," observed Norma, "I'd like to go home about that time, too. And all that's to be discovered, which, I suppose, will be nothing, ought to be found out in that time."

"It wouldn't surprise me to have some further spiritual manifestations," the Professor stated, with a deeply thoughtful air. "I don't know why there wouldn't be such."

"Not with fatal results, I hope," and Mr. Tracy shuddered.

"I hope not, too," and the Professor looked grave. "But if we receive another warning, I shall go home at once."

"I don't think we will," Eve said, "I think there was a reason for the wrath of the phantasms, and now that wrath is appeased. We must not provoke it further."

"You know," Norma added, "the two who—who died, were scoffers at the idea of spiritual visitations."

"Uncle Gif was," said Braye, "but little Vernie wasn't."

"Oh, yes, she was," corrected Eve. "She made fun of our beliefs all along. And if she really made the Ouija write that message in a spirit of bravado, it's small wonder that the vengeance reached her as well as Mr. Bruce, who openly jeered at it all."

"I can't think it," mused Tracy, "that sweet, lovable child,—full of mischief, of course, but simple, harmless mischief,—"

"But, Mr. Tracy," Norma looked and spoke positively, "it's easier to think of a supernatural spirit wanting to harm the child, than a living person! What possible cause could a human being have to wish harm to little Vernie Reid?"

"That's true, Miss Cameron. But it's inexplicable, however you look at it."

"At the same time," Braye argued, "we must give both sides a chance. If there is any trick or scheme that a man might have used to bring about those deaths at that moment,—I can't conceive of any, but if there should have been such,—we must, of course, give all possible assistance to Mr. Peterson in his search."

"I'm more than willing," said Tracy, "I'm anxious to help him for, as you say, Braye, if there's a human mind capable of devising means to commit such a crime, it surely ought to be within the province of some other human mind to discover it."

"Suppose we start out on that basis," suggested Braye. "I mean, assume that a live person did the deed, and it's up to us to find him. Then if we can't do it, fall back on our occult theories."

"I know where I'd look first," said Landon, grimly.

"Where?"

"Toward Eli Stebbins. I've always thought he or the Thorpes, or all of them together, know more than we suspect they do. Why, think a minute. Do you remember the first queer, inexplicable thing that happened up here?"

"I do," Eve spoke up. "It was the night we arrived. That battered old candlestick moved itself from Mr. Bruce's room to Vernie's."

"Yes, Eve, that's what I have in mind. Well, I thought then, and I think now, that Stebbins moved that thing himself."

"Why?" asked several voices at once.

"I thought I saw him sneaking across the hall that night. And as you know, none of us would have done it, and I don't think Mr. Bruce did. I thought that at first, but since Mr. Bruce's death, I know he never played any tricks on us."

"Oh, that doesn't follow," objected Hardwick. "I always suspected Bruce would trick us if he could, but when it came to his own death, I've no notion that he compassed that!"

"No," agreed Braye, "whatever the truth may be, there was no suicide."

And so they talked, discussed, surmised, argued and theorized, without getting any nearer a positive belief, or proof of any sort to uphold their opinions.

Each seemed to have marked out a certain line of thought and doggedly stuck to it.

Professor Hardwick was, perhaps, the one most positive regarding supernatural causes, though Eve and Norma were almost equally certain.

Braye and Landon were not entirely willing to accept these beliefs, but confessed they had no plausible substitutes to suggest. Tracy, as a clergyman, was loth to accept what seemed to him heathen ideas, but he was more or less influenced by the talk of the Professor and of Eve Carnforth, who was exceedingly persuasive in manner and argument.

Milly had little thought of her own about the matter, but was always ready to believe as her husband did, though, she, too, was swayed by the strong statements and declarations of Eve Carnforth.

But Dan Peterson paid no more heed to ghost lore of any sort or kind than as if the words had not been spoken. Miss Carnforth's glib recital of wonders she knew to be true, Miss Cameron's quiet statements that she vouched for as facts, the Professor's irascible arguments, all were as nothing to the practical, hard-headed detective.

"No, ma'am," he said to Eve; "it ain't that I doubt your word, but those things don't go down. I've seen criminals before, try to get out by blaming ghosts, but they couldn't put it over."

"Are you implying that one of us may be guilty!" cried Eve, really incensed at the thought.

"I'm not implying anything, ma'am. I'm investigating. When I find out anything, I'll accuse, I won't imply."

The man's personality was not unpleasant. Of a commonplace type, he went about his business cheerfully, and in a practical, common sense fashion.

He examined the great hall, where the deaths had occurred, for a possible secret entrance.

"Nothing doing," was his sum-up of this investigation. "That mahogany wall of the vestibule is as solid as a rock, and nobody could get through those bronze doors when they're locked and fastened with those bolts!"

"Are you assuming that some one entered and killed the victims, as we all sat round drinking tea?" exclaimed the Professor, irascibly.

"Not just that, sir," returned Peterson, gravely. "But somebody might have entered in the night, say, and secreted himself,—"

"And then appeared to poison the cake when we weren't looking!" jeered Landon.

"Well," and the detective looked a little sheepish, "I got to consider all points, you know. And there don't seem to be any clues—of any sort."

"No," said Braye, "no dropped handkerchief or broken cuff-link. Those would be a help, wouldn't they?"

"And then," Landon went on, "usually, there's somebody who had a quarrel with the victim, and so, can be duly suspected. But there's nothing of that sort in this case."

"Nobody at odds with Mr. Bruce, wasn't there?" asked the detective, hopefully.

"Nobody," declared Landon. "Now you may as well know all there is to know, Peterson. Mr. Braye here, is the heir to Mr. Bruce's large fortune. After him, I inherit. If these facts are of the nature of straws to show you which way the wind blows, make the most of them. But do it openly. If you suspect Mr. Braye or myself, even in the slightest degree, tell us so. Don't work behind our backs. We're ready and willing to help you. That's so, Braye?"

"Rather, Wynne! Moreover, if there's any way to use it, the fortune of Uncle Bruce is at the disposal of anybody who can bring the criminal to justice. I don't want the money,—at least, I can't enjoy it, and don't want it, considering the way it has come to me. I shall endow a hospital or something with it. For, truly,—I may be foolish, but I can't seem to see myself living luxuriously on money that has come to me as this has. I don't wonder that to an outsider, it might look very much as if I had removed these two people in order that I might acquire riches, or, it would have looked so, if I had been here at the time. I doubt if the most fertile imagination can invent a way I could

have been the criminal when I was in East Dryden shopping with Mrs. Landon."

"Also, Mr. Peterson," Landon resumed, "remember that I am the next to inherit, and if I could have compassed the taking off of these two, I could doubtless have later despatched Mr. Braye, and so have come into the fortune myself."

"Wynne," pleaded Milly, "*don't* say those things! They're too absurd!"

"Not that, Milly dear. Mr. Peterson might easily take up some such line of deduction, and while I'm willing he should do so, and proceed in any way he chooses, I repeat that I want him to do it openly, and not try to convict Rudolph or myself, behind our backs. When I proffer him my help, it is in a real and sincere offer of assistance, and I want him to be equally frank and outspoken."

"I guess you're pretty safe in your attitude," said Peterson, smiling. "Criminals don't speak right out in meeting, like that. And I don't suspect you gentlemen, if you *are* heirs to the property. I think there's others to be suspected, and I promise you, sir, if I'm led toward any of your party here, I'll tell you what I'm up to."

"That's enough, Peterson, I trust you to keep your word, and you may rely on us to help in any way we can."

And so life at Black Aspens settled down to its former routine, at least in matters of daily household affairs. But the actuating principle of the psychic investigators had changed. Those who thoroughly believed in occultism, sought expectantly for

further proofs. Those who were still uncertain, awaited developments. And those who had little or no belief in the supernatural sought some clues or hints that might point to a human criminal.

Dan Peterson was among these last. A good, able-minded detective, though not of the transcendental type found in story-books, he worked diligently at his problem, which seemed to him a harder one than he had ever before tackled.

His suspicions were all toward the servants of the house, and with these he included Elijah Stebbins.

Nor was he illogical in his thoughts. Stebbins was acting queerly. He was frightened at questions, and was difficult to get hold of for an interview. He answered at random, frequently contradicted himself, and showed a positive terror of his own house, since the tragedies there.

"If he killed those two people with his own hands, he couldn't act any different," Peterson said to Landon, whom he frequently consulted. "But I can't imagine any way to connect him up with it. He was home in East Dryden when they died, and that's certain. Now, if he could have made old Thorpe act as his tool—but, Lord, why would he do it, anyhow! It's too absurd to think Stebbins would want to take those two lives! He wanted you people should be scared, that I'm sure of. He did all he could to scare you,—that I know. But as to killing any of you, I'm sure he didn't. Howsumever, somebody committed those murders, and I'm going to find out who!"

CHAPTER XII
The Professor's Experience

BUT the days passed by, and Dan Peterson was unable to make good his word. Everybody, outside of the immediate household at Black Aspens believed the two mysterious deaths were the result of the murderous intent of one or more human beings, and refused absolutely to consider the spook nonsense offered in explanation by the friends and relatives of the victims.

Meanwhile there were a few further inexplicable happenings in the old house. Now and then, one or another would notice the odour of prussic acid, or would report a glimpse of a ghostly figure prowling round at night, or tell of hearing low moans at four o'clock in the morning.

But, usually, these were the experiences of only one, and lacking corroboration, could be set down to imagination, which was now especially vivid in all the party. Often Eve or Norma recounted some of these mysteries, but Landon laughed at them and said the girls had been dreaming.

Professor Hardwick experienced no similar illusions, though he longed to do so. Indeed, he really watched and listened, hoping for some message or manifestation from his friend, Gifford Bruce. But none was vouchsafed to him, and though interested in the experiences of the others, he still longed for a personal experience.

And finally one came to him.

At four o'clock one morning, he lay awake, as often, listening to the strokes of the hall clock, which none of them could ever hear without a thrill, and slowly in at his bedroom door floated a dim, ghostly shape.

There was not sufficient light for him to discern more than the outline of what seemed to be a tall, gaunt figure, with a shawl over its head. Nearer to him the thing came, and the old Professor felt himself grow cold with fear. He had often boasted of his desire to see the ghost, and of his scorn of fear in connection therewith. But now, that the spectre had really appeared to him, the old man trembled all over, and tried in vain to cry out.

His throat contracted, his tongue was powerless, and a sort of paralysis of terror held him in thrall.

The approaching figure seemed not to walk, but progressed by a strange gliding motion, and came within a foot or two of the bed, where the Professor lay, shivering with dread.

Still but a misty wraith, the awful thing leaned over the prostrate man and as the shawled head drew near, Professor Hardwick saw dimly the face of his visitor, and it was a skull!

The fearsome sight of hollow eye-sockets and grinning, fleshless jaws, gave a sudden strength to the frightened man, and he uttered a faint terrorized scream.

Slowly the spectre raised a long, white-draped arm, and Hardwick saw a small glass tumbler in front of his face. Only for an instant, and then the phantom faded away, and vanished into space.

Again the Professor called out, and hurrying footsteps were heard in the hall.

Mr. Tracy was away in Boston, and Rudolph Braye had gone to New York, so the only other man in the house was Landon, who came hastily to the Professor's door in his dressing-gown and slippers.

"What is it," he asked, "did you call? Are you ill?"

"The—the ghost—" the old man articulated with difficulty.

"Nonsense!" said Landon, "you've been dreaming. Where's a ghost? I just came along the corridor, and I didn't see any."

"Don't tell me I didn't see it," babbled the Professor. "I did, Wynne, as plain as I see you now."

Landon had brought his own bedroom candle, and by its scant light he scanned the old man's face.

"You're all scared up, Professor," he said, kindly. "Guess I'll give you a nightcap, and send you back to sleep again, it's only four or so."

"I know it, Wynne, it was just four when that—that thing came. I wasn't asleep, I haven't been for an hour or more. Just at four o'clock,—the hall clock was striking,—I saw that awful thing come stalking in—and—and it had a death's head under that white shawl—"

"Hold on, there, Professor, if that's so, there must be somebody who did the stalking! I'm going to make search."

Landon called Thorpe, and together the two went over the whole house, searching in every nook and cranny that could possibly conceal an intruder. But none was found. Every door

and window was securely fastened, and as Landon had often observed, not a mouse could get into Black Aspens, once it was locked up for the night.

"Nothing doing, Professor," he reported cheerfully, after the search. "We lighted up the whole place, and we scoured for burglars or ghost-pretenders, but nothing human has entered this house to-night. Nor was your spook any of ourselves, for Milly has rounded up the girls, and I've made sure that the doors that shut off the servants' quarters have not been opened. Now, what have you to say?"

"Only that I saw the thing," the Professor had pulled himself together, "and I'm not prepared to say whether I think it was a phantom or a person pretending to be one. You're sure about the servants?"

"Absolutely, they couldn't get through."

"What about Stebbins? Could he have been concealed in the house all night?"

"No; and if he had, how could he have got out? All the doors and windows are locked on the inside, just as they've been all night. He couldn't lock them behind him."

"Thorpe could let him in and out, if he wanted to."

"Into the back part of the house. But Thorpe himself can't get into the main house, the rooms that we use, after I lock the doors between. Come, now, Professor, you know all that as well as I do. Either you dreamed your ghost, or it's the real thing, this time. Take your choice."

Landon was so cheerful and took the thing so lightly, that Hardwick began to feel more at ease, and recounted his story in further detail. "It was the real thing," he concluded. "I wish Rudolph or Mr. Tracy had been here. They sleep in this wing, and they would have come to me more quickly than you did, Wynne."

"I came the moment I heard you call, at least, as soon as I could slip into a bathrobe."

"I know you did, and it wouldn't have mattered. That thing didn't walk away down the corridor, you know, it just faded away,—vanished into the air. I could see it—"

"How could you, with no light?"

"I don't know how I did. It wasn't exactly luminous, and yet it gave out a very faint glow, enough for me to see it, anyhow. Oh, I shall never forget its awful grin!"

Professor Hardwick told his tale to Eve and Norma later in the day, and in the afternoon the men returned. Mr. Tracy said he had been to Boston, to see the trustees of a church that had called him to its pastorate, and Braye had been in New York looking after some of his late uncle's business affairs.

Both men were deeply interested in the story of the ghost, for as they said, Professor Hardwick was not one to imagine or to think himself awake when he was dreaming.

They listened attentively, and Tracy summed it up by saying, "Well, if Professor Hardwick saw that, it makes me feel like believing in the supernatural."

"Me, too," agreed Braye. "I don't take much stock in the stories of the girls, for Eve is a visionary creature, and Norma is very imaginative. But when a rational, scientific man sees things, I believe the things are there to be seen! At least, I'm willing to believe. I would feel more certain if I saw it myself,—and yet,—to tell the truth I've no desire to see it. I'll take other people's words for it. How about you, Tracy?"

"I don't believe I'm psychic, or sensitive, or whatever you call it," and the clergyman smiled. "You know I slept in the room with the tassels, but no ghostly visitor favoured me."

"It may come to you yet," said Hardwick, turning grave eyes on Tracy, "or you, either, Rudolph. You see, it doesn't visit *only* that room. I wish some of you others could see it, I'd feel more sure of my own story."

"Aren't you sure of it?" asked Tracy.

"What do you mean by sure?" queried the Professor, a little petulantly. "Of course, I'm sure I saw what I've told you, but I want to be sure it *was* a ghost, and not a person tricking me. Could it have been Miss Carnforth, now?"

"No, it wasn't," declared Landon. "Milly went to the girls as I went to you, Professor, and found them both asleep. Or at least they were dozing, but they were safely in their beds. You know we're all more or less wakeful at four A.M."

"Four P.M. is a more fatal time," said Braye, musingly. "The whole thing is frightful. I'm for going back to New York, as soon as we can."

"If this should be the eleventh case," began the Professor.

"What do you mean, the eleventh case?" asked Tracy.

"As I told these people before we started up here, Andrew Lang has said, in one of his books, that ten out of every eleven cases of so-called supernatural manifestations are produced by fraud. When I said that, Miss Carnforth very astutely said, that it was the eleventh case that was of interest to investigators. And I agreed. If this, now, is the eleventh case,—I don't mean only my experience of last night, but all our experiences up here,—if this is the eleventh case, that is *not* the result of fraud, and it certainly looks like it, why, then, we have something worth investigating."

"Not at the cost of any more lives," said Braye, sternly. "If it is the eleventh case, and if it is going right on being an eleventh case, I've had enough of it! Perhaps that apparition of a glass in the spectre's hand, foretells tragedy to you, Professor."

Braye spoke gloomily, rather than as an alarmist, but the Professor turned white. "I've thought of that," he said, in a low voice. "That's why I want to be sure the phantom was a real one. If it was fraud, I have no fear, but if it was really the disembodied spirit of that shawled woman, appearing in her own materialized skeleton,—I, too, have had about enough investigating!"

"What do you think, Norma?" Braye asked of the girl, as, later in the afternoon, they were walking round along the wild path that was the only approach to the great portals of Black Aspens.

"I don't know, Rudolph, but I'm beginning to think there *is* a human hand and brain back of it all. I'm a sensitive, and that's

one reason why these things *don't* appeal to me as supernatural. I've had more or less experience with supernormal matters and I've never known anything like the things that have happened and are happening up here."

"Whom do you suspect, Norma? Tell me, for I, too, think there may be some trickery, and I wonder if we look in the same direction."

"I don't want even to hint it, Rudolph, but—"

"Don't hesitate to tell me, dear. Oh, that slipped out! I've no right to say 'dear' to you, but,—Norma, after we get back to town, after these horrors are farther in the past, mayn't I tell you then,—what I hope you will be glad to hear?"

"Don't—don't say such things," and a pained look came into the blue eyes. "You know you are not free to talk like that!"

"Not free? Why am I not? What do you mean?"

"You know, you must know. Eve told me—"

"Eve couldn't have told you that there was anything between her and me! Why, Norma, I have loved you from the very first moment I laid eyes on you! I have kept myself from telling you, because of all these dreadful things that have been going on. This atmosphere is no place for love-making, but, dearest, just give me a gleam of hope that later,—when we go back home, that I may—"

"Oh, Rudolph! Look! What is that? See, in the room with the tassels!"

They had neared the house on their return stroll, and from the window of the fatal room peered out at them a ghastly, grinning

skull!

It was nearly dusk, but they could see quite clearly the hollow eye-sockets and the awful teeth of the fleshless face.

Norma clung to Braye, almost fainting. He slipped an arm round her saying, "Brace up, Norma, dearest, be brave. This is our chance. Let us dash right in, and see if it is still there. Stay here, if you prefer, but I must go!"

He hastened toward the house, and Norma kept pace with him. She felt imbued with his spirit of courage and bravery, and together they hurried and burst in at the front door, which was never locked save at night.

Without stopping, Braye rushed into the room with the tassels. But there was no one there, and no sign of any occupant, either human or supernatural.

There was no one in the hall, and further search showed no one in the drawing room. Nor could anything unusual be found in the house.

Most of the people were in their rooms. Eve was partly ill with a headache, and Milly was looking after her.

The men appeared as Braye and Norma called out, and soon all had gathered to hear the strange new story.

"I shouldn't believe it, if you hadn't both seen it," said the Professor, "but I can't think you were *both* under the spell of imagination."

"I want to go home," Milly said, plaintively, "I don't want to see the thing, and I'm afraid I'll be the next one it will visit."

"We will go, dear," said Landon. "As soon as we can make arrangements we'll get off. Don't you say so, Eve?"

"Yes," she assented, but slowly. "I would prefer to stay a bit longer, myself, but I really don't think Milly ought to. However, I'll do as the majority wish."

But the matter of going away from Black Aspens was not entirely at their own disposal. The detective, Dan Peterson, had been exceedingly busy, and had wrung a confession out of Elijah Stebbins. It had been a mild sort of third degree, but it had resulted in a frank avowal of Stebbins' implication in some, at least, of the mysterious happenings that had puzzled the people at Black Aspens.

Stebbins defended himself by the statement that he only rented his house on the understanding that it was haunted. He said, it was reputed haunted, but he knew that unless something mysterious occurred, the tenants would feel dissatisfied.

He said, too, that he saw no harm in doing a few little tricks to mystify and interest the investigators, but he swore that he had no hand in the spectral appearances nor in the awful tragedy of the four o'clock tea.

What he did confess to was the placing of the old, battered candlestick in Miss Reid's room the first night the party arrived.

"I done it, sort of on impulse," he said; "I heard 'em talking about ghosts, and just to amaze them, I sneaked in in the night

and took that candlestick offen Mr. Bruce's dresser and set it on the young lady's. I didn't mean any harm, only to stir things up."

"Which you did," remarked Peterson drily. "Go on."

The confession was being recorded in the presence of police officials, and Stebbins was practically under arrest, or would be very shortly after his tale was told.

"Well, then, the first night Mr. Bruce slept in that room, that ha'nted room, I thought I'd wrap a sheet round me and give him a little scare,—he was so scornful o' ghosts, you know. An' I did, but nobody would believe his yarn. So that's all I did. If any more of them ghost performances was cut up by live people, they wasn't me. Somebody else did it."

And no amount of further coercion could budge Stebbins from these statements. He stuck to it, that though he had tricked his tenants, he had done nothing to harm them, and his intentions were of the best, as he merely wanted to give them what they had taken his house for.

"You intended to keep it up?" asked Peterson.

"Yes, I did, but after they took things into their own hands, and played spooks themselves, what was the use?"

"How did you get into the house at night, when it was so securely locked?" asked Peterson.

"I managed it, but I won't tell you how," said Stebbins, doggedly.

"With Thorpe's help," suggested Peterson, "or—oh, by Jinks!" he whistled; "I think I begin to see a glimmer of a gleam of light on this mystery! Yes, I sure do! Excuse me, and I'll fly over to the

house and do a little questioning. Officer, keep friend Stebbins safe against my return."

Arrived at Black Aspens, Peterson asked for Rudolph Braye, and was closeted with him for a secret session, from which Braye came forth looking greatly worried and perturbed.

Peterson went away, and Braye sought the others. He found them listening to a letter which Professor Hardwick had just received and which the old man was reading aloud.

"It's from Mr. Wise," he said to Braye, as the latter came in hearing. "He's a detective, and he writes to me, asking permission to take up this case."

"What a strange thing to do!" exclaimed Braye.

"Yes," agreed Hardwick, "and he seems to be a strange man. Listen; 'If I succeed in finding a true solution to the mystery, you may pay me whatever you deem the matter worth, if I do not, there will be no charge of any sort. Except that I should wish to live in the house with you all, at Black Aspens. I know all of the affair that has been printed in the newspapers, and no more. If you are still in the dark, I should like prodigiously to get into the thick of it and will arrive as soon as you summon me."

There was more to the letter but that was the gist of it, and Braye listened in silence.

"I think," he said, as the Professor finished, "that we don't want that detective poking into our affairs."

"I agree," said Landon. "There's been quite enough publicity about all this already, and I, for one, prefer to go back to New

York and forget it as soon as we can."

"We can't forget it very soon, Wynne," put in Milly, "but I, too, want to go back to New York."

"We can't go right off," Braye told them, "we must wait a week or so, at least."

"Why?" asked Eve, not at all displeased by this statement, for she frankly admitted a desire to stay longer at Black Aspens.

"Oh, lots of reasons." Braye put her off. "But let's settle down for another week here, and then we'll see."

"Then I'm going to tell Wise to come up for that week," declared the Professor. "I don't altogether adhere to my conviction as to supernatural powers, and I want to see what a big, really clever detective can dig up in the way of clues or evidence or whatever they work by."

"Oh, cut out Wise," urged Braye. "We don't want any more detectives than we are ourselves. And Peterson is pretty busy just now, too."

It was after the confab broke up that Milly went to Braye.

"Why don't you want Mr. Wise to come?" she said, without preamble.

"Why, oh,—why just 'cause I don't," he stammered, in an embarrassed way.

"You can't fool me, Rudolph," she said, with an agonized look on her pretty face. "You are afraid he'll suspect Wynne,—aren't you?"

"Don't, Milly," urged Braye, "*don't* say such things!"

"You are! I know from the way you try to put me off. Oh, Braye, he *didn't* do it! He hadn't any hand in any of the queer doings, had he, Rudolph? Tell me you *know* he hadn't!"

"Of course, Milly, of course."

"But, listen, Rudolph, I heard some of the things that Peterson man said to you, I listened at the door, I couldn't help it."

"Milly! I'm ashamed of you!"

"I don't care! I'm not ashamed. But,—I heard him say that he thinks Wynne is in league with Mr. Stebbins and that the two of them brought about all the mysterious doings—"

"Hush, Milly! Don't let any one hear you! You mustn't breathe such things!"

"But he did say so, didn't he, Rudolph?"

"I won't tell you."

"I know he did! I heard him."

"Then forget it, as soon as you can. Trust me, Milly. I'll do all I can to keep suspicion from Wynne. But, do this, Milly. Use all your powers of persuasion with Professor Hardwick, and make him give up his plan of getting that detective up here. That Wise is a wise one indeed! He'll find out every thing we don't want known, and more, too! Will you, Milly, *will* you,—if only for Wynne's sake—try to keep that man away?"

"I'll try, Rudolph, oh, of course I will! But what can I do, if the Professor has made up his mind? You know how determined he is."

"Get the girls to help. Don't breathe to them a word that you overheard Peterson say, but manage to make them do all they

can to keep that detective off. If you all band together, you can do it. Wynne won't want him; I don't; I don't think Mr. Tracy will; and if you women are on our side, Hardwick will be only one against the rest of us, and we *must* win the day! Milly, that Wise must *not* come up here,—if you value your peace of mind!"

"Oh, Rudolph, you frighten me so. I will do all I can, oh, I *will*!"

CHAPTER XIII
Pennington Wise

WHEN Mary Pennington married a man named Wise, it was not at all an unusual impulse that prompted her to name her first born son after her own family name, and so Pennington Wise came into being.

Then, of course, it followed, as the night the day, that his school chums should call him Penny Wise, which name stuck to him through life. Whether this significant name was the cause of his becoming a detective is not definitely known, but a detective he did grow up to be, and a good one, too. Eccentric, of course, what worthwhile detective is not? But clear cut of brain, mind and intelligence. And always on the lookout for an interesting case, for he would engage in no others.

Wherefore, his persistence in desiring to investigate the strange mysteries of Black Aspens won the day against Milly's endeavours to prevent his coming. She had done all she could, and most of the house party had aided her efforts, but Professor Hardwick had become imbued with the idea that there was human agency at work, and that his belief in spiritual visitation, honest though it had been, was doomed to a speedy death, unless further proof could be shown.

Norma, too, was rather inclined to welcome a specialist in the solving of mysterious problems, and in conference with the

Professor agreed to do all she could to help the Wise man in his work.

Norma was still of the opinion that the two tragic deaths were the work of evil spirits, but if it were not so, she wanted to know it.

But the principal reason why Pennington Wise came to Black Aspens was his own determination to do so. He had never heard of such an unusual and weird mystery, and it whetted his curiosity by its strange and almost unbelievable details.

The opposing party gave in gracefully, when they found his advent was inevitable. All but Milly, that is. She spent her time alternately crying her heart out in Wynne's arms, and bracing herself up for a calm and indifferent attitude before the new investigator.

"Keep a stiff upper lip," Braye advised her. "Remember not to give out any information, Milly. Let him find out all he can, but don't help him."

"All right, Rudolph; and, anyway, I know Wynne is innocent,—"

"Of course he is! That goes without saying. But if he is suspected, say, if Stebbins or Thorpe or anybody else puts Wise up to suspicion, it may mean a bad quarter of an hour for all of us. So, just be quiet, dignified, pleasant-mannered and all that, but don't say anything definite. For it might be misconstrued and misunderstood, and make trouble. At least, that's the course I'm going to pursue, and I think it's the best plan."

"Oh, I know it is," Milly agreed. "In fact, that's just about what Wynne told me; he thinks if I try to help, I'll only make

mistakes, so he, too, told me to keep quiet. Eve is awfully angry, because that man is coming. She's not saying so, but I know her! And, Rudolph, she's afraid of something. I don't know what, exactly, but she's fearfully afraid of developments."

"We all are, Milly. If the detective pins it on any human being,—that means trouble, and if he decides it's spooks, after all,—I think I'll be more afraid of them than ever!"

"I can't be any more afraid of them than I am!" Milly shuddered. "Oh, Rudolph, how I wish we had never come up here!"

"We all wish that, Milly, but as we're in for it now, we must see it through."

Pennington Wise arrived the next afternoon. He came into the hall like an army with banners. A tall, well set-up man, of about thirty-three or four, thick chestnut hair, worn *à la brosse*, clear blue eyes, a clean-cut, fine-featured face, and a manner that proclaimed generalship and efficiency to the last degree.

"Here I am," he announced, setting down several pieces of hand luggage and whipping off his soft gray felt hat. "You are the hostess?"

His quick-darting eyes had picked out Milly, and he greeted her as a distinguished visitor might.

"Who is that?" exclaimed Milly, looking at a slight, black-haired girl who followed quietly in Wise's footsteps.

"That? oh that's Zizi,—part of my luggage. Put her any place. Is there a housekeeper person? Yes? Well, turn Zizi over to her,

she'll be all right."

Hester was peeping in at a rear door, unable to restrain her curiosity as to the commotion, and Zizi glided toward her and disappeared in the shadows.

"Now," said Wise, his quick smile flashing inclusively at all of them, "we must get acquainted. I'm Penny Wise, and all possible jokes on my name have already been made, so that's all right. I know Mrs. Landon, and you, of course," looking at Wynne, "are her husband. Professor Hardwick," and he bowed slightly, "is the man with whom I have had a short correspondence regarding my coming here. You, sir,—" he looked inquiringly at Braye.

"I'm Rudolph Braye, nephew of Mr. Gifford Bruce, and present heir to his fortune." The quiet sadness of Braye's tone precluded any idea of his triumph of exultation at the fact he stated. "This," he went on, "is the Reverend Mr. Tracy, a friend of us all. And these ladies are Miss Carnforth and Miss Cameron, both deeply interested in the solution of the mysteries that confront us. Since introductions are in order, may I inquire further concerning the young lady,—or child,—who accompanied you?"

"Zizi? She's part of my working outfit. In fact, one of my principal bits of paraphernalia. I always use her on mysterious cases. Don't look on her as an individual, please, she's a property,—in the theatrical sense, I mean."

"But her standing in the household?" asked Milly, "does she belong with the servants, or in here with us?"

"She'll look after that herself," and Penny Wise smiled. "Pay no more attention to her than you would to my umbrella or walking stick. Now we know each others' names, let's proceed to the case itself. Who is going to tell me all about it?"

"Which of us would you rather have do so?" asked Eve, her long, glittering eyes fixed on the detective's face.

He glanced at her quickly, and then let his gaze continue to rest on her beautiful, sibylline countenance.

"Not you," he said, "you are too—well, I suppose the word I must use is temperamental, but it's a word I hate."

"Why?" asked the Professor, "what do you mean by temperamental?"

"That's the trouble," smiled Wise. "It doesn't mean anything. Strictly speaking, every one has temperament of one sort or another, but it has come to mean an emotional temperament,—"

"What do you mean by emotional?" interrupted Hardwick.

"There you go again!" and Wise looked amused. "Emotions are of all sorts, but emotional has come to be used only in reference to demonstrations of the affections."

"You're a scholar!" cried the Professor. "Rarely do I meet a man with such a fine sense of terminology!"

"Glad you're pleased. But, Professor, neither do I choose you as historian of the affairs of Black Aspens. Let me see," his eyes roved from one to another, "it seems to me I'll get the most straightforward, uncoloured statement from a clerical mind. I think Mr. Tracy can tell me, in the way I want to hear it, a

concise story of the mysteries and tragedies you have been through up here."

Mr. Tracy looked at the detective gravely.

"I am quite willing to do what I can," he said, "and I will tell the happenings as I know them. For occasions when I was not present, or where my memory fails, the others will, I trust, be allowed to help me out."

And then, the whole matter was laid before the intelligence of Pennington Wise, and with a rapt look of interest and a few pointed questions here and there, the detective listened to the history of his new case.

At last, the account having been brought up to date, Wise nodded his head, and sat silent for a moment. It was not the melodramatic silence of one affecting superiority, but the more impressive quietude of a mind really in deep thought.

Then Wise said, simply, "I've heard nothing yet to make me assume any supernatural agency. 'Ve you, Zizi?"

"No," came a soft, thin voice from the shadowy depths of the rear hall.

Milly jumped. "Has she been there all the time?" she said.

"She's always there," returned Wise, in a matter-of-fact way. "Now I'm ready to declare that the deaths of your two friends are positively not due to spiritistic wills, but are dastardly murders, cleverly accomplished by human hands and human brains."

"How?" gasped Eve Carnforth. She was leaning forward, her beryl eyes dilated and staring, her hands clenched, her slender

form trembling with excitement.

"That I do not know yet,—do you, Zizi?"

"No," came tranquilly from the distance.

"Let that girl come here," cried Milly, pettishly. "It gets on my nerves to have her speaking from way back there!"

"Come here, Zizi," directed Penny Wise, and the slim young figure glided toward them. She was a mere slip of a girl, a wisp of humanity, in a flimsy frock of thin black stuff, with a touch of coral-tinted chiffon in bodice and sash. The skirt was short, and her black silk stockings and high-heeled pumps gave her a chic air. Her black hair was drawn smoothly back, in the prevailing mode, and though she had an air of world-knowledge, she was inconspicuous in effect.

Without a glance at the people, personally, she sat down in a chair, a little apart, yet in full view of all.

Wise paid no attention to her, and went on, thoughtfully. "No, there is no evidence pointing to the occult, but innumerable straws to show which way the camel's back is to be broken."

"Mr. Wise," said Eve, determinedly, "I don't think it is fair for you to hear the story only from Mr. Tracy. I think he is opposed to a belief in psychics and so unintentionally colours his narrative to lead away from such theories."

"That may be so," said Tracy, himself, looking thoughtfully at Eve; "and I agree it would be fairer to hear the story, or parts of it, retold by Miss Carnforth or some one who fully believes in spiritism."

"Right," said Wise; "go ahead, Miss Carnforth, tell me anything that seems to you different in meaning from what Mr. Tracy has described."

Quite willing, Eve told of the ghostly visitant that had appeared to her the night she slept in the room with the tassels, and then described vividly the ghost that had appeared to Vernie, as Vernie had told it to her.

"You see," she concluded, "there is no explanation for these things, other than supernatural, for the locks and bars on the house preclude intrusion of outsiders, and all the occupants of the house are accounted for. I tell you the things just as they happened."

"With no wish to be discourteous, Miss Carnforth, I would advise you to tell those tales to the submarines. Even the marines couldn't swallow those! Could they, Zizi?"

"No," and now that they could see the girl, all noticed a slight smile of amusement on her young face. It was quickly followed by a look of horror in her black eyes, as she murmured, "What awful frights you must have had!" and she glanced at Milly, in sympathy. Then she turned toward Norma, and seemed about to speak, but thought better of it.

Not looking toward his "property," Wise went on talking. "I can readily see how any one willing to believe in the occult could turn these weird happenings into plausible proof. But it is not so. Miss Carnforth's own story convinces me even more strongly that there has been diabolical cleverness used, but by a human being, not a phantom."

"And you will discover how, you will solve the mysteries?" asked the Professor, eagerly.

"I hope to. But it is the most difficult appearing case I have ever encountered."

"It is not an eleventh case, then?" and Professor Hardwick told again of Andrew Lang's percentage of proof.

"No, it is not. It is one of the ten that are the result of fraud. Now to find the perpetrator of the fraud."

"At least you must admit, Mr. Wise," said Eve, a little spitefully, "that your saying it is a case of fraud does not make it so."

"No," agreed Wise, smiling in an exasperatingly patronizing way, "it sure does not. In fact it has already made itself so."

"And your discovery of the means used is bound to come?" asked Tracy, with interest.

"Bound to come," repeated the detective. "But don't let us begin by being at odds with each other. I came here to discover the truth. If any one wants the truth to remain undiscovered, now is the time to say so. For it will soon be too late."

"Why should any one want the truth to remain undiscovered?" said Braye, abruptly.

"For two reasons," replied Wise, seriously. "First, any one criminally implicated might wish it to remain unknown; second, any one wishing to shield another, might also wish no discoveries made."

"But you don't think any of us are criminally implicated, I hope," and Braye looked questioning.

"There are others in this house beside you people," Wise returned; "and I tell you frankly, I'm not ready yet to suspect any one or even imagine who the criminal may be. I only state positively that disembodied spirits are not responsible for those two tragic deaths. Also, may I ask you to remember, that I've only just arrived, that I've had a tiresome journey, that I'd like rest and refreshment, and that there are more days coming for my further work."

"Why, bless my soul!" exclaimed the Professor, "that's all true! Do you know, Mr. Wise, it seems as if you'd always been here, it seems as if you were already one of us."

"Thank you, sir, that's a pleasant compliment to my personality, anyway. And now, if you please, Mrs. Landon, may I be shown to my room?"

"Certainly," said Milly, and she rang for Thorpe, as Landon rose to escort the guest himself.

"Where's that girl?" said Norma, looking round after the detective had gone off, "what became of her?"

But there was no sight of the little black-robed figure.

"Oh, let her alone," said Eve, "she slid out to the kitchen, I think. Hester will look after her. That man said to pay no more attention to her than to his hand luggage. She'll look out for herself, I've no doubt. Isn't she awful, anyway?"

"I think she's pretty," said Norma, "in a weird, elfin sort of way."

"She knows it all," said Braye. "I never saw such an effect of old head on young shoulders in my life. But what a funny way to

treat her."

"She's a spy," declared Eve, "that's what she is, a spy! With her silent, gliding ways, and her sly, soft voice! I hate her!"

"Now, now, Evie, don't be unjust!" and Braye smiled at her. "She is a bit your style and temperament, but don't be jealous!"

"Nonsense!" and Eve laughed back at him, "why, she isn't a bit like me! She has black hair and eyes—"

"I didn't notice," said Braye, "but she impressed me as being like you in lines and motions."

"A pocket edition," laughed Tracy. "Miss Carnforth would make two of that little shrimp, and Miss Carnforth is a sylph, herself."

The party broke up into smaller groups, and Braye and Norma sauntered off for their usual afternoon stroll.

Eve watched them go, her eyes moodily staring.

"Won't I do?" said Tracy's quiet voice, and Eve pulled herself together and smiled at him.

"You're the one I want most," she declared gaily, unwilling to be thought disappointed. "Let's walk down by the lake."

The walk by the lake was always shaded, but as the day was murky it was gloomier than ever.

"You like this place?" asked Tracy, with a glance at the black grove of aspens, and their dark reflection in the still water of the deep pool.

"Yes, I do; or, I did, until that man came up here. There's no use in pursuing our investigations with him around."

"All the more use," declared Tracy. "If any supernatural things happen it will refute his cocksure decisions."

"Yes, it would. Oh, I do wish a ghost would appear to him, and scare him out of his wits!"

"He has plenty of wits, Miss Carnforth, and he'd take some scaring, I think. But if a real phantasm came, he'd know it, and he'd acknowledge it, I'm sure. He strikes me as an honourable man, and a decent, straightforward sort."

"If he is," and Eve ruminated, "perhaps he can help us to investigate—"

"That's what he's here for."

"I mean investigate *our* beliefs. If he could be convinced, as we are, of the existence of phantoms, and of their visitations, he'd be a splendid help, wouldn't he? Perhaps I am in wrong in disliking him."

"You're certainly premature. Why, not one man out of a thousand does believe in the occult. And not one in a million detectives, I daresay."

Meantime, Braye and Norma were talking in like vein.

"I do believe it was a spirit that killed our dear Vernie, and Mr. Bruce," Norma declared, "but if Mr. Wise can prove the contrary, we want him to do so, don't we, Rudolph?"

"Of course, Norma, we all feel that way. I, especially, for as heir to Uncle Gif's money, I'm in a peculiar position. But if anybody can get at the truth, this Wise person can. He's a live wire, I can see that."

"Shall we help him, Rudolph, or hold back and let him work alone?"

"Help him, of course! Why not? But, be careful that it is help we offer him, and not merely stupid interference."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing particular; but some of us are inclined to be a bit officious, and—oh, I don't know, Norma,—I don't want to say anything—even to you. Let's talk of pleasanter subjects."

"What, for instance?"

"You, for instance! You're enchanting to-day, in that pale blue gown. It makes you look like an angel."

"Do they wear pale blue?"

"I don't know what they wear, and shan't care until you really are one, and then, I hope I'll be one, too. But you look like an angel, because of your angelic face. It's like a roseleaf washed in sunlight—"

"Now, Rudolph, don't try to be poetical! You can't hit it off! A washed face is remindful of a soap advertisement,—not an angel!"

"Rogue! You love to make fun of me! But I don't mind. Oh, Norma, I don't care what you say to me, if you'll only say yes. Won't you, dearest?"

"Bad boy! Behave yourself! I told you not to ask *any* question until we get away from this place. I won't listen to love talk at Black Aspens! It's out of the picture!"

"But will you, as soon as we get back to New York? Will you, Norma—darling?"

"Wait till then, and we'll see," was all the answer he could get.

CHAPTER XIV
Zizi

"WHERE is she?" Milly asked of Hester, as, more out of curiosity than hospitality she went to the kitchen.

"Well! Mis' Landon, I never see such a thing in all my born days! She slid out here like she was on roller-skates! 'Hester?' she says, smilin', and with that she settled herself for good and all, 'sif she'd been born an' brought up here! She slid to the cupboard, and picked out the tea caddy, and took down a little teapot, and in a jiffy, she'd snatched up the b'ilin' teakettle, and was settin' at that there table, drinkin' her tea! I got her out some cakes, and by then she was a-cuttin' bread an' butter! Never've I seen her like!"

"Did she trouble you?"

"Land, no, ma'am! She waits on herself, but so quick, you'd think she was a witch!"

"Where is she now?"

"Well, ma'am, she finished her tea, and then she fair scooted up the back stairs. I heard her dart into one or two rooms, and then she took the little South gable room for hers. I could hear her stepping about, putting her things away, I make no doubt. She looked in here again, a minute, and said, 'I've chosen that little room with the lattice wall paper,' and then she disappeared again. That's all I know about her. No, ma'am, she

don't trouble me none, and I don't say I don't sort o' take to her. But she's a queer little piece. She is that."

Milly sighed. "Every thing's queer, Hester," she said, broodingly, and then she went back to the hall.

Wynne Landon sat there alone. His face was grave, and he sighed deeply as his wife came to him and laid her hand on his shoulder.

"Where's everybody, Wynnsie?" she said cheerily.

"Traipsing over the house, hunting clues! Rotten business, Milly."

"Why? What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing. I hope if that man is going to find the criminal, he'll make short work of it!"

"So do I, dear, then we can go home, can't we?"

"You bet! Here they are, now,—they seem in good spirits."

The crowd came down the stairs and into the great hall, laughing at some quip of Wise's. Ever since the day of the two deaths a sombre gloom had pervaded the whole place, and smiles had been few. The sound of laughter came as a shock to the Landons, but the cheery face of Penny Wise betokened only wholesome good nature, and not flippant heartlessness.

"Old Montgomery knew how to build a house," he commented, looking at the finely curving staircase, and its elaborate balusters. "Living rooms nowadays are all very well, but these great entrance halls are finer places to congregate. You spend much of your time here, I'm sure. The worst part is, they're

difficult to light properly,—by daylight, I mean. And, you've no electrics here, have you?"

"No," replied Landon, "only kerosene and candles. You see, the place has been unoccupied for years."

"Haunted houses are apt to be,—"

"Reputed haunted houses," corrected the Professor.

"There are no others," and Wise grinned. "All reputed haunted houses have nothing to haunt them but their repute. I mean, the story of their ghost is all the ghost they have."

"But I *saw* the ghost here," and Eve spoke with a quiet dignity that defied contradiction.

"Of course you did," Wise assented. "The ghost came purposely to be seen."

"Did you ever see one, Mr. Wise?"

"I never did, Miss Carnforth, I never hope to see one! But I can tell you anyhow, I'd rather see than be one."

"Oh, of course, if you're going to take that tone," and Eve turned away, decidedly offended.

"Sorry!" and Wise flashed a smile at her. "But, you see, a detective can't afford to believe in ghosts. We make our living solving mysteries, and to say, 'It was the ghost! You're right, it was the ghost!' is by way of begging the question."

"Then you think the phantoms that appeared to some of us were really human beings?" asked Tracy, interestedly.

"I sure do."

"And you propose to find out who and how?" said Braye.

"If I live up to my reputation, I must do so. There are but two kinds of detectives. Effective detectives and defective detectives. It is the aim of my life to belong to the former class, and here's my chance to make good. Now, I've examined the upper floors, I'll look over this hall and the ground floor rooms. Shall I have time before dinner, Mrs. Landon?"

His charm and pleasant personality had already won Milly's liking and she said, cordially, "Yes, indeed, Mr. Wise. And if you wish, we'll delay dinner to suit your pleasure."

"Not at all. Done in a few minutes. Stunning hall, eh, Zizi?"

"Yes," said the thin little voice of the thin little girl, and Milly suddenly realized that Zizi was present with the crowd.

The graceful little figure stepped forward and stood at Wise's side as he looked the hall over. He tapped at the panelled walls, and smiled as he said, "Solid and intact. No secret passage or sliding panel,—of that I'm sure."

"If you're trying to find a secret entrance into the house, Mr. Wise," Landon said, "you are wasting your time. I am more or less architecturally inclined, and I've tapped and sounded and measured and calculated,—and I can assure you there's nothing of the sort."

"Good work! That saves me some trouble, I'm sure. Marvellous work on these doors, eh? And the bronze columns,—from abroad, I take it."

"Yes;" Professor Hardwick said, slapping his hand against one of the fluted bronze pillars, "I admire these columns more than the doors even. They're unique, I don't wonder their owner

'built a house behind them.' I doubt if their match is in America."

"And the locks and bolts are as ponderous as the doors," commented the detective. "Eh, Zizi?"

"They are like that all over the house," said the girl, in a casual tone. "Even the kitchen quarters are as securely fastened and bolted. And upstairs, any doors that give on balconies are strongly guarded. I have never seen a house more carefully looked after in the matter of barricades."

The girl spoke slowly, as if on the witness stand. Then suddenly her black eyes twinkled, and she turned sharply toward Eve, saying, "Oh, do *you* do that, too?"

"Do what?" cried Eve, angrily. "What do you mean?"

"Scribble notes, and pass 'em to somebody. I do, too. It's a habit I can't seem to break myself of."

"I didn't!" and Eve's face flushed and her eyes glittered with a smouldering fire.

"Oh, tra la la," trilled Zizi, and nonchalantly turned away.

"Now for the room with the tassels," said Wise, and led the way to the fateful room.

"Ghastly, ghostly and grisly!" he declared after a quick survey, "but no entrance except by door or windows."

"And they were locked every time the room was slept in by any of our party," announced the Professor, positively.

"That makes it easier," smiled Wise. "You see, I feared secret panels and that sort of thing,—not uncommon in old houses. But you've found none?"

"None," asseverated Landon. "If your theory of a human 'ghost' is right, you've got to account for the forcing of the big bolts of those front doors or—"

"Or suspect some of your household," concluded Wise, practically. "Well, I haven't suspected any one as yet; I'm just absorbing facts, on which to base my theories. Now, for the drawing room."

The long sombre, old-fashioned room received scant examination.

"Nothing doing, Zizi?" said Wise, briefly.

"Only a Bad Taste Exhibition," the girl remarked, making a wry face at the ornate decorations and appointments. Then, with her peculiar, gliding motion, she slid across the hall again, and examined the knob and lock on the door of the room with the tassels.

"Fascinating room," she said, with a glance round it. "But horrible," and her thin shoulders shrugged. "Those tassels are enough to make a hen cross the road!"

Milly giggled, and for the first time since the day of the tragedies.

Dinner was rather pleasant than otherwise. The detective, laying aside all thought or talk of his purpose there, was entertaining and even merry. He spoke somewhat of himself, and it transpired that he was an artist,—an illustrator of current magazine stories.

"And Zizi is my model," he informed them, "that is, when I want a thin, scarecrow type. I don't use her for the average peach heroine. Look out Ziz, don't eat too much of that potato puff! You see, if she puts on a bit of flesh, she runs straight back to the movie studios."

"Ah, a film star?" said Braye.

"Not a star," and Wise shook his head. "But a good little actress for a brat part."

Zizi flashed an amused smile from her black eyes and partook again of the forbidden potato puff.

"Zizi! For the love of Mike!" expostulated Wise.

"The love of Mike is the root of all evil," said Zizi, saucily; "but then, everything is."

"Is what?" asked Eve, interested against her will in this strange child.

"Is the root of all evil," was the calm reply.

"Whew! this must be an evil old world!" exclaimed Braye.

"And isn't it?" Zizi flashed back, her big eyes sparkling like liquid jet.

"Are you a pessimist, little one?" asked the Professor, studying the clever, eerie face.

"Nay, nay, Pauline,*" and the small, pointed chin was raised a bit. "Not so, but far otherwise."

[* "Nay, nay, Pauline. You've made your own bed. You've as good as left your happy home an' family cart to steal it. Now you lie on it."—*Steam Tactics* by Rudyard Kipling.]

"Then why do you think the world is evil?"

"Ah, sir, when one spends one's life between a Moving Picture Studio and a popular artist's studio, one learns much that one had better left unlearnt."

The child face suddenly looked ages old, and then, as suddenly broke into a gay smile: "Don't ask me these things," she said, "ask Penny Wise. I'm only his Pound Foolish."

"You'll put on another foolish pound if you eat any more of that dessert," growled Wise, scowling at her.

"All right, I won't," and the slender little fingers laid down the teaspoon Zizi was using. Then, in an audible aside, she added, "Hester will give me more, later," and chuckled like a naughty child.

The next morning Pennington Wise set about his work in earnest.

"I'm going to East Dryden," he announced. "I want to interview the doctors, also Mr. Stebbins. I don't mind saying frankly, this is the deepest mystery I have ever encountered. If any of you here can help me, I beg you will do so, for the case looks well-nigh hopeless. Ah, there, Zizi."

The girl appeared, ready to go with Wise in the motor car. She wore a small black hat with an oriole's wing in it, and a full-draped black cape, whose flutterings disclosed an orange-coloured lining. Inconspicuous, save when the cape's lining showed, Zizi looked distinguished and smartly costumed. A small black veil, delicately adjusted, clouded her sharp little

features, and she sprang into the car without help, and nestled into a corner of the tonneau.

Only a chauffeur accompanied them, and he could not hear the conversation carried on in low tones.

"What about it, Ziz?" murmured Wise, as they passed the aspen grove and the black lake.

"Awful doings," she returned, merely breathing the words. "The Eve girl has a secret, too."

"Too?"

"Yes, she isn't the criminal, you know."

"I don't know."

"Well, you will know. She's a queer mechanism, but she never killed anybody."

"Sure, Zizi?"

"Sure, oh, Wise Guy. Now, who did do it?"

"Well, who did?"

"We don't know yet, and we mustn't theorize without data, you know."

"Rats! I always theorize without data. And I've never failed to corral the data."

"You're a deuce of a deducer, you are!"

"And you're a She Sherlock, I suppose! Well, oh, Mine of Wisdom, go ahead. Spill it to me."

"Can't now. I've lost my place! But, after a few more interviews with some few more interested parties, I may, perhaps, possibly, maybe,—oh, Penny, look back at the house from here! Did you *ever* see such a weird, wild spook-pit!"

Black Aspens did indeed look repellent. No one was in sight, and the grove of black, waving trees, mirrored in the deep black shadows of the lake gave it all a doomed effect that the dull, leaden sky intensified.

The grim old house seemed the right abode for evil spirits or uneasy wraiths, and Zizi, fascinated by the still scene continued to gaze backward until a turn of the road hid it from view.

Then she became silent, and would vouchsafe no answer to Wise's questions or make any remarks of her own.

During the interview between the detective and Elijah Stebbins, she said almost nothing, her big eyes staring at the owner of Black Aspens, until the old man writhed in discomfort.

"How did you get in?" she shot at him, as he frankly admitted his harmless tricks to give his tenants their desired interest in his house.

"I *was* in, miss," Stebbins said, nervously twisting his fingers; "I staid there the first night, and 'twas then I moved the old candlestick."

"I don't mean that," and Zizi's eyes seemed to bore through to his very brain, "I mean the night you played ghost."

"Why,—I—that is,—they left a window open—"

"They did not!" Zizi shot at him, "and you know it! How did you get in?"

But old Stebbins persisted in his story of entrance by an overlooked window.

"There's heaps of windows in that house," he declared. "Land, I could get in any time I wanted to."

"Sure you could," retorted Zizi, "but not through a window!"

"How, then?" said Stebbins.

"That's what I asked you. I know."

"You know! *How* do you know?"

"Your mama told my mama and my mama told me!" Zizi's mocking laughter so incensed the old man that he shook with fury.

"You don't know!" he cried, "'cause there's nothin' to know! Land! All them folks up there has hunted the place for secret entrances, and I ruther think you have too," and he nodded at Wise.

"I have," said Wise, frankly, "and I've discovered none as yet. But, listen here, friend Stebbins, if there is one, I will find it,—and that's all there is about that!"

Zizi said nothing, having returned to her taciturn rôle, but the glance she threw at Stebbins, he said afterward, made his blood run cold.

"She's a witch-cat!" he declared to his cronies, when telling the tale, "she ain't all human,—or *I'm* a sinner!"

On their way to see Dan Peterson, Wise inquired concerning Zizi's knowledge of a secret way to get into the house.

"A small bluff," she said, carelessly. "I dunno how he got in, I'm sure. But I don't believe those people left a window conveniently open, unless—they did it on purpose. Who does the locking up, do you know?"

"Mr. Landon, I believe."

"Quite so! It's a pity, isn't it Pen, how everything appears to wind around back to that nice Mr. Landon!"

"Well, what now?"

"Well, if he and Stebbins were in cahoots—"

"Hold up, Zizi, don't run away with yourself! You're a day ahead of the fair. Now, are you going to talk, in here at Peterson's, or sit like a bump on a log,—smiling at grief?"

"I dunno; which would you?"

"Talk," said Wise, succinctly, and Zizi talked.

Indeed, she carried on the main part of the conversation, which was exactly what Wise had meant for her to do.

She charmed Peterson with her bright, alert air and her pleasant, quick-witted way of putting things.

Together they went over the known details, and then she cleverly drew from Peterson his deductions and decisions.

At first, inclined to resent the advent of this all-wise detective, he now began to think that if they could work together, he would shine by reflected glory, that is, if the new chap succeeded in solving the mystery, which to him was inexplicable.

"I can't suspect the Thorpes or Mr. Stebbins," Peterson finally declared: "I did think I could, but though Eli did cut up some tricks, they were harmless and merely in fun. And, too, he has absolute alibis for all the spook appearances after a certain date. And that's the date when that Miss Carnforth saw a ghost. As near as I can make out, that ghost was Stebbins himself, but

no spooks after that was Stebbins' doings. Now, I give you that straight and simple, Mr. Wise, but it took me a long time to ferret it out. I suspected it, but I've had hard work to get Stebbins to admit his tricks, and also to check up his alibis after that particular night."

"These perfectly attested alibis are sometimes manufactured very carefully," said Zizi, fixing her black eyes on Peterson.

"Yes, they are. That's why I checked up Eli's so carefully. But they're all true. I've got an exact list of the spook performances from the people at the house. I got the data from different ones, at different times, so's to be sure they were all there. Then, I looked up Stebbins' whereabouts on each occasion, and as I tell you, after the night he owns up to playing ghost, he never did it again."

"Then did he arrange for the Thorpes or one of the waiting-maids to do it?" queried Zizi.

"That I can't say. I think he must have done so, but I can't find a scrap of proof, nor is there any motive. Stebbins is a good old sort and he honestly wanted to give his tenants the ha'nts, as he calls 'em, that they wanted. But why, on this good green earth, he should want to kill two of them is unanswerable. No, take it from me, Eli Stebbins is no murderer. I've looked up his record and his life story, and there's no indication that he knew any of these people before they came up here, so he couldn't have had any old grudge or family feud or anything of that sort. Stebbins isn't the criminal, no sir-ee!"

"I never thought he was," said Wise, quietly. "You've done good work Mr. Peterson, and you've saved me a heap of trouble in getting these facts so undeniably established. I thank you, and I shall be glad of your coöperation in my further work."

"Good for you, I'll be right down glad to work with you. And this young lady, Mr. Wise, is she one of us?"

"She *is* us," returned Wise, simply. "Don't bother about her, Mr. Peterson, she's the sort that looks after herself. Report to me, please, if you discover anything new."

CHAPTER XV
Tracy's Story

"NOW I wouldn't say," Wise observed, "that there is no such thing as occult phenomena—"

"What do you mean by phenomena?" interrupted the Professor. "Not one person in ten uses that word correctly."

"I'm that single and unique one, old top," Wise assured him, "for my exact meaning, see Webster; but I was going to say, even granting the possibility of the two deaths being due to supernatural causes, I'm not going to accept that solution of the mystery until I've exhausted all other available means of finding a flesh and blood murderer, which same I strongly expect to find."

"He'll do it," said Zizi, addressing the others, while her black eyes looked at Wise as at an inanimate object. "He's an effective detective, first, last and all the time. And I'm the little cog that makes the wheels go round. So, I think, Tecky-teck, that I'll carry out a plan I've just thought of. I'll move from the pretty little bedroom I now occupy, and sleep in the room with the tassels."

"Oh, don't!" cried Norma. "Something might happen to you!"

"That's what I'm flattering myself. And it's nice of you, Miss Cameron, to speak out like that." Zizi's eyes flashed a quizzical glance at Eve, who was nodding satisfaction at the proposed plan.

Eve coloured and dropped her eyes, and Zizi went on. "You see, people, Mr. Wise can't size up these ghosts of yours unless he sees them,—and for me to see them is the same thing. So I'm going to take the haunted room for my own and if the Shawled Woman appears, I'll pin a tag on her shawl."

Norma shuddered. "Don't talk like that," she begged. "You don't know what risk you run. Milly, don't let the child sleep there."

But all objections were overruled, and Zizi quietly transferred her few simple belongings to the room with the tassels.

At breakfast, the morning after her first night in the haunted room, she declared she had never slept better or more soundly, that there had been no disturbance of any kind, and that she adored the room.

"You saw and heard nothing?" queried Eve, looking at her intently.

"Nixy," and the pert little face was all smiles. "But the game isn't out till it's played out, you know."

"I fail to grasp the cryptic meaning of that remark," said Eve, with an insolent stare at Zizi.

"Same here!" and the child's eerie laugh rang out. "But when I don't know exactly what to say, I sing out some old saw like that."

Zizi's laugh was infectious, and Milly giggled in sympathy, while the others smiled too.

"The experience was mine, last night," said Mr. Tracy, in his deep, resonant voice. "I suppose I'd better tell of it."

"By all means," said Penny Wise, as the clergyman hesitated.

"A phantom appeared to me," Tracy began, "just as the hall clock struck four. I wasn't asleep, of that I'm sure, but I was suddenly aware of a presence in the room. A tall, misty shape seemed to take form as I looked, and it had the appearance of a woman with a shawl over her head. She drew near to me, and I could see her face, and it was that of a skull. I was stunned, rather than frightened, and when I tried to call out, I could make no sound. The thing faded away as gradually as it had appeared, and after a time I regained a normal state of nerves. I don't want to be an alarmist, or frighten anybody, but I—well, I confess I didn't enjoy the experience, and I take occasion to say now, that I shall leave here to-day. I'm going to Boston, and will return at any time, if for any reason my presence is desired or my affidavit wanted as a witness. You all know what I've thought about this whole matter. While not a spiritualist, I've preserved an open mind toward any revelations we may have had, and I'm always ready to be convinced. And I may say the sight I saw last night has gone far to convince me. But I don't care to see it again," Tracy shuddered, "and at risk of being thought cowardly, I've determined to go away. I had intended to go shortly, anyway, and I prefer to go to-day."

"I don't blame you, old chap," said Braye, heartily; "there's no reason why you should jeopardize your nervous system by exposing it to further shocks. Let Mr. Wise take down the details of your story, keep in touch with us as to your whereabouts and where we can communicate with you, and go ahead. I don't

blame you one bit. In fact, if any one else wants to leave, no objections will be made. How about you, Professor?"

"I want to stay, please. I'm terribly interested in the matter, and I think Mr. Wise is making progress, and will make more, rapidly. I'm anxious to stay."

"I'm game, too," said Landon. "In fact I think we all want to see it through, except Mr. Tracy, and he is not so closely associated with the case as the rest of us."

So Tracy went, about noon of that day, and left an address that he said would always reach him, wherever he might be temporarily.

Milly and Norma regretted his going, for they had come to like the grave, kindly man, but Eve seemed not to care; and the men were all so interested in the work of Penny Wise, that they only gave a hearty good-bye and Godspeed to the departing cleric.

"Queer, that spook should appear to him," said Wise, after Mr. Tracy had gone.

"He told me some time ago," said Norma, reminiscently, "that he often heard strange sounds at four in the morning. He said they were like faint moans and rustlings and sometimes a soft step along the halls."

"Did he ever see anything before?" asked Zizi.

"I don't think so. He was not very communicative about it, anyway. I think he was nervous on the subject."

"I know he was," Eve spoke scornfully. "He was afraid, I'm positive. No one ought to have joined this party who was

afraid."

"We only asked him to fill in, you know," said Milly, rather apologizing for the minister's timidity. "And goodness knows, *I'm* afraid! Or I should be, if Wynne weren't always with me. If that thing appeared to me,—well!"

Milly could find no words to express her horror, and Landon looked at her anxiously.

"It won't," said Zizi, reassuringly, "it won't, Mrs. Landon."

"How do you know?" said Eve, a bit abruptly.

"Your mama told my mama and my mama told me," returned Zizi, who could put such graphic impudence into the silly phrase, that it was impossible not to be amused at it. "Oh, do *you* do that, too?" she added, as Eve bit her lip in annoyance. "So do I! It's such a hard habit to break, ain't it? But you oughtn't to, it scars your lips. Now, Penny Wise, if you'll go for a walk and a talk with your little otherwise, she'll tell you sumpum that you ought to know."

"Look out, Ziz," Wise said to her, as they walked off by themselves, and followed the path by the lake, "you mustn't be too saucy to Miss Carnforth, or there'll be trouble."

"Have to, honey. I've got to get her real mad at me, to find out her secret. She's no criminal, as I've told you, but she knows who is."

"Do you?"

"Not yet, but soon. Now, listen, while I expound a few. Friend Spook did appear to me last night."

"Really?"

"Sure as shootin'! I thought it over, and decided I'd better not admit it to the gaping crowd, or we'll never find out who does the stunt."

"But, really, Zizi?"

"Yes, really, Pen. It was about two o'clock,—not four. A tall shape, draped in white, breezed in and toddled around trying to attract my attention. I lay there and looked sort of glassy-eyed, as if I was awake, but kinda hypnotized, you know. Well, I kept up that attitude, and the thing came nearer and leaned over me, and sure enough it had a skull for a face; but, land, Penny, it was a *papier maché* skull,—a mask, you know. 'Twould be fine in the movies, I must put Manager Reeves up to that dodge!"

"Go on, Ziz."

"Well, the thing,—the person, I mean, for it was a real, live person all right,—sashayed around a bit, then gave a hollow groan,—I guess that's what they call hollow,—and slid out. That's all."

"You're a corker, Zizi! Why didn't you yell?"

"I wanted to see the game. Then, when the pleasant-faced visitor left, I knew it was because I was supposed to have been sufficiently impressed. I thought it over, and I decided that at breakfast, I'd say I hadn't seen anything, and see who looked self-conscious. And, by jiminy! nobody did! If any one around that table was my visiting spook, he or she carried it off something marvellous! Not one of 'em flickered an eyelash when I said I'd had a sweet, sound sleep all night. I can't see

how any one could be so self-controlled. Now, Penny, could it have been anybody who wasn't at the breakfast table?"

"Meaning Stebbins or the Thorpes?"

"Oh, no! none of them! But how about some outsider, hired, you know, by somebody in the house."

"How'd he get in?"

"There's a secret way into this house. You needn't tell me there isn't. Just 'cause you haven't stumbled over it yet! Also, who's doing the hiring?"

"You said everything came around toward Landon."

"There's motive there. You see, after Mr. Braye, Mr. Landon inherits all the Bruce fortune, and that's millions."

"What's the matter with Braye being the murderer? He inherits first."

"That's just it. If Mr. Braye wanted to kill his relatives to get the fortune, he wouldn't do it up here, where he's so liable to be suspected. He'd invent some subtler way, or some less suspicious scheme. But Mr. Landon could do it up here, and feel sure the suspicion would fall on Mr. Braye. Then, you see, Mr. Braye gets the money, and later on, Mr. Landon puts him out, too. In some awfully clever way, that can't be traced to him, d'y' see? And, too, Mr. Braye has declared he'll give all the money, if necessary, to discovering the criminal, if there is one. And he said, he'd give what was left to build a hospital. No, he doesn't want the money that came to him in such an awful way, leastwise, not if it throws suspicion on him. He's going to be

cleared, or he's not going to use the money for himself. Miss Carnforth told me all that, I've talked a lot with her."

"You've talked with all of them, haven't you?"

"Yes, indeed. I've babbled on, and most often they tell me a lot that they don't realize. Mrs. Landon, now, she's struggling hard not to suspect her own husband, but Miss Carnforth has said a few things that scare Mrs. Landon 'most to death. Oh, Penny, it's a fearful case! We must fix it up, we must!"

"We will, Zizi. There's so much evidence not to be denied, that we must ferret out what it really means. I'm getting a glimmer, but your help is invaluable. That was a stroke of genius for you not to tell of your ghost! Weren't you frightened?"

"Not a bit. All I wanted to do, was to find out who it was. But I didn't dare grab at it, for I knew it would get away. I hope it will come again. I'll try to make it speak, and maybe I'll get a line on the voice."

"Was it a man or a woman?"

"I couldn't tell. The draperies were long and full, and the skull-mask covered the face."

"Didn't you see the hand?"

"It was lost in the draped shawl. But I'm sure I'll have another visit, and then I'll get more information. You think I did well, oh, Wise Guy?"

"I do indeed!" and the approving smile that was Zizi's most welcome reward lighted up the detective's face.

Zizi pursued her plan of talking to the various people

separately. She gleaned much this way and with her powers of lightning calculation, she put two and two together with astounding results.

She even lured the old Professor into a tête-à-tête conversation.

"No, I don't believe those deaths were supernatural, *now*," he said, thoughtfully; "I did, but it's too incredible. However, it's no more unbelievable than that they could have been accomplished by human power."

"They were," and Zizi's black head nodded affirmation.

"How, then?"

"By a diabolically clever genius. Tell me again, Professor, just how those people were sitting? Were they together?"

"Mr. Bruce and Vernie? No. There was the width of the room between them."

"Were you near either?"

"Yes, sitting next to Mr. Bruce. We were talking absorbedly."

"Had he tasted his tea?"

"I think he had taken one sip,—not more, I'm sure."

"There was poison in that tea, Professor."

"There must have been, but how *could* there be?"

"Who gave it to him?"

"Let me see; Miss Carnforth presided, as Mrs. Landon was not at home. Miss Carnforth made the tea, and poured the cups, and Vernie and Mr. Tracy,—yes, and Mr. Landon were passing the things around. It was all most informal, we never have the

servants in at tea-time. I couldn't really say just who did give Mr. Bruce his cup. Vernie gave me mine, I think."

"Well, the poison was put in Mr. Bruce's cup, after Miss Carnforth fixed it for him."

"Bless my soul, do you think so? That lets Braye out, then, for he wasn't there."

"You don't suspect Mr. Braye, do you?"

"No; of course not; but I don't really suspect anybody. But Mr. Braye is the heir, you know, and so may be said to have motive."

"That is true of Mr. Landon,—in a way."

"I can't suspect either of those two,—it's impossible."

"Go on, Professor, tell me about the little girl's death."

"You've heard it before."

"I know, but every little helps."

"She was across the room. I was looking at Bruce, of course, when I heard an exclamation—"

"From whom?"

"I don't know; Miss Carnforth, I think. Any way, she and Tracy were bending over Vernie,—they had laid her on a couch,—and in a moment, they said she was dead. At the same time, Mr. Bruce breathed his last. It was all so fearful, so terrible, we were stunned. At least, I was, and one by one we pulled ourselves together, trying to realize what had happened."

"All right, I know the rest. You've helped me a little—"

"Do you suspect anybody? Does Mr. Wise? Tell me, child. I can doubtless be of help, if I know what to do."

"No, Professor, you can't help. It's very awful, but it will soon be clear to all. Heaven help that poor Miss Carnforth."

"Nonsense! Eve didn't do it! Of that I'm certain."

"So am I. Of course, Miss Carnforth didn't do it. The tea was all right when she fixed Mr. Bruce's cup."

"Then who tampered with it? Not Vernie!"

But Zizi had run away. She had a way of making sudden exits and entrances, and one never knew where she was or when she would appear.

That night Zizi declared that she hoped the ghost would visit her. She said this openly, as the whole crowd were preparing to go to their rooms for the night.

"Perhaps it will," said Wise, looking at her, thoughtfully. "If it called on Mr. Tracy last night, it may be here again to-night, and you may be favoured. Are you not afraid?"

"Not of the ghost," said Zizi, "but I am afraid that some of you people may play a trick just to scare me. Will you double up, so I can feel sure there's nothing of that sort?"

"I'll take Mr. Tracy's room," said Mr. Wise, "then I can keep my eye on Mr. Braye and Professor Hardwick. Though I've no mental image of either of them trailing round in sheets!"

"I should say not!" and Braye shuddered. "No, Miss Zizi, you've nothing to fear from us."

"Nor us," Norma assured her. "I was going to sleep in the room with Miss Carnforth, anyway, and that will preclude either of us impersonating a phantom."

"What an awful idea," and Eve glowered at Zizi. "You don't really think any of us would stoop to such a despicable thing, do you?"

"You never can tell," said Zizi, nonchalantly. "Mrs. Landon, you won't let your husband leave your room, will you?"

"No," said Milly, not at all resenting the question which Zizi put to her in a gentle, pleading tone, very different from that she had used to the others.

And so, the inmates of the house being accounted for, and the doors and windows looked after with extra care and precaution, the household settled itself to quietness, and the dark hours passed, ticked off and struck by the great deep-toned clock in the hall.

It was between two and three, when Zizi, watching, perceived her door slowly and silently swing open.

Determined to learn all possible as to who the intruder could be, the girl lay motionless, but breathing deeply as if asleep.

Her eyes, almost closed, yet took in every movement of her silent visitor.

It was no white-robed ghost, but a tall figure, clad in a long black cloak, and wearing a black mask.

With a swift stride, that betokened a man, the figure approached the bed, having first softly closed the door that led to the hall.

Watching covertly for the next development, Zizi was all unprepared for what really happened.

The man, with a sudden, swift gesture, took the girl's chin in one strong hand, and opened her mouth, while with the other he thrust in a thick soft cloth, saturated with chloroform.

Not enough to make her lose her senses entirely, it partially stupefied her, and the choking cloth prevented all speech.

Whipping off the long dark cloak he wore, the man flung it round Zizi, as he lifted the slender form from the bed.

Vainly trying to emit a shriek, or utter a groan, Zizi fell, half-conscious, back in the arms that supported her.

After an unknown interval, a draught of cool air on her face brought her back to a dim consciousness, and she realized she was out of doors. A struggle of her arms and legs resulted in a firmer grasp of the strong arms that carried her, and she quit moving, to think. She had been kidnapped, taken from her bed, and had been carried out of doors, but she had no knowledge of who her captor was nor by what means they had left the house. Her brain was furiously wide awake, but she made no move, lest more chloroform be administered, and she lose her regained consciousness.

On the shore of the black lake the man stopped, and set her on her feet. Her mouth, still filled with the soft cloth, was strained and painful, but the first attempt to raise her hand resulted in its being clutched by the strong hand of the man who swayed her destiny.

So slender and light was she, that he handled her as one might a child, and in his strong grasp she was as powerless as an

infant.

Working quickly and deftly, he tied a strong rope round her ankles and to it attached what was only too evidently a bag of stones or bricks.

Then, without a word, he flung her into the deep, dark waters of the lake, and with one backward glance, he walked away.

CHAPTER XVI
What Happened to Zizi

"JUST like a kitten!" Zizi sputtered; "just like a little, day-old kitten! Ugh! I'm as mad as a wet hen!"

She was sitting on the bank of the lake, dripping wet, daubed with mud, her black eyes snapping with anger.

When she had been thrown into the pool, the big, entangling cape had caught in the sedge grass that bordered the water, and clutching this, the girl had hung on till she could manage to slip her slim little feet from the rope that bound them. A stiff rope and clumsily tied, it had been possible to free herself, though she might not have been able to do it, but for her experiences as a moving picture actress. It was not the first time she had been flung into water, for her slim agility had proved useful in film thrillers, and acrobatic feats were her long suit.

Able, too, to remain under water for a few moments without breathing, she had freed herself from the rope, and scrambled up the bank almost as rapidly as she had been sent to her intended doom.

She had pulled the cloth from her mouth, and sat, breathing in good air, but too exhausted to rise.

"If he'd only spoken, drat him!" she muttered, "and yet it *must* have been that wretch! I *know* it was, but how can I prove it? Oh, I wish it wasn't so dark! And I'm so *wet*!"

She got up now, and tried to wring the water from the cloak that she still clutched round her. Beside that she had on her nightdress, and a thin silk kimono, both of which were wetly clinging to her slim little body.

Throwing the still soaking wet cloak about her, and shivering as it sopped against her, she went toward the house.

It stood, still and sombre, a black thing amid blacker shadows. The aspen branches soughed eerily, but no other sound broke the silence. The great doors were closed, the windows all shut, and no sign of life was visible.

Zizi hesitated. Should she whistle beneath Penny Wise's window, or—

The alternative she thought of seemed to her best, and she drew her wet draperies about her and scuttled off at a smart pace toward the village.

Barefooted as she was, she chose grassy ground whenever possible, but her feet were sadly cut and bruised before she reached her destination.

This was the house of Dan Peterson, and a ring at his doorbell, brought the sound of a hastily flung-up window, and a sharp "Who's there?"

"Me," said Zizi, truthfully, "please let me in."

Not quite certain of the identity of his caller, but touched by the pleading little voice, Peterson came downstairs, followed by his wife.

A few words of explanation resulted in Zizi's being put into warm, dry clothes, and tucked into bed by Mrs. Peterson, who

admonished her to 'sleep like a baby till mornin'.'

Which, nothing loth, Zizi did.

Morning at Black Aspens brought a shock of surprise.

It was Hester who first discovered the absence of Zizi from the room with the tassels.

Hester had been fond of the child from the beginning, and in spite of her fifteen years, and her even older world-knowledge, Zizi was a child, in many ways. Hester mothered her whenever possible, though Zizi's natural efficiency made little assistance really necessary. But Hester loved to wait on her, and so, this morning, when, going into the room with a can of hot water, she found no sleepy little occupant of the great bed, she ran straight upstairs to Miss Carnforth's room.

"Where's that child?" she demanded as Eve opened the door to her loud knock.

"What child? Who?"

"Zizi. She's gone! Sperrited away! What have you done with her?"

"Hush, Hester! You act crazy—"

"And crazy I am, if any harm's come to that girl! Where is she?"

Doors opened and heads were thrust out, as the voice of the irate Hester was heard about the house.

Penny Wise, in bathrobe and slippers, appeared, saying, "What's up? Zizi disappeared?"

"Yes," moaned Hester, "her bed's been slept in, but she ain't nowhere to be found. Oh, where can she be?"

"Be quiet," commanded Wise. He ran downstairs, and examined the doors and windows minutely. Except for those that Hester or Thorpe had opened that morning, all were locked as they had been left the night before.

"She may be in the house somewhere," suggested Norma, wide-eyed and tearful.

"Not she," said Wise. "She would hear our commotion, and come to us. Zizi is not one to play mischievous tricks."

"But how did she get out?"

"How did Vernie's body get out?" asked Braye, gravely. "There's no chance for a human marauder this time."

"No," and Professor Hardwick looked over the great locks and bolts on the front doors, and examined the window catches.

Pennington Wise looked very serious.

"Don't talk any foolishness about spooks," he said, sternly; "I don't want to hear it. Zizi has been carried off by mortal hands, and if any harm has been done her it will go hard with the villain who is responsible!"

"Who could have done it—and why?" cried Eve.

"Those who know the most about it, are often the loudest in their lamentations," Wise returned and stalked off to his room.

Breakfast was eaten in a silence that seemed portentous of impending trouble. Pennington Wise was deep in thought and apparently had no knowledge of what he was eating nor any consciousness of the people about him.

During the meal a note was brought to him by a messenger from the village. He read it and slipped it in his pocket without a word.

After breakfast he requested the entire household, including the servants, to gather in the hall.

He addressed them in grave, earnest tones, without anger or undue excitement, saying, in part:

"I have made considerable progress in the investigations of the tragedies that have occurred in this house. I have learned much regarding the crimes and I think I have discovered who the guilty party is. I may say, in passing, that there is not, and has not been any supernatural influence at work. Any one who says that there has, is either blindly ignorant of or criminally implicated in the whole matter. The two deaths were vile and wicked murders and they are going to be avenged. The kidnapping of Zizi is the work of the same diabolical ingenuity that compassed the deaths of two innocent victims. A third death, that of my clever child assistant, was necessary to prevent discovery, hence Zizi's fate."

"Is she dead?" wailed Hester, "oh, Mr. Wise, is she dead?"

"I will tell you what happened to her," said Wise, quietly. "She was taken from her bed in the so-called haunted room, she was carried out of the house, and a bundle of bricks was tied to her, and she was thrown into the lake. That's what happened to Zizi."

Milly screamed hysterically, Norma Cameron cried softly and Eve Carnforth exclaimed, with blazing eyes, "I don't believe it!

You are making that up! How can you know it? Why didn't you rescue her?"

The men uttered various exclamations of incredulity and horror, and the servants sat, aghast.

Pennington Wise surveyed rapidly one face after another, noting the expression of each, and sighing, as if disappointed.

"She is not dead," he said, suddenly, and watched again the telltale countenances.

"What!" cried Wynne Landon, "bricks tied to her, and thrown in the lake but not drowned! Who saved her life?"

"She herself," returned Wise, "didn't you, Zizi?"

And there she was, in the back of the hall, behind the group, every member of which turned to see her. Peterson was with her, and the two came forward.

Zizi was garbed in clothes that Mr. Peterson had lent her, and though too large, she had pinned up the plain black dress until it looked neither grotesque nor unbecoming.

"Yes, I'm here," she announced, "but only because a bag o' bones can't be sunk by a bag o' bricks! Your Shawled Woman,—only he didn't have his shawl over his head,—carried me off about as easy as he might have sneaked off a doll-baby! Then,—shall I tell 'em all, Pen?"

"Yes, child, tell it all, just as it happened."

"Well, he stuffed a bale of cotton into my mouth, which same was soaked with chloroform, so, naturally I couldn't yell; likewise, I didn't know just where I was at for a few minutes."

"Who was he?" exclaimed Braye, "what did he look like?"

"Was it the skull face?" asked Eve.

"Nixy on the bone face!" returned Zizi, "he was a plain clothes man in civilian dress, with a black mask over his patrician features."

"Don't you know who it was?" and Eve's voice was intense and strained.

"Not positively," Zizi answered. "Well, he picked me up like I was a feather, and how he got out of the house I've no idea, but I felt a breeze of night air, and there was I by the bank of the lake, and there was he, busily engaged in tying a load of bricks to my ankles!"

"Did you scream?" asked the Professor, absorbed in the account.

"My dear man, how could I, with my mouth chock-a-block with a large and elegant bundle of gag? I was thankful that my wits were workin', let alone my lung power! Well, he tossed me in the nasty, black lake, and that's where he spilled the beans! For ground and lofty tumbling into lakes is my specialty. I'm the humble disciple of Miss Annette Kellerman, and not so awful humble, either! So, I held my breath under water long enough to wriggle my feet out of those ropes, the old stupid didn't know how to tie anything but a granny slip knot! and I scrambled out, just as my windpipe was beginning to go back on me."

"You make light of it, Zizi, but it was a narrow squeak," said Wise, looking at her gravely.

"You bet it was! If he'd had a softer rope, I'd been done for. It was the stiffness of that rope, and—well, the stiffness of my

upper lip,—that rescued your little Ziz from a watery grave, and horrid dirty old water, too!"

Wise slipped his arm round the child, and told her to go on with the story.

"Then," she proceeded, "I squz out what wetness I could from my few scanty robes, in which I was bedecked, and I borrowed the long cloak, which friend Kidnapper had kindly wrapped me in."

"What kind of a cloak?" asked Eve.

"Nothing very smart," said Zizi, nonchalantly, "looked to me like an old-fashioned waterproof,—the kind they wore, before raincoats came in. Only, it *wasn't* waterproof, not by several jugs full! But I wrung it out all I could, and then I tried to get in the house. But,—it was all locked up, and as it seemed a pity to disturb all you sound sleepers, I ran to the village and begged a lodging with my friend, Mr. Peterson. He and his wife were most kind, and put me in a nice dry, little bed, that had no tassels or ghosts attached to it. I sent Mr. Wise a note, as soon as I could, so he wouldn't worry."

"That was the note I received at the breakfast table," Wise informed them. "Now, you see, there is a real man at the bottom of the villainy going on up here. He desired to remove Zizi, lest she discover his crime, and I daresay, he planned to dispose of me also, if he could manage it. His seems to be a will that stops at nothing, that is ready to commit any crime or any number of crimes to save his own skin. Has anybody present any idea of

the identity of this man? Any reason to suspect any one? Any light whatever to throw on the situation?"

"No!" declared Landon, "we have not! I speak for myself, and for all present, when I say we have no knowledge of a wretch answering to that description! Nor did I suppose that such existed! Can you track him down, Mr. Wise? Is your power sufficient to discover and deal death to this beast you describe?"

"I hope so," and Penny Wise carefully scrutinized the face of the speaker. "I think, Mr. Landon, that with Zizi's help, with the enlightenment her awful experience gives us, I can get the criminal and that in a short time."

"Good!" exclaimed Hardwick. "I am not vindictive, but I confess I never wanted anything more than to see brought to justice the man who could conceive and carry out such diabolical crimes!"

"Are you sure they are one and the same?" asked Braye, "I mean the man who killed Mr. Bruce and Vernie, and the one who carried off Miss Zizi?"

"Yes," said Wise, thoughtfully. "There are not two such, I should say. But the quest of one person is my immediate business. If I find there are others implicated, I shall get them, too. I am not more incensed over the attack on Zizi than on your two friends, but I don't deny it has given me an added wrong to avenge. But for the child's strong nerve, and clever quickness of action, she would now lie at the bottom of the lake where—"

He stopped abruptly.

"Go away, all of you," he said, in a low, strained voice. "I mean, go about your business, but leave me to myself for a time. Peterson, come in here."

He went into the room with the tassels. Peterson followed, and Zizi glided in beside them. The door closed and the group left in the hall looked at one another in perplexity and horror.

"I can't understand, Wynne," said Milly, "who took Zizi away?"

"I don't know, dear; what do you think, Professor?"

"I think in so many directions, that I'm sure none of them is right. Awful things suggest themselves to my mind, but I can't believe them, and I dismiss them, half thought out."

"That's the way with me," sighed Braye. "It looks now as if there must be some one who gets in from outside the house, and who is responsible for all the inexplicable happenings. Of course, that would point to Stebbins, we must all admit that."

The servants had left the hall, so Braye permitted himself this freedom of speech.

"I don't say it's Stebbins," the Professor mused, "but I do think it's some one from outside. There may be a village inhabitant who is possessed of a homicidal mania, that's the theory that seems to me the only one possible. And we must assume, now, that there is a secret way to get in and out of the house."

"If so, that clever detective ought to find it," argued Braye.

"Perhaps he will," said Hardwick, "also, perhaps he has. He doesn't tell all he knows. Now, this is certain. All here present are, I am thankful to say, free from any breath of suspicion. For last night, you, Braye, and the detective and I all slept with our

doors open, and none of us could have left our rooms without being observed by the others. The same is true of the ladies, and of course, Mrs. Landon can vouch for her husband."

"Don't talk that way," said Norma, with a shudder. "You know none of us could be suspected."

"Not by ourselves," agreed the Professor; "nor by each other, of course. But by an outsider, or by the servants, or by the detectives,—it is indeed a good thing to have matters arranged as they are. I feel a decided satisfaction in knowing that no unjust suspicion can attach itself to any one of our party."

"That's so," and Braye nodded. "But it doesn't get us any nearer to the real criminal. I incline to the Professor's idea of a man of homicidal mania, in the village. They say, that's a real disease, and that such people are diabolically clever and cunning in carrying out their criminal impulses."

"But how could such a man get in?" asked Eve, her eyes wide with wonder.

"We don't know," said Braye, "but there must be a secret entrance. Why, Stebbins as good as admitted there was, but he wouldn't tell where it was. However, it's unimportant, how he got in, if he did get in."

"Do you mean that some such person acted the ghost,—and—all that?" said Norma, dubiously. "But, if so, how could he kill Mr. Bruce and Vernie? Oh, it's too ridiculous! Those two deaths were not occasioned by any crazy man from East Dryden! It's impossible."

"Come out for a little stroll, Norma," said Braye to her, seeing how nervously excited the girl was. "A breath of fresh air will do you good, and we can do nothing here."

They went out into the pleasant August sunshine, and strolled toward the lake.

"Not that way," begged Norma. "It's too horrible. Oh, Rudolph, who do you suppose tried to drown that poor little Zizi?"

"Nobody, Norma. She made up that yarn."

"Oh, no, Rudolph, I don't think so!"

"Yes, she did. That Wise is trying to get at his discoveries in the theatrical fashion all detectives love to use, and that movie actress is part of his stock in trade. She fell in the lake, all right, I daresay, but the tale about the bogey man is fictitious, be sure of that."

"But how did she get out of the house, and leave all the doors locked behind her?"

"Perhaps, as the Professor suggested, Wise knows of the secret entrance, if there is one, and of course, Zizi does too. Or, that little monkey could have scrambled down from the second-story window, she's as agile as a cat! Anyway, Norma, she wasn't pitched in the lake by the same villain that did for Uncle Gif and Vernie."

"Who could that have been?"

"Who, indeed?"

"Rudolph, tell me one thing,—please be frank; do you think any one we know—is,—is responsible for those deaths?"

Braye turned a pained look at her. "Don't ask such questions, dear," he said. "I can't answer you,—I don't want to answer."

"I am answered," said Norma, sadly. "I know you share the—the fear, I won't call it a suspicion,—that Eve and I do. And—Rudolph, Milly fears it, too. She won't say so, of course, but I know by the way she looks at Wynne, when she thinks no one notices. And she's so afraid Mr. Wise will look in that direction. Oh, Rudolph, must we let that detective go on,—no matter what he—exposes?"

"Landon got him up here," said Braye, "no, the Professor really heard of him first, but Landon urged his coming."

"Milly didn't. Could Wynne have been prompted by—by bravado?"

"I don't know, dear. Please don't talk of it, Norma. It seems—"

"I know, it seems disloyal to Wynne for us even to hint at such a thing. But if we could help him—"

"How?"

"Oh, I don't know. I suppose we oughtn't to condone,—and, too, Rudolph, if this should remain undiscovered, should be all hushed up, you know, and if nobody should really accuse—you know who—wouldn't *your* life be in danger?"

"Hush, Norma, I won't listen to such talk! Has Eve put you up to all this?"

"She and I have talked it over, yes. She is so anxious for you."

"For me?"

"Yes; you know Eve—cares a great deal for you."

"Hush, dear, you're not yourself to-day. And I don't wonder. The awful times we're going through are enough to upset your nerves. But never speak of Eve Carnforth and me in that tone! You know, Norma, I love you and you only. I want you for my own, my darling, and when we get away from these awful scenes, I shall woo and win you!"

CHAPTER XVII
Stebbins Owns Up

"NOW, Mr. Stebbins, you'd better speak out in meetin' and tell all you know. Tell your Auntie Zizi jes' how naughty you was, and how you managed it. C'mon, now,—'pit it all out!"

Zizi sat on the edge of a chair in Elijah Stebbins' office, and leaned toward him, her eerie little face enticingly near his, and her smile such as would charm the birds off the trees.

Stebbins looked at her, and shifted uneasily in his chair.

"I didn't do nothin' wrong," he began, "I played a silly trick or two, but it was only in fun. When I see they took it seriously, I quit."

"Yes, I know all that," and the impatient visitor shook a prompting little forefinger at him. "I know everything you said and did to scare those people into fits, and when they wouldn't scare, but just lapped up your spook rackets, you quit, as you say, and then,—they took up the business themselves."

"You sure of that?"

"I am,—certain. Also, I know who did it. What I'm after is to find out a few missing ways and means. Now, you *were* a tricksy Puck, weren't you, when you moved the old battered candlestick that first night? And it did no harm, that I admit. It roused their curiosity, and started the spook ball rolling. Then, as a ghost, you appeared to Mr. Bruce, didn't you?"

"Well, I—did," Stebbins grudgingly confessed, forced by the compelling black eyes, "I just wrop a shawl over my head, and spooked in. But nobody believed his yarn about it."

"No; they thought Mr. Bruce made up the story, because he had said he would trick them if he could."

"Yep, I know that," agreed Stebbins, eagerly. "Then once again, I played spook, and that time, Miss Carnforth was a sleepin' in that ha'nted room. You see, I expected it would be one o' the men, and when I see a woman—"

"You were more scared than she was!" Zizi leaned eagerly forward, almost spilling off her chair, in her interested attention.

"I believe I was," said Stebbins, solemnly. "Anyways, I went out, vowin' never to do any more spook work,—and I never did."

"All that tallies with my discoveries so far," Zizi nodded, "now what I'm after, is the way you got in."

"That's a secret," and Stebbins squirmed uneasily.

"A secret entrance, you mean?"

"Yes'm. And how to get into it is a secret that has been known only to the owner of that house, for generations,—ever since it was built. Whenever anybody bought it or inherited it, he was told the secret entrance, and sworn never to tell of it."

"But, look here, Mr. Stebbins, your entrance to that house, or whatever it is, was seen by somebody. That somebody used it afterward, and played ghost, and committed crime, and even stole the body of that poor little girl away. Also, some one carried me,—*me!* if you please, out by that secret passage, and

tried to drown me! Now, do you think it is your duty to remain silent, because of that old oath of secrecy?"

Zizi had risen and stood over him like a small but terrifying avenging angel. If she had brandished a flaming sword, it could not have impressed Eli Stebbins more than her burning black eyes' glance.

Her long, thin arms were outspread, her slim body poised on tiptoe and her accusing, condemning face was white and strained in its earnestness.

"No, ma'am, I don't!" and Stebbins rose, too. "Come with me, Miss; I'll go with you and I'll show you that secret entrance, nobody could ever find it alone, and I'll own up to all I did, wrong or right. I'm no murderer, and I'll not put a straw in the way of findin' out who is."

In triumph, Zizi entered the hall of Black Aspens, leading her captive. Though it must be admitted Stebbins came willingly.

"This here's my house," he said, with an air of importance, "and so far's I'm responsible for queer goin's on, I'll confess. And after that, you, Mr. Detective, can find out who carried on the hocus-pocus."

"Thank you, Mr. Stebbins," said Pennington Wise, gravely. "Suppose we ask all the members of the household to be present at your revelations."

"Not the Thorpes, or them servant maids, if you please. They ain't none of 'em implicated, and why let 'em know what's goin' on?"

"That's right," said Zizi. "Whatever we learn may not be entirely given to the public. Just call the rest of the party, Pen."

As it happened, the men were all in the hall talking with Wise when Stebbins arrived, so Zizi went in search of the women. They were congregated in Milly's room, and as they came downstairs, the detective noted their expressions, a favourite method with him of gaining information.

Milly's round little face was so red and swollen with weeping, that it excited only compassion in any observer. Norma, too, was sad and frightened-looking, but Eve was in a defiant mood, and her scarlet lips were curved in a disdainful smile.

"As we're all at one in our search for the criminal," Wise began, tactfully, "I think it best that we should hear, all together, Mr. Stebbins' explanation of how this house may be entered from outside, though apparently locked and bolted against intrusion."

"I should think, Mr. Wise," said Eve, scornfully, "that if there were such a possibility, your detective genius ought to have discovered it."

"He couldn't," said Stebbins, simply. "It ain't a means that any one could discover."

"Then how did the criminal find it out?" demanded Eve.

"He must have seen me come in by it," Stebbins replied. "Nobody could ever suspect the real way."

"Oh, come now," said Zizi, "Mr. Wise does know. He is not at all vain glorious, or he would tell you himself. But he prefers to let Mr. Stebbins tell."

"Is that so, Mr. Wise?" asked Professor Hardwick, eagerly. "If you have discovered the secret entrance, I wish you would say so. I feel chagrined that my own reasoning powers have given me no hint."

"I have satisfied myself of the means and the location of the entrance," Wise returned, "but I have not examined the place definitely enough to find the hidden spring that must be there."

"You know that much!" cried Stebbins, in amazement.

"Yes, largely by elimination. There are no hollow walls, no false locks, no sliding panels,—it seems to me there is no logical hidden entrance, but through one of those columns," and he pointed to the great bronze columns that flanked the doorway.

"By golly!" and Stebbins stared at the speaker. "You've hit it, sir!"

"I could, of course, find the secret spring, which must be concealed in the ornamentation," Wise went on, "but I've hesitated to draw attention to the columns by working at them. Suppose we let Mr. Stebbins tell us, and not try to find what we know must be cleverly concealed."

"But wait a minute," pleaded Hardwick. "I'm terribly interested in this proof of Mr. Wise's perspicacity. You needn't touch the column, but tell us your theory of its use. Is there a sliding opening in the solid bronze?"

"I think not," and Wise smiled. "I may be all wrong, I really haven't looked closely, but my belief is that one or both of those great columns, which, as you see, are half in and half out of the

hall, must swing round, revolve, you know,—and so open a way out."

"Exactly right!" and Stebbins sprang toward the column that was on the side of the hall toward the room with the tassels. "That's the secret. Nobody ever so much as dreamed of it before! See, you merely press this acorn in this bronze oak wreath, half-way up, press it pretty hard, and the column swings round."

They crowded closer to see, and learned that the column was made in two half sections, one in the hall and one outside. These, again, were divided horizontally, about seven feet above the floor, and the joint concealed by a decorative wreath of bronze oak boughs.

The column was hollow, and one half the shaft revolved within the other, which, in turn, revolved over the first, so that by successive movements of the two, one could pass right through the vestibule wall, and close the opening after him, leaving no trace of his entry or exit. The vestibule wall, of mahogany, concealed the longitudinal joint in the column when closed. The doors were hinged to this wooden wall, and were opened and closed, and locked, quite independently of the columns. Owing to perfectly adjusted ball bearings, and a thoroughly oiled condition, the mechanism worked easily and soundlessly.

"The whole contraption was brought from Italy," Stebbins informed them, "by the original Montgomery. I don't think he ever used it for any wrong doings, though they do say, soldiers was smuggled through in war times, and contraband smuggling

went on, too. But those is only rumours and probably exaggerated."

"You exaggerated the ghost stories, too, didn't you, Mr. Stebbins?" asked Wise.

"I didn't need to, sir. Those yarns of the Shawled Woman, have been told and retold so many years now, they've grown way beyond their first facts, if there ever was any truth to 'em. This here column, only one of 'em revolves,—has always been kept secret, but when the little witch child made me see it was my duty to tell of it, tell of it I did. Now, sir, go ahead and find who committed them dastardly murders and I'll consider I did right to break my oath of secrecy."

"No one will blame you for it," said Professor Hardwick, who was still experimenting with the revolving column. "This is a marvellous piece of workmanship, Landon. I never saw such before."

Pennington Wise was covertly watching all the faces as the various ones peered into the opening left when the column was turned. He stood on guard, too, and when Eve curiously bent down to open a long box, which stood up on end, against the inside of the bronze cylinder, he reached ahead of her.

"Yes," he said, consentingly, "let us see what is in here."

In full view of all, he opened the long box, such a box as long stemmed roses might have been packed in, and took from it a voluminous cloak of thin white material, a flimsy, white shawl, and a mask that represented a skull.

"The paraphernalia of the Shawled Woman," the detective said, exhibiting the things, "your property, Mr. Stebbins?"

"Yes, they are," and the man looked shame-faced, but determined. "I made all my plans, before the folks came up here, to haunt the room with the tassels. I meant no harm, I vow. I thought they was a silly set of society folks, who believed in spooks, and I thought I'd give 'em what they come for. I bought the mask at a fancy shop in town, and the thin stuff too. The shawl is one my wife used to have. I own up to all my doin's, because while they was foolish, and maybe mean, they wasn't criminal. Now, if so be's somebody saw me go in and out, and used those ghost clo'es, which it seems they must have done, I'll help all I can to fasten the guilt where it belongs."

"I, too," declared Rudolph Braye. "It certainly looks as if some one had seen Mr. Stebbins enter the house secretly, and watching, saw him leave. Then, this night prowler tried the game himself."

"Yes, sir," replied Stebbins. "Just the same sort of spring, inside and out. Anybody seein' me go through, either way, could easily work out the secret. But, not knowing of it, nobody'd ever suspect."

"Of course not," agreed Braye. "Now, we have a start, let us get to work on the more serious aspect of the affair. For, while this revelation explains the entrance of some midnight marauder, with intent to frighten us, it doesn't do much toward lessening the mystery of those two deaths."

"You're sure, Mr. Stebbins," and Eve turned glittering eyes on him, "that you never 'haunted' after that night when you appeared to me! You know a ghost appeared to Vernie after that. Can we believe that was not the work of the same malignant—"

"Malignant is not the word to apply to Mr. Stebbins," Pennington Wise interrupted her, "and it is up to us,—to me, to find who took his place as haunter of this house. Also, who it was that removed the body of Vernie Reid, doubtless through the revolving column, and—who kidnapped and tried to drown Zizi."

"Those are secondary problems," said Braye, thoughtfully gazing at the detective. "But they must be solved, too, of course. What I'm more anxious about, however, is to learn how any one could compass the murders,—if murders they were."

"Of course they were," said Hardwick. "Now that I know as much as I do know, I'm sure we'll learn all. Mr. Wise, I'm of a detective bent, myself, and you may count on me to help you all I can. You needn't laugh—"

"My dear Professor Hardwick, I assure you I've no thought of laughing, or of belittling the help you offer. I'm truly glad of your assistance and it is my habit to be frank with my clients, so we need have no reservations, on either side. The assurance we have received that an intruder could and did enter the house, gives us new directions in which to look and new theories to pursue. I'm sure you will all agree with me that the body of

Miss Reid was carried out through the secret column, and not removed by supernatural means."

"Without doubt," said Rudolph Braye, but Eve Carnforth looked a denial.

"I can't agree," she said, "that the discovery of a secret entrance disproves all possibility of the presence of supernatural agencies. I think no human intruder can be held responsible for all we have been through. How do you account for two deaths occurring at the very moment they were foretold?"

Her question was evidently addressed to Wise, and he replied, "I think, Miss Carnforth, that those two deaths were murders, cleverly accomplished by human wills, and it is my immediate duty to prove this. Therefore, I am now going to endeavour to recover the missing body of the unfortunate girl who was killed."

"What! Vernie's body!" and Eve gasped.

"Yes. And not wishing to do anything to which you may not all agree, I announce frankly that I am going to have the lake dragged."

"The lake!" cried Wynne Landon, "why, man, it is miles long!"

"But I think that the same person who tried to drown Zizi is responsible for the disappearance of Miss Reid's body, and I feel sure that if we look in that same part of the lake we will find what we are after."

"Incredible!" exclaimed Landon. "You will only waste your time!"

Wise looked closely at the face of the speaker, and then turned quickly to observe another face.

"At any rate, it can do no harm to try," he said, finally.

"Not at all," said Braye; "go ahead. But even the recovery of Vernie's body, will get us no nearer to her murderer. I wish I had been here at the time of those deaths. While I cannot feel I should have been of any help, I do think I could have noticed something or formed some opinion or conclusion from the circumstances."

"No, Rudolph," said the Professor. "There was nothing to be seen or deduced from anything that happened at that time. I was nearest to Mr. Bruce, Miss Carnforth was nearest to Vernie. Neither of us saw anything suspicious or of unexplainable intent."

"And yet Mr. Bruce was poisoned," said Wise, glancing from one face to another. "And I feel positive Miss Reid was also poisoned. She must have been. What else could have killed her, like that?"

"True enough," and Braye nodded his head. "But do you think an examination of her body, after all this time, could prove that?"

"Whether it could or not," said Wise, "we want to recover the body if possible. My theory is that it must have been thrown in the lake. If it was taken away through the revolving column, what else could have been done with it? To bury it would have been to risk discovery. And Zizi's experience—"

"Are you sure, Mr. Wise, that Zizi's experience was truthfully related? May she not have been hysterically nervous, and imagined the whole thing? I've heard of such cases."

"Who put you up to that idea, Miss Carnforth?" said Wise, very quietly, and Eve flushed and turned aside, remaining silent.

Pennington Wise's theory proved the true one.

The men employed to drag the lake at Black Aspens succeeded in finding the body of Vernie Reid. A bag of bricks had been tied to the ankles, in the same manner as described by Zizi, and the little form had been sunk in almost the same place that Zizi had been flung into the water.

Reverent hands carried the body to the house, and later it was examined by a skilled physician from New York City.

He reported that death had ensued upon the girl's arm being scratched with some sharp implement, which had been previously dipped in a powerful poison.

As this was the same physician who had passed the final judgment on the cause of Mr. Bruce's death, his report was listened to with confidence and belief.

"You must know," he said, to the awed group, "that about last March, a plot was formed against some high officials in England. These diabolical plans included the use of extremely poisonous drugs. By a most culpable oversight the names and descriptions of these poisons crept into the public press, and since then, several attempts at their use have been made, mostly, I am glad to say, without result.

"But, it is clear to me, that the murderer of these two people, Mr. Bruce, and the child, Vernie Reid, used the poisons I have told you of."

"I read about them," said Pennington Wise. "They included a rare drug only to be obtained from South America."

"That was the statement," said the doctor, "but I'm credibly informed there is a supply secretly hoarded in this country. However that may be, I am convinced that was the means used in Miss Reid's case. This poison must be introduced under the skin, by means of a cut or scratch, whereupon, the effect is instantaneously fatal. Twenty seconds is said to be the extreme length of time for life to remain in a body after the introduction of the venom. There is a distinct scratch on Miss Reid's upper right arm, so inflamed and poisoned as to leave no doubt in the matter."

"That's why the body was removed," said the Professor, "lest that scratch be discovered."

"Yes," agreed Wise, "and the other victim, Mr. Bruce, was killed by having the poison introduced into his stomach."

"That was a different poison," said the doctor. "That was strychnine hydrochlorate, which acts with equal speed. The evidential point is, that these two poisons were both plotted to be used in the case I mentioned in England, which, however, was foiled before it was actually attempted. The grave wrong, was the account in the newspapers, which was so circumstantial and definite as to give information to whoever cared to use it. Can any one doubt that the villain in this case,

read the article I speak of, which was in several of our American papers, and made use of his ill-gotten directions to achieve his purpose?"

"How did it get into Mr. Bruce's stomach?" demanded Braye.

"It was secretly placed in his tea or in the cake he was eating," declared the doctor. "Don't ask me how,—or who did it. That is not my province. But whoever could plan these fearsome deeds, could find an ingenious method of carrying out his plans,—of that I'm sure."

"I wish I'd been present," said Braye, again, as he sighed deeply.

CHAPTER XVIII
Another Confession

PENNINGTON WISE and Zizi sat in the hall talking. It was part of Wise's policy never to hold secret conclaves with his little assistant, for, he said that the people who employed him were entitled to all his suspicions or deductions as they took shape and grew in his mind. Professor Hardwick joined them as Wise was saying, "What first turned your attention to the room with the tassels, Ziz? Why did you move into that room to sleep?"

"Because the lock was oiled," Zizi replied, her black eyes glistening. "The first time I got a chance I looked at all the locks in the house, and only two were freshly oiled, and they had been well looked after,—I can tell you."

"What did that prove to you?" Hardwick asked.

"That somebody was haunting the room with the tassels who had to open the door to get in. No ghost would need to turn a knob and open the door. They splash right through walls or anything, or they ought to, if they know their business! But this lock, as well as the knob, was oiled, and, as you know, the door was opened though locked on the inside. Clever fingers can turn a key from the other side, if they have a certain implement, used by burglars. Also, if the key was not in the door, clever people could provide a duplicate key. But these things are not necessary for ghosts. They just glide in serenely, not even thinking about keys or doors."

"You're right, child," and Wise nodded approvingly at her. "Now, what other door had its lock oiled?"

"Not only the lock, but the hinges of one of the bedroom doors were carefully oiled. You know which one, Penny."

"I do, Zizi. Have you no suspicion, Professor?"

"I'd rather not say. As a friend of all the people in our party, I simply can't bring myself to mention the name of any one of them, and, yet if one of us is a criminal, it is the duty of the others to see justice done."

"Well, it must soon come out, anyway. It is Mr. Tracy's door, isn't it, Zizi?"

"Yes."

"Bless my soul!" cried the Professor, "Tracy! Why, he's a minister!"

"No," and Penny Wise shook his head, "Mr. Tracy is not a minister and never was. On the contrary, he's about as far removed from piety of any sort, as any man on God's green earth!"

"What are you saying?" cried Eve Carnforth, coming swiftly toward them. "Mr. Tracy not a minister!"

"No;" repeated Wise, "John Tracy is a notorious criminal, known as Smug Johnny by his friends, and also by the police. I have just had returns from some inquiries I sent to Chicago, and I learn that this double-dyed villain is wanted on several counts, but never before has he been accused of murder."

"And did he kill Mr. Bruce and Vernie?" cried Eve, her hands clenched in excitement and her long eyes narrowed with fear.

"He did, I am positive. We have yet to prove it, but I have evidence enough—"

"Where is he?" said Hardwick, abruptly.

"Under strict surveillance," returned Wise. "My men are at his heels day and night. He can't get away."

"He stole me," said Zizi; "you see I had my eye on him, 'cause of his oiled door. Then when he came, I thought he was only going to scare me, but he stuffed that old chloroform in my mouth so quick, I couldn't even yell out. If I hadn't had some experience in swimming pools and movie thrillers, I'd been down at the bottom of that horrid old lake this minute!"

"But I can't understand," and Eve looked puzzled; "why would Mr. Tracy kill those people, and how did he do it? Mr. Wise, you're crazy! It's an impossible theory!"

Others had gathered in the hall, now, and Pennington Wise told them all of his recent advices from Chicago, that proved the supposed clergyman a fraud and a villain.

Milly showed the greatest relief. "Oh," she cried, "I'm glad you've found out who it was, anyway! But it doesn't seem as if Mr. Tracy could be a bad man—are you sure, Mr. Wise?"

"Yes, Mrs. Landon, there is no doubt at all. Now, let us reconstruct the scene of those two deaths. Where was Mr. Tracy sitting?"

"Right here, where I am now," said Norma, thinking back. "Vernie was over there, near the front door. Mr. Bruce was across the hall by Professor Hardwick, and Eve was in the middle of the room by the tea-table."

"Will you be so kind, Miss Carnforth, as to think very carefully," said Wise, "and see if you recollect Mr. Tracy's presence near you as you were fixing the various cups of tea. Did he have the slightest opportunity to add anything to the cup that was afterward handed to Mr. Bruce?"

Excited, almost hysterical, Eve obeyed the detective's command, and said, after a moment's thought, "Yes, he did. I remember he passed near me, and Vernie stood at my side also. They had a bit of good-natured banter as to which should take the cup I had just poured out, and Vernie won, and she laughingly carried it to Mr. Bruce. I remember it distinctly."

"Then, doubtless, at that moment, Tracy dropped the small amount of poison necessary in the cup, sure that it would be given to Mr. Bruce. Had Vernie given it to any one else, he would have intercepted it. He is a man of suave manners, you know."

"Yes," said Norma, "particularly so, and very graceful about any social matters. He always assisted in passing the tea things."

"Go on," said Penny Wise; "what happened as Mr. Bruce took his first sip of tea?"

"He changed countenance at once," said Hardwick. "I was talking to him, and a queer pallor came over his face and then it turned fiery red. He dropped his cup and—"

"One moment," said Wise; "what became of that broken cup?"

"I've no idea," said the Professor, helplessly looking about him.

"I wasn't home," began Milly, "Mr. Braye and I had gone to East Dryden—"

"The tray was taken out as usual," interposed Eve, but Norma said, quietly, "I picked up the broken bits and laid them on the tray."

"Call in the servant who took away that tray," said Wise, shortly.

Old Thorpe was called in, and told his story.

"I came in for the tray," he said, "and seein'—what I did see—I was fair knocked out. I did as usual, and picked up the tray to carry it to the kitchen. Mr. Tracy was by the tray at the time, and he was pourin' hot water into the teacups. I don't think the man knew what he was about,—none of us did, and small wonder!"

Thorpe knew nothing of the recent developments regarding Tracy, and Wise pursued: "Do you remember whether Mr. Tracy poured hot water over the broken cup?"

"That's just what he was doin', sir, that's why I thought he didn't rightly know what he was about."

"You may go, Thorpe," said Wise.

"You see," he continued after the old man had gone, "Tracy poured boiling hot water from the afternoon teakettle over the broken cup, that all evidence of poison might be removed, if the bits of china were examined. I've not heard of that being done, however, but a guilty conscience would naturally fear it. That little incident shows the astuteness of his criminal mind."

"It does!" cried Professor Hardwick. "What a depraved, a demoniacal nature must be his! Where did he come from? Who introduced him to our party?"

"I did," said Rudolph Braye. "I had, of course, no suspicion of his real nature. I met Tracy on the train, travelling from Chicago to New York, about a year ago. He was a pleasant smoking room companion, and I've seen him several times since, in New York. I had no reason to think him other than what he represented himself, a clergyman, with a church in Chicago. He impressed me as a fine, congenial sort, and when Mrs. Landon asked me to suggest another member for our house party, I thought of him at once. His cloth seemed to me to be his adequate credentials and, in fact, I never gave a thought to his possible duplicity! Nor can I reconcile the facts, even yet. How do you know these things, Mr. Wise? Are you not romancing a little?"

"No, Mr. Braye, I am not even surmising. What I have stated is true, because there is no other possible deduction from the facts I have learned. I have identified the man Tracy who was here with you as the notorious Smug Johnny of Chicago. Do you need further knowledge of him to believe that he is the criminal in this case, rather than one of your own immediate circle?"

"No," and Milly shuddered; "it is bad enough that it should have been Mr. Tracy, but far better than to suspect one of us here."

"Furthermore," continued Wise, "let us look into the details of the death of Vernie Reid. Who can give me the exact facts as noticed?"

"I," said Eve Carnforth; "and, now, as I look back, I see it all in a different light! I was looking at Mr. Bruce, as everybody was, startled by the sound of crashing china, and I heard Mr. Tracy

say, 'Vernie, child! What *is* the matter?' or some such words. Then he ran quickly to her side and held her up in his arms, while I ran to them and helped him to lay her on the sofa."

"See?" said Wise; "at the moment Tracy sprang toward the girl she was unharmed, and as he put his arm round her, he scratched her arm with a sharp pointed instrument, which had been dipped in the awful poison that we have learned of. It is said to be similar to that with which the barbarians of South America tip their arrows. But the least scratch is instantly fatal, and proved so in Vernie's case. The instrument he used, we have reason to think, was a steel pen."

"Why do you think that?" asked Professor Hardwick.

"Because Zizi found a few new ones in Tracy's room, that had not been used for writing purposes. There were five in a small paper parcel. We have found that he bought these at a shop in the village, buying six at the time. This is merely a shred of evidence, but the fact that Zizi found the pens became known to Mr. Tracy, in fact he caught her searching his room. It was this that made him try to do away with the child."

"Tracy? Do away with Zizi!" exclaimed Braye. "Why, he was gone away from here, then."

"No. He had left the house, but he was lurking about, and after all had retired that night, he came through the revolving column, and kidnapped Zizi, and threw her into the lake,—as he had previously thrown in the body of Vernie Reid. That, he did, lest the scratch on her arm be discovered by the doctors, and he be suspected."

"Then it was Tracy who discovered the secret of the revolving column," said Braye, thoughtfully. "You take a great deal for granted, Mr. Wise."

"I take nothing for granted, save what the facts prove, Mr. Braye. That Tracy used the revolving column is positive. Do you not all remember the night when Professor Hardwick saw the apparition of the Shawled Woman? On that night Mr. Tracy was supposed to be in Boston. As a matter of fact, he was not, he had left the house, saying he was going to Boston but he remained in hiding near the house, played ghost, and *then* went on his way."

"I was in New York that night," said Braye, musingly. "But, look here, Mr. Wise, one afternoon, about dusk, Miss Cameron and I distinctly saw the apparition of the Shawled Woman in the room with the tassels when we ourselves were out of doors. We saw it through the window,—don't you remember, Norma?"

"I do,—"

"Then that was Mr. Tracy's doings also," declared Wise. "How simple for him to get the paraphernalia from the column, where it was always in readiness, make his appearance to frighten you two, and then return the shawl and so forth before you could enter and catch him."

"It would have been possible," agreed Braye, and then Hardwick began.

"There were many other strange things to be accounted for, such as moanings and rustlings in the morning at four o'clock,

and also occasional odours of prussic acid, without apparent reason."

"Lay them all to Tracy," said Wise, "you won't be far out. Now, who was running that Ouija board the night it said the two people would die at four o'clock?"

"Vernie and Mr. Tracy," said Norma, "but when it said that, Mr. Tracy took his hands off and said he would have no more to do with it. He said he believed Vernie pushed it to those letters."

"He was a good actor," said Wise, looking grave and sighing; "he fooled you all, it would seem."

"He certainly fooled me, good and plenty," said Braye, angrily. "You say you have him in custody, Mr. Wise?"

"I did not say that, but I have him under such surveillance that he cannot get away. There are some other matters to be discussed. Granting Tracy's guilt, what do you ascribe as a motive?"

There was a profound silence. What could have been the motive for a perfect stranger to kill with deliberation two people who had never injured him in any way, and from whose death he could expect no pecuniary advantage?

"Look here," said Wynne Landon, suddenly, "Mr. Tracy went away from here because the spectre appeared to him. How do you account for that?"

"Mr. Tracy *said* so," returned Wise, "but that story of his ghostly vision was made up out of the whole cloth,—which was all of the 'cloth' with which he ever had to do."

"He made up that yarn, then, as an excuse to get away?" said Hardwick.

"He did just that," replied Wise. "But what has any one to suggest as Mr. Tracy's motive for the crimes he committed?"

"Plain homicidal mania," offered Hardwick, at last, as no one else spoke.

"No," said Wise, "John Tracy is not of that type. Such people are abnormal, they have special physical characteristics, and they are easily recognized, once suspicion is attached to them. Tracy is a quiet, even debonair character, he is even-tempered, gentle-mannered and though deeply clever he hides it under a mask of kindliness and consideration. Victims of what is called homicidal mania are not at all like this. They are difficult to get along with, they do queer, inexplicable things, and most of all, they show in their faces the traits that lead them to their villainous deeds. You all know Tracy is not of this type. Therefore you must look further for his motive."

"Did he receive any bequest from Mr. Bruce's will?" asked Hardwick, wonderingly.

"Certainly not," asserted Landon. "He didn't know Mr. Bruce until we came up here, and that would have been no motive for his killing Vernie. Nor can there be any personal motive, Mr. Wise, for that. Shall we not have to ascribe it to some form of degeneracy, whether that seems plausible or not?"

"No," decreed Wise, looking sternly from one to another. "No; John Tracy's motive for those two inhuman murders was the motive that is oftenest the reason for murder—money lust!"

Eve Carnforth gave a scream and buried her face in her hands.

Milly Landon turned white and swayed as if about to faint, but her husband caught her in his arms and supported her.

"What can he mean?" said Norma, turning to Braye, "how could Mr. Tracy have done it for money? Who would give him money?"

"Hush, Norma," said Braye, in a low voice, and Norma remembered it was the same tone he had used, when she had before asked questions of him. She had thought over his words on that occasion, and had concluded he meant she must not say anything that seemed to throw suspicion toward Wynne Landon. She looked at the sobbing Milly, and the pained, strained face of Wynne, who was trying to soothe her, and then Norma turned to Eve.

Eve was using all her will power to preserve her poise, but Norma saw at once that she was having difficulty to do so. In kindness of heart, Norma went over to the suffering girl.

"Come with me, Eve," she said, softly, "let us go off by ourselves for a while."

"Yes, do," said Penny Wise, looking kindly at the two girls. "Zizi, perhaps you can be of use."

Zizi followed the other two, and they went to Eve's room. With all the deftness of a nurse, Zizi found some aromatic cologne, and a fresh handkerchief, and in a moment was bathing Eve's temples, with a gentle, soothing touch.

"What a funny little piece you are!" said Eve, looking at the small sympathetic face, and speaking in a preoccupied way.

"Yes," acquiesced Zizi, while Norma sat by, lost in her own thoughts.

"Tell me," said Eve, suddenly roused to energy. "Tell me, Zizi,—you know as much as Mr. Wise does,—tell me, who paid Tracy money?"

"What!" cried Norma, "Eve, hush! don't say such things. If anybody did, we don't want to know it!"

"We'll have to know it," said Eve, simply, "and, Norma,—"

But Norma interrupted her; "No, Eve, we don't have to, at least, we don't have to ask about it, or inquire into it. The detective will do that."

"You'll soon *have* to know," said Zizi, quietly; "indeed you know now, don't you, Miss Carnforth?"

"I asked you!" cried Eve, hysterical again. "Tell me, tell me at once, girl!"

But Zizi shook her head, and continued to bathe Eve's brow. "Try to be calm," she whispered, "there will be much for you to bear, and you must be brave to bear it."

Eve looked at her wonderingly, and seeing deep compassion in the black eyes, she ceased questioning and closed her own eyes.

After a few moments, she opened her eyes and rose from her couch. "Thank you, Zizi," she said, "I am all right now. I am going back to join the others. Will you come, Norma?"

Dazedly, as one in a dream, Norma rose, and the three went downstairs. Apparently little had been said of importance since they left. There was a tense silence, and Pennington Wise said,

"I find I must speak out and tell you the truth. I had hoped for a confession but I see no signs of it.

"I was not, strictly speaking, employed by any one of you. I asked to be allowed to investigate this case because it seemed to me the most remarkable one I had ever heard of. I wrote to Professor Hardwick for information concerning it, and finally I arranged to come up here. I brought Zizi, because she is invaluable to me in collecting evidence. Her quick wit, and her dainty personality can compass effects that I can not. I feel, therefore, that it is to Professor Hardwick that I should make my direct report. But as you are all interested, I will ask any of you who choose to do so, to remain and listen. The others may be excused."

"Of course, we'll all stay!" exclaimed Landon. "We're all quite as much interested as Professor Hardwick can possibly be. More so, indeed, for the victims of the crime are not relatives of his."

"Very well," returned Wise, "stay, then, all of you. The story is not a long one, though it is a deeply sad one. John Tracy was hired,—basely hired, to commit those two murders. The man who hired him is, of course, the greater criminal, though his hands are unstained with actual blood. The man who hired the assassin, is, naturally, the man who desired the large fortune of Gifford Bruce, and who realized that unless two people were removed from earth he could not inherit. Need I say more?"

"You need not," said Rudolph Braye. "I confess. The plan was Tracy's, the suggestion was his. He tempted me, by telling me

that he had read of a plan by which people could be put to death and leave no possible trace. He said that I would eventually inherit the fortune, and that I ought to have it while I was young enough to enjoy it. He said he would do the deed and I need know nothing about it, nor be present at the time. I am not shifting the blame, I am merely telling you the facts."

Braye spoke in a monotone, his eyes on the floor, his hands nervously twitching.

"A hundred times I regretted our plans, a hundred times I begged Tracy to give up the project, but he held me to it, and said if I petered out he would tell the whole story.

"When the plan for coming up here was started, Tracy made me get him invited saying it was an ideal opportunity. I didn't think he would really carry out his intentions, and as the ghost seemed really to appear, I watched to discover the means. I did see Stebbins enter through the revolving column and had no difficulty in discovering how it worked. I showed this to Tracy, —he made me do so,—and when I went to New York, he played ghost and appeared to little Vernie.

"Again and again I plead with him to give up the fearful scheme but he refused to do so. The day I went to East Dryden with Milly I had no idea that he intended to do the deed, but—he did. I had promised him half the fortune, and he had declared that there could be no suspicion of either of us,—he said, if there were any suspicion it would be directed toward Wynne. I make no excuses, I voice no cry for forgiveness or for leniency, but I hereby pay the penalty."

Braye swallowed what was evidently a portion of the same poison that had killed Gifford Bruce, and in less than a minute he was a dead man.

John Tracy was arrested and received his just deserts.

Wynne Landon inherited the fortune, and though it had painful associations, he and Milly went away from Black Aspens never to return and in time lived down the sad and awful memories.

"You see, Penny," Zizi summed up, "a criminal always slips up on some minor count. If the Tracy person hadn't oiled his door and the door of that haunted room so carefully, or if he'd had the wit to oil some other doors too, we might have overlooked him as a possible suspect, eh?"

"I don't think so, Ziz."

"Neither do I, Penny Wise."

THE END

The Man Who Fell Through The Earth

Carolyn Wells · First published 1919

CHAPTER I
Moving Shadow-Shapes

ONE of the occasions when I experienced "that grand and glorious feeling" was when my law business had achieved proportions that justified my removal from my old office to new and more commodious quarters. I selected a somewhat pretentious building on Madison Avenue between Thirtieth and Fortieth Streets, and it was a red-letter day for me when I moved into my pleasant rooms on its top floor.

The Puritan Trust Company occupied all of the ground floor and there were also some of the private offices of that institution on the top floor, as well as a few offices to be let.

My rooms were well located and delightfully light, and I furnished them with care, selecting chairs and desks of a dignified type, and rugs of appropriately quiet coloring. I also selected my stenographer with care, and Norah MacCormack was a red-haired piece of perfection. If she had a weakness, it was for reading detective stories, but I condoned that, for in my hammocky moods I, too, dipped into the tangled-web school of fiction.

And, without undue conceit, I felt that I could give most specimens of the genus Sherlock cards and spades and beat them at their own game of deduction. I practiced it on Norah sometimes. She would bring me a veil or glove of some friend of hers, and I would try to deduce the friend's traits of character.

My successes and failures were about fifty-fifty, but Norah thought I improved with practice, and, anyway, it exercised my intelligence.

I had failed to pass examination for the army, because of a defect, negligible, it seemed to me, in my eyesight. I was deeply disappointed, but as the law of compensation is usually in force, I unexpectedly proved to be of some use to my Government after all.

Across the hall from me was the private office of Amos Gately, the President of the Puritan Trust Company, and a man of city-wide reputation. I didn't know the great financier personally, but everyone knew of him, and his name was a synonym for all that is sound, honorable, and philanthropic in the money mart. He was of that frequently seen type, with the silver gray hair that so becomingly accompanies deep-set dark eyes.

And yet, I had never seen Mr. Gately himself. My knowledge of him was gained from his frequent portraiture in the papers or in an occasional magazine. And I had gathered, in a vague way, that he was a connoisseur of the fine arts, and that his offices, as well as his home, were palatial in their appointments.

I may as well admit, therefore, that going in and out of my own rooms I often looked toward his door, in hopes that I might get a glimpse, at least, of the treasures within. But so far I had not done so.

To be sure, I had only occupied my own suite about a week and then again Mr. Gately was not always in his private offices

during business hours. Doubtless, much of the time he was down in the banking rooms.

There was a yellow-haired stenographer, who wore her hair in ear-muffs, and who was, I should say, addicted to the vanity-case. This young person, Norah had informed me, was Jenny Boyd.

And that sums up the whole of my intimate knowledge of Amos Gately—until the day of the black snow squall!

I daresay my prehistoric ancestors were sun-worshipers. At any rate, I am perfectly happy when the sun shines, and utterly miserable on a gloomy day. Of course, after sunset, I don't care, but days when artificial light must be used, I get fidgety and am positively unable to concentrate on any important line of thought.

And so, when Norah snapped on her green-shaded desk light in mid-afternoon, I impulsively jumped up to go home. I could stand electrically lighted rooms better in my diggings than in the work-compelling atmosphere of my office.

"Finish that bit of work," I told my competent assistant, "and then go home yourself. I'm going now."

"But it's only three o'clock, Mr. Brice," and Norah's gray eyes looked up from the clicking keys.

"I know it, but a snow storm is brewing,—and Lord knows there's snow enough in town now!"

"There is so! I'm thinking they won't get the black mountains out of the side streets before Fourth of July,—and the poor White Wings working themselves to death!"

"Statistics haven't yet proved that cause of death prevalent among snow-shovelers," I returned, "but I'm pretty sure there's more chance for it coming to them!"

I hate snow. For the ocular defect that kept me out of the army is corrected by not altogether unbecoming glasses, but when these are moistened or misted by falling snow, I am greatly incommoded. So I determined to reach home, if possible, before the squall which was so indubitably imminent.

I snugged into my overcoat, and jammed my hat well down on my head, for the wind was already blowing a gale.

"Get away soon, Norah," I said, as I opened the door into the hall, "and if it proves a blizzard you needn't show up tomorrow."

"Oh, I'll be here, Mr. Brice," she returned, in her cheery way, and resumed her clicking.

The offices of Mr. Gately, opposite mine, had three doors to the hall, meaning, I assumed, three rooms in his suite.

My own door was exactly opposite the middle one of the three. On that was the number two. To its left was number one, and to its right, number three.

Each of these three doors had an upper panel of thick, clouded glass, and, as the hall was not yet lighted and Mr. Gately's rooms were, I could see quite plainly the shadows of two heads on the middle door,—the door numbered two.

Perhaps I am unduly curious, perhaps it was merely a natural interest, but I stood still a moment, outside my own door, and watched the two shadowed heads.

The rippled clouding of the glass made their outlines somewhat vague, but I could distinguish the fine, thick mane of Amos Gately, as I had so often seen it pictured. The other was merely a human shadow with no striking characteristics.

It was evident their interview was not amicable. I heard a loud, explosive "No!" from one or other of them, and then both figures rose and there was a hand-to-hand struggle. Their voices indicated a desperate quarrel, though no words were distinguishable.

And then, as I looked, the shadows blurred into one another,—swayed,—separated, and then a pistol shot rang out, followed immediately by a woman's shrill scream.

Impulsively I sprang across the hall, and turned the knob of door number two,—the one opposite my own door, and the one through which I had seen the shadowed actions.

But the door would not open.

I hesitated only an instant and then hurried to the door next on the right, number three.

This, too, was fastened on the inside, so I ran back to the only other door, number one,—to the left of the middle door.

This door opened at my touch, and I found myself in the first of Amos Gately's magnificent rooms.

Beyond one quick, admiring glance, I paid no attention to the beautiful appointments, and I opened the communicating door into the next or middle room.

This, like the first, contained no human being, but it was filled with the smoke and the odor of a recently fired pistol.

I looked around, aghast. This was the room where the altercation had taken place, where two men had grappled, where a pistol had been fired, and moreover, where a woman had screamed. Where were these people?

In the next room, of course, I reasoned.

With eager curiosity, I went on into the third room. It was empty.

And that was all the rooms of the suite.

Where were the people I had seen and heard? That is, I had seen their shadows on the glass door, and human shadows cannot appear without people to cast them. Where were the men who had fought? Where was the woman who had screamed? And who were they?

Dazed, I went back through the rooms. Their several uses were clear enough. Number one was the entrance office. There was an attendant's desk, a typewriter, reception chairs, and all the effects of the first stage of an interview with the great man.

The second office, beyond a doubt, was Mr. Gately's sanctum. A stunning mahogany table-desk was in the middle of the floor, and a large, unusually fine swivel-chair stood behind it. On the desk, things were somewhat disordered. The telephone was upset, the papers pushed into an untidy heap, a pen-tray overturned, and a chair opposite the big desk chair lay over on its side, as if Mr. Gately's visitor had risen hurriedly. The last room, number three, was, clearly, the very holy of holies. Surely, only the most important or most beloved guests were received in here. It was furnished as richly as a royal salon, yet

all in most perfect taste and quiet harmony. The general coloring of draperies and upholstery was soft blue, and splendid pictures hung on the wall. Also, there was a huge war map of Europe, and indicative pins stuck in it proved Mr. Gately's intense interest in the progress of events over there.

But though tempted to feast my eyes on the art treasures all about, I eagerly pursued my quest for the vanished human beings I sought.

There was no one in any of these three rooms, and I could see no exit, save into the hall from which I had entered. I looked into three or four cupboards, but they were full of books and papers, and no sign of a hidden human being, alive or dead, could I find.

Perhaps the strangeness of it all blunted my efficiency. I had always flattered myself that I was at my best in an emergency, but all previous emergencies in which I had found myself were trivial and unimportant compared with this.

I felt as if I had been at a moving picture show. I had seen, as on the screen, a man shot, perhaps killed, and now all the actors had vanished as completely as they do when the movie is over.

Then, for I am not entirely devoid of conscience, it occurred to me that I had a duty,—that it was incumbent upon me to report to somebody. I thought of the police, but was it right to call them when I had so vague a report to make? What could I tell them? That I had seen shadows fighting? Heard a woman scream? Smelled smoke? Heard the report of a pistol? A

whimsical thought came that the report of the pistol was the only definite report I could swear to!

Yet the whole scene was definite enough to me.

I had seen two men fighting,—shadows, to be sure, but shadows of real men. I had heard their voices raised in dissension of some sort, I had seen a scuffle and had heard a shot, of which I had afterward smelled the smoke, and,—most incriminating of all,—I had heard a woman's scream. A scream, too, of terror, as for her life!

And then, I had immediately entered these rooms, and I had found them empty of all human presence, but with the smoke still hanging low, to prove my observations had been real, and no figment of my imagination.

I believed I had latent detective ability. Well, surely here was a chance to exercise it!

What more bewildering mystery could be desired than to witness a shooting, and, breaking in upon the scene, to find no victim, no criminal, and no weapon!

I hunted for the pistol, but found no more trace of that than of the hand that had fired it.

My brain felt queer; I said to myself, over and over, "a fight, a shot, a scream! No victim, no criminal, no weapon!"

I looked out in the hall again. I had already looked out two or three times, but I had seen no one. However, I didn't suppose the villain and his victim had gone down by the elevator or by the stairway.

But where were they? And where was the woman who had screamed?

Perhaps it was she who had been shot. Why did I assume that Mr. Gately was the victim? Could not he have been the criminal?

The thought of Amos Gately in the rÃ´le of murderer was a little too absurd! Still, the whole situation was absurd.

For me, Tom Brice, to be involved in this baffling mystery was the height of all that was incredible!

And yet, was I involved? I had only to walk out and go home to be out of it all. No one had seen me and no one could know I had been there.

And then something sinister overcame me. A kind of cold dread of the whole affair; an uncanny feeling that I was drawn into a fearful web of circumstances from which I could not honorably escape, if, indeed, I could escape at all. The three Gately rooms, though lighted, felt dark and eerie. I glanced out of a window. The sky was almost black and scattering snowflakes were falling. I realized, too, that though the place was lighted, the fixtures were those great alabaster bowls, and, as they hung from the ceiling, they seemed to give out a ghostly radiance that emphasized the strange silence.

For, in my increasingly nervous state, the silence was intensified and it seemed the silence of death,—not the mere quiet of an empty room.

I pulled myself together, for I had not lost all sense of my duty. I *must* do something, I told myself, sternly,—but what?

My hand crept toward the telephone that lay, turned over on its side, on Mr. Gately's desk.

But I drew back quickly, not so much because of a disinclination to touch the thing that had perhaps figured in a tragedy but because of a dim instinct of leaving everything untouched as a possible clew.

Clew! The very word helped restore my equilibrium. There had been a crime of some sort,—at least, there had been a shooting, and I had been an eye-witness, even if my eyes had seen only shadows.

My rÃ´le, then, was an important one. My duty was to tell what I had seen and render any assistance I could. But I wouldn't use that telephone. It must be out of order, anyway, or the operator downstairs would be looking after it. I would go back to my own office and call up somebody. As I crossed the hall, I was still debating whether that somebody would better be the police or the bank people downstairs. The latter, I decided, for it was their place to look after their president, not mine.

I found Norah putting on her hat. The sight of her shrewd gray eyes and intelligent face caused an outburst of confidence, and I told her the whole story as fast as I could rattle it out.

"Oh, Mr. Brice," she exclaimed, her eyes wide with excitement, "let me go over there! May I?"

"Wait a minute, Norah: I think I ought to speak to the bank people. I think I'll telephone down and ask if Mr. Gately is down there. You know it may not have been Mr. Gately at all, whose shadow I saw—"

"Ooh, yes, it was! You couldn't mistake his head, and, too, who else would be in there? Please, Mr. Brice, wait just a minute before you telephone,—let me take one look round,—you don't want to make a—to look foolish, you know."

She had so nearly warned me against making a fool of myself, that I took the hint, and I followed her across the hall.

She went in quickly at the door of room number one. One glance around it and she said, "This is the first office, you see: callers come here, the secretary or stenographer takes their names and all that, and shows them into Mr. Gately's office."

As Norah spoke she went on to the second room. Oblivious to its grandeur and luxury, she gave swift, darting glances here and there and said positively: "Of course, it was Mr. Gately who was shot, and by a woman too!"

"The woman who screamed?"

"No: more likely not. I expect the woman who screamed was his stenographer. I know her,—at least, I've seen her. A little doll-faced jig, who belongs about third from the end, in the chorus! Be sure she'd scream at the pistol shot, but the lady who fired the shot wouldn't."

"But I saw the scrimmage and it was a man who shot."

"Are you sure? That thick, clouded glass blurs a shadow beyond recognition."

"What makes you think it was a woman, then?"

"This," and Norah pointed to a hatpin that lay on the big desk.

It was a fine-looking pin, with a big head, but when I was about to pick it up Norah dissuaded me.

"Don't touch it," she warned; "you know, Mr. Brice, we've really no right here and we simply must not touch anything."

"But, Norah," I began, my common sense and good judgment having returned to me with the advent of human companionship, "I don't want to do anything wrong. If we've no right here, for Heaven's sake, let's get out!"

"Yes, in a minute, but let me think what you ought to do. And, oh, do let me take a minute to look round!"

"No, girl; this is no time to satisfy your curiosity or, to enjoy a sight of these—"

"Oh, I don't mean that! But I want to see if there isn't some clew or some bit of evidence to the whole thing. It is too weird! too impossible that three people should have disappeared into nothingness! Where are they?"

Norah looked in the same closets I had explored; she drew aside window draperies and portiÃ¨res, she hastily glanced under desks and tables, not so much, I felt sure, in expectation of finding anyone, as with a general idea of searching the place thoroughly.

She scrutinized the desk fittings of the stenographer.

"Everything of the best," she commented, "but very little real work done up here. I fancy these offices of Mr. Gately's are more for private conferences and personal appointments than any real business matters."

"Which would account for the lady's hatpin," I observed.

"Yes; but how did they get out? You looked out in the hall, at once, you say?"

"Yes; I came quickly through these three rooms, and then looked out into the hall at once, and there was no elevator in sight nor could I see anyone on the stairs."

"Well, there's not much to be seen here. I suppose you'd better call up the bank people. Though if they thought there was anything queer they'd be up here by this time."

I left Norah in Mr. Gately's rooms while I went back to my own office and called up the Puritan Trust Company.

A polite voice assured me that they knew nothing of Mr. Gately's whereabouts at that moment, but if I would leave a message he would ultimately receive it.

So, then, I told them, in part, what had happened, or, rather, what I believed had happened, and still a little unconcerned, the polite man agreed to send somebody up.

"Stuffy people!" I said to Norah, as I returned to the room she was in. "They seemed to think me officious."

"I feared they would, Mr. Brice, but you had to do it. There's no doubt Mr. Gately left this room in mad haste. See, here's his personal checkbook on his desk, and he drew a check today."

"Nothing remarkable in his drawing a check," I observed, "but decidedly peculiar to leave his checkbook around so carelessly. As you say, Norah, he left in a hurry."

"But how did he leave?"

"That's the mystery; and I, for one, give it up. I'm quite willing to wait until some greater brain than mine works out the problem."

"But it's incomprehensible," Norah went on; "where's Jenny?"

"For that matter," I countered, "where's Mr. Gately? Where's his angry visitor, male or female? and, finally, where's the pistol that made the sound and smoke of which I had positive evidence?"

"We may find that," suggested Norah, hopefully.

But careful search failed to discover any firearms, as it had failed to reveal the actors of the drama.

Nor did the representative from the bank come up at once. This seemed queer, I thought, and with a sudden impulse to find out something, I declared I was going down to the bank myself.

"Go on," said Norah, "I'll stay here, for I must know what they find out when they do come."

I went out into the hall and pushed the "Down" button of the elevator.

"Be careful," Norah warned me, as the car was heard ascending, "say very little, Mr. Brice, except to the proper authorities. This may be a terrible thing, and you mustn't get mixed up in it until you know more about it. You were not only the first to discover the disappearance,—but you and I are apparently the only ones in this corridor who know of it yet, we may be—"

"Suspected of the abduction of Amos Gately! Hardly! Don't let your detective instinct run away with you Norah!"

And then the elevator door slid open and I got into the car.

CHAPTER II
Jenny's Version

The elevators in the building were run by girls, and the one I entered was in charge of Minny Boyd, a sister of Jenny, who was in Mr. Gately's office.

As soon as I stepped into the car I saw that Minny was in a state of excitement.

"What's the matter?" I asked, sympathetically.

"Oh, Mr. Brice," and the girl burst into tears, "Jenny said—"

"Well," I urged, as she hesitated, "what did Jenny say?"

"Don't you know anything about it?"

"About what?" I asked, trying to be casual.

"Why, about Mr. Gately."

"And what about him?"

"He's gone! Disappeared!"

"Amos Gately? The president of the Puritan Trust Company! Minny, what do you mean?"

"Why, Mr. Brice, only a little while ago, I took Jenny down. She was crying like everything and she said that Mr. Gately had been shot!"

"Shot?"

"Yes, that's what she said—"

"Who shot him?"

"I don't know, but Jenny was nearly crazy! I told her to go to the lunchroom,—that's where the girls go when off duty,—and I

said I'd come to her as soon as I could. I can't leave my car, you know."

"Of course not, Minny," I agreed; "but what did Jenny mean? Did she see Mr. Gately shot?"

"No, I don't think so,—but she heard a pistol fired off, and she —she—"

"What did she do?"

"She ran into Mr. Gately's private office,—and, he wasn't there! And then she—oh, I suppose she hadn't any right to do it,—but she ran on to his own personal room,—the one where she is never allowed to go,—and there wasn't anybody there! So Jenny was scared out of her senses, and she ran out here,—to the hall, I mean,—and I took her downstairs,—and oh, Mr. Brice, I've got to stop at this floor,—there's a call,—and please don't say anything about it,—I mean don't tell I said anything—for Jenny told me not to—"

I saw Minny was in great perturbation, and I forebore to question her further, for just then we stopped at the seventh floor and a man entered the elevator.

I knew him,—that is, I knew he was George Rodman,—but I wasn't sufficiently acquainted to speak to him.

So the three of us went on down in silence, past the other floors, and reached the ground floor, where Rodman and I got out.

Waiting to go up, I found Mr. Pitt, a discount clerk of the Puritan Trust Company.

"This is Mr. Brice?" he said, in a superior way.

I resented the superiority, but I admitted his soft impeachment.

"And you say there is something to be investigated in Mr. Gately's offices?" he went on, as if I were a Food Administrator, or something.

"Well," I returned, a little curtly, "I chanced to see and hear and smell a pistol shot,—and further looking into the matter failed to show anybody killed or wounded or—in fact, failed to disclose anybody whatever on the job, and I confess it all looks to me mighty queer!"

"And may I ask why it appeals to you as queer?"

I looked Friend Pitt square in the eye, and I said, "It seems to me queer that a bank president should drop out of existence and even out of his business affiliations in one minute without any recognition of the fact."

"Perhaps you overestimate an outside interest," said Pitt. "You must know it is really none of the business of the Puritan Trust Company what Mr. Gately does in his leisure hours."

"Very well, Mr. Pitt," I returned, "then let us go and interview the young woman who is Mr. Gately's stenographer and who is even now in hysterics in the employees' lunchroom."

Mr. Pitt seemed duly impressed and together we went to find Jenny.

The lunchroom for the employees of the building was a pleasant place, on the ground floor, and therein we found Jenny, the yellow-haired stenographer of Amos Gately.

The girl was, without doubt, hysterical, and her account of the shooting was disjointed and incoherent.

Moreover, Mr. Pitt was of the supercilious type, the kind who never believes anything, and his manner, as he listened to Jenny's story, was incredulous and almost scoffing.

So Jenny's story, though to me illuminating, was, I felt sure, to Pitt, of little value.

"Oh," Jenny exclaimed, "I was in my room, the first room, and I didn't mean to listen,—I never do! and then, all of a sudden, I heard somebody threatening Mr. Gately! That made me listen,—I don't care if it was wrong—and then, I heard somebody quarreling with Mr. Gately."

"How do you know they were quarreling?" interposed Pitt's cold voice.

"I couldn't help knowing, sir. I heard Mr. Gately's usually pleasant voice raised as if in anger, and I heard the visitor's voice, high and angry too."

"You didn't know the visitor's voice? you had never heard it before?" asked Pitt.

"No, sir; I've no idea who he could have been!" and the foolish little Jenny bridled and looked like an innocent *ingÃ©nue*.

I broke in.

"But didn't you admit all visitors or callers to Mr. Gately?" I demanded.

Jenny looked at me. "No, sir," she replied; "I received all who came to my door, but there were others!"

"Where did they enter?" asked Pitt.

"Oh, they came in at the other doors. You see, I only looked after my own room. Of course, if Miss Raynor came,—or anybody that Mr. Gately knew personally—" Jenny paused discreetly.

"And did Miss Raynor come this morning?" I asked.

"Yes," Jenny replied, "she did. That is, not this morning, but early this afternoon. I know Miss Raynor very well."

Mr. Pitt seemed a little disturbed from his usual calm, and with evident reluctance said to me, "I think, Mr. Brice, that this matter is more serious than I thought. It seems to me that it would be wise to refer the whole matter to Mr. Talcott, the secretary of the Trust Company."

Now, I was only too glad to refer the matter to anybody who could be considered authoritative, and I agreed at once.

"Moreover," said Mr. Pitt, as he gave an anxious glance at Jenny, "I think it well to take this young woman along, as she is the secretary of Mr. Gately and may know—"

"Oh, no, sir," cried Jenny, "I don't know anything! Please don't ask me questions!"

Jenny's perturbation seemed to make Mr. Pitt's intentions more definite, and he corralled the young woman, as he also swept me along.

In a moment, we were all going into the offices of the Puritan Trust Company.

And here, Mr. Pitt faded from view, and he left us in the august presence of Mr. Talcott, the secretary of the Company.

I found myself in the quiet, pleasant atmosphere of the usual banker's office, and Mr. Talcott, a kindly gentleman of middle-aged aristocracy, began to question me.

"It seems to me, Mr. Brice," he began, "that this story of yours about Mr. Gately is not only important but mysterious."

"I think so, Mr. Talcott," I responded, "and yet, the whole crux of the matter is whether Mr. Gately is, at present, in some one of his offices, or, perhaps at his home, or whether his whereabouts are undetermined."

"Of course, Mr. Brice," the secretary went on, "it is none of our business where Mr. Gately is, outside of his banking hours; and yet, in view of Mr. Pitt's report of your account, it is incumbent upon us, the officers of the Trust Company, to look into the matter. Will you tell me, please, all you know of the circumstances pertaining to Mr. Gately's disappearance,—if he has disappeared?"

"If he has disappeared!" I snapped back; "and, pray, sir, if he has not disappeared, where is he?"

Mr. Talcott, still unmoved, responded, "That is aside the question, for the moment. What do you know of the matter, Mr. Brice?"

I replied by telling him all I knew of the whole affair, from the time I first saw the shadows until the moment when I went down in the elevator and met Mr. Pitt.

He listened with deepest attention, and then, seemingly unimpressed by my story, began to question Jenny.

This volatile young lady had regained her mental balance, and was more than ready to dilate upon her experiences.

"Yes, sir," she said, "I was sitting at my desk, and nobody had come in for an hour or so, when, all of a sudden, I heard talking in Mr. Gately's room."

"Do callers usually go through your room?" Mr. Talcott inquired.

"Yes, sir,—that is, unless they're Mr. Gately's personal friends,—like Miss Raynor or somebody."

"Who is Miss Raynor?" I broke in.

"His ward," said Mr. Talcott, briefly. "Go on, Jenny; nobody had gone through your room?"

"No, sir; and so, I was startled to hear somebody scrapping with Mr. Gately."

"Scrapping?"

"Yes, sir; sort of quarreling, you know; I—"

"Did you listen?"

"Not exactly that, sir, but I couldn't help hearing the angry voices, though I didn't make out the words."

"Be careful, Jenny," Talcott's tones were stern, "don't assume more than you can be sure was meant."

"Then I can't assume anything," said Jenny, crisply, "for I didn't hear a single word,—only I did feel sure the two of 'em was scrapping."

"You heard, then, angry voices?"

"Yes, sir, just that. And right straight afterward, a pistol shot."

"In Mr. Gately's room?"

"Yes, sir. And then I ran in there to see what it meant,—"

"Weren't you frightened?"

"No, sir; I didn't stop to think there was anything to be frightened of. But when I got in there, and saw—"

"Well, go on,—what did you see?"

"A man, with a pistol in his hand, running out of the door—"

"Which door?"

"The door of number three,—that's Mr. Gately's own particular private room,—well, he was running out of that door, with a pistol in his hand,—and the pistol was smoking, sir!"

Jenny's foolish little face was red with excitement and her lips trembled as she told her story. It was impossible to disbelieve her,—there could be no doubt of her fidelity to detail.

But Talcott was imperturbable.

"The pistol was smoking," he repeated, "where did the man go with it?"

"I don't know, sir," said Jenny; "I ran out to the hall after him,—I think I saw him run down the staircase, but I,—I was so scared with it all, I jumped into the elevator,—Minny's elevator,—and came downstairs myself."

"And then?" prompted Talcott.

"Then, sir,—oh, I don't know,—I think I lost my head—it was all so queer, you know—"

"Yes, yes," said Talcott, soothingly,—he was a most courteous man, "yes, Miss Jenny,—I don't wonder you were upset. Now, I think, if you will accompany us, we will go upstairs to Mr. Gately's rooms."

It seemed to me that Mr. Talcott did not pay sufficient attention to my presence, but I forgave this, because I felt sure he would be only too glad to avail himself of my services later on. So I followed him and the tow-headed Jenny up to the offices of the bank president.

We did not go up in Minny's elevator, but in another one, and our appearance at the door of Mr. Gately's office number one, was met by Norah,—my Norah, who received us with an air of grave importance.

She was unawed by the sight of Mr. Talcott, imposing though he was, and was clearly scornful of Jenny, who had already assumed a jaunty manner.

But Jenny was quite self-possessed, and with a toss of her head at Norah she started to explain.

"I was in here, at my desk, Mr. Talcott," she began, volubly; "and in Mr. Gately's office, I heard somebody talking pretty sharp—"

"A man?"

"Yes, sir."

"How did he get in, if not through your room?"

"Oh, people often went through the hall doors of number two or three, and sometimes they came through my room."

"Who went through your room this afternoon?"

"Only three people. An old man named Smith—"

"What was his business?"

"I'm not quite sure, but it had to do with his getting a part salary from Mr. Gately; he was a down-and-outer, and he hoped

Mr. Gately would help him through."

"And did he?"

"Oh, yes, sir! Mr. Gately always was soft-hearted and never turned down anybody in need."

"And the other callers?"

"There was an old lady, to see about her husband's pension,—and—"

"Well? I suppose not all the callers were beneficiaries?"

"No, sir. One was a—a lady."

"A lady? Describe her."

"Why, she was Miss Olive Raynor,—Mr. Gately's ward."

"Oh, Miss Raynor. Well, there's no use discussing her. Were there any other ladies?"

"No, sir."

"Nor any other men?"

"No, sir; that is, not through my room. You know, people could go in to Mr. Gately's private offices without going through my room."

"Yes, I know. But couldn't you see them?"

"Only dimly,—through the clouded glass window between my room and Mr. Gately's."

"And what did you see of the callers in Mr. Gately's room just before you heard the shot fired?"

Jenny looked dubious. She seemed inclined not to tell all she knew. But Mr. Talcott spoke sharply.

"Come," he said; "speak up. Tell all you know."

"I didn't hear anybody come in," said Jenny, slowly; "and then, all of a sudden, I heard loud voices,—and then, I heard quarrelly words—"

"Quarrelly?"

"Yes, sir, as if somebody was threatening Mr. Gately. I didn't hear clearly, but I heard enough to make me look through the window between the two rooms—"

"This window?"

"Yes, sir," and Jenny nodded at the clouded glass pane between her room and Mr. Gately's office. "And I saw sort of shadows,—and then in a minute I saw the shadows get up—you know, Mr. Gately and another man,—and then,—I heard a pistol fired off, and I yelled!"

"It was your scream I heard, then!" I exclaimed.

"I don't know," Jenny replied, "but I did scream, because I am fearfully scared of pistol shots, and I didn't know who was shooting."

"What did you do next?" asked Mr. Talcott, in his quiet way.

"I ran into Mr. Gately's room—"

"And you weren't frightened?"

"Not for myself. I was frightened of the shot,—I always am afraid of firearms, but I wanted to know what was doing. So, I opened the door and ran in—"

"Yes; and?"

"I saw nobody in Mr. Gately's room,—I mean this room next to mine,—so I ran on, to the third room,—I am not supposed to go

in there,—but I did, and there I saw a man just going out to the hall and in his hand was a smoking revolver."

"Out to the hall? Did you follow him?"

"Of course I did! But he ran down the staircase. I didn't go down that way, because I thought I'd get down quicker and head him off by going down in the elevator."

"So you went down in the elevator?"

"Yes, sir. It was Minny's elevator,—Minny's my sister,—and after I got in,—and saw Minny, I got sort of hysterical and nervous, and I couldn't remember what I was about."

"What became of the man?" asked Talcott, uninterested in Jenny's nerves.

"I don't know, sir. I was so rattled,—and I only saw him a moment,—and—"

"Would you know him if you saw him again?"

"I don't know,—I don't think so."

"I wish you could say yes,—it may be of gravest importance."

But Jenny seemed to resent Mr. Talcott's desire.

"I don't see how you could expect it, sir," she said, pettishly; "I saw him only in a glimpse,—I was scared to death at the sound of the pistol shot,—and when I burst into this room and found Mr. Gately gone I was so kerflummixed I didn't know what I was about! That I didn't!"

"And yet," Norah remarked, quietly, "after you went downstairs and these gentlemen found you in the lunchroom, you were perfectly calm and collected—"

"Nothing of the sort!" blazed back Jenny; "I'm all on edge! My nerves are completely unstrung!"

"Quite so," said Mr. Talcott, kindly, "and I suggest that you go back to the lunchroom, Miss Jenny, and rest and calm yourself. But please remain there, until I call for you again."

Jenny looked a little disappointed at being thus thrust out of the limelight, but as Mr. Talcott held the door open for her, she had no choice but to depart, and we presently heard her go down in her sister's elevator.

"Now," Mr. Talcott resumed, "we will look into this matter further.

"You see," he proceeded, speaking, to my surprise, as much to Norah as to myself, "I can't really apprehend that anything serious has happened to Mr. Gately. For, if the shot which Jenny heard, and which you, Mr. Brice, heard,—had killed Mr. Gately, the body, of course, would be here. Again, if the shot had wounded him seriously, he would in some way contrive to make his condition known. Therefore, I feel sure that Mr. Gately is either absolutely all right, or, if slightly wounded, he is in some anteroom or in some friend's room nearby. And, if this is the case,—I mean, if our Mr. Gately is ill or hurt, we must find him. Therefore, careful search must be made."

"But," spoke up Norah, "perhaps Mr. Gately went home. There is no positive assurance that he did not."

Mr. Talcott looked at Norah keenly. He didn't seem to regard her as an impertinent young person, but he took her suggestion seriously.

"That may be," he agreed. "I think I will call up his residence."

He did so, and I gathered from the remarks he made on the telephone that Amos Gately was not at his home, nor was his niece, Miss Olive Raynor, there.

Talcott made another call or two, and I finally learned that he had located Miss Raynor.

For, "Very well," he said; "I shall hope to see you here in ten or fifteen minutes, then."

He hung up the receiver,—he had used the instrument in Jenny's room, and not the upset one on Mr. Gately's desk,—and he vouchsafed:

"I think it is all right. Miss Raynor says she saw her uncle here this afternoon, shortly after luncheon, and he said he was about to leave the office for the day. She thinks he is at his club or on the way home. However, she is coming around here, as she is in the limousine, and fearing a storm, she wants to take Mr. Gately home."

CHAPTER III
The Elevator

MR. TALCOTT returned to the middle room and looked more carefully at the disturbed condition of things around and on Mr. Gately's desk.

"It is certain that Mr. Gately left the room in haste," he said, "for here is what is undoubtedly a private and personal checkbook left open. I shall take on myself the responsibility of putting it away, for the moment, at least."

Mr. Talcott closed the checkbook and put it in a small drawer of the desk.

"Why don't you put away that hatpin, too?" suggested Norah, eying the pin curiously. "I don't think it belongs to Miss Raynor."

"Take it up by the edge," I warned; "I may be jumping to conclusions, but there is a possibility that a crime has been committed, and we must preserve what *may* be evidence."

"Quite right, Mr. Brice," agreed Talcott, and he gingerly picked up the pin by taking the edges of its ornate head between his thumb and forefinger. The head was an Egyptian scarab,—whether a real one or not I couldn't tell,—and was set on a flat backing of gold. This back might easily retain the thumb print of the woman who had drawn that pin from her hat in Mr. Gately's office. And who, Norah surmised, was the person who had fired the pistol that I had heard discharged.

Placing the hatpin in the drawer with the checkbook, Mr. Talcott locked the drawer and slipped the key in his pocket.

I wondered if he had seen some entry in the book that made him wish to hide Mr. Gately's private affairs from curious eyes.

"There is indeed a possibility of something wrong," he went on, "at first I couldn't think it, but seeing this room, that overturned chair and upset telephone, in connection with the shooting, as you heard it, Mr. Brice, it certainly seems ominous. And most mysterious! Two people quarreling, a shot fired by one or other of them, and no sign of the assailant, his victim, or his weapon! Now, there are three propositions, one of which *must* be the truth. Mr. Gately is alive and well, he is wounded, or he is killed. The last seems impossible, as his body could not have been taken away without discovery; if he were wounded, I think that, too, would have to be known; so, I still feel that things are all right. But until we can prove that, we must continue our search."

"Yes," I agreed, "search for Mr. Gately and also, search for the man who was here and who quarreled with him."

"Or the woman," insisted Norah.

"I can't think it was a woman," I said. "Although the shadow was indistinct, it struck me as that of a man, the motions and attitudes were masculine, as I recall them. The hatpin may have been left here this morning or any time."

"The visitor must be found," declared Mr. Talcott, "but I don't know how to go about it."

"Ask the elevator girls," I suggested; "one of them must have brought the caller up here."

We did this, but the attendants of the three elevators all denied having brought anyone up to Mr. Gately's offices since the old man and the elderly lady who had been mentioned by Jenny.

Miss Raynor had been brought up by one of the girls also, but we couldn't quite ascertain whether she had come before or after the other two.

While waiting for Miss Raynor to come again, I tried to do a little scientific deduction from any evidence I might notice.

But I gained small information. The desk-blotter, inkwell, and pens were in immaculate order, doubtless they were renewed every day by a careful attendant. All the minor accessories, such as paperweights and letter openers were of individual styles and of valuable materials.

There was elaborate smoking paraphernalia and a beautiful single rose in a tall silver vase.

"Can you read anything bearing on the mystery, Mr. Brice," asked Talcott, noting my thoughtful scrutiny.

"No; nothing definite. In fact, nothing of any importance. I see that on one occasion, at least, Mr. Gately kept a chauffeur waiting an unconscionably long time, and the man was finally obliged to go away without him."

"Well, now, how do you guess that?" and Mr. Talcott looked decidedly interested.

"Like most of those spectacular deductions," I responded, "the explanation takes all the charm out of it. There is a carriage

check on the desk,—one of those queer cards with a lot of circular holes in it. That must have been given to Mr. Gately when he left his car, or perhaps a taxicab, outside of some hotel or shop. As he didn't give it up, the chauffeur must have waited for him until he was tired."

"He may have gone off with some friend, and sent word to the man not to wait," offered Talcott.

"But then he would have sent the call-check out to identify him. What a queer-looking thing it is," and I picked up the card, with its seven round holes in a cabalistic array.

"Perhaps the caller left it," spoke up Norah; "perhaps he, or she, came here in a cab, or a car, and—"

"No, Norah," I said, "such checks are not given out at a building of this sort. Only at hotels, theaters, or shops."

"It's of no importance," and Mr. Talcott gave a slight shrug of impatience; "the thing is, where is Mr. Gately?"

Restless and unable to sit still, I wandered into the third room. I had heard of this sanctum, but I had never expected to see inside of it. The impulse came to me now to make the most of this chance, for when Mr. Gately returned I might be summarily, if courteously, ejected.

The effect of the room was that of dignified splendor. It had evidently been done but not overdone by a decorator who was a true artist. The predominant color was a soft, deep blue, and the rugs and textile fabrics were rich and luxurious. There were a few fine paintings in gold frames and the large war map occupied the greater part of a paneled wall space. The chairs

were spacious and cushioned, and a huge davenport stood in front of a wide fireplace, where some logs were cheerily burning.

A cozy place to entertain friends, I ruminated, and then, turning back to the middle room, I reconstructed the movements of the two people I had seen shadowed.

"As they rose," I said to Mr. Talcott, "Amos Gately was behind this big table-desk, and the other man,—for I still think it was a man,—was opposite. The other man upset his chair, on rising, so he must have risen hastily. Then the shot was fired, and the two disappeared. As Jenny came into the room at once, and saw the strange man going through the third room and on out to the stairs, we are forced to the conclusion that Mr. Gately preceded him."

"Down the stairs?" asked Mr. Talcott.

"Yes, for the flight, at least, or Jenny would have seen him. Also, I should have seen him, had he remained in this hall."

"And the woman?" asked Norah, "what became of her?"

"I don't think there was any woman present at that time," I returned. "The hatpin was, doubtless, left by a woman caller, but we've no reason to suppose she was there at the same time the shooting occurred."

"I can't think of any reason why anyone should shoot Mr. Gately," said Talcott, musingly. "He is a most estimable gentleman, the soul of honor and uprightness."

"Of course," I assented; "but has he no personal enemies?"

"None that I know of, and it is highly improbable, anyway. He is not a politician, or, indeed, a public man of any sort. He is exceedingly charitable, but he rarely makes known his good deeds. He has let it be known that he wishes his benefactions kept quiet."

"What are his tastes?" I asked, casually.

"Simple in the extreme. He rarely takes a vacation, and though his home is on a magnificent scale, he doesn't entertain very much. I have heard that Miss Raynor pleads in vain for him to be more of a society man."

"She is his ward?"

"Yes; no relation, although she calls him uncle. I believe he was a college chum of Miss Raynor's father, and when the girl was left alone in the world, he took her to live with him, and took charge of her fortune."

"A large one?"

"Fairly so, I believe. Enough to tempt the fortune-hunters, anyway, and Mr. Gately frowns on any young man who approaches him with a request for Olive Raynor's hand."

"Perhaps the caller today was a suitor."

"Oh, I hardly think a man would come armed on such an errand. No; to me, the most mysterious thing about it all, is why anyone should desire to harm Mr. Gately. It must have been a homicidal maniac,—if there is really such a being."

"The most mysterious part to me," I rejoined, "is how they both got away so quickly. You see, I stood in my doorway opposite, looking at them, and then as soon as I heard the shot I ran to

the middle door as fast as I could, then to the third room door, and then back to the first. Of course, had I known which room was which, I should have gone to door number one first. But, as you see, I was in the hall, going from one door to another, and I must have seen the men if they came out into the hall from any door."

"They left room number three, as you entered number one," said Norah, carefully thinking it out.

"That must be so, but where did they go? Why, if Mr. Gately went downstairs, has he not been visible since? I can't help feeling that Amos Gately is unable to move, for some reason or other. May he have been kidnaped? Or is he bound and gagged in some unused room, say on the floor below this?"

"No," said Talcott, briefly. "Without saying anything about it I put one of the bank clerks on the hunt and I told him to look into every room in the building. As he has not reported, he hasn't yet found Mr. Gately."

And then, Olive Raynor arrived.

I shall never forget that first sight of her. Heralded by a fragrant whiff of fresh violets, she came into the first room, and paused at the doorway of the middle room, where we still sat.

Framed in the mahogany door-casing, the lovely bit of femininity seemed a laughing bundle of furs, velvets, and laces.

"What's the matter?" said a soft, sweet voice. "Has Uncle Amos run away? I hope he is in a sheltered place for there's a ferocious storm coming up and the wind is blowing a gale."

The nodding plumes on her hat tossed as she raised her head inquiringly and looked about.

"What do I smell?" she exclaimed; "it's like—like pistol-smoke!"

"It is," Mr. Talcott said. "But there's no pistol here now—"

"How exciting! What's it all about? Do tell me."

Clearly the girl apprehended no serious matter. Her wide-open eyes showed curiosity and interest, but no thought of trouble had as yet come to her.

She stepped further into the room, and throwing back her furs revealed a slender graceful figure, quick of movement and of exquisite poise. Neither dark nor very fair, her wavy brown hair framed a face whose chief characteristic seemed to be its quickly changing expressions. Now smiling, then grave, now wondering, then merry, she looked from one to another of us, her big brown eyes coming to rest at last on Norah.

"Who are you?" she asked, with a lovely smile that robbed the words of all curtness.

"I am Norah MacCormack, Miss Raynor," my stenographer replied. "I am in Mr. Brice's office, across the hall. This is Mr. Brice."

There was no reason why Norah should be the one to introduce me, but we were all a little rattled, and Mr. Talcott, who, of course, was the one to handle the situation, seemed utterly at a loss as to how to begin.

"How do you do, Mr. Brice?" and Miss Raynor flashed me a special smile. "And now, Mr. Talcott, tell me what's the matter? I see something has happened. What is it?"

She was grave enough now. She had suddenly realized that there was something to tell, and she meant to have it told.

"I don't know, Miss Raynor," Talcott began, "whether anything has happened, or not. I mean, anything serious. We—that is,—we don't know where Mr. Gately is."

"Go on. That of itself doesn't explain your anxious faces."

So Talcott told her,—told her just what we knew ourselves, which was so little and yet so mysterious.

Olive listened, her great, dark eyes widening with wonder. She had thrown off her fur coat and was seated in Amos Gately's desk-chair, her dainty foot turning the chair on its swivel now and then.

Her muff fell to the floor, and, unconsciously, she drew off her gloves and dropped them upon it. She said no word during the recital, but her vivid face showed all the surprise and fear she felt as the tale was told.

Then, "I don't understand," she said, simply. "Do you think somebody shot Uncle Amos? Then where is he?"

"We don't understand, either," returned Talcott. "We don't know that anybody shot him. We only know a shot was fired and Mr. Gately is missing."

Just then a man entered Jenny's room, from the hall. He, too, paused in the doorway to the middle room.

"Oh, Amory, come in!" cried Miss Raynor. "I'm so glad you're here. This is Mr. Brice,—and Miss MacCormack,—Mr. Manning. Mr. Talcott, of course you know."

I had never met Amory Manning before, but one glance was enough to show how matters stood between him and Olive Raynor. They were more than friends,—that much was certain.

"I saw Mr. Manning downstairs," Miss Raynor said to Talcott, with a lovely flush, "and—as Uncle Amos doesn't—well, he isn't just crazy over him, I asked him not to come up here with me, but to wait for me downstairs."

"And as you were so long about coming down, I came up," said Mr. Manning, with a little smile. "What's this,—what about a shot? Where's Mr. Gately?"

Talcott hesitated, but Olive Raynor poured out the whole story at once.

Manning listened gravely, and at the end, said simply: "He *must* be found. How shall we set about it?"

"That's what I don't know," replied Talcott.

"I'll help," said Olive, briskly. "I refuse to believe any harm has come to him. Let's call up his clubs."

"I've done that," said Talcott. "I can't think he went away anywhere—willingly."

"How, then?" cried Olive. "Oh, wait a minute,—I know something!"

"What?" asked Talcott and I together, for the girl's face glowed with her sudden happy thought.

"Why, Uncle Amos has a private elevator of his own. He went down in that!"

"Where is it?" asked Manning.

"I don't know," and Olive looked about the room. "And Uncle forbade me ever to mention it,—but this is an emergency, isn't it? and I'm justified,—don't you think?"

"Yes," said Manning; "tell all you know."

"But that's all I do know. There is a secret elevator that nobody knows about. Surely you can find it."

"Surely we can!" said I, and jumping up, I began the search.

Nor did it take long. There were not very many places where a private entrance could be concealed, and I found it behind the big war map, in the third room.

The door was flush with the wall, and painted the same as the panel itself. The map simply hung on the door, but overlapped sufficiently to hide it. Thus the door was concealed, though not really difficult of discovery.

"It won't open," I announced after a futile trial.

"Automatic," said Talcott. "You can't open that kind, when the car is down."

"How do you know the car is down?" I asked.

"Because the door won't open. Well, it does seem probable that Mr. Gately went away by this exit, then."

"And the woman, too," remarked Norah.

As before Mr. Talcott didn't object to Norah's participation in our discussion, in fact, he seemed rather to welcome it, and in a way, deferred to her opinions.

"Perhaps so," he assented. "Now, Miss Raynor, where does this elevator descend to? I mean, where does it open on the ground floor?"

"I don't know, I'm sure," and the girl looked perplexed. "I've never been up or down in it. I shouldn't have known of it, but once Uncle let slip a chance reference to it, and when I asked him about it, he told me, but told me not to tell. You see, he uses it to get away from bores or people he doesn't want to see."

"It ought to be easy to trace its shaft down through the floors," said Amory Manning. "Though I suppose there's no opening on any floor until the street floor is reached."

Manning was a thoughtful-looking chap. Though we had never met before, I knew of him and I had an impression that he was a civil engineer or something like that. I felt drawn to him at once, for he had a pleasant, responsive manner and a nice, kindly way with him.

In appearance, he was scholarly, rather than business-like. This effect was probably due in part to the huge shell-rimmed glasses he wore. I can't bear those things myself, but some men seem to take to them naturally. For the rest, Manning had thick, dark hair, and he was a bit inclined to stoutness, but his goodly height saved him from looking stocky.

"Well, I think we ought to investigate this elevator," said Talcott. "Suppose you and I, Mr. Brice, go downstairs to see about it, leaving Miss Raynor and Mr. Manning here,—in case,—in case Mr. Gately returns."

I knew that Talcott meant, in case we should find anything wrong in the elevator, but he put it the more casual way, and Miss Raynor seemed satisfied.

"Yes, do," she said, "and we'll wait here till you come back. Of course, you can find where it lands, and—oh, wait a minute! Maybe it opens in the next door building. I remember, sometimes when I've been waiting in the car for Uncle, he has come out of the building next door instead of this one, and when I asked him why, he always turned the subject without telling me."

"It may be," and Talcott considered the position of the shaft. "Well, we'll see."

Norah discreetly returned to my offices, but I felt pretty sure she wouldn't go home, until something was found out concerning the mysterious disappearance.

On the street floor we could find no possible outlet for the elevator in question, and had it not been for Olive's hint as to where to look, I don't know how we should have found it at all.

But on leaving the Trust Company Building, we found the place at last. At least, we found a door which was in the position where we supposed the elevator shaft would require it, and we tried to open it.

This we failed to do.

"Looks bad," said Talcott, shaking his head. "If Amos Gately is in there, it's because he's unable to get out—or—unconscious."

He couldn't bring himself to speak the crueler word that was in both our minds, and he turned abruptly aside, as he went in search of the janitor or the superintendent of the building.

Left by myself I stared at the silent door. It was an ordinary-looking door, at the end of a small side passage which

communicated with the main hall or lobby of the building. It was inconspicuous, and as the passage had an angle in it, Amos Gately could easily have gone in and out of that door without exciting comment.

Of course, the janitor would know all about it; and he did.

He returned with Mr. Talcott, muttering as he came.

"I always said Mr. Gately'd get caught in that thing yet! I don't hold with them automaticky things, so I don't. They may go all right for years and then cut up some trick on you. If that man's caught in there, he must be pretty sick by this time!"

"Does Mr. Gately use the thing much?" I asked.

"Not so very often, sir. Irregular like. Now, quite frequent, and then, again, sort of seldom. Well, we can't open it, Mr. Talcott. These things won't work, only just so. After anybody gets in, and shuts the door, it can't be opened except by pressing a button on the inside. Can't you get in upstairs?"

"No," said Talcott, shortly. "Get help, then, and break the door down."

This was done, the splintered door fell away, and there, in a crumpled heap on the floor of the car, was Amos Gately,—dead.

CHAPTER IV
The Black Squall

IF I had thought Mr. Talcott somewhat indifferent before, I changed my opinion suddenly. His face turned a ghastly white and his eyes stared with horror. There was more than his grief for a friend, though that was evident enough, but his thoughts ran ahead to the larger issues involved by this murder of a bank president and otherwise influential financier.

For murder it was, beyond all doubt. The briefest examination showed Mr. Gately had been shot through the heart, and the absence of any weapon precluded the idea of suicide.

The janitor, overcome at the sight, was in a state bordering on collapse, and Mr. Talcott was not much more composed.

"Mr. Brice," he said, his face working convulsively, "this is a fearful calamity! What can it mean? Who could have done it? What shall we do?"

Answering his last question first, I endeavored to take hold of the situation.

"First of all, Mr. Talcott, we must keep this thing quiet for the moment. I mean, we must not let a crowd gather here, before the necessary matters are attended to. This passage must be guarded from intrusion, and the bank people must be notified at once. Suppose you and the janitor stay here, while I go back next door and tell—tell whom?"

"Let me think," groaned Mr. Talcott, passing his hand across his forehead. "Yes, please, Mr. Brice, do that—go to the bank and tell Mr. Mason, the vice-president—ask him to come here to me,—then, there is Miss Raynor—oh, how horrible it all is!"

"Also, we must call a doctor," I suggested, "and, eventually, the police."

"Must they be brought in? Yes, I suppose so. Well, Mr. Brice, if you will attend to those errands, I will stay here. But we must shut up that janitor!"

The man, on the verge of collapse, was groaning and mumbling prayers, or something, as he rocked his big body back and forth.

"See here, my man," I said, "this is a great emergency and you must meet it and do your duty. That, at present, is to stay here with Mr. Talcott, and make sure that no one else comes into this small hall until some of Mr. Gately's bank officers arrive. Also, cease that noise you're making, and see what you can do in the way of being a real help to us."

This appeal to his sense of duty was not without effect, and he straightened up and seemed equal to the occasion.

I ran off, then, and out of one big building back into the other. The storm, still brewing, had not yet broken, but the sky was black, and a feeling of more snow was in the atmosphere. I shivered as I felt the bitterly cold outside air, and hurried into the bank building.

I had no trouble in reaching Mr. Mason, for the bank itself was closed and many of the employees had gone home. My manner

of grave importance sufficed to let me pass any inquisitive attendants and I found Mr. Mason in his office.

I told him the bare facts in a few words, for this was no time to tarry,—I wanted to get up and tell Miss Raynor before any less considerate messenger might reach her.

Mr. Mason was aghast at the terrible tidings, and closing his desk at once, he quickly reached for his hat and coat and started on his fearsome errand.

"I will call Mr. Gately's physician," he said, his mind working quickly, as he paused a moment, "and you will break the news to Miss Raynor, you say? I can't seem to comprehend it all! But my place is by Mr. Gately and I will go there at once."

So I hastened up to the twelfth floor again, trying, on the way, to think how I should best tell the awful story.

The elevator ride had never seemed so short,—the floors fairly flew past me, and in a few moments I was in the beautiful third room of Mr. Gately's, and found Miss Raynor and Mr. Manning eagerly awaiting my news.

"Have you found Mr. Gately?" Amory Manning asked, but at the same instant, Olive Raynor cried out, "You have something dreadful to tell us, Mr. Brice! I know you have!"

This seemed to help me, and I answered, "Yes, Miss Raynor,—the worst."

For I felt that this imperious, self-possessed girl would rather be told abruptly, like that, than to have me mince matters.

And I was right, for she said, quickly, "Tell it all,—any knowledge is better than suspense."

So I told her, as gently as I could, of our discovery of the body of Amos Gately in his private elevator, at the bottom of the shaft.

"But I don't understand," said Manning. "Shot through the heart and alone in the elevator?"

"That's the way it is. I've no idea of the details of the matter. We didn't move the body, or examine it thoroughly, but the first glance showed the truth. However, a doctor has been sent for, and the vice-president and secretary of the Trust Company have things in charge, so I came right up here to tell you people about it."

"And I thank you, Mr. Brice," Olive's lovely dark eyes gave me a grateful glance. "What shall I do, Amory? Shall we go down there?"

Manning hesitated. "I will," he said, looking at her tenderly, "but—do you want to? It will be hard for you—"

"I know,—but I must go. If Uncle Amos has been killed—surely I ought to be there to—to—oh, I don't know what!"

Olive Raynor turned a piteous face to Manning, and he took her hand in his as he responded: "Come, if you think best, dear. Shall we go together?"

"Yes," she said; "I dread it, but I must go. And if you are with me I can stand it. What are you going to do, Mr. Brice?"

"I was about to go home," I replied, "but I think I will go back to the Matteawan Building, for I may be able to give assistance in some way."

I went across to my office and found that Norah had gone home. Snapping on some lights, I sat down for a few minutes to straighten out my bewildered, galloping thoughts.

Here was I, Tom Brice, a quiet, inconspicuous lawyer, thrown suddenly into the very thick of a most mysterious murder case. I well knew that my evidence concerning the shadows I had seen would be eagerly listened to by the police, when the time came, and I wondered how soon that would be. I wanted to go home. I wanted to avoid the coming storm and get into my cozy rooms, and think the thing over. For, I had always felt that I had detective ability, and now I had been given a wonderful chance to prove it. I did not intend to usurp anybody's prerogative nor did I desire to intrude. If I were not asked to assist, I should not offer; but I had a vague hope that my early acquaintance with the vital facts would make me of value as a witness and my mental acumen would bring forth some original ideas in the way of investigation.

And I wanted some time to myself, to cogitate, and to formulate some theories already budding in my brain. Now if the police were already on the scene next door, they would not let me get away, if I appeared.

And yet, I longed for further news of the proceedings. So, I concluded to look in at the Matteawan, and if that led me into the clutches of the police inquisitors, I must submit. But, if I could get away before their arrival, I should do so. I was quite willing to be called upon by them, and to tell all I knew, but I wanted to postpone that until the next day, if possible.

Not wishing to obtrude my presence further on Miss Raynor, I went down in an elevator without returning to the Gately rooms. Indeed, I didn't know whether she had gone down yet or not.

But she had, and when I reached the scene, both she and Manning were there and were consulting with the men from the bank as to what should be done.

The doctor came, too, and began to examine the body.

The rest of us stood huddled in the narrow hall, now grown hot and close, but we dared not open the door to the main lobby, lest outsiders should make their way in.

I asked the janitor if there were not some room that could be used as a waiting place, but even as he answered me, the doctor made his report.

It was to the effect that Amos Gately had been shot before he entered the elevator or immediately upon his entrance. That he had died instantly, and, therefore it would seem that the body must have been placed in the car and sent down by the assailant. But this was only conjecture; all the doctor could assert was that Mr. Gately had been dead for perhaps an hour, and that the position of the body on the floor indicated an instantaneous death from a shot through the heart.

And then the janitor bestirred himself, and said he could give us the use of a vacant office on the ground floor, and we went in there,—all except the doctor, who remained by the elevator.

Mr. Mason and Mr. Talcott agreed that the police must be notified and they declared their willingness to stay for their

arrival. But the vice-president told Miss Raynor she could go home if she preferred to.

"I'll wait a while," she said, with the quick decision that I found was habitual with her, "the car is still here,—oh, ought we not to tell Connor? He's our chauffeur."

"I'll tell him," volunteered Manning. "I have to go now, I've an important matter to attend to before six o'clock. Olive, may I come up to the house this evening?"

"Oh, do," she answered, "I'll be so glad to have you. Come early, won't you?"

"Yes," said Manning, and after pausing for some further talk with the doctor he went away.

I tarried, wondering if I might go also, or if I were needed there.

But as Mason and Talcott were deeply engrossed in a low-toned conversation and as Miss Raynor was waiting an opportunity to confer with the doctor, who was their family physician, I concluded I might as well go home while I was free to do so.

So without definite adieux, but with a word to Miss Raynor that she might command my services at any time, I started for home.

The long expected storm had begun, and enormous snowflakes were falling thickly.

As I left the Matteawan, I discerned Amory Manning talking to the chauffeur of a big limousine and knew that he was telling Amos Gately's man what had happened to his master.

I slowed up, hoping Manning would get through the interview and walk along, and I would join him.

When he left the chauffeur, however, he darted across the street, and though I followed quickly, I almost lost sight of him in the blinding snowfall.

I called out to him, but he didn't hear, and small wonder, for the wind roared and the traffic noises were deafening.

So I hurried after him, still hoping to overtake him.

And I did, or, at least, when he finally boarded a Southbound car on Third Avenue, I hopped on the same car.

I had intended taking a Madison Avenue car, but there was none in sight, and I felt pretty sure there was a blockade on the line. The streets showed snowpiles, black and crusted, and the street cleaners were few and far apart.

The car Manning and I managed to get onto was crowded to the doors. We both stood, and there were just too many people between us to make conversation possible, but I nodded across and between the bobbing heads and faces, and Manning returned my greeting.

Stopping occasionally to let off some struggling, weary standees and to take on some new snow-besprinkled stampeders, we at last reached Twenty-second Street, and here Manning nodded a farewell to me, as he prepared to leave by the front end of the car.

This was only three blocks from my own destination, and I determined to get off, too, still anxious to speak to him regarding the scene of tragedy we had just left.

So I swung off the rear end of the car, and it moved on through the storm.

I looked about for Manning, but as I stepped to the ground a gust of wind gave me all I could do to preserve my footing. Moreover, it sent a flurry of snowflakes against my glasses, which rendered them almost opaque.

I dashed them clear with my gloved hand, and looked for my man, but he was nowhere to be seen from where I stood in the center of the four street corners.

Where could Manning have disappeared to? He must have flown like the wind, if he had already darted either up or down Third Avenue or along Twenty-second Street in either direction.

However, those were the only directions he could have taken, and I concluded that as I struggled to raise my umbrella and was at the same time partially blinded by my snowed-under glasses, he had hurried away out of sight. Of course, he had no reason to think I was trying to catch up with him, indeed, he probably did not know that I also left the car, so he had no need for apology.

And yet, I couldn't see how he had disappeared with such magical celerity. I asked a street cleaner if he had seen him.

"Naw," he said, blowing on his cold fingers, "naw, didn't see nobody. Can't see nothin' in this here black squall!"

And that's just what it was. A sudden fierce whirlwind, a maelstrom of tossing flakes, and a black lowering darkness that seemed to envelop everything.

"Mad Mary," the great clock nearby, boomed out five solemn notes that somehow added to the weirdness of the moment, and I grasped my umbrella handle, pushed my glasses more firmly into place, and strode toward my home.

With some, home is where the heart is, but, as I was still heart-whole and fancy-free, I had no romantic interest to build a home around, and my home was merely two cozy, comfy rooms in the vicinity of Gramercy Park.

And at last I reached them, storm-tossed, weary, cold, and hungry, all of which unpleasant conditions were changed for the better as rapidly as I could accomplish it.

And when, finally, I found myself seated, with a lighted cigar, at my own cheery reading table, I congratulated myself that I had come home instead of remaining at the Matteawan Building.

For, I ruminated, if the police had corralled me as witness, and held me for one of their protracted queryings, I might have stayed there until late into the night or even all night. And the storm, still howling outside my windows, made me glad of warmth and shelter.

Then, too, I was eager to get my thoughts in order. I am of a methodical mentality, and I wanted to set down in order the events I had experienced and draw logical and pertinent deductions therefrom.

I greatly wished I had had a few moments' chat with Amory Manning. I wanted to ask him some questions concerning Amos Gately that I didn't like to ask of the bank men. Although I knew

Gately's name stood for all that was honorable and impeccable in the business world, I had not forgotten the hatpin on his desk, nor the queer smile on Jenny's face as she spoke of his personal callers.

I am not one to harbor premature or unfounded suspicions of my fellow creatures, but

" A little nonsense, now and then,
Is relished by the best of men,"

And Amos Gately may not have been above enjoying some relaxations that he felt no reason to parade.

But this was speculation, pure and simple, and until I could ask somebody concerning Mr. Gately's private life, I had no right to surmise anything about it.

Carefully, I went over all I knew about the tragedy from the moment when I had opened my outer office door ready to start for home. Had I left a few moments sooner, I should probably never have known anything much of the matter except what I might learn from the newspapers or from the reports current among the tenants of the Puritan Building.

As it was, and from the facts as I marshaled them in order before my mind, I believed I had seen shadowed forth the actual murder of Amos Gately. A strange thing, to be an eye-witness, and yet to witness only the shadows of the actors in the scene!

I strove to remember definitely the type of man who did the shooting. That is, I supposed he did the shooting. As I ruminated, I realized I had no real knowledge of this. I saw the shadowed men rise, clinch, struggle, and disappear. Yes, I was positive they disappeared from my vision before I heard the shot. This argued, then, that they wrestled,—though I couldn't say which was attacker and which attacked,—then they rushed to the next room, where the elevator was concealed by the big map; and then, in that room, the shot was fired that ended Amos Gately's life.

This must be the truth, for I heard only one shot, and it must have been the fatal one.

Then, I could only think that the murderer had deliberately,—no, not deliberately, but with exceeding haste,—had put his victim in the elevator and sent the inert body downstairs alone.

This proved the full knowledge of the secret elevator on the part of the assassin, so he must have been a frequenter of Mr. Gately's rooms, or, at least had been there before, and was sufficiently intimate to know of the private exit.

To learn the man's identity then, one must look among Mr. Gately's personal friends,—or, rather, enemies.

I began to feel I was greatly handicapped by my utter ignorance of the bank president's social or home life. But it might be that in the near future I should again see Miss Raynor, and perhaps in her home, where I could learn something of her late uncle's habits.

But, returning to matters I did know about, I tried hard to think what course of procedure the murderer probably adopted after his crime.

And the conclusion I reached was all too clear. He had, of course, gone down the stairs, as Jenny had said, for at least a few flights.

Then, I visualized him, regaining his composure, assuming a nonchalant, business-like air, and stopping an elevator on a lower floor, where he stepped in, without notice from the elevator girl or the other passengers.

Just as Rodman had entered from a middle floor, when I was descending with Minny.

Perhaps Rodman was the murderer! I knew him slightly and liked him not at all. I had no earthly reason to suspect him,—only,—he had got on, I remembered, at the seventh floor, and his office was on the tenth. This didn't seem terribly incriminating, I had to admit, but I made a note of it, and determined to look Mr. Rodman up.

My telephone bell rang, and with a passing wonder at being called up in such a storm, I responded.

To my delight, it proved to be Miss Raynor speaking.

"Forgive me for intruding, Mr. Brice," she said, in that musical voice of hers, "but I—I am so lonesome,—and there isn't anyone I want to talk to."

"Talk to me, then, Miss Raynor," I said, gladly. "Can I be of any service to you—in any way?"

"Oh, I think so. I want to see you tomorrow. Can you come to see me?"

"Yes, indeed. At what time?"

"Come up in the morning,—that is, if it's perfectly convenient for you."

"Certainly; in the morning, then. About ten?"

"Yes, please. They—they brought Uncle home."

"Did they? I'm glad that was allowed. Are you alone?"

"Yes; and I'm frightfully lonely and desolate. It's such a terrible night I wouldn't ask any of my friends to come to stay with me."

"You expected Mr. Manning to call, I thought."

"I did; but he hasn't come. Of course, the reason is that it isn't a fit night for anyone to go out. I telephoned his rooms, but he wasn't in. So I don't know what to think. I'd suppose he'd telephone even if he couldn't get here."

"Traffic must be pretty nearly impossible," I said, "it was awful going when I reached home soon after five, and now, there's a young blizzard raging."

"Yes, I couldn't expect him; and perhaps the telephone wires are affected."

"This one isn't, at any rate, so chat with me as long as you will. You can get some friend to come to stay with you tomorrow, can't you?"

"Oh, yes; I could have got somebody tonight, but I hadn't the heart to ask it. I'm all right, Mr. Brice, I'm not a very nervous person,—only, it is sort of awful. Our housekeeper is a nice old

thing, but she's nearly in hysterics and I sent her to bed. I'll say good-by now, and I'll be glad to see you tomorrow."

CHAPTER V
Olive Raynor

I DID see Miss Olive Raynor the next day, but not in the surroundings of her own home as I had expected.

For I received a rather peremptory summons to present myself at police headquarters at a shockingly early hour, and not long after my arrival there, Miss Raynor appeared also.

The police had spent a busy night, and had unearthed more or less evidence and had collected quite a cloud of witnesses.

Chief of Police Martin conducted the inquiry, and I soon found that my story was considered of utmost importance, and that I was expected to relate it to the minutest details.

This I did, patiently answering repeated questions and asseverating facts.

But I could give no hint as to the identity, or even as to the appearance of the man who quarreled with Mr. Gately. I could, and did say that he seemed to be a burly figure, or, at least, the shadow showed a large frame and broad shoulders.

"Had he a hat on?" asked the Chief.

"No; and I should say he had either a large head or thick, bushy hair, for the shadow showed that much."

"Did you not see his face in profile?"

"If so, it was only momentarily, and the clouded glass of the door, in irregular waves, entirely prevented a clear-cut profile view."

"And after the two men rose, they disappeared at once?"

"They wrestled;—it seemed, I should say, that Mr. Gately was grabbed by the other man, and tried to make a getaway, whereupon the other man shot him."

"Are you quite sure, Mr. Brice," and the Chief fixed me with his sharp blue eye, "that you are not reconstructing this affair in the light of the later discovery of Mr. Gately's fate?"

I thought this over carefully before replying, and then said: "It's quite possible I may have unconsciously done so. But I distinctly saw the two figures come together in a desperate struggle, then disappear, doubtless into the third room, and then I heard the shot. That is all I can state positively."

"You, then, went right across the hall and tried to enter?"

"Yes; tried to enter at the middle door, where I had seen the men."

"And next?"

"Finding that door fastened, I tried the third, because the men had seemed to disappear in that direction."

"The third room was also locked?"

"Yes; or at least the door would not open from the outside. Then I went back to the door number one."

"And that opened at once?"

"Yes; had I tried that first, I should probably have seen the men,—or the girl, Jenny."

"Perhaps. Could you recognize the head of the visitor if you should see it again shadowed on the door?"

"I am not sure, but I doubt if I could. I could tell if it were a very different type of head, but if merely similar, I could not swear it was the same man."

"H'm. We must make the experiment. At least it may give us a hint in the right direction."

He questioned me further as to my knowledge of Mr. Gately and his affairs, but when he found I knew almost nothing of those and had been a tenant of the Puritan Building but a very short time he suddenly lost interest in me and turned his attention to Miss Raynor.

Olive Raynor had come alone and unattended. This surprised me, for I had imagined the young ladies of the higher social circles never went anywhere alone. But in many ways Miss Raynor evinced her independence and self-reliance, and I had no doubt a trusted chauffeur waited in her car outside.

She was garbed in black, but it was not the heavy crape material that I supposed all women wore as mourning. A long black velvet cape swathed the slender figure in its voluminous folds, and as this was thrown back, I saw her gown was of black satin, with thinner black material used in combination. Women's clothes, though a mystery to me, had a sort of fascination for my ignorant eyes, and I knew enough to appreciate that Miss Raynor's costume was correct and very smart.

Her hat was black, too, smaller than the one I saw her in the day before, and of a quieter type.

Altogether, she looked very lovely, and her sweet, flower-like face, with its big, pathetic brown eyes, was raised frankly to Chief Martin as she answered his questions in a low, clear voice. A slight pallor told of a night of wakefulness and sorrow, but this seemed to accentuate the scarlet of her fine, delicate lips,—a scarlet unacquainted with the assistance of the rouge stick.

"No," she said, positively, "Mr. Gately had no enemies, I am sure he hadn't! Of course, he may have kept parts of his life or his affairs secret from me, but I have lived with him too long and too familiarly not to know him thoroughly. He was of a simple, straightforward nature, and a wise and noble gentleman."

"Yet you were not entirely fond of your uncle," insinuated the Chief.

"He was not my uncle," returned Olive, calmly. "I called him that but he was no relation to me. He used to be a college chum of my father's and when both my parents died, he became not only my guardian but my kind friend and benefactor. He took me to live with him, and I have been his constant companion for twelve years. During that time, I have seen no act, have heard no word that could in the slightest way reflect on his honor or his character as a business man or as a gentleman."

The girl spoke proudly, as though glad to pay this tribute to her guardian, but still, there was no note of affection in her voice,—no quiver of sorrow at her loss.

"Yet you are not bowed with grief at his death," observed Martin.

The dainty chin tilted in indignation. "Mr. Martin," Olive said, "I cannot believe that my personal feelings are of interest to you. I understand I am here to be questioned as to my knowledge of facts bearing on this case."

The Chief nodded his head. "That's all right," he said, "but I must learn all I can of Mr. Gately's life outside his bank as well as in it. If you won't give me information I must get it elsewhere."

The implied threat worked.

"I do indeed sorrow at Mr. Gately's tragic fate," Olive said, gently. "To be sure, he was not my kin, but I admired and deeply respected him. If I did not deeply love him it was his own fault. He was most strict and tyrannical in his household, and his lightest word was law. I was willing enough to obey in many matters, but it annoyed and irritated me when he interfered with my simplest occupations or pleasures. He permitted me very little company or amusement; he forbade many of my friends the house; and he persistently refused to let me accept attentions from men, unless they were certain ones whom he preferred, and—whom I did not always favor."

"Did he favor Amory Manning?" was the next abrupt question.

Olive's cheeks turned a soft pink, but she replied calmly. "Not especially, though he had not forbidden Mr. Manning the house. Why do you ask that?"

"Had you noticed anything unusual lately about Mr. Gately? Any nervousness or apprehension of danger?"

"Not in the least. He was of a most equable temperament, and there has been no change of late."

"When did you last see him—alive?"

"Yesterday afternoon. I went to his office to get some money."

"He has charge of your fortune?"

"Yes."

"He made no objection to your expenditures?"

"Not at all. He was most just and considerate in my financial affairs. He gave me then what I asked for, and after a very short stay I went on."

"Where?"

"To the house of a friend on Park Avenue, where I spent most of the afternoon."

"At what time were you in Mr. Gately's office?"

"I don't know exactly. About two o'clock, I think."

"Can't you tell me more positively? It may be important."

But Olive couldn't be sure whether she was there before or after two. She had lunched late, and had done some errands, and had finally reached her friend's home by mid-afternoon.

This seemed to me most plausible, for society young ladies do not always keep strict note of time, but the Chief apparently thought it a matter of moment and made notes concerning it.

Olive looked indifferent, and though she was courteous enough, her whole manner betokened a desire to get the examination over and to be allowed to go home.

After a little further tedious questioning, which, so far as I could see, elicited nothing of real importance, the Chief sighed

and terminated the interview.

Mr. Mason and Mr. Talcott had by this time arrived, and their presence was welcomed by Miss Raynor, who was apparently glad of the nearness of a personal friend.

Of course, their evidence was but a repetition of the scenes I had been through the day before, but I was deeply interested in the attitudes of the two men.

Talcott, the secretary of the Trust Company, was honestly affected by the death of his friend and president, and showed real sorrow, while Mr. Mason, the vice-president, was of a cold, precise demeanor, seemingly far more interested in discovering the murderer than appalled by the tragedy.

"We *must* learn who killed him," Mr. Mason reiterated. "Why, Chief Martin, if the police fail to track down the slayer of Amos Gately, it will be a blot on their record forever! Spare no effort, —put your best men on the case, move heaven and earth, if need be, but get your man! The Company will back you to the full extent of its power; we will offer a reward, when the suitable time comes for that. But the crime must be avenged, the man that shot President Gately *must* pay the penalty!"

Olive's flashing eyes showed her sympathy with this sort of talk and I could quite understand the attitude of the girl, whose sense of justice cried out for revenge, while she was forced to admit the deprivations of her life with her guardian.

Somewhat later, the three went away together, Miss Raynor and the men from the bank, but I remained, hoping to learn more from further witnesses. And I did. I learned so much that

my thoughts and theories were started off along totally different lines; my half-formed beliefs were knocked down and set up again, with swift continuance.

First, Jenny Boyd, the yellow ear-muffed stenographer came in, wearing her Sunday clothes. Her cheaply fashionable hat was tilted over her pert little face, which showed enthusiastic, if ill-advised application of certain pigments. Her gown was V-necked and short-skirted, but it had a slight claim to style and was undeniably becoming. Her air of importance was such that I thought I had never seen such an enormous amount of ego contained in such a small cosmos.

Minny was with her, but the older sister, in quieter attire, was merely a foil for the ebullient Jenny. Also, they were accompanied by a big, good-natured faced man, whom I recognized at once as the janitor of the Matteawan Building, and who, it transpired, was the father of the two girls.

"Here we are," he said, in a bluff, hearty way; "here's me and my girls, and we'd be obliged, Mr. Chief, if you'd cut it short as much as you can, for me and Minny wants to get back."

"All right, Boyd," and Chief Martin smiled at him. "I'll tackle you first. Tell us all about that private elevator of Mr. Gately's."

"I will, but savin' for this murder business, not a word of it would ever have crossed my lips. Well, Mr. Gately, he owned the Matteawan, d'you see? and when it suited his purposes to put in a private elevator up to his rooms on the top floor of the next door building,—The Puritan Building, you know,—what more easy than to run the shaft up in the one building with the

opening at the top out into the other house. Anyways, that's what he done,—a long time ago. I had to know of it, of course, __"

"Of course, as superintendent of the Matteawan."

"That's what they call it now, but I like better to be called janitor. As janitor I began, and as janitor I'll work to the end. Well, Mr. Gately, he went up and down in the little car whenever he chose, and no one noticed him at all. It wasn't, after all, to say, secret, exactly, but it was a private elevator."

"But a concealed door in his own office makes the thing pretty secret, I should say."

"Secret it is, then. But it's no crime for a man to have a concealed way of gettin' into or out of his own rooms, is it? Many's the time Mr. Gately's come down laughing fit to bust at the way he got away from some old doddering fool who wanted to buzz him to death!"

"You frequently saw him come down, then?"

"Not to say frequently,—but now and again. If I happened to be about at the time."

"Did anyone else use the elevator?"

"Sometimes, yes. I've seen a few people go up or come down,—but mostly it was the boss himself."

"Did he go up in it yesterday?"

"Not that I seen. But, of course, he may have done so."

"When did he last come into his offices before—before he disappeared?"

"When did he, Jenny? Speak up, girl, and tell the Chief all you know about it."

Although Martin had not addressed Jenny, he turned to her now as if inviting her story.

And Jenny bridled, shook out her feather boa, made a futile attempt to pull her brief skirt a trifle farther down toward a silk-stockinged ankle, and began:

"Of course, when Mr. Gately went into his office he most gen'ally went in the middle door, right into his pers'nal office. He didn't go through my room. And, so, yest'day, he went in the middle door, but right away, almost, he opened my door and stuck his head in, and says, 'Don't let anybody in to see me this afternoon, unless you come and ask me first.'"

"Wasn't this a general rule?"

"'Most always; but sometimes somebody I'd know'd come, like Mr. Talcott or Miss Olive, and they'd just nod or smile at me and walk right in at Mr. Gately's door. So I says, 'Yes, sir,' and I looked sharp that nobody rushed me. Mr. Gately, he trusted me, and I was careful to do just what he said, always."

"Well, go on. Who called?"

"First, Mr. Smith; and then Mrs. Driggs; and after them, Miss Olive."

"Miss Raynor?"

"Yes, of course!" and Jenny spoke flippantly. "I even announced her, 'cause I had strick orders. Miss Olive, she just laughed and waited till I come back and said she might go in."

"What time was this?"

"Couldn't say for sure. 'Long about two or three, I guess."

Jenny was assiduously chewing gum, and her manner was far from deferential, which annoyed the Chief.

"Try to remember more nearly," he said, sharply. "Was Miss Raynor there before or after the other two callers you mentioned?"

"Well, now, it's awful hard to tell that." Jenny cocked her head on one side, and indulged in what she doubtless considered most fetching eye-play. "I ain't a two-legged time-table!"

"Be careful," advised the Chief. "I want straight answers, not foolishness, from you."

Jenny sulked. "I'm givin' it to you as straight's I can, Mr. Chief. Honest to goodness, I don't know if Miss Olive was just before the Driggs hen or after her!"

"Also, be more careful of your choice of words. Did Mrs. Driggs go back through your room when she left?"

"Yes, I guess she did,—but,—lemmesee, no, I guess she didn't either."

"Isn't your memory very short?"

"For such trifles, yes, sir. But I can remember lots of things real easy. I've got a date now, with—"

"Stop! If you don't look out, young woman, you'll be locked up!"

"Behave pretty, now, Jenny girl," urged her father, who was quite evidently the slave of his resplendent offspring; "don't be flip; this here's no place for such-like manners."

"You're right, it isn't," agreed the Chief, and he glared at Jenny, who was utterly unmoved by his sternness.

"Well, ain't I behaving pretty?" and the silly thing giggled archly and folded her hands with an air of mock meekness.

Continued harsh words from the Chief, however, made her at last tell a straight and coherent story, but it threw no light on the mysterious caller. In fact, Jenny knew nothing whatever of him, save that she saw or thought she saw him run downstairs, with a pistol in his hand.

"What sort of hat did the man wear?" asked the Chief, to get some sort of description.

"I don't know,—a soft hat, I guess."

"Not a Derby?"

"Oh, yes! I do believe it *was* a Derby! And he had on an overcoat—"

"A dark one?"

"No,—sort of—oh, I guess it wasn't an overcoat,—but a, you know, Norfolk jacket, like."

"A Norfolk, and no overcoat on a day like yesterday! I don't believe you saw any man at all, Jenny!"

"Do you know, that's what I think sometimes, Mr. Chief! It almost seems's if I dreamed it."

"What do you mean! Don't you dare guy me, miss!"

"I'm not," and Jenny's saucy face looked serious enough now. "But it was all so fearful sudden, and I was so struck all of a heap, that I just can't say what was so and what wasn't!"

"That does seem to be your difficulty. You sit over there and think the matter over, while I talk to your sister."

Minny, a quiet, pretty girl, was as reticent as Jenny was voluble. But after all, she had little to tell. She had brought no one up in her elevator to see Mr. Gately beside Miss Raynor that she knew of except the man named Smith and Mrs. Driggs.

"Did these people all go down in your car, too?"

"I'm not sure. The cars were fairly crowded, and I know Miss Raynor did not, but I'm not so sure about the others."

Well, Minny's evidence amounted to nothing, either, for though she told of several strangers who got on or off her car at various floors, she knew nothing about them, and they could not be traced.

The three Boyds were quizzed a little more and then old Joe Boyd, the father, and Minny were allowed to go back to their respective posts, but the Chief held Jenny for further grilling. He had a hope, I felt sure, that he could get from her some hint of Mr. Gately's personal affairs. He had heard of the hatpin, and though he hadn't yet mentioned it definitely, I knew he was satisfied it was not Miss Raynor's, and he meant to put Jenny through a mild sort of third degree.

I was about to depart, for I knew I would not be invited to this session, and, too, I could learn the result later.

Then an officer came in, and after a whispered word to Chief Martin they beckoned to me.

"Do you know Amory Manning?" the Chief inquired.

"I met him yesterday for the first time," I replied, "but I have known of him before."

"Where does he live?"

"Up around Gramercy Park somewhere, I think."

"That's right, he does. Well, the man is missing."

"Missing! Why, I saw him last night,—that is, yesterday afternoon, and he was all right then."

"I've had men searching for him all the morning," the Chief went on, "and he's nowhere to be found. He wasn't at his rooms at all last night."

I harked back. I had last seen Manning getting off the Third Avenue car at Twenty-second Street,—just where he would naturally get off to go to his home.

I told this, and concluded, "he must have changed his mind, then, and gone somewhere else than to his rooms."

"Yes, it looks that way," agreed the Chief. "But where did he go? That's the question. He can't be found."

CHAPTER VI
Clews

I DIDN'T reach my office until afternoon, and there I found Norah, in a brown study.

She looked up with a smile as I came in.

"I'm neglecting my work," she said, with a glance at a pile of papers, "but that affair across the hall has taken hold of me and I can't put it out of my mind."

"Nor can I. I feel as if I were deeply involved in it,—if not indeed, an accessory! But there are new developments. Mr. Manning is missing."

"Mr. Manning? What has he got to do with it?"

"With the crime? Nothing. He didn't come up here until Miss Raynor came, you know. But—"

"Are they engaged?"

"Not that I know of. I think not."

"Well, they will be, then. And don't worry about Mr. Manning's absence. He'll not stay long away from Miss Raynor. Who is he, anyway? I mean what does he do?"

"He's a civil engineer and he lives in Gramercy Park. That's the extent of my knowledge of him. I've seen him down in the bank once or twice since I've been here, and I like his looks. I hope, for Miss Raynor's sake, he'll turn up soon. She expected him to call on her last evening and he didn't go there at all."

"I shouldn't think he would! Why, it was a fearful night. I was going to the movies, but I couldn't think of going out in that wild gale! But never mind Mr. Manning now, let's talk about the Gately affair. I want to go over there and look around the office. Do you suppose they'd let me?"

"Why, I expect so. Is anybody there now?"

"Yes, a police detective,—that man, Hudson. You know they call him Foxy Jim Hudson, and I suppose he's finding out a lot of stuff that isn't so!"

"You haven't a very high opinion of our arms of the law."

"Oh, they're all right,—but most detectives can't see what's right under their noses!"

"Not omniscient Sherlocks, are they? And you think you could do a lot of smarty-cat deduction?"

Norah didn't resent my teasing, but her gray eyes were very earnest as she said, "I wish I could try. A woman was in that room yesterday afternoon; someone besides Miss Raynor and the old lady Driggs."

"How do you know?"

"Take me over there and I'll show you. They'll let me in, with you to back me."

We went across and the officer made no objections to our entrance. In fact, he seemed rather glad of someone to talk to.

"We're sorta up against it," he confessed. "Our suspicions are all running in one direction, and we don't like it."

"You have a suspect, then?" I asked.

"Hardly that, but we begin to think we know which way to look."

"Any clews around, to verify your suspicions?"

"Lots of 'em. But take a squint yourself, Mr. Brice. You're shrewd-witted, and—my old eyes ain't what they used to was."

I took this mock humility for what it was worth,—nothing at all,—and I humored the foxy one by a properly flattering disclaimer.

But I availed myself of his permission and tacitly assuming that it included Norah, we began a new scrutiny of the odds and ends on Mr. Gately's desk, as well as other details about the rooms.

Norah opened the drawer that Mr. Talcott had locked,—the key was now in it.

"Where's the checkbook?" she asked, casually.

Hudson looked grave. "Mr. Pond's got that," he said; "Mr. Pond's Mr. Gately's lawyer, and he took all his accounts and such. But that checkbook's a clew. You see the last stub in it shows a check drawn to a woman—"

"I said it was a woman!" exclaimed Norah.

"Well, maybe,—maybe. Anyhow the check was drawn *after* the ones made out to Smith and the Driggs woman. So, the payee of that last check was in here later than the other two."

"Who was she?" was Norah's not unnatural inquiry.

But Hudson merely looked at her, with a slight smile that she should expect an answer to that question.

"Oh, all right," she retorted; "I see her hatpin is still here."

"If that there hatpin is a clew, you're welcome to it. We don't think it is. Mr. Gately had frequent lady callers, as any man's got a right to have, but because they leaves their hatpins here, that don't make 'em murderers. No, I argue that if a woman shot Mr. Gately she would be cute enough *not* to leave her hatpin by way of a visitin' card."

This raised Hudson's mentality in my opinion, and I could see it also scored with Norah.

"That's true," she generously agreed. "In books, as soon as I come to the dropped handkerchief or broken cuff-link, I know that *isn't* the property of the criminal. But, all the same, people do leave clews,—why, Sherlock Holmes says a person can't enter and leave a room without his presence there being discoverable."

"Poppycock," said Hudson, briefly, and resumed his cogitation.

He was sitting at ease in Mr. Gately's desk-chair, but I could see the man was thinking deeply, and as he had material for thought that he wasn't willing to share with us, I returned to my own searching.

"Here's something the lady left!" I exclaimed, as on a silver ash-tray I saw a cigarette stub, whose partly burned gold monogram betokened it had served a woman's use.

"Hey, let that alone!" warned Hudson. "And don't be too previous; sometimes men have gilt-lettered cigs, don't they?"

Without reply, I scrutinized the monogram. But only a bit remained unburnt, and I couldn't make out the letters.

Norah was digging in the waste basket, and, the scamp! when Hudson's head was turned, she surreptitiously fished out something which she hid in her hand, and later transferred to her pocket.

"Nothing doing!" scoffed Hudson, as he turned and saw her occupation, "we been all through that, and anything incriminating has been weeded out. They wasn't much,—some envelopes and letters, but nothing of any account. Oh, well, straws show which way the wind blows, and we've got some several straws!"

"Is this one?" and Norah pointed to the carriage check, which still lay on the desk.

"Nope. Me and the Chief, we decided that didn't mean nothing at all. It's old, you can see, from its grimy look, so it wasn't left here yesterday. Those things are always clean and fresh when they're given out, and that's sorta soiled with age, you see."

"Well!" I exclaimed, "*why* would a carriage check be soiled with age? They're used the same day they're given out. Why is it here, anyway?"

Hudson looked interested. "That's so, Mr. Brice," he admitted. "I take it that there check was given to Mr. Gately at some hotel, say. Well, he didn't use it for some reason or other, and brought it home in his pocket. But as you say, why is it here? *Why* did he keep it? And, what did he do with it to give it that thumbed, used look?"

We all examined the check. A bit of white cardboard, about two by four inches in size, and pierced with seven circular

holes in irregular order. Across the top was printed "Don't fold this card," and at one end was the number 743 in large red letters. Also, the right-hand upper corner was sliced off.

"Why," I exclaimed, "here's a narrow strip of paper pasted across the end, and—look,—it's almost transparent! I can read through it—'Hotel St. Charles!' That's where it came from!"

"Hold your horses!" and Hudson smiled condescendingly, "that's where it *didn't* come from! It came from any hotel *except* the St. Charles. You may not know it, but often a hotel will use electric call-checks of other hotels, with a slip of paper pasted over the name. That's an item for you to remember. No, Mr. Brice, I can't attach any importance to that check, but I'm free to confess I don't see why it's there. Unless Mr. Gately found it in his pocket after it had been there unnoticed for some time. And yet, it is very much thumbed, isn't it? That's queer. Maybe he used it for a bookmark, or something like that."

"Maybe the lady left it here," suggested Norah. "The same time she left her hatpin."

"Now, maybe she did," and Foxy Jim Hudson smiled benignly at her. "Any ways, you've made the thing seem curious, and I guess I'll keep it for a while."

He put the card away in his pocketbook, and Norah and I grinned at each other in satisfaction that we had given him a clew to ponder over.

"You know, Mr. Brice," Hudson remarked, after another period of silent thought, "you missed it, when you didn't fly in here quicker and catch the murderer redhanded."

"If I'd known that the first door, Jenny's door, was the only one I could open, of course I should have gone there first. But I'd never been in here at all,—I've only been in the building a week or so, and I *did* lose valuable time running from one door to another. But I still think it's queer that I didn't see anything of the man Jenny describes."

"One reason is, there wasn't any such man," and Hudson seemed to enjoy my blank look.

"What became of the murderer, then?"

"Went down in the car with Mr. Gately. Private elevator. Shot him on the way down—"

"But man, I heard the shot,—and this room was full of smoke."

"Shot him twice, then. Say the first time, Mr. Gately wasn't killed and could get into the elevator. Then murderer jumps in, too, and finishes the job on the way down. It's a long trip to the ground floor, you know. Then, murderer leaves elevator, slams door shut, and walks off."

I ruminated on this. It seemed absurd on the face of it, and yet —

"Why, then, did Jenny say she saw a man?" demanded Norah.

"Maybe she thought she did,—you know people think they see what they think they ought to see. Jenny heard a shot, and running in, she *expected* to see a man with a pistol,—therefore, she thought she *did* see him. Or, again, the girl is quite capable of making up a yarn out of the solid. For the dramatic effect, you know, and to put her silly little self in the limelight."

This was not unbelievable. Jenny was most unreliable as a witness. She stumbled and contradicted herself as to the man's hat and had given conflicting testimony about his overcoat.

"Well, as I say, Mr. Brice, the chance was yours to be on the spot but you missed it. Of course, you are not to blame,—but it's a pity. Now, s'pose you tell me again, as near as you can rec'lect, about that other shadow,—the one that wasn't Mr. Gately."

I tried hard to add to my previously related details, but found it impossible to do so.

"Well, could it have been a woman?"

"At first I should have said no, Mr. Hudson. But on thinking it over, I suppose I may say it *could* have been but I do not think it was."

"You know nowadays the women folks wear their hair plastered so close to their heads that their heads wouldn't shadow up any bigger'n a man's."

"That's so," cried Norah. "A woman's head is smaller than a man's, but her hair makes it appear larger in a shadow. Unless, as Mr. Hudson says, she wore it wrapped round her head,—and didn't have much, anyway."

"You go outside, Mr. Brice," directed Hudson, "and look at the shadows of me and Miss MacCormack, and then come back and tell us what you can notice."

I did this, and the two heads were shadowed forth on the same door that I had watched the day before. But the brighter daylight made the shadows even more vague than yesterday, and I returned without much information.

"I could tell which was which, of course," I reported, "but it's true that if I hadn't known you people at all, I could have mistaken Norah's head for a man, and I might have believed, Hudson, that you were a woman. It's surprising how little individuality was shown in the shadows."

"Well, of course they were clearer yesterday, as the hall was darker," mused Hudson. "After all, Mr. Brice, your testimony can't amount to much unless we can get the actual murderer behind that glass, and some peculiar shape or characteristic makes you recognize the head beyond all doubt."

"I think I could do that," I returned; "for though I can't describe any peculiarity, I'm sure I'd recognize the *same* head."

"You are?" and Hudson looked at me keenly. "Well, perhaps we'll try you out on that."

They had a definite suspect, then. And they proposed to experiment with my memory. Well, I was ready, whenever they were.

Norah and I went into the third room, Hudson making no objection. At another time we would have been deeply interested in the pictures and the furnishings but now we had eyes and thoughts only for one thing.

We looked behind the war map and saw the elevator door, but could not open it.

"The car's down," spoke up Hudson, who was watching us sharply. "I dunno will it ever be used again. Though I suppose these rooms will be let to somebody else, some time. Mr.

Gately's things here will be sent to his house, I expect, but his estate is a big one and will take a deal of settling."

"Who's his executor?"

"Mr. Pond, his lawyer. But his financial affairs are all right. Nothing crooked about Amos Gately—financially. You can bank on that!"

"How, then?" I asked, for the tone implied a mental reservation.

"I'm not saying. But they do say every man has a secret side to his life, and why should Mr. Gately be a lone exception?"

"A woman?" asked Norah, always harking back to her basic suspicion.

Foxy Jim Hudson favored her with that blank stare which not infrequently was his answer to an unwelcome question, and which, perhaps, had a share in earning him his sobriquet.

Then he laughed, and said, "You've been reading detective stories, miss. And you remember how they always say 'Churches lay femmy!' Well, go ahead and church, if you like. But be prepared for a sad and sorrowful result."

The man was obviously deeply moved, and his big, homely face worked with emotion.

But as he would tell us nothing further, and as Norah and I had finished our rather unproductive search of the rooms, we went back to my office.

Here Norah showed me what she had taken from the waste basket.

"I'll give it back to him, if you say so," she offered; "but he could do nothing with it, and maybe I can."

It was only a tiny scrap of pinkish paper, thin and greatly crumpled. I took it.

"Be careful," warned Norah; "I don't suppose it could show finger prints, but anyway, it's a sort of a kind of a clew."

"But what is it?" I asked, blankly, as I held the crumpled paper gingerly in thumb and forefinger.

"It's a powder-paper," vouchsafed Norah, briefly.

"A what?"

"A powder-paper. Women carry them,—they come in little books. That's one of the leaves. They're to rub on your face, and the powder comes off on your nose or cheeks."

"Is that so? I never saw any before."

"Lots of girls use them." Norah's clear, wholesome complexion refuted any idea of her needing such, and she spoke a bit scornfully.

"Proving once more the presence of what Friend Hudson calls a femmy," I smiled.

"Yes; but these things have great individuality, Mr. Brice. This is of exceedingly fine quality, it has a distinct, definite fragrance, and is undoubtedly an imported article,—from France, likely."

"Can they get such things over now?"

"Oh, pshaw, it may have been imported before the war. This quality would keep its odor forever! Anyway, don't you believe we could trace the woman who used it and left it there? It must

have happened yesterday, for the basket is, of course, emptied every day in that office."

"Good girl, Norah!" and I nodded approval. "You are truly a She Sherlock! A bit intimate, isn't it, for a woman to powder her nose in a man's office?"

"Not at all, Mr. Old Fogey! Why, you can see the girls doing that everywhere, nowadays. In the street-cars, in the theater,—anywhere."

"All right. How do you propose to proceed?"

"I think I'll go to the smartest Fifth Avenue perfume shops and try to get a line on the maker of this paper."

My door opened then, and the Chief of Police stood in the doorway.

"Will you come over, across the hall, Mr. Brice?" he said.

"May I come?" piped up Norah, and without waiting for the answer, which, by the way, never came, she followed us.

"We have learned a great deal," began the Chief, as I waited, inquiringly. "And, now think carefully, Mr. Brice, I want you to tell me if the head you saw shadowed on the door, could by any possibility have been a woman's head?"

"I think it could have been, Chief; we've been talking that over, and I'm prepared to say that it could have been,—but I don't think it was."

"And the shoulders? Though broad, like a man's, might not a woman's figure, say, wrapped in furs, give a similar effect?"

An icy chill went through me, but I answered, "It might; the outlines were very indistinct."

"We are carefully investigating the movements of Miss Raynor," he went on, steadily, "and we find she told a deliberate untruth about where she spent yesterday afternoon. She said she was at the house of a friend on Park Avenue. We learned the name of the young lady and she says Miss Raynor was not there at all yesterday. Also, we find that Miss Raynor was in this office *after* the calls of the old people we know about, and not *before* them, as Miss Raynor herself testified."

"But—" I began.

"Wait a moment, please. This is positively proved by the fact that a check drawn to Miss Raynor by Mr. Gately follows immediately *after* the two checks drawn to Mr. Smith and Mrs. Driggs."

"Proving?" I gasped.

"That Miss Raynor is the last one known to be in this room before the shooting occurred."

"Oh," cried Norah, "for shame! To suspect that lovely girl! Why, she wouldn't harm a fly!"

"Do you know her?"

"No, sir; but—"

"It is an oft proven fact that the mildest, gentlest woman, if sufficiently provoked to it, or if given a sudden opportunity, will in a moment of passion do what no one would dream she could do! Miss Raynor was very angry with her uncle,—Jenny admitted that, after much delay. Mr. Gately had a revolver, usually in his desk drawer, but *not* there now. And,"—an

impressive pause preceded the next argument, "Mr. Amory Manning is not to be found."

"What do you deduce from that?" I asked, amazedly.

"That he has purposely disappeared, lest he be brought as a witness against Miss Raynor. He could best help her cause, by being out of town and impossible to locate. So, he went off, and she pretended she did not know it. Of course, she did,—they connived at it—"

"Stop!" I cried, "you are romancing. You are assuming conditions that are untrue!"

"I wish it were so," and the Chief exhibited a very human aspect for the moment; "but I have no choice in the matter. I am driven by an inexorable army of facts that cannot be beaten back. What else can you think of that would account for Mr. Manning's sudden disappearance? Attacked? Nonsense! Not in the storm of last evening. Abducted? Why? He is an inoffensive citizen, not a millionaire or man of influence. You said you saw him last night, Mr. Brice. Where, exactly, was that?"

I told of my trip down in the Third Avenue car, and of my getting off at Twenty-second Street, meaning to speak to Mr. Manning. Then I told of his sudden, almost mysterious disappearance.

"Not mysterious at all," said the Chief. "He gave you the slip purposely. He went away at once, and has hidden himself carefully. But we will find him. It's not easy for a man to hide from the police in this day and generation!"

"But, Miss Raynor!" I said, still incredulous. "Why? What motive?"

"Because her uncle wouldn't let her marry Amory Manning. When she said she went to her friend, Miss Clark's house, she really went to the home of a Mrs. Russell, the sister of Manning. She was to meet Manning there. I have all this straight from Mrs. Russell."

"And you think it was Miss Raynor's shadow I saw on the door!"

"You said it might have been a woman."

"Very well, then look for another woman! It was never Miss Raynor!"

"Your indignation, Mr. Brice, is both natural and admirable, but it is based on your disinclination to think ill of Miss Raynor. The police are not allowed the luxury of such sentiments."

"But—but—how did she—how did Miss Raynor get out of the room?"

"We do not entirely credit Jenny's story of the man with a revolver running downstairs. And we do think that the person who did the shooting may have gone down in the private elevator with the victim. It would be easy to gain the street unnoticed, and it presupposes someone acquainted with the working of the automatic elevator."

"But Miss Raynor said she had never seen it," I cried, triumphantly. "She said she had only heard her uncle speak of it!"

"I know she *said* so," returned the Chief.

CHAPTER VII
Hudson's Errand

FOR a day or two I moped around, decidedly out of sorts. I didn't feel sufficiently acquainted with Miss Raynor to call on her,—though she had once asked me to do so,—but I greatly longed to find out if the police had yet acquainted her with their suspicions. I thought perhaps they were waiting for further proofs, or it might be, waiting until after the funeral of Mr. Gately. There had been, so far, nothing in the papers implicating Olive, and I hoped against hope there would not be. But I felt sure she was being closely watched, and I didn't know what new evidence might be cooking up against her.

The funeral of the great capitalist was on Saturday evening.

I attended, and this being my first visit to the house, I was all unprepared for the wealth of art treasures it held.

I sat in the great salon, lost in admiration of the pictures and bronzes, as well as the beautiful architecture and mural decorations.

A throng of people attended the services and the oppressive fragrance of massed flowers and the continuous click of folding-chairs, combined with the whispers and subdued rustling of the audience, produced that unmistakable funeral atmosphere so trying to sensitive nerves.

Then, a single clear, sweet soprano voice, raised in a solemn anthem, broke the tension, and soon the brief obsequies were

over, and I found myself moving along with the crush of people slowly surging toward the door.

I walked home, the clear, frosty air feeling grateful after the crowded rooms.

And I wondered. Wondered what would be the next scene in the awful drama. Would they accuse Miss Raynor,—lovely Olive Raynor, of the crime? How could they? That delicate, high-bred girl!

And yet, she was independent of thought and fearless of action.

Though I knew her but slightly, I had heard more or less about her, and I had learned she was by no means of a yielding or easily swayed disposition. She deeply resented her guardian's tyrannical treatment of her and had not infrequently told him so. While they were not outwardly at odds, they were uncongenial natures, and of widely divergent tastes.

Olive, as is natural for a young girl, wanted guests and gayety. Mr. Gately, a thoroughly selfish man, preferred quiet and freedom from company. Her insistence met with refusal and the results were often distressing to both of them. In fact, Miss Raynor had threatened to leave her guardian's home and live by herself, but this by no means suited his convenience. The comfort of his home and the proper administration of his household depended largely on Olive's capable and efficient management, and without her presence and care he would miss many pleasant details of his daily existence. He rarely

allowed her to go away on a visit, and almost never permitted her to have a friend to stay with her.

I learned of these intimate matters from Norah,—who, in turn, had them from Jenny.

Jenny had not been with Mr. Gately long, but she had managed to pick up bits of information regarding his home life with surprising quickness, and when quizzed by the police had told all she knew,—and, I suspected,—*more* than she knew,—about Miss Raynor.

Now, I don't suppose the police went so far as to assume that Olive Raynor had killed Mr. Gately because he would not indulge her wishes, but they seemed to think they really had grounds for suspecting.

I was in despair. On Sunday, I could think of nothing but the matter and I wondered if it would be too presumptuous of me to offer Miss Raynor my help or advice. Doubtless she had hordes of advisers, but she might need such a legal friend as I could be to her.

On the impulse, I telephoned and asked if she cared to see me. To my delighted surprise she welcomed the suggestion and begged me to call that afternoon, as she had real need of legal advice.

And so four o'clock found me again at the house of the late president of the Trust Company.

This time I was shown to a small reception room, where Olive soon appeared.

"It's this way, Mr. Brice," she said after a few moments' conversation. "I don't like Mr. Pond,—he's Uncle's lawyer,—I just can't bear the man!"

"For any definite reason, Miss Raynor?" I asked.

"N—no,—well, that is—oh, he's a horrid old thing, and he wants to marry me!"

"Are you quite sure you want to confide these personal matters to me?" I felt I ought to say this, for the girl was nervously excited, and I was by no means sure she would not later regret her outspokenness.

"Yes, I do. I want a lawyer, Mr. Brice, and I will not have Mr. Pond. So I ask you here and now to take my affairs in charge, look after my financial matters, and advise me in many ways when I need your help. You may suppose I have many friends,"—the big brown eyes were pathetically imploring, "but I haven't. Uncle Amos,—of course, you know he was not my uncle, but I called him that,—would not allow me to make many friends and his own acquaintances are all elderly people and he hadn't very many of those. My money is in my own right. Mr. Gately was punctilious in his care of my accounts,—and I want it all taken out of the hands of Mr. Pond and transferred to your care. This can be done, of course."

Olive looked imperious and seemed to think the matter all settled.

"Doubtless it can be arranged, Miss Raynor; I will consider it."

"Don't consider,—just say yes! If you don't I must hunt up another lawyer, and—I'd rather have you."

I wasn't proof against her pretty, dictatorial ways, and I agreed to take the steps she desired.

She went on to tell me how she was placed:

Not only in possession of a considerable fortune of her own, Amos Gately's will left her a goodly additional sum, and also the house in which they had lived.

"So you see," Olive said, "I shall continue to live here,—for the present. I have Mrs. Vail now with me,—as a duenna, for propriety's sake. She is a dear old lady, and is of a pliable, manageable sort. I chose her for that reason, largely. Also, she is pleasant and cheerful, and I like to have her about. I was fond of Uncle Amos, Mr. Brice, but we had many dissensions. If he had allowed me a little more freedom, I could have got along with him beautifully,—but he treated me as a child. You see, he took me to live with him when I *was* a child, and he never realized that I had grown up and had an individuality and a will of my own. I am twenty-two years old, and he acted as if I were twelve!"

"And now, absolutely your own mistress?"

"Yes; doesn't it seem strange? And it is *all* so strange! This house, without him, is like a different house. And the dreadfulness of his death! Sometimes I think I can't stay here,—I must get into other surroundings. But the thought of moving out of here is too much for me, at present, anyway. Oh, I don't know *what* to do! I can't realize that he is gone!"

Olive did not cry. She sat, dry-eyed and tearless, looking so pathetically lonely and so unable to cope with her new

responsibilities, that I gladly promised her all possible assistance that I could give, both in legal matters and in any personal or friendly ways.

"Don't think me helpless," she said, reading my thoughts; "I shall rise to the situation, I shall adapt myself to my changed circumstances, but it will take a little time, of course."

"Yes, indeed," I agreed, "and don't attempt to do too much at first. Take plenty of time to rest and to let yourself react from the shock and the awful scenes you have been through."

It was clear to me that the girl had no thought that she was suspected, or that the police were watching her. I wondered whether it would be kinder to give her a hint of this or to leave her in ignorance, when just then a servant entered, saying Mr. Hudson wished an interview with Miss Raynor.

Hudson! Foxy Jim Hudson! Of course, this could mean but one thing.

"Let me stay!" I said, impulsively, and, "Oh, do!" she returned, and in another minute Hudson came in.

There was something about the man's manner that I couldn't help liking and if Olive had to be questioned I felt sure he would do it as gently as anybody could.

Though uncultured, his voice was kindly, and as he put some preliminary questions Olive answered straightforwardly and without objection.

But when he asked her where she had been on the afternoon of Mr. Gately's death, she looked at him haughtily, and said:

"I told all that to the man who questioned me downtown,—that Mr. Martin."

"Did you tell him the truth, Miss Raynor?"

"Sir?"

Into the one word, Olive put a world of scornful pride, but I could note also a look of fear in her eyes.

"Now, let me give you a bit of friendly advice," Hudson said, "you're a very young lady, and you prob'ly think you can tell a little white falsehood and get away with it, but you can't do it to the police. You see, miss, we know where you were on Wednesday afternoon, and you may as well be frank about it."

"Very well, then, where was I?"

"At the house of Mrs. Russell,—the sister of Mr. Manning."

Olive looked at him in amazement. Then her manner changed.

"Since you know," she said, "I may as well own up. I *was* at Mrs. Russell's. What of it?"

"Only that if you prevaricated in one instance, Miss Raynor, you may have done so in others. Will you tell me why you said you were at the house of your friend, Miss Clark?"

"Of course I will. My guardian was unwilling to have me go to Mrs. Russell's house, because of a personal matter. Therefore, when I wished to go there I sometimes told him that I was going to Miss Clark's. This small falsehood I considered justifiable, because Mr. Gately had no right to say where I should go and where not! If I was untruthful it was because his unjust rules and regulations made me so! I am not a story-teller, ordinarily.

If I was forced to be one, in order to enjoy some simple pleasures or diversions, it is no one's business but my own."

"That's true, Hudson," I interposed, "why constitute yourself Miss Raynor's Sunday-School teacher?"

"Sorry I am to do so," and the good-natured face showed real regret; "but I've orders. Now, Miss Raynor, I must put you a few straight questions. Where's Mr. Amory Manning?"

"I don't know! I only wish I did!"

"Now, now, that won't do! I guess you can think up some hint of his whereabouts for me. You can't deceive us, you know."

"Nor do I want to!" Olive's eyes blazed. "Because I found it necessary to evade my guardian's espionage now and then you needn't think I am unable to tell the truth! I have no idea where Mr. Manning is, and I am exceedingly anxious lest some harm has befallen him. If you can find him you will be doing me a great favor."

"Are you engaged to him, Miss Raynor?"

"No, I am not, though I do not concede your right to ask that question. Mr. Manning and I are good friends, that is all."

"Mr. Gately did not approve of his attentions to you?"

"He did not, and that was why I refrained from telling of occasions when I saw or might see Mr. Manning at his sister's house. If that is of interest to you, I've no objections to your knowing it."

"Can you fire a pistol, Miss Raynor?"

I perceived it was Hudson's method to take her by surprise, and so, perhaps, learn something from an answer given off her

guard.

"Yes," she replied, promptly, "I am a good shot; why?"

Her wondering eyes were fearless, now, and to me it seemed a proof of her entire innocence that she showed no embarrassment at this inquiry.

But Hudson evidently thought differently. He looked accusingly at her, and continued, "Do you own a pistol?"

"Yes; Mr. Gately gave me one a few years ago."

"Where is it?"

"Down at our country-place, on Long Island. I am afraid of burglars there, but not nearly so much so in the city."

"H'm. Now, Miss Raynor, you are the last one known to have seen Amos Gately alive."

"Why, Mr. Brice saw the shooting!"

"Only in shadow. I mean you are the last one known to have talked with him in his office. Was your interview—er,—amicable?"

"Entirely so. I went there for some money, as I occasionally did. My guardian gave me a check and I cashed it at the Trust Company Bank."

"Yes, we know that; and that the check was given to you, and was later cashed, all at about the time Mr. Gately was killed."

"Earlier Mr. Hudson. I was in the bank about half-past two."

"No, Miss Raynor. We have the teller's statement that you were there about three o'clock."

"He is mistaken," Olive's voice was confident, and had in it a ring of indignation, "by three o'clock, or very little after, I was at

Mrs. Russell's."

"Was Mr. Manning there?"

"No; he expected to come later, after he had attended to some business."

"What was the business?"

"I do not know, but it must have been somewhere in the vicinity of the Puritan Building, for he was near there when I arrived."

"At what time was that?"

"I don't know exactly, perhaps half-past three or a little later. I had been at Mrs. Russell's but a few moments when Mr. Talcott telephoned me there."

"How did he know you were there?"

"He called up Miss Clark first, and she told him."

"Your friends, then, aided and abetted you in deceiving your guardian?"

"I resent the way you put that, Mr. Hudson," Olive looked at him haughtily, "but I answer, yes. My friends agreed with me that Mr. Gately was unreasonable in his commands and that I was not bound to obey them."

"But you are now freed from his injustice."

"That is a brutal speech and unworthy of any man! My freedom is too dearly purchased at such a fearful price!"

"Are you *sure* you think so?"

"What are you implying, Mr. Hudson? Speak out! Do you think I killed my guardian?"

"There are people that do think that, Miss Raynor."

"Leave this house!" cried Olive, rising. "Such words can not be spoken here!"

"Now, now, miss, dramatics won't get you anywheres! There is evidence against you, or so the police think, and it's up to me to tell you that we must ask you not to go out of town without acquainting us of the fact. We do not accuse you, but we do want you where we can communicate with you at will. I am going now Miss Raynor. I came only to make sure on a few points,—which I have done,—and to tell you to remain within call. Indeed, I may as well tell you that any attempt to get away will be frustrated."

"You mean I am under surveillance!"

"That's about it, miss."

Olive looked at him as one might regard a worm of the dust.

"Go!" she said, quietly but forcefully. "I shall not leave town, I shall probably not leave this house. Your suspicion is beneath contempt. However, it has taught me one thing,—I shall engage someone else—someone quite outside the stupid police, to discover the murderer of my uncle! And also to trace my friend, Mr. Manning."

Hudson smiled. He looked at Olive almost tolerantly, as if she were a wilful child.

"All right. Miss Raynor. I'll take your word as to your staying here, and I rather guess the police force will yet round up the murderer and will also discover the hiding-place of Amory Manning. Good day."

Hudson went away, and Olive turned to me in a passion of rage.

"What insolence!" she exclaimed. "Are such things permitted? To come here and practically accuse me of my uncle's murder!"

"He wasn't your uncle, you know."

"That doesn't matter. I loved him as I would a relative. His sternness and his unreasonable commands were distasteful to me, but that didn't alter my real love and affection for the man. He has been everything to me for the greater part of my life. He has been kindness itself in most matters. He indulged me in all possible ways as to creature comforts and luxuries. He never criticized the ways in which I spent my money, or in which I entertained myself, save in the matter of having guests or making visits."

"And allowing admirers?"

"There were some men he approved of,—you may as well know, Mr. Brice, my guardian wished me to marry his friend and lawyer, Mr. Pond."

"Why, when that gentleman is so greatly your senior?"

"Merely because Uncle was so fond of him. And, too, Uncle never seemed to realize that I was of a different generation from himself. He couldn't understand,—he really couldn't—why I wanted young company and gay parties. *He* didn't, and he really assumed that *I* didn't. I think he never realized how greatly he was depriving me when he forbade me society."

"Did it really amount to that?"

"Practically. Or, if I succeeded in persuading him to let me have a house guest or a small party, he made things so unpleasant that I was glad when they were gone."

"Unpleasant, how?"

"Oh, fussing around, as if his comfort were interfered with,—as if he were terribly incommoded by their presence, and by demanding my time and attention for himself, instead of allowing me to entertain my guests properly."

"Doubtless so you wouldn't do it again."

"Yes, of course. But all that was uncomfortable for me,—almost unbearable,—yet one doesn't kill one's people for such things."

To me this simple statement of Olive Raynor's was more convincing than a storm of denial. She had stormed, with indignation, at the hint of suspicion, but her quiet, dignified refutation went far to assure me of her entire innocence.

"Of course, one doesn't," I agreed, "and now to find out who did do it. Have you any suspicion,—Miss Raynor, even the slightest?"

"No; except that it seems to me it must have been some man who knew Uncle in a business way. Though a generous and charitable man, Amos Gately was scrupulously just, and if he had enemies, they were men whom he had discovered in some wrong-doing and he had exposed or punished them. No man had a cause for righteous enmity against him,—of that I'm sure!"

CHAPTER VIII
The Man Who Fell Through the Earth

"AND it is for me," Olive went on, with a solemn look in her brown eyes, "to avenge the death of my guardian. I am not worried about this surveillance, or whatever they call it, of myself,—it is too absurd to take very seriously. Of course, I shall not leave the city, and I will answer any questions the police may put to me. For, you see, Mr. Brice, the only reason I had for telling falsehoods is a reason no longer. I did resort to 'white lies' because Uncle Amos was so unreasonably strict with me, but I've no further need for that sort of thing, and I assure you you will find me absolutely truthful from now on."

A sad little smile accompanied the words, and an earnest expression on the delicate, high-bred face gave me implicit confidence in her sincerity.

"Then," I hastened to advise her, "do not antagonize the police. If they have you under their eye, rest assured they think there is some reason to watch you. Be friendly, or, at least patient with them, and they will all the sooner be aware of their mistake. Moreover, you want their help in running down the real murderer of your guardian. It is a mysterious affair, Miss Raynor."

"Oh, it is, Mr. Brice, and it may be that in penetrating the mystery we may unearth something—you know,—something detrimental to Mr. Gately's character."

"Have you any such fear—definitely, I mean?"

"Not definitely, no. If I had I should tell you. But in a vague, apprehensive way, I feel there must be something in his life that brought this about, and that I as yet know nothing of. But you think, don't you, that we must go ahead and learn all we can?"

"You are not afraid, then, of investigation, for yourself—or, for anyone else?"

I put this query after a moment's hesitation, yet I had to know.

"No, sir," her voice rang out clearly. "I know what you mean, you are thinking of Mr. Manning. And there is another task for you. We must find Amory Manning. That man never went away, voluntarily, without sending me some word. He said he would come up here that night,—the night of Uncle's death. He didn't come, nor did he communicate with me in any way. That means he was unable to do so."

"But what could have happened that would make it impossible for him to send you some word?"

"I don't know—I can't think, I'm sure. But he was attacked or overcome by someone who wanted him put out of the way. Mr. Manning had enemies,—that much I may tell you—"

"Do you know more? That you can *not* tell me?"

"No; that is, I don't *know* anything,—but I have some foreboding,—oh, nothing definite, Mr. Brice, but I can't help fearing we shall never see Amory Manning alive again!"

"I don't want to force your confidence, but can't you tell me a few more facts? Why has he enemies? Are they political?"

"Yes; in a way. Don't ask me now anyway. Let us try to find Amory and if we fail, I may decide it my duty to tell you what I now withhold."

And with this I was forced to be content. For Olive Raynor did not talk like a young, inexperienced girl, as I had thought her; she gave me now the impression of a young woman involved in weighty matters, and the trusted holder of important secrets.

"To begin with, then," I said, "suppose we try first to find Mr. Manning,—or to learn what became of him."

"Yes," she agreed; "but how shall we set about it? I've already telephoned to several of his friends, whom I know, and none of them has seen him since that day,—the day of Uncle's death. Thank Heaven nobody is foolish enough to blame that on him!"

"They couldn't very well, as he was with you when the discovery was made."

"I know it. And for the police to say he ran away to hide to protect me from suspicion is just about the most absurd theory possible!"

"I think so, too. Now, to get down to dates. Have you heard anything of Mr. Manning later than the time when I saw him get off the Third Avenue car on his way home that night?"

"No, I haven't. And we know he never reached his home. His rooms are in a house on Gramercy Park—"

"That's why he got off at Twenty-second Street—"

"Yes, of course. He left you there, didn't he?"

"We both got off the car there. My own rooms are in the same locality. But the snow squall was a whirlwind at the corner, and

my glasses were so covered with flakes that I couldn't see a thing for a moment, and when I could, Manning had got out of sight. I didn't know then in just what direction he lived, so I looked all four ways but I didn't see him. However, in the black squall, one couldn't see half a dozen steps anyway."

"Of course, he started toward his home,—perhaps, he almost reached it,—when whoever was lying in wait for him attacked him."

"Why are you so sure he was attacked? He may have had an errand in some other direction."

"I sort of see the thing as a picture. And as he got out at that corner I naturally see him going straight home. It is not likely that he would be going on some other errand, and yet get off at that corner."

"No; I suppose not."

"Well, then, as he never did go home,—hasn't been there yet,—what theory is there except that he was prevented from going there? He may have been kidnaped,—don't smile, it is among the possibilities,—or, he may have met with a serious accident, —slipped and broken his leg or something of that sort. But in such a case, he would have been taken to a hospital, and I should have heard of it. No, Mr. Brice, he was carried off by some powerful enemy. I say powerful, meaning rather, clever or diplomatic, for as I see it, trickery would have been used, not force, to abduct Amory Manning."

"But why abduct him?" I cried in amazement "What is he? Why is he a menace?"

"I can't tell you, Mr. Brice, unless it becomes gravely necessary. But it has to do with—with men higher up,—and it has nothing to do with my guardian's death,—of that I'm certain."

"Very well, Miss Raynor; I trust you, of course, that goes without saying, but I also trust your judgment in reserving your full confidence in this matter."

"You may. I assure you I will tell you all, if it becomes imperative that I do so. Meantime, let us try to find some trace of him."

"You have tried the hospitals?"

"Yes; I have telephoned to some of them, and I asked our family doctor to inquire of others. He did so, but with only negative results. Now—"

"Now, it's time to call in a detective," I said, positively. "And I don't mean a mere police detective, but a special investigator. Have you any objection to such a course?"

"No; not if we get a good one. I don't know much about such things, but don't some of those all-wise detectives have more theories and deductions than results?"

"You have put your finger on a vital flaw in the usual Smarty-Cat detective," I laughed. "But I know of a splendid man. He is eccentric, I admit, but beyond that he has none of the earmarks of the Transcendental Detective of the story-books. He is intelligent rather than cocksure and efficient rather than spectacular. He *is* expensive, but no more so than his success warrants."

"That sounds well. But first, Mr. Brice, can't we do a little investigating by ourselves? I had hoped so. To engage a detective is to make the whole affair so public, and I shrink from that."

"Not necessarily, Miss Raynor. If the man I speak of should take the case, he would make no fuss or stir about it. And if you say so, he can also try to find the man who killed Amos Gately."

"Oh, that is what I want! Yes, let us retain—or whatever the procedure is, your detective. What is his name?"

"Don't laugh, but it is Penny Wise!"

"What? How ridiculous!"

"Yes, but true. Pennington Wise is on his visiting cards, but no human nature could refrain from the inevitable nickname."

"He ought to change that name! It's enough to belittle any good work he might do!"

"Well, he doesn't think so. In fact, he has become so used to having people joke about it that he only smiles perfunctorily and goes on about his business."

"Will you ask him to help us?"

"Of course I will, and if not too busy on some other matter he will doubtless begin at once."

"I feel so young and inexperienced," Olive shuddered, "to be deciding these big things. It seems as if someone older and wiser ought to direct me. Oh, I know I have your help and counsel, but I wish I had some relative or near friend on whose judgment I could rely. I am singularly alone in the world, Mr. Brice."

"You have Mrs. Vail?"

"My companion? She is delightful as a chaperon and promises to be most pleasant and congenial in my home life, but she is not capable of giving me any advice of value in these important affairs."

"You are indeed alone, Miss Raynor, but you are amazingly capable for a young woman and you continually surprise me by your grasp of the situation and your ability to rise to its demands."

"If I only had Amory Manning to help me."

Poor child, I knew that was at the bottom of her loneliness, and though I didn't presume to sympathize, I felt privileged to assure her of my personal help as well as my interested performance of my legal duties.

"Well, then, Mr. Brice," she responded, "there is one thing I want you to do for me. I want you to go to the morgue. I can't bring myself to do that, nor do I want to ask anyone else I know to do so."

"Certainly," I replied, instinctively treating the matter casually, for I saw she was deeply moved. "It will be merely a form, but it is better to feel we have made every possible inquiry and left no stone unturned. I will go there at once,—now, if you say so."

She seemed gratified at my prompt compliance, and urged my going immediately.

"Come back this evening and report," she said, and then, with one of those sudden changes of demeanor which I was beginning to learn were characteristic of her, she bade me good

afternoon with a quick, curt manner, and practically dismissed me.

I started on my grewsome errand with enough food for thought to set my brain in a whirl. I was deeply in the matter now, and quite satisfied that it should be so. I was the lawyer and adviser of Miss Raynor, and I determined to do my best to deserve and justify her choice. Hitherto obscure, I should now be looked up to by members of my profession with envy—and, doubtless, with criticism. The latter, I meant to take good care, should be favorable.

As I looked at it I had three distinct missions. First, to arrange and attend to all of Miss Raynor's financial matters. Second, to assist her to track down the murderer of Amos Gately. Third, to help her to find, or to learn the fate of Amory Manning.

The first was my only personal charge. The other two must be accomplished by Wise, and for my part I felt sure he would succeed.

My visit to the morgue, as I had surmised, brought no result. The poor unfortunates whose mortal remains had been brought there during or since Wednesday, the day of Manning's disappearance, could by no stretch of the imagination be thought to look like Amory Manning.

Though I had never seen him until that day, I had a vivid picture of the man, large-framed, well set up, and with a general air of forcefulness and power. I had watched his face, as we stood in the crowded street-car, too far apart for conversation, yet in full view of each other.

His face was strong and scholarly, the latter effect enhanced by his huge, shell-rimmed glasses, and he had thick, rather coarse dark hair. Also a dark Vandyke beard and small mustache, both carefully trimmed.

"No," I said to the morgue-keeper, "the man I'm looking for isn't here."

I went on to tell him of Manning, in case he knew anything to tell me. But he only said, briefly:

"You're not the first, sir. The police have looked here for Mr. Manning and some others have done so beside."

So the police were ahead of me! Well, that only made it the more certain that what we sought was not here.

"There was another chap, but he wasn't Mr. Manning either," vouchsafed my informant. "Howsomever, the police went to see him. Wanta go?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why, that same afternoon, there was a corpse picked outa the East River, froze stiff. Leastways, we thought he was a corpse, but blamed if the chap didn't come to life!"

I wasn't greatly interested, for if the corpse was taken from the river that afternoon, it couldn't have been Manning. But the morgue-keeper went on: "You might take a look, sir, to see if you know him. For the poor fellow's lost his mind,—no, not that,—but he's lost his memory, and he dunno who he is!"

"Amnesia?" I asked.

"That's what they call it, and the other thing, too. Aspasia,—or whatever it is."

"Aphasia," I corrected him, without smiling, for how should he know anything about what was a mystery to most skilled physicians. "Where is he?"

"They carted him over to Bellevue soon's they seen he was alive. It was a touch job to *keep* him alive, I heard, and his memory is completely busted. It would be a godsend to him if you could identify him. I ask everybody to take a look on the chance. Somehow, I'm sorry for him."

I wasn't especially interested, but being thus appealed to in the interests of humanity, I went over to the hospital, and had no difficulty in gaining a sight of the patient in question. Indeed, the doctors were most anxious for visitors to see him, hoping that someone might identify the man.

My first glance convinced me it was not Amory Manning, though I had not thought that it was.

This man had thin, light hair and vacant-looking, weak eyes. He was smooth-shaven and his voice was peculiar,—a voice sufficient to identify anyone, I felt sure, but it was not a voice I had heard before.

No; I didn't know him, and a careful scrutiny made me positive I did not.

But it was a sorry case. Apparently the man was of good education and accustomed to cultured surroundings. Moreover, he had a sense of humor which had not deserted him, along with his memory.

I sat by his bedside, and I remained rather longer than I had intended, for I became interested in his story, and the time

slipped by.

"You see," he said, fixing me with his queer-looking eyes, "I fell through the earth."

"You what?"

"I did. I fell through the earth, and it was a long, long fall."

"Well, yes, eight thousand miles, I'm told."

"Oh, no," and he was almost pettish, "I didn't fall through the middle of it."

"Oh," and I paused for further enlightenment.

"It was this way. I remember it perfectly, you know. I was somewhere,—somewhere up North—"

"Canada?"

"I don't know—I don't know." He shook his head uncertainly. "But I know it was up North where it's always cold."

Perhaps the man had been an Arctic explorer.

"Iceland?" I said, "Greenland?"

"Maybe," and he looked uninterested. "But," here he brightened a little, "anyway, I fell through the earth. I fell in *there*, wherever it was, and came on down, down through the earth till I came out at the other end."

"You mean, you fell through a section or segment of the globe? As if, say, you fell in at London and came out at the Cape of Good Hope!"

"That's the idea! Only I fell *out* here in New York."

"And you fell in?"

"That's what I can't remember, only it was 'way up North,—somewhere."

"If you had a map, now, and looked at all the Northern countries, it might recall itself to you,—the place where you entered,—where you began your journey."

"I thought so, but the nurse brought me an atlas and I couldn't find the place. I wish I had a globe."

Poor chap. I wondered what had given him this strange hallucination. But as he talked on, I became interested in his own personality.

He was as sane as I was in all respects, save his insistence that he had fallen through the earth.

As a child, an ambition of mine had been to dig down to China, and many times I had started the task. Perhaps his childhood had known a similar ambition, and now, his memory gone, his distorted mind harked back to that idea. I changed the subject, and found him remarkably well informed, fairly well educated, and of a curiously analytical temperament, but of his identity or his personality he had no knowledge.

He appreciated this, and it made the thing more pathetic.

"It will come back to me," he said, cheerfully. "The doctors have explained all about this aphasic-amnesia, and though mine is the worst case they have ever seen, it will go away some time, and I'll recover my memory and know who I am."

"You can reason and understand everything said to you?"

"Oh, yes; I'm my own man in every respect except in a knowledge of who or what I was before that journey through the earth."

"Then," I tried plain common sense, "then, if you can reason, you must know that you didn't fall through the earth. It would be impossible."

"I know that. My reason tells me it's impossible. But all I know about it is, that I did do it."

"Through a long hole,—miles long?"

"Yes."

"Who bored the hole?"

"It was there all the time. I suppose Nature made it."

"Oh, a sort of rock fissure—"

"No; more like a mine,—a—"

"That's it, old chap! You were a miner, and there was a cave-in, and it spoiled your thinker—temporarily."

"But a mine doesn't have an exit at the bottom of it. I tell you I was far away from where I fell in, and I came miles straight down through the solid earth—"

"Could you see plainly?"

"Oh, no, it was dark,—how could it be otherwise, inside the earth?"

It was hopeless to dissuade him. We talked for some time, and outside his hallucination he was keen and quick-witted. But whatever gave him his idea of his strange adventure he thoroughly believed in it and nothing would shake that belief.

"What are you going to do when you get out of here?" I asked him.

"I don't know, I'm sure. But I can't help feeling that the world owes me a living—especially after I've fallen through it!"

I laughed, for his humor was infectious, and I felt pretty sure he would make good somehow. He was about thirty, I judged, and though not a brawny man, he seemed possessed of a wiry strength.

The doctors, he told me, assured him of speedily returning health but would give no definite promise regarding the return of his memory.

"So," he said, cheerfully, "I'll get along without it, and start out fresh. Why, I haven't even a name!"

"You can acquire one at small expense," I advised him.

"Yes; I've part of it now. I shall take Rivers as a surname, because they pulled me out of the East River, they say."

"How were you dressed?"

"In Adam's costume, I'm told. I regret the loss of a full suit of apparel, more especially as it might have proved my identity."

"You mean you were entirely divested of clothing?"

"Except for a few rags of underwear, entirely worthless as clews to what was doubtless an illustrious personality! However, I'm lucky to have breath left in my body, and when I get back my memory, I'll prove that I really did fall through the earth, and I'll find out where I fell in."

"I sincerely hope you will, old chap," and I shook hands as I rose to go. "As the play says, 'You interest me strangely!' May I come to see you again?"

"I wish you would, Mr. Brice, and by that time I shall have chosen me a first name."

CHAPTER IX
The Man in Boston

I COULD not suppress a feeling of elation as I once again rang at the door of Olive Raynor's home that evening. I almost began to feel a proprietary interest in the mansion, as I now was practically the legal adviser of its new mistress. And to be received as a privileged caller, even a welcome one, was a source of gratification to my pride and self-respect.

Mrs. Vail was present at our interview this time, and my first sight of her gave me a very favorable impression. A distinguished-looking lady, slightly past middle age, she was aristocratic of bearing and kindly pleasant of manner. Perhaps a trifle of condescension mingled with her courteous reception of me, but I put that down to her recent acquirement of a position of importance. No such trait was visible in Miss Raynor's simple and sincere greeting, and as Olive eagerly inquired as to the result of my afternoon's quest, I told her my story at once.

She was greatly relieved that no trace of Amory Manning had been found on the morgue records and though she was duly sympathetic when I told her of the strange case of the man who fell through the earth, it only momentarily claimed her preoccupied attention.

She first satisfied herself that by no chance could this man be Manning, and then turned her thoughts back to her all-

engrossing theme.

"I am sorry for him," she said, as I described his cheerful disposition and rather winning personality, "and if I can do anything to help him, I will do it. Does he want a position of some sort when he gets well enough to take one?"

"I suppose he will," I returned; "he's an alive sort of chap, and of course he'll earn his living one way or another."

"And he may soon recover his memory," began Mrs. Vail. "I knew a man once who had amnesia and aphasia both, and it was six months before he got over it. But when his memory came back, it came all at once, like a flash, and then he was all right."

"In this case," I said, "the doctors want to find someone who knows the man. It ought not to be difficult to find his friends, or someone who can identify him. Why, that peculiar voice ought to do it."

"Imitate it," directed Mrs. Vail, and to the best of my ability I talked in the monotonous tones of the amnesic victim.

Olive laughed. "I never heard anybody talk like that," she said. "It's absolutely uninflected."

"Yes, that's just what it was. He had no inflections or shadings in his tones."

"A voice is so individual," pursued Olive. "Amory Manning's voice is full and musical; I've often told him he conveys as much meaning by his tones as by his words."

"I knew a man once," put in Mrs. Vail, "who could recite the alphabet so dramatically that he made his audience laugh or

cry or shudder, just by his tones."

"Yes, I've heard that done on the vaudeville stage," said Olive. "Now Mr. Brice, what shall be our next step? I don't mind confessing I'm relieved that your errand of today is over with. Our doctor told me there was no chance of Mr. Manning having been killed or injured, without our receiving notification of the fact, somehow. But I've been nervously troubled about it, and nights I've dreamed of seeing him somewhere,—alone and helpless,—and unable to let me know—"

"Maybe he is," said Mrs. Vail; "I knew a man once—"

But Olive cut short the tale of this acquaintance of her friend and kept to the business in hand.

"I can't think of anything better to do," I said, "than to advertise. But why are not other people doing this? Who are Mr. Manning's friends? Who are his business people? Why are they silent?"

"I don't know that they are," Olive returned; "but to tell the truth, I don't know much about Mr. Manning's affairs, in a business way. I know he is a civil engineer, but that's about all. A consulting engineer he is, too. As to his people, I know only his sister, and she doesn't know what to do either. I've seen Mrs. Russell twice since, and we can only sympathize with each other."

"Who is Mr. Russell?"

"Her husband? He's in France, and she's alone with her two little girls. She and Amory are devoted to each other, and he was

of such help and comfort to her in her husband's absence. Now, she doesn't know which way to turn."

"I must look these things up," I said; "I must talk with Mr. Manning's business associates,—doubtless Mrs. Russell can tell me of them."

"Oh, yes, of course. You go to see her, and she'll be only too glad to see you."

"And as to a detective? Shall I get in touch with Wise?"

"Yes, I think so. It does seem so queer for me to decide these things! I can't get used to the fact that I'm my own guardian!"

"You're of age, Olive," and Mrs. Vail smiled.

"Oh, yes, and I've had entire control of my money for some time. But Uncle always decided all matters of importance,—though, goodness knows, there never were any such to decide as those that beset us now! Think of my engaging a detective!"

"But Wise is so interesting and so adaptable, you'll really like him. I'll ask him to call here with me some afternoon or evening and you can get acquainted."

"I'd like to meet him," put in Mrs. Vail; "I knew a man once who wanted to be a detective, but he died. I've never seen a real detective."

"Pennington Wise is a real one, all right," I declared. "Of course, Miss Raynor, I shall tell the police that you are employing a private detective, for I don't think it a good plan to do it secretly. It is never wise to antagonize the police; they do all they can, popular prejudice to the contrary notwithstanding."

"Very well, Mr. Brice," and Olive gave me a look of confidence. "I don't care what you do, so long as you attend to it. I don't want to see those horrid police people again."

I thought to myself that she might be obliged to do so, unless Penny Wise could find another way to make them look. But I did not tell her so, for nothing raised her ire like the hint of suspicion directed toward herself in the matter of Amos Gately's murder.

"How dare they!" she exclaimed, her eyes fairly snapping with anger; "to dream that I—Olive Raynor—could—why, it's impossible to put it into words!"

It did seem so. To look at that dainty, lovely girl,—the very ideal of all that is best and gentlest in human nature,—it was impossible to breathe the word *murder* in the same breath!

I went away from the house, when my visit was over, determined to track down the assassin,—with the help of Penny Wise,—and thereby clear Olive's name from the least taint of the ugly suspicion now held by the police.

*

THE next morning, in my office, I told Norah of all the developments of Sunday.

The warm-hearted girl was deeply interested, and eager for me to communicate with Wise at once, for which purpose she slipped a fresh sheet of paper in her typewriter, and waited for my dictation of a letter to the detective.

"Wait a minute, Norah," I laughed; "give me time to open my desk!"

But I did dispatch the letter that morning, and awaited the answer as impatiently as Norah herself.

And then I went down to Police Headquarters.

There a surprise was given me. The Chief had received a letter that seemed to have a decided bearing on the mystery of the murder. He handed it to me without comment, and I read this:

To Police Headquarters, New York City

Sirs:

Last Wednesday afternoon, I was in New York, and was in the Building of the Puritan Trust Company. I had occasion to transact some business on the tenth floor, and afterward, when waiting for the elevator to take me down, I saw a pistol lying on the floor of the hallway near the elevator. I picked it up and put it in my pocket,—undecided, at the moment, whether to consider it "findings-keepings" (as it was a first-class one!) or whether to turn it in at the superintendent's office. As a matter of fact, when I reached the street floor I forgot all about the thing, nor did I remember it until I was back in Boston. And then, I read in the papers the accounts of the murder in that same building, that same afternoon, and I saw it was my duty to return the pistol and acquaint you with these facts. But alas, for dilatory human nature! I procrastinated (without meaning to) until today, and now I send this belated word, with an apology for my tardiness. The pistol is safe in my possession, and I will

hold it pending your advices. Shall I send it to you,—and how? Or shall I turn it over to the Boston police? My knowledge of the whole matter begins and ends with the finding of the pistol, which after all, may have nothing to do with the crime. But I found it at three o'clock, or a very few minutes after, if that interests you. I shall be here, at The Touraine, for another week, and will cheerfully allow myself to be interviewed at your convenience, but, as I said, I have no further information to give than that I have here set forth.

Very truly yours,

Nicholas Lusk.

The letter was dated from Boston, on Saturday evening, two days before. Truly, Friend Lusk had delayed his statement, but as he said, that was human nature, in matters not important to oneself.

The Chief was furiously angry at the lateness of the information, and had already dispatched a messenger to get the weapon and to interview the Boston man.

"It's all straight on the face of it," declared Chief Martin; "only an honest, cheerful booby would write like that! He picks up a pistol, forgets all about it, and then, when he learns it's evidence,—or may be,—he calmly waits forty-eight hours before he pipes up!"

"Is it *the* pistol?" I asked, quietly.

"How do I know?" blustered Martin. "Likely it is. I don't suppose half a dozen people sowed pistols around that building

at just three o'clock last Wednesday afternoon!"

"How do you fit it in?"

"Well, this way,—if you want to know. Miss—well, that is,—whoever *did* do the shooting, ran out of the third room, just as Jenny described, and ran downstairs,—it doesn't matter whether all the way down or not, but at least to the tenth—two floors below, and there dropped the pistol, either by accident or by design, and proceeded to descend, as I said, either by the stairs or by taking an elevator at some intervening floor. Now, we want that pistol. To be sure, it may not incriminate anybody,—and yet, there's lots of individuality in firearms!"

"In detective stories the owner's initials are on all well-conducted pistols," I remarked, casually.

"Not in real life, though. There's a number on them, of course, but that seldom helps. And yet, I've got a hunch that that pistol will tell its own story, and my fingers itch to get a hold of it!"

"When do you expect it?"

"I've sent young Scanlon after it. He's a live wire, and he'll get back soon's anybody could. See here, this is the way I dope it out. If a woman did the shooting, she'd be more'n likely to throw away a pistol,—or to drop it unintentional like, in her nervousness, but a man—nixy!"

I had foreseen this. And the statement was, in a way, true. A man, having committed murder, does not drop his pistol,—unless, and I divulged this thought to Martin, unless he wants to throw suspicion on someone else.

"Nothin' doin'," was his curt response. "Nobody on that floor possible to suspect, 'ceptin' it's Rodman,—and small chance of him."

"Rodman!" I cried; "why, he got on the elevator at the seventh floor, just after the shooting."

"He did!" the Chief straightened up; "how do you know?"

"Saw him. I was going down,—in Minny's elevator, you know,—to look for Jenny—"

"When was this?"

"About ten minutes after the shooting—and of course I got on at the twelfth floor, and there were no other passengers at first, so I talked to Minny. But at the seventh Rodman got on, and so we stopped talking."

"His office is on the tenth," mused Martin; "s'posin'—just s'posin' he'd—er—he was implicated, and that he ran downstairs afterward, to his own floor, you know,—and then, later, walked to seven, and took a car there—"

"Purposely leaving his pistol on his own floor!"

"Shucks, no! Dropped it accidentally."

"But you said male criminals don't do that!"

"Oh, pshaw! I say lots of things,—and you would, too, if you were as bothered as I am!"

"That's so, Chief," I agreed, "and there is certainly something to be looked into,—I should say, without waiting for a report from Boston."

"You bet there is! I'm going to send Hudson right up there. He's as good a sleuth as we've got, and he'll deal with the Rodman

matter in a right and proper way. If there's nothing to find out, Rodman will never know he looked."

Hudson was duly dispatched, and I returned to the Puritan Building. It was queer, but Rodman had been in the back of my head all along,—and yet, I had no real reason to think him implicated. I did not know whether he knew Mr. Gately or not, but I, too, had confidence in Foxy Jim Hudson's discretion, and I was pretty positive he'd find out something,—if there were anything worth finding out.

And there was!

Rodman, by good luck, was out and his offices locked. Hudson gently persuaded the locks to let go their grip, and, for he let me go with him, we went in.

The first thing that hit me in the eyes, was a big war map on the wall. Moreover, though not a duplicate of Mr. Gately's map, it was similar, and it hung in a similar position. That is, as Rodman's offices were directly under those of the bank president, two floors below, the rooms matched, and in the "third room" as we called it in Mr. Gately's case, Rodman also had his map hung.

There was but one conclusion, and Hudson and I sprang to it at once.

Together, we pulled aside the map, and sure enough, there was a door exactly like the door in Mr. Gately's room, a small, flush door, usually hidden by the map.

"To the secret elevator, of course," I whispered to Hudson, for walls have ears, and these walls were in many ways peculiar.

"By golly, it is!" he returned; "let's open her up!"

He forced the door open, and assured himself that it did indeed lead into the private elevator shaft, and there were the necessary buttons to cause it to stop, if properly used. But now, the car being down on the ground floor, where it had stayed ever since the day of the murder, of course, the buttons could not be manipulated.

"Now," said Hudson, his brow furrowed, "to see where else this bloomin' rogue trap lets 'em off! There's somethin' mighty queer goin' on that we ain't caught on to yet!"

He carefully closed the door, readjusted the map, and making sure we had left no traces of our visit, he motioned me out and we went away.

He asked me to return to my office, and promised to see me there later.

When he returned, he told me that he had visited every other office in the building through whose rooms the elevator shaft descended and in no other instance was there an opening into the shaft.

"Which proves," he summed up, "that Mr. Gately and Mr. Rodman was somehow in cahoots, else why would Rodman have access to that secret elevator? Answer me that!"

There were several possible answers. Rodman might have taken his offices after the elevator was built, and might never have used it at all. His map might have hung over it merely to cover the useless door.

Or, Rodman might have been a personal friend of Mr. Gately's and used the little car for informal visits.

Again,—though I hated myself for the thought,—Mr. Gately might have had guests whom he didn't wish to be seen entering his rooms, and he might have had an arrangement with Rodman whereby the visitors could go in and out through his rooms, and take the private elevator between the tenth and twelfth floors.

I distrusted Rodman; without any definite reason, but all the same I did distrust him, and I have frequently found my intuitions regarding strangers hit pretty nearly right.

It was unnecessary, however, to answer Foxy Jim's question, for he answered it himself.

"There's something about Mr. Gately," he said, and he spoke seriously, almost solemnly, "that hasn't come to light yet, but it's bound to. Yes, sir, it's bound to! And it's on the way. Now, if we can hook up that Boston pistol with Mr. George Rodman, well and good; if we can't, Rodman's got to be put through the grill anyhow. He's in it for keeps—that elevator door isn't easily explained away."

"Does Mr. Rodman," it was Norah who spoke, and as before, Hudson turned to her almost expectantly—he seemed to depend on her for suggestions, or at least, he always listened to them—"I wonder, Mr. Brice," she went on slowly, "does Mr. Rodman look at all like the figure you saw in the shadow?"

I thought back.

"Yes," I said, decidedly, "he does! Now, hold on, Hudson, it's only a memory, you know, and I may easily be mistaken. But it seems to me I can remember a real resemblance between that shadowed head and the head of George Rodman."

"It's worth an experiment," returned the foxy detective, and on the strength of his decision he waited in my office until George Rodman returned to his.

I didn't know, at the time, what argument Hudson used to get Rodman to do it, but his foxiness prevailed and, obeying orders, I found myself watching the shadow of George Rodman's head on Amos Gately's glass door, as Hudson engaged his suspect in animated conversation.

Of course, the scene of the crime was not re-enacted, there was merely the shadowed picture of the two men, but Hudson managed to have Rodman conspicuously shadowed in various positions and postures.

And after it was over, and Hudson, back in my office, asked me for my verdict, I was obliged to say:

"Mr. Hudson, if that is not the man I saw quarreling with Mr. Gately, it is his exact counterpart! Were it a less grave occasion, I should not hesitate to swear that it is the same man."

"That's enough, Mr. Brice," and Foxy Jim Hudson went back to Headquarters with his report.

CHAPTER X
Penny Wise and Zizi

AND so it was at this stage of affairs that Pennington Wise got into the game. He willingly agreed to take up the case, for the mystery of it appealed to him strongly, and by a stroke of good luck he was not otherwise engaged.

He had promised to call at Miss Raynor's, and as she had asked me to be present also, I went up there, reaching the house before Wise did.

"What's he like?" Olive inquired of me.

"Good-looking sort of chap, without being handsome," I told her. "You'll like his personality, I'm sure, whether he helps us out of our troubles or not."

"I don't care a fig for his personality," she returned, "but I do want him to solve our two mysteries. I suppose you'll think I'm dreadful,—but I'd rather Mr. Wise would find Amory Manning for me, than to discover Uncle Amos' murderer."

"I don't blame you at all for that. Of course, we want to find the criminal, but even more, I too, want to find Mr. Manning for you."

"And, anyway, I suppose the police think now that Mr. Rodman did it."

"They don't go so far as to say that, but they're hunting up evidence, and they've got hold of some pretty damaging information. It seems Rodman was mixed up in some

wrongdoing, and it begins to look as if Mr. Gately was in some way connected with it,—at least, to a degree."

"If he was, then he didn't know it was wrong." Olive spoke with deep conviction, and I didn't try to disabuse her mind.

And then Pennington Wise was announced.

As he entered the room his manner showed no trace of self-consciousness, and as I had anticipated, Olive was greatly pleased with her first glimpse of him. But to her surprise, and mine also, he was accompanied, or rather followed, by a young woman, a mere slip of a girl, who paused and stood quietly by.

As Olive smiled at her inquiringly, Wise said:

"That's Zizi. She's part of my working paraphernalia, and will just sit and listen while we talk."

The girl was fascinating to look at. Slight of build, she had a lithe suppleness that made her every motion a gesture of grace, and her pretty smile was appreciative and responsive. She had black hair and very black eyes, which sparkled and danced as she took in her surroundings. But she said no word, acknowledging her brief introduction only by a slight bow, and accepting the chair that Olive offered, she sat quietly, her small gloved hands resting in her lap.

She wore a black suit with a fine set of black fox furs. Unfastening the fur collar, she disclosed a black blouse of soft, thin material which fell away from her slender white throat in becoming fashion.

Her manner was correct in every particular, and she sat in an unembarrassed silence as Wise proceeded to talk.

"I know all that has been in the papers," he said, somewhat abruptly, "now, I'd like you to tell me the rest. I can't help feeling there must be more in the way of evidence or clews than has been made public. First of all, do *you* think Mr. Rodman the guilty man?"

He addressed himself mainly to Olive, though including me in his inquiring glance.

"I'm sure I don't know," Olive returned; "I won't believe, however, that Amos Gately was involved in any sort of wrong. His honor and integrity were of the highest type,—I knew him intimately enough to certify to that."

"What sort of wrongdoing is this Rodman accused of?" asked Wise.

"Nobody seems willing to tell that," I answered, as Olive shook her head. "I've inquired of the police, and they decline to reveal just what they do suspect him of. But I think it's something pretty serious, and they're tracking it down as fast as they can."

"You see," Olive put in, "if Mr. Rodman is such a bad man, he may have hoodwinked Mr. Gately and made him believe something was all right when it was all wrong."

"Of course he might," said Wise, sympathetically. "Did people come here to the house to see Mr. Gately on business?"

"No; never. Uncle had few visitors, but they were always just his friends, not business callers."

"Then most of our search must be in his offices. You noticed nothing there, Mr. Brice, that seemed indicative?"

Then I told him about the hatpin and the carriage check; and I also related how Norah had found and kept the "powder-paper" that she picked out of the waste basket.

Zizi's eyes flashed at this, and she said, "Has she traced it?"

It was the first time the girl had spoken, and I was charmed with her voice. Low and soft, it had also a bell-like quality, and seemed to leave a ringing echo in the air after she ceased speaking.

"Yes; to the shop where it was bought," I replied. "As Norah guessed, it came from a very high-class perfumer's on Fifth Avenue. But of course he could not tell us to whom he had sold that particular paper."

"I'd like to see it," said Zizi, simply, and again relapsed into silence.

"Norah must be a bright girl," observed Wise, "and she has made a good start by finding the shop. Perhaps we can carry the trail further. It wasn't yours, Miss Raynor?"

"No; I use a paler tint. This one, I have seen it, is quite a deep pink."

"Indicating a brunette possibly. Now, it's not likely it belonged to that old Mrs. Driggs, so we must assume another woman in the office that day. And we must discover who she is."

"There is the hatpin, you know," said Olive. "I have it here, if you care to see it. But the police decided it meant nothing."

"Nothing means nothing," said Zizi, with a funny little smile. "Please let us see the hatpin."

Olive took it from a desk drawer and handed it to the girl, who immediately passed it over to Penny Wise.

He looked at it with interest, for a silent minute.

"There couldn't be a better *portrait parlÃ©!*" he exclaimed. "This pin belongs to a lady with dark, straight hair,—coarse, and lots of it. She has good teeth, and she is proud of them. Her tastes incline to the flashy, and she is fond of strong perfumes. She is of somewhat untidy habits and given to sentiment. She is intellectual and efficient and, if not wealthy, she has at least a competence."

"For gracious goodness sake!" gasped Olive; "and I've studied that hatpin for hours and never could deduce a thing!"

"What I have read from it may be of no use to us," said Wise, indifferently; "I think it will be a sufficient indication of which way to look to find the lady in question, but that doesn't necessarily mean the finding of her will do any good."

"But she may know something to tell us that will do good," Olive suggested; "at any rate, let's find her. How will you go about it?"

"Why, I think it will be a good plan to ask the stenographer, Jenny Boyd, if she ever saw anyone there who fits our description."

"She's the lady of the powder-paper, maybe," murmured Zizi, and Penny Wise said, "Of course," in a preoccupied way, and went on:

"That Jenny person must be further grilled. She hasn't told all she knows. She was in Mr. Gately's employ but a short time and

yet she picked up a lot of information. But she hasn't divulged it all, not by a long shot!"

"How do you know all this?" asked Olive, wonderingly.

"I've read the papers. I have an unbreakable habit of reading between the lines, and I think Miss Jenny has been persuaded by somebody to suppress certain interesting bits of evidence that would fit right into our picture puzzle."

"May I come in?" said a gentle voice, and Mrs. Vail appeared in the doorway.

As we rose to greet her, Olive presented Mr. Wise, and then Mrs. Vail permitted herself the luxury of a stare of genuine curiosity.

His whimsical smile charmed her, and she was most cordial of speech and manner. Indeed, so absorbed was she in this new acquaintance that she didn't even see Zizi, who sat, as always, back and in the shadow.

"Don't let me interrupt," said Mrs. Vail, fluttering into a chair. "Just go on as if I were not here. I'm *so* interested, just let me listen! I won't say a word. Oh, Olive dear, did you show Mr. Wise the letter?"

"No; it's unimportant," replied the girl.

"But I don't think it is, my dear," Mrs. Vail persisted. "You know it might be a—what do they call it?—a clew. Why, I knew a lady once—"

"A letter is always important," said Zizi from her corner, and Mrs. Vail jumped and gave a startled exclamation.

"Who's that?" she cried, peering through her *lorgnon* in the direction of the voice.

"Show yourself, Zizi," directed Wise. "This is my assistant, Mrs. Vail. She is in our council but not of it. I can't explain her exactly, but you'll come to understand her."

Zizi leaned forward and gave Mrs. Vail a pleasant if indifferent smile, then sank back to her usual obscurity.

The girl was, Wise had said, a negligible personality, and yet whenever she spoke she said something!

Mrs. Vail looked bewildered, but apparently she was prepared to accept anything, however strange, in connection with detective work.

"Well," she observed, "as that pretty little thing says, a letter is always important, and I think you ought to show it, Olive. I had a letter once that changed the whole current of my life!"

"What is this letter, Miss Raynor?" asked Wise, in a matter-of-fact way.

"One I received in this morning's mail," Olive replied; "I paid no attention to it, because it was anonymous. Uncle Amos told me once never to notice an anonymous letter,—always to burn and forget it."

"Good enough advice, in general," said Wise; "but in such serious matters as we have before us any letter is of interest."

"Is the letter written by a woman, and signed 'A Friend'?" asked Zizi in her soft voice.

"Did you write it?" cried Olive, turning to the wraith-like girl who sat so quietly behind her.

"Oh, no, no, no! *I* didn't write it," and the demure little face showed a fleeting smile.

"Then how did you know? For it *is* signed 'A Friend,' but I don't know whether it was a woman who wrote it or not."

"It was," and Zizi nodded her sleek little black head. She had removed her hat and placed it on a nearby chair, and as she nestled into her furs which formed a dark background, her small white face looked more eerie than ever. "Ninety per cent. of all anonymous letters are written by women, and ninety per cent. of these are signed 'A Friend.' Though usually that is a misstatement."

"May I see the letter?" asked Wise.

"Sure; I'll get it."

It was Zizi who spoke! And rising, she went swiftly across the room, to a desk, and from a pigeonhole took an opened letter, which she carried to Wise, and then dropped back into her seat again.

Mrs. Vail gave a surprised gasp, and Olive looked her amazement.

"How did you know where to find that?" she exclaimed, her great brown eyes wide with wonder.

"Dead easy," said Zizi, nonchalantly; "you've scarcely taken your eyes off that spot, Miss Raynor, since the letter was mentioned!"

"But even though I looked at the desk, how could you pick out the very letter, at once?"

"Oh, I looked at the desk, too. And I saw your morning's mail, pretty well sorted out. There's a pile of bills, a pile of what are unmistakably social notes, and, up above in a pigeonhole, all by itself, was this letter. You glanced at it a dozen times or more, so I couldn't help knowing."

Olive laughed. One couldn't help liking the strange girl whose expression was so earnest, even while her black eyes were dancing.

Meanwhile, Penny Wise examined the missive.

"I'll read it aloud?" and he glanced at Olive, who acquiesced by a nod.

"Miss Raynor: "Quit looking for slayer of A.G. or you'll be railroaded in yourself. This is straight goods. Call off all Tecs, or beware consequences. Will not warn twice! "A Friend."

"A woman," Pennington Wise said in a musing voice, after he read it.

"A business woman," added Zizi from her corner.

"A stenographer maybe," Wise went on, and Olive cried:

"Do you mean Jenny?"

"Oh, no; this is written by a woman with more brains than Jenny ever dreamed of. A very clever woman in fact."

"Who?" breathed Olive, her eager face flushing in her interest and anxious to know more.

"I don't know that, Miss Raynor, but—"

"Oh, Mr. Wise," broke in Mrs. Vail; "you are so wonderful! Won't you explain how you do it, as you go along?"

She spoke as if he were a conjurer.

"Anything to oblige," Wise assented. "Well, here's how it looks to me. The writer of this letter is a business woman, not only because she uses this large, single sheet of bond paper, but because she knows how to use it. She is a stenographer,—by that I do not necessarily mean that is her business,—she may have a knowledge of stenography, and be in some much more important line of work. But she is an accomplished typist and a rapid one. This, I know, of course, from the neat and uniform typing. She is clever, because she has used this non-committal paper, which is in no way especial or individual. She is a business woman, again, because she uses such expressions as 'quit,' railroaded,' 'Tecs,' 'straight goods,'—"

"Which she might do by way of being misleading—" murmured Zizi.

"Too many of 'em, and too casually used, Ziz. A society girl trying to pose as a business woman never would have rolled those words in so easily. I should have said a newspaper woman but for a certain peculiarity of style which indicates,—what, Zizi?"

"You've got it; a telegraph operator."

"Exactly. Do you know any telegrapher, Miss Raynor?"

"No, indeed!" and Olive looked astounded at the suggestion that she should number such among her acquaintances. "Are you sure?"

"Looks mighty like it. The short sentences and the elimination of personal pronouns seem to me to denote a telegraph girl's

diction. And she is very clever! She has sent the carbon copy of the letter and not the outside typing."

"Why?" I asked.

"To make it less traceable. You know, typewriting is very nearly as individual as pen-writing. The differentiations of the machine as well as of the user's technique, are almost invariably so pronounced as to make the writing recognizable. Now these peculiarities, while often clear on the first paper, are blurred more or less on the carbon copy. So 'A Friend,' thinking to be very canny, has sent the carbon. This is a new trick, though I've seen it done several times of late. But it isn't so misleading as it is thought to be. For all the individual peculiarities of the typewriter,—I mean, the machine, are almost as visible on this as on the other. I've noticed them in this case, easily. And moreover, this would-be clever writer has overreached herself! For a carbon copy smudges so easily that it is almost impossible to touch it, even to fold the sheet, without leaving a telltale thumb or finger print! And this correspondent has most obligingly done so!"

"Really!" breathed Zizi, with a note of satisfaction in her low voice.

"And the peculiarities,—what are they?" asked Olive.

"The one that jumps out and hits me first is the elevated *s*. Look,—and you have to look closely, Miss Raynor,—in every instance the letter *s* is a tiny speck higher than the other letters."

"Why, so it is," and Olive examined the letter with deep interest; "but how can you find a machine with an elevated *s?*"

"It isn't a sign-board, it's a proof. When we think we have the right machine, the *s* will prove it,—not lead us to it."

"Let me see," begged Mrs. Vail, reaching for the paper. "A friend of mine is a stenographer; maybe she—"

"Excuse me," and Penny Wise folded the letter most carefully. "We can't get any more finger prints on this paper, or we shall render it useless. Now, Miss Raynor, I'm going. I'll take the letter, and I've little doubt it will be a great help to me in my work. I will report to you from time to time, but it may be a few days before I learn anything of importance. Zizi?"

"Yes; I'll stay here," and the girl sat quietly in her chair.

"That means she'll take up her abode with you for the present, Miss Raynor," and Wise smiled at Olive.

"Live here?"

"Yes, please. It is necessary, or she wouldn't do it."

"Oh, let her stay!" cried Mrs. Vail; "she's so interesting—and queer!"

The object of her comment gave her an engaging smile, but said nothing, and beckoning me to go with him, Wise rose to take leave.

But I wanted to have a little further talk with Olive on several matters and I told Wise I'd join him a little later.

"Be goody-girl, Zizi," he adjured as he went off, and she nodded her head, but with a saucy grimace at the detective.

"My room?" she said, inquiringly, with a pretty, shy glance at Olive. "I'm no trouble,—not a bit. Any little old room, you know."

"You shall have it in a few moments," and Olive went away to see the housemaids about it.

Mrs. Vail snatched at a chance to talk uninterruptedly to the strange girl.

"What is your work?" she inquired; "do you help Mr. Wise? Isn't he wonderful! How you must admire him. I knew a detective once,—or, at least, a man who was going to be a detective, but—Oh, *do* tell me what your part of the work is!"

"I sit by," returned Zizi, with a dear little grin that took off all edge of curtness.

"Sit by! Is that some technical term? I don't quite understand."

"I don't always understand myself," and the girl shook her head slowly; "but I just remain silent until Mr. Wise wants me to speak,—to tell him something, you know. Then I tell him."

"But how do *you* know it?" I put in, fascinated by this strange child, for she looked little more than a child.

"Ooh!" Zizi shuddered, and drew her small self together, her black eyes round and uncanny-looking; "ooh! I donno how I know! I guess the bogie man tells me!"

Mrs. Vail shuddered too, and gave a little shriek.

"You're a witch," she cried; "own up, now, aren't you a witch?"

"Yes, lady, lady! I *am* a witch,—a poor little witch girl!" and Zizi laughed outright at her own little joke.

If her smile had been charming, her laugh was more so. It was not only of a silvery trill, but it was infectious, and Mrs. Vail and I laughed in sympathy.

"What are you all laughing at?" said Olive, reappearing.

"At me," and Zizi spoke humbly now; "I made 'em laugh. Sorry!"

"Come along with me, you funny child," and Olive led her away, leaving me to be the victim of Mrs. Vail's incessant stream of chatter.

The good lady volubly discussed the detective and his assistant and detailed many accounts of people she had known. Her acquaintance was seemingly a wide one!

At last Olive returned, smiling.

"I never saw anything like her!" she exclaimed; "I gave her a pretty little room, not far from mine. I don't know, I'm sure, why she's staying here, but I like to have her. Well, in about two minutes she had the furniture all changed about. Not the heavy pieces, of course, but she moved a small table and all the chairs, and finally unscrewed an electric light bulb from one place and put it on another, and then, after looking all about, she said, 'Just one thing more!' and if she didn't spring up on to a table with one jump and take down quite a large picture! 'There,' she said, and she set it out in the hall; 'I can't bear that thing! Now this is a lovely room, and I thank you, Miss Raynor. The pink one we passed is yours, isn't it?'

"'Yes; how did you know?' I asked her. And she said, 'I saw a photograph of Mr. Manning on your bureau.' Little rascal! I

can't help liking her!"

CHAPTER XI
Case Rivers

SO absorbed was I in the new interests that had come into my life, so anxious to be of assistance to Olive Raynor, and so curious to watch the procedure of Pennington Wise, that I confess I forgot all about the poor chap I had seen at Bellevue Hospital,—the man who "fell through the earth"! And I'm not sure I should ever have thought of him again, save as a fleeting memory, if I hadn't received a letter from him.

My dear Brice [he wrote]:

I've no right to pilfer your time, but if you have a few minutes to squander, I wish you'd give them to me. I'm about to be discharged from the hospital, with a clean bill of health,—but with no hint or clew as to my cherished identity. The doctors—drat 'em!—say that some day my memory will spring, full-armed, back at me, but meanwhile, I must just sit tight and wait. Not being of a patient disposition, I'm going to get busy at acquiring a new identity, then, if the old one ever does spring a come-back, I'll have two,—and can lead a double life! No, I'm not flippant, I'm philosophical. Well, if your offer didn't have a string tied to it come in to see me,—please.

Sincerely yours,

Case Rivers.

P.S.—The doctors look upon me as a very important and interesting case,—hence my name.

I smiled at the note, and as I had taken a liking to the man from the start, I went at once to see him.

"No," I assured him, after receiving his cordial welcome, "my offer had no string attached. I'm more than ready to help in any way I can, to find a niche for you in this old town and fit you into it. It doesn't matter where you hail from, or how you got here; New York is an all-comers' race, and the devil take the hindmost."

"He won't get me, then," and Rivers nodded his head determinedly; "I may not be in the van, just at first, but give me half a chance, and I'll make good!"

This was not bumptiousness or braggadocio, I could see, but an earnest determination. The man was sincere and he had a certain doggedness of purpose, which was evident in his looks and manner as well as in his words.

Rivers was up and dressed now, and I saw he was a good-looking chap. His light-brown hair was carefully parted and brushed; his smooth-shaven face was thin and pale, but showed strong lines of character. He had been fitted with glasses,—a *pince-nez*, held by a tiny gold chain over one ear,—and this corrected the vacant look in his eyes. His clothes were inexpensive and quite unmistakably ready-made.

He was apologetic. "I'd rather have better duds," he said, "but as I had to borrow money to clothe myself at all, I didn't want to

splurge. One doctor here is a brick! He's going to follow up my 'case,' and so I accepted his loan. It's a fearful predicament to be a live, grown-up man, without a cent to your name!"

"Let me be your banker," I offered, in all sincerity; "I—"

"No; I don't want coin so much as I want a way to earn some. Now, if you'll put me in the way of getting work,—anything that pays pretty well,—I'll be obliged, sir, and I'll be on my way."

His smile was of that frank, chummy sort that makes for sympathy and I agreed to help him in any way I could think of.

"What can you do?" I asked, preliminarily.

"Dunno. Have to investigate myself, and learn what are my latent talents. Doubtless their name is legion. But I've nailed one of them. I can draw! Witness these masterpieces!"

He held up some sheets of scribble paper on which I saw several careful and well-done mechanical drawings.

"You were a draughtsman!" I exclaimed, "in that lost life of yours."

"I don't know. I may have been. Anyway, these things are all right."

"What are they?"

"Not much of anything. They're sort of designs for wall-paper or oilcloth. See? Merely suggestions, you know, but this one, repeated, would make a ripping study for a two-toned paper."

"You're right," I exclaimed, in admiration of the pattern. "You must have been a designer of such things."

"No matter what I *was*,—the thing is what can I be now, to take my place in the economic world. These are, do you see,

adaptations from snow crystals."

"So they are! It takes me back to my school days."

"Perhaps I'm harking back to those, too. I remember the pictures of snow crystals in 'Steele's Fourteen Weeks in Natural Science.' Did you study that?"

"I did!" I replied, grinning; "in high school! But, is your memory returning?"

"Not so's you'd notice it! I have recollection of all I learned in an educational way, but I can't see any individual picture of *me*, personally,—oh, never mind! How can I get a position as master designer in some great factory?"

"That's a big order," I laughed. "But you can begin in a small way and rise to a proud eminence—"

"No, thanky! I'm not as young as I once was,—my favorite doctor puts me down at thirty,—plus or minus,—but I feel about sixty."

"Really, Rivers, do you feel like an old man?"

"Not physically,—that's the queer part. But I feel as if my life was all behind me—"

"Oh, that's because of your temporary mental—"

"I know it. And I'm going to conquer it,—or get around it some way. Now, if you'll introduce me,—and, yes, act as my guarantee, my reference,—I know it's asking a lot, but if you'll do that, I'll make good, I promise you!"

"I believe you will, and I'm only too glad to do it. I'll take you, whenever you say, around to a firm I know of, that I believe will

be jolly glad to get you. You see, so many men of your gifts have gone to war—"

"Yes, I know, and I'd like to enlist myself, but Doc says I can't, being a—a defective."

"I wish you were a detective instead," I said, partly to turn the current of his thoughts from his condition and partly because my mind was so full of my own interests that he was a secondary consideration.

"I'd like to be. I've been reading a bunch of detective stories since I've been here in hospital, and I don't see as that deduction business is such a great stunt. Sherlock Holmes is all right, but most of his imitators are stuff and nonsense."

And then, unable to hold it back any longer, I told him all about the Gately case and about Pennington Wise.

He was deeply interested, and his eyes sparkled when I related Wise's deductions from the hatpin.

"Has he proved it yet?" he asked; "have you checked him up?"

"No, but there hasn't been time. He's only just started his work. He has another task; to find Amory Manning."

"Who's he?"

"A man who has disappeared, and there is fear of foul play."

"Is he suspected of killing Gately?"

"Oh, no, not that; but he was suspected of hiding to shield Miss Raynor—"

"Pshaw! a girl wouldn't commit a murder like that."

"I don't think this girl did, anyway. And, in fact, they—the police I mean—have a new suspect. There's a man named

Rodman, who is being looked up."

"Oh, it's all a great game! I wish I could get out into the world and take part in such things!"

"You will, old man. Once you're fairly started, the world will be __"

"My cellar-door! You bet it will! I'm going to slide right down it."

"What about your falling through it? Do you remember any more details of that somewhat—er—unusual performance?"

"Yes, I do! And you can laugh all you like. That's no hallucination, it's a clear, true memory,—the only memory I have."

"Just what do you remember?"

"That journey through the earth—"

"You been reading Jules Verne lately?"

"Never read it. But that long journey down, down,—miles and miles,—I can never forget it! I've had a globe to look at, and I suppose I must have started thousands of miles from here—"

"Oh, now, come off—"

"Well, it's no use. I can't make anybody believe it, but it's the truth!"

"Write it up for the movies. The Man Who Fell Through the Earth would be a stunning title!"

"Now you're guying me again. Guess I'll shut up on that subject. But I'll stick you for one more helping-hand act. Where can I get a room to live in for a short time?"

"Why a short time?"

"Because I must take a dinky little cheap place at first, then soon, I'll be on my feet, financially speaking, and I can move to decenter quarters. You see, I'm going to ask you after all to trust me with a few shekels, right now, and I'll return the loan, with interest, at no far distant date."

His calm assumption of success in a business way impressed me favorably. Undoubtedly, he had been one accustomed to making and spending money in his previous life, and he took it as a matter of course. But his common sense, which had by no means deserted him, made him aware that he could get no satisfactory position without some sort of credentials.

As he talked he was idly, it seemed, unconsciously, drawing on the paper pad that lay on the table at his elbow—delicate penciled marks that resolved themselves into six-sided figures, whose radii blossomed out into beautiful tendrils or spikes until they formed a perfect, harmonious whole; each section alike, just as in a snow crystal.

They were so exquisitely done that I marveled at his peculiar gift.

"You ought to design lace," I observed; "those designs are too fine for papers or carpets."

"Perhaps so," he returned, seriously gazing at his drawings. "Anyway, I'll design something,—and it'll be something worthwhile!"

"Maybe you were an engraver," I hazarded, "before you—"

"Before I fell through the earth? Maybe I was. Well, then, suppose tomorrow I so far encroach on your good offices as to

go with you to see the firm you mentioned. Or, if you'll give me a letter of introduction—"

"Do you know your way around New York?"

"I'm not sure. I have a feeling I was in New York once,—a long time ago, but I can't say for certain."

"I'll go with you then. I'll call for you tomorrow, and escort you to the office I have in mind, and also, look up a home and fireside that appeals to you."

"The sort that appeals to me is out of the question at present," he said, firmly determined to put himself under no greater obligation to me than need be. "I'll choose a room like the old gentleman in the Bible had with a bed and a table and a stool and a candlestick."

"You remember your literature all right."

"I do, mostly; though I'll confess I read of that ascetic individual since I've been here. The hospital is long on Bibles and detective stories, and short on *belles-lettres*. Well, so long, old man!"

I went away, pondering. It was a strange case, this of Case Rivers. I smiled at the name he had chosen.

He was positively a well-educated and well-read man. His speech gave me a slight impression of an Englishman, and I wondered if he might be Canadian. Of course, I didn't believe an atom of his yarn about coming from Canada to our fair city *via* the interior of the globe,—but he may have had a lapse of memory that included his railroad journey, and dreamed that he came in some fantastic way.

*

AND then, as is usual, when leaving one scene for another, my thoughts flew ahead to my next errand, which was a visit to Police Headquarters.

Here Chief Martin gave me a lot of new information. It seemed they had unearthed damaging evidence in the case of George Rodman, and he was, without a doubt, a malefactor,—but in what particular branch of evil the Chief omitted to state. Nor could any rather broad hints produce any result. At last I said:

"Why don't you arrest Rodman, then?"

"Not enough definite evidence. I'm just about sure that he killed Gately, and I think I know why, but I can't prove it,—yet. Your statement that his head shadowed on that glass door was the same head you saw the day of the murder, is our strongest point—"

"Oh, I didn't say that!" I cried, aghast; "I do say it looked like the same head, but I wouldn't swear that it was!"

"Well, I think it was, and though we can't connect up the pistol with Rodman—"

"Did you get the pistol from the Boston man?"

"Yes; Scanlon brought home that bacon. But careful grilling failed to get any more information from Lusk, the man who found the pistol. He tells a straight tale of his visit to the Puritan Building, and his business there, all corroborated by the people he called on. He found that pistol, just as he says he did. And, of course, I knew he told the truth in his letter. If he were involved, or had any guilty knowledge of the crime, he surely

wouldn't write to tell us of it! So now we have the pistol, and we know it was picked up in the tenth floor hall near Rodman's door,—but that proves nothing, since we can't claim it is Rodman's weapon. It may be, of course, but there's nothing to show it."

"What does Rodman say for himself?"

"Denies everything. Says he had the merest nodding acquaintance with Gately,—this we know is a lie!—says he knew there was an elevator door in his room, but he had never used it, nor even opened it. Said he hung a big war map over it because it was a good place for a map. We've no living witness to give a shred of evidence against Rodman, except your statement about his shadow,—and that is uncertain at best."

"Yes, it is. I do say it looked like Rodman's head,—that is, I mean, Rodman's head looked like the one I saw that day. But other heads might look as much like it."

"That's the trouble. George Rodman is a slick chap, and what he does that he doesn't want known, doesn't get known! But I'm onto him! And I'll bet I'll get him yet. He's so comfoundedly cool that all I say to him rolls off like water off a duck's back. He knows I've got no proof, and he's banking on that to get through."

"What about Jenny? Can't she tell you anything?"

"She knows nothing about Rodman. And that very point proves that if he visited Gately often, as I think he did, he came and went by that private elevator which connected their two offices, as well as made a street exit for either or both of them."

"Did old man Boyd ever see Rodman leave the Matteawan by way of that elevator?"

"He says he never did, but sometimes I think Rodman has fixed him."

"And Jenny, too, maybe."

"Maybe. And here's another thing. There's somebody called 'The Link,' who figures largely in the whole affair, but figures secretly. I won't say how I found this little joker, but if I can dig up who 'The Link' is, I've made a great stride toward success."

Naturally, I said nothing about Pennington Wise to the Chief of Police, but I made a mental note of "The Link" to report to the detective.

"Reward's offered," we were suddenly informed, as Foxy Jim Hudson burst into the room.

"For what?" asked the Chief, a little absent-mindedly.

"For information leading to the whereabouts of Amory Manning."

Martin wheeled round in his chair to look at his subordinate. "Who offered it? How much?"

"That's the queer part, Chief. Not the amount,—that's five thousand dollars, but it's a person or persons unknown who will put up the kale. It's done through the firm of Kellogg and Kellogg,—about the whitest bunch of lawyers in town. I mean whoever offers that reward is somebody worthwhile. No shyster business. I'm for it,—the money, I mean. Do you know, Chief, the disappearance of that Manning chap is in some way connected with the Gately murder? I've got a hunch on that.

And here's how I dope it out. Manning saw Rodman,—well, perhaps he didn't see him shoot, but he saw something that incriminated Rodman, and so he,—Rodman, had to get Manning out of the way. And did! You see, Friend Rodman is not only a deep-dyed scoundrel,—but the dye was 'made in Germany'!"

"Well, I'm glad the reward is offered," commented the Chief. "Now some rank outsider'll pipe up and speak his little piece."

"Meaning anybody in particular?" I asked.

With that peculiarly irritating trick of his, Chief Martin not only made no reply but gave no evidence of having heard my question. He went on:

"That makes two rewards. The Puritan Trust Company has offered five thousand for the apprehension of Gately's murderer. This other five thousand adds to the excitement and ought to produce a good result."

"I'm out for both," announced Hudson. "Can't say I expect to get 'em, but I'll make a fierce stab at it. Rodman has an awful big income, and no visible means of support. That fact ought to help."

"How?" I asked.

"Oh, it proves to my mind that he was mixed up in lucrative business that he didn't—well—advertise. 'The Link' was mixed in, too. That is,—I suppose,—'The Link' was a sort of go-between, who enabled Rodman to transact his nefarious deals secretly."

"Well, Foxy, you know a lot," and the Chief laughed good-humoredly.

I felt that I now knew a lot, too, and as I went away I determined to see Penny Wise at once, and report all I had learned. I dropped in first at my own office, and found Norah in a brown study, her hands behind her head and a half-written letter in her typewriter.

She gazed at me absently, and then, noting my air of excitement, she became alert and exclaimed, "What's happened? What do you know that's new?"

"Heaps," I vouchsafed, and then I told her, briefly, of Rodman's probable guilt and also of the offered rewards.

"Jenny's your trump card," she said after a thoughtful silence. "That girl knows a good deal that she hasn't told. I shouldn't be surprised if she's in Rodman's employ."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, she's too glib. She admits so many things that she has seen or heard and then when you ask her about others, she is a blank wall. Now, she does know about them, but she won't tell. Why? Because she's paid not to."

"Then how can we get around her?"

"Pay her more." And Norah returned to her typing. But she looked up again to say: "Mrs. Russell called here about an hour ago."

"She did! What for?"

"I don't know. She wanted to see you. She was a bit forlorn, so I talked to her a little."

"I'm glad you did. Poor lady, she feels her brother's absence terribly."

"Yes; we discussed it. She thinks he has been killed."

"Has she any reason to think that?"

"No, except that she dreamed it."

"A most natural dream for a nervous, worried woman."

"Of course. I wonder if she knows there's a reward offered for Mr. Manning?"

"Maybe she offered it,—through the Kellogg people."

"No, she didn't."

"Pray, how do you know, oh, modern Cassandra?"

"I don't know your old friend Cassandra, but I do know Mrs. Russell isn't offering any five thousand dollars. She can't afford it."

"Why, she's a rich woman."

"She passes for one, and, of course, she isn't suffering for food or clothes. But she is economizing. She was wearing her last year's hat and muff, and she maids herself."

"Perhaps she wore her old clothes because she was merely out to call on my unworthy self."

"No. She was on her way to a reception. They're her best clothes now. And a tiny rip in one glove and a missing snap-fastener on her bodice proves she keeps no personal lady's maid, as people in her position usually do. So, I'm sure she isn't offering big reward money, though she loves her brother."

"You're a born detectivess, Norah. You'll beat Penny Wise at his own game, if he doesn't watch out!"

"Maybe," said Norah, and she laid her fingertips gracefully back on her typewriter keys.

CHAPTER XII
The Link

IT was the next afternoon that Penny Wise came into my office. It was his first visit there, and I gave him a hearty welcome. Norah looked so eagerly expectant that I introduced him to her, for I couldn't bear to disappoint the girl by ignoring her.

Wise was delightfully cordial toward her, and indeed Norah's winsome personality always made people friendly.

I had tried to get in touch with the detective the day before but he was out on various errands, and I missed him here and there, nor could we get together until he found this leisure.

I told him all I had learned from the police, but part of it was already known to him. He was greatly interested in the news which he had not heard before, that there was somebody implicated, who was called "The Link."

"That's the one we want!" he cried; "I suspected some such person."

"Man or woman?" asked Norah, briefly, and Wise glanced at her.

"Which do you think?"

"Woman," she replied, and Penny Wise nodded his head. "Yes, I've no doubt 'The Link' is a woman, and a mighty important factor in the case."

"But I don't understand," I put in. "What does she link?"

"Whom,—not what," said Wise, and he looked very serious. "Of course, you must realize, Brice, there's a great big motive behind this Gately murder, and there's also a big reason for Amory Manning's disappearance. The two are connected,—there's no doubt of that,—but that doesn't argue Manning the murderer, of course. No, this Link is a woman of parts,—a woman who is of highest value to the principals in this crime, and who must be found, and that at once!"

"What did she have to do with Mr. Gately?" asked Norah, her gray eyes burning with interest.

"I—don't—know." Wise's hesitating answer was by no means because of disinclination to admit his ignorance, but because he was thinking deeply himself. "Look here, Brice, can't we go over Gately's rooms now? I don't want to ask permission of the police, but if the Trust Company people would let us in—"

"Of course," I responded, and I went at once to the vice-president for the desired permission.

"It's all right," I announced, returning with the keys, "come ahead."

We went into the beautiful rooms of the late bank president.

Pennington Wise was impressed with their rich and harmonious effects, and his quick eyes darted here and there, taking in details. With marvelous swiftness he went through the three rooms of the suite nodding his head as he noted the special points of which he had been told. In the third room,—the Blue Room,—he glanced about, raised the map from the wall, and dropped it back in place, opened the door to the hall,

and closed it again, and then turned back to the middle room, the office of Amos Gately, and apparently, to the detective's mind, the principal place of interest.

He sat down in the fine big swivel-chair, whose velvet cushioning deprived it of all look of an ordinary desk-chair, and mused deeply as his eyes fairly devoured the desk fittings. Nothing had been disturbed, that I noticed, except that the telephone had been set up in its right position, and also the chair which I had found overturned was righted.

Wise fingered only a few things. He picked up the penholder, a thick magnificent affair made of gold.

"Probably a gift from his clerks," said I, smiling at the ornate and ostentatious looking thing. "All the other gimcracks are in better taste."

Pennington Wise opened the desk drawers. There was little to see, for all financial papers had been taken away by Mr. Gately's executors.

"Here's a queer bunch," Wise observed, as he picked up a packet of papers held together by a rubber band. He sorted them out on the desk.

They were sheets of paper of various styles, each bearing the address or escutcheon of some big city hotel. Many of the principal hostelries of New York were represented among them. Each sheet bore a date stamped on it with an ordinary rubber dating-stamp.

"Important, if true," commented Wise.

"If what's true?" asked Norah, bluntly.

"My deductions," he returned. "These letters, if we can call them letters, doubtless were sent to Mr. Gately at separate times and in separate envelopes."

"They were," I informed him. "One came the morning after his death."

"It did! Which one?"

"It isn't here. All the new mail went to his lawyer."

"We must get hold of it!"

"But,—do tell me what's the import of a blank sheet of paper?"

"These aren't blank," and he pointed to the stamped dates. "They are very far from blank!"

"Only a date,—on a plain sheet of paper,—what does that mean?"

"Perhaps nothing—perhaps everything."

It wasn't like Penny Wise to be cryptic, and I gathered that the papers were really of value as evidence. "Has the writing been erased?" I hazarded.

"Probably not. No. I don't think so." He scrutinized more closely.

"No," he concluded, "nothing like that. The message is all told on the surface, and he who runs may read."

"Read, 'The Waldorf-Astoria, December 7.'" I scoffed. "And is the reader greatly enlightened?"

"Not yet, but soon," Wise murmured, as he kept up his investigation. "Ha!" he went on, "as the actor hath it,—what have we here!"

He was now scrutinizing the ends of two burnt cigarettes, left on the ash-tray of the smoking-set.

"The lady has left her initials! How kind of her!"

"Why, Hudson studied those and couldn't make out any letters," I exclaimed.

"Blind Hudson! These very dainty and expensive cigarettes belonged to a fair one, whose name began with K and S,—or S and K. Be careful how you touch it, but surely you can see that the tops of the letters though scorched, show definitely enough to know they must be K and S."

"They are!" cried Norah; "I can see it now."

"Couldn't that S be an O?" I caviled.

"Nope," and Wise shook his head. "The two, though both nearly burnt away, show for sure that the letters are K and S. Here's a find! Does Miss Raynor smoke?"

"I don't think so," I replied. "I've never seen her do so,—and she doesn't seem that type. And then,—the initials—"

"Oh, well, she might have had some of her friends' cigarettes with her. I was only thinking it must have been a pretty intimate caller who would sit here and smoke with Mr. Gately—here are his own cigar stubs you see and of course, Miss Raynor came into my mind. Eliminating her we have, maybe, the lady of the hatpin."

"And the powder-paper!" cried Norah.

"Yes, they all seem to point to a very friendly caller, who smoked, who took off her hat, and who powdered her nose, all in this room, and all on the day Mr. Gately was killed. For, of

course, the whole place was cleaned and put in order every day."

"And there was the carriage check," I mused; "perhaps she left that."

"Carriage check?" asked Wise.

"Yes, a card like a piece of Swiss cheese,—you know those perforated carriage-call checks?"

"I do. Where is it?"

"Hudson took it. But he won't get anything out of it, and you might."

"Perhaps. I must see it, anyway. Also, I want to see Jenny,—the young stenographer who was—"

"Shall I get her here?" offered Norah.

"Yes," Wise began, but I cut him short.

"I've got to go home," I said. "I promised Rivers I'd see him this afternoon, and take him on some errands. Suppose I go now, and you go with me, Mr. Wise, and suppose Norah gets Jenny and brings her round to my rooms. We can have the interview there; Rivers may not come till later, but I must be there to receive him."

*

SO Penny Wise and I went down to my pleasant vine and figtree, and as we went, I told him about Case Rivers.

He was interested at once, as he always was in anything mysterious, and he said, "I'm glad to see him. What a strange case! Can he be the missing Manning?"

"Not a chance," I replied. "The two men are totally dissimilar in looks and in build. Manning is heavy,—almost stocky. Rivers is gaunt and lean. Also, Manning is dark-haired and full-blooded, while Rivers is pale and has very light hair. I tried to make out a resemblance, but it can't be done. However, Case Rivers is interesting on his own account;" and I told him the story of his journey through the earth.

He laughed. "Hallucination, of course," he said; "but it might easily lead to the discovery of his identity. That amnesic-aphasia business always fascinates me. That is, if I'm convinced it's the real thing. For, you know, it's a fine opportunity to fake loss of memory."

"There's no fake in this case, I'm positive," I hastened to assure him; "I've taken a decided liking to Rivers, and I mean to keep in touch with him, for when he regains his memory I want to know about it."

"Pulled out of the river, you say?"

"Yes, a tugboat picked him up, drowned and frozen, it was supposed. He was taken to the morgue, and bless you, if he didn't show signs of life when he thawed out a little. So they went to work on him and revived him and sent him over to Bellevue where he became a celebrated case."

"I should think so. No clothes or any identification?"

"Not a rag. Or rather only a few rags of underwear,—but nothing that was the slightest clew."

"What became of his clothes?"

"Nobody knows. He was found drifting, unconscious, apparently dead, and entirely nude save the fragments of underclothing."

"Those fragments have been kept?"

"Oh, yes; but they mean nothing. Just ordinary material,—good,—but nothing individual about them."

"Where was he picked up?"

"I don't know exactly, but not far from the morgue, I believe. It was the same day as the Gately murder, that's why I remember the date. It was a dreadfully cold snap, the river was full of ice and it's a wonder he wasn't killed, as well as knocked senseless."

"Was he knocked senseless?"

"I'm not sure, but he was unconscious from cold and exposure and very nearly frozen to death."

"And his memory now?"

"Is perfect in all respects, except he doesn't know who he is."

"A fishy tale!"

"No; you won't say so after you've seen him. When I say his memory is perfect, I mean regarding what he has read or has studied. But it is his personal recollections that have gone from him. He has no remembrance of his home or his friends or his own identity."

"Can't you deduce his previous occupation?"

"I can't. Perhaps you can. He can draw, and he is well-read, that's all I know."

We were at my rooms by that time, and going up, we found Case Rivers already there awaiting us. I lamented my lack of

promptness, but he gracefully waived my apology.

"It's all right," he smiled in his good-humored way, "I've been browsing among your books and having the time of my life."

I introduced the two men, and told Rivers that Wise was the famous detective I had mentioned to him.

"I'm downright glad to know you," Rivers said, earnestly; "if you can do a bit of deduction as to who I am, I'll be under deepest obligation. I give you myself as a clew."

"Got a picture of Amory Manning?" asked Wise, abruptly.

I handed him a folded newspaper, whose front page bore a cut of Manning, and the story of his mysterious disappearance.

Wise studied the picture and compared it with the man before him.

"Totally unlike," he said, disappointedly.

"Not a chance," laughed Rivers; "I wish I could step into that chap's shoes; but you see, I came from far away."

"Tell me about that trip of yours," asked Wise.

"Don't know much to tell," returned Rivers; "but what I do know, I know positively, so I'll warn you beforehand not to chuckle at me, for I won't stand it!"

Rivers showed a determination that I liked. It proved that I was right in ascribing a strong character to him. He would stand chaffing as well as anyone I knew, but not on the subject of his fall through the earth.

"I don't know when or where I started on my memorable journey, but I distinctly remember my long, dark fall straight down through the earth. Now it would seem impossible, but I

can aver that I entered in some very cold, arctic sort of country, and I came on down feet first, till I made exit in New York. I was found, but how I got into the river, I don't know."

"You were clothed when you started?"

"I can only say that I assume I was. I'm a normal, decent sort of man, and I can't think I'd consciously set out on a trip of any sort undressed! But I've no doubt my swashing around in the ice-filled river did for my clothes. Probably, as related by the Ancient Mariner, 'the ice was here, the ice was there, the ice was all around: it cracked and growled and—something or other—and howled, like noises in a swound.' You see, I still know my 'Familiar Quotations' by heart."

"That's a queer phase," and Wise shook his head. "It may be you are a poet—"

"Well, I haven't poetized any since my recrudescence."

"And that's another queer thing," pursued the detective. "Most victims of aphasia can't remember words. You are exceptionally fluent and seem to have a wide vocabulary."

"I admit it all," and Rivers looked a little weary, as if he were tired of speculating on his own case.

"Now, to change the subject, how are you progressing, Mr. Wise, with your present work? How goes the stalking of the murderer?"

"Haven't got him yet, Mr. Rivers, but we've made a good start. You know the details?"

"Only the newspaper accounts, and such additional information as Mr. Brice has given me. I'm greatly interested,—

for,—tell it not to Gath detectives,—I fancy I've a bent toward sleuthing myself."

Pennington Wise smiled. "You're not alone in that," he said, chaffingly, but so good-naturedly that Rivers took no offense.

"I suppose it's your reflected light that makes everybody who talks with you feel that way," he came back. "Well, if you get up a stump, lean on me, Grandpa,—I'm 'most seven."

And then we all three discussed the case, in all its phases, and though Rivers said nothing of great importance, he showed such an intellectual grasp of it all, and responded so intelligently to Wise's theories and opinions that the two soon became most friendly.

The announcement of the rewards stirred Rivers to enthusiasm.

"I'm going to get 'em!" he cried; "both of 'em! With all due respect to you, Mr. Wise, I'm going to cut under and win out! Don't say I didn't warn you, and hereafter all you say will be used against you! If there's one thing I need more than another it's ten thousand dollars,—I could even do with twenty! So, here goes for Rivers, the swiftsure detective!"

Not a bit offended, Penny Wise laughed outright.

"Go ahead, my boy," he cried; "here's a bargain; you work with me, and I'll work with you. If we get either Manning or the murderer or both, then either or both rewards shall be yours. I'll be content with what else I can get out of it."

"Done!" and Case Rivers was jubilant. "Perhaps Manning is the murderer," he said, thoughtfully.

"No," I put in. "That won't do. Manning is in love with Miss Raynor, and he wouldn't queer his cause by killing her guardian."

"But Guardy didn't approve of Suitor Manning," Rivers said.

"No; but I know Manning and you don't,—well, that is, I know him only slightly. But I'm sure he's not the man to shoot a financial magnate and a first-class citizen just because he frowned on his suit. Try again, Rivers."

"All right: what you say goes. But I'm just starting in, you know. And, by the way, I'm to get a job of some sort today—yes?"

He looked at me inquiringly, but Wise answered. "Wait a bit, Rivers, as to that. If you'll agree, I'll grubstake you for a fortnight or so, and you can help me. Really, I mean it, for as a stranger you can go to places, and see people, where I can't show my familiar face. Then, when you get the two rewards you can repay me my investment in you. And if you fail to nail the ten thousand, I'll take your note."

"I'll go you!" said Rivers, after a moment's thought. "You're a brick, Penny Wise!"

A tap at the door announced Norah, and with her came Jenny Boyd. Nor was Jenny dragged unwillingly,—she seemed eager to enter,—but her absurd little painted face wore a look of stubbornness and her red lips were shut in a determined pout.

"Jenny knows who 'The Link' is, and she won't tell," Norah declared, as a first bit of information.

"Oh, yes, she will," and Penny Wise winked at the girl. He really gave a very knowing wink, as who should say: "We

understand each other."

As they had never met before, I watched to see just how Jenny would take it, and to my surprise she looked decidedly frightened.

Wise saw this too,—doubtless he brought about the effect purposely,—but in a moment Jenny regained her poise and was her saucy self again.

"I don't know for sure," she said, "and so I don't want to get nobody into trouble by suspicioning them."

"You won't get anybody into trouble," Wise assured her, "unless she has made the trouble for herself. Let's play a game, Jenny,—let's talk in riddles."

Jenny eyed him curiously, and then, as he smiled infectiously, she did, too.

"Now," went on Wise, "this is the game. I don't know, of course, whom you have in mind, and you don't know whom I have in mind, so we'll play the game this way: I'll say, 'I know she is a clever woman.' Now you make a truthful statement about her."

Enthralled by his manner, Jenny said, almost involuntarily, "I know she is a wrong one!"

"I know she's pretty," said Wise.

"I know she isn't!" snapped Jenny.

"I know she is black-haired and dresses well and owns a scarab hatpin."

"I know that, too," and Jenny was breathless with interest.

"No; that won't do. You must know something different from my know."

"Well, I know she's a friend of Mr. Rodman."

"And of Mr. Gately," added Wise.

"Oh, no, sir, I don't think so!" Jenny's surprise was unfeigned.

"Well, I know she's a telegraph girl."

"Yes: and I know she has more money to spend than she gets for a salary."

"I know she's a good girl."

"Oh, yes, sir,—that way. But she—"

"She smokes cigarettes."

"Yes; she does. Oh, I think that's awful."

"Well, it's your turn. You know she's 'The Link'?"

"I know she's been called that, but it isn't a regular nickname, and I don't know what it means."

"Where is she?"

"Her work, you mean?"

"Yes; she's in the company's office,—" Here Jenny whispered the address to Wise.

"Good girl," he commented. "Keep it dark. No use in telling all these people!"

He turned to my telephone, then said: "No, Brice, you do it. Call Headquarters and tell the Chief to arrest,—what's her name, Jenny?"

"I—I didn't say, sir." The girl's caution was returning.

"Say now, then," commanded Wise. "I know, anyway. It begins with S."

"Her first name,—yes, sir."

"And the last name with K. You see I know! So, out with it!"

"Sadie Kent," whispered Jenny, her nerves beginning to go to pieces at realizaton of what she had done.

"Yes, of course. Sadie Kent. Go ahead, Brice. Fix it all up,—and go to the telegraph office yourself. Meet the officers there. Scoot!"

*

I SCOOTED. The strong arm of the law works swiftly when it wills to do so. Within half an hour Sadie Kent was arrested at her key in the telegraph office on charge of stealing confidential telegrams sent by officials in Washington to munition plants and steamship companies and delivering them to persons who she knew would transmit them to the German Foreign Office.

When approached, the girl,—the woman rather,—put up a bold bluff, but it was of no avail. She was taken into custody, and all her appeals for mercy denied. All but one. She begged so hard to be allowed to telephone to her mother that Hudson, who was present, softened.

"You can't, my lady," he said, "but I'll have it done for you. Mr. Brice, now, maybe he'll do it."

"Oh, if you would be so kind," and the beautiful brunette, for she was that, gave me a grateful look. "Just call 83649 Greenwich Square, and ask for Mrs. Kent. Then tell her, please, that—that I won't be home tonight. That's all."

Her voice broke and she sobbed softly in her handkerchief.

They took her away, to be detained pending developments. I made the call and gave the message exactly as she had asked

me. A pleasant voice responded, saying the speaker was Mrs. Kent, and she thanked me for sending word.

*

I HURRIED back to my rooms. Wise and Rivers were still there but Norah and Jenny had left. I had no sooner got my coat off than Zizi came flying in.

"Oh, everybody," she cried, in a whirl of excitement, "Olive's gone! She's kidnaped or abducted or something. A telephone message came and she flew off, telling nobody but Mrs. Vail, and telling her not to tell!"

"Where's she gone?" I cried, flinging back into my coat.

"Nobody knows. I only got it out of Mrs. Vail this minute, and then only by threatening her with all sorts of horrors if she didn't tell me. She doesn't know where Olive's gone,—nobody knows,—but whoever telephoned said he had Amory Manning with him, just for a few moments and for her to come at once if she wanted to see him. A car would come for her at four o'clock, exactly, and she was to get in and ask no questions. And she did —and she told Mrs. Vail that as soon as she got to Mr. Manning she would telephone back,—in about fifteen minutes. And now it's over an hour! and no word from her! That stupid old woman just walks up and down and wrings her hands!"

"I should think she would! Which way shall we look, Wise?"

"I don't know, I'm sure!" and for once the resourceful detective was absolutely at a loss.

"Oh, Penny Wise," and Zizi burst into tears, "if *you* don't know what to do, nobody does! Olive will be killed or held for ransom or some dreadful thing! What *can* we do?"

But the dull silence that fell on us all proved that no one present was able to offer any suggestion.

CHAPTER XIII
Olive's Adventure

"GIVE me a handkerchief, somebody!" commanded Zizi, and not without reason, for her own tiny wisp of cambric was nothing but a wet ball, which she was futilely dabbing into her big black eyes.

I hurried into my bedroom and hastily grabbed a fresh handkerchief from a drawer, which I brought to the excited girl.

"Thanks," she said, as she grasped it and plied it diligently; "now, men, we must get busy! It's after five o'clock, Olive went away before four,—anything may have happened to her—we *must* rescue her!"

"We will!" exclaimed Case Rivers, showing more energy than I knew he possessed. "What about 'The Link,' Mr. Brice?"

As quickly as I could, I detailed what had happened at the telegraph office, where Sadie Kent had been taken into custody by Hudson's men.

"Did she go quietly?" asked Penny Wise.

"She did not!" I returned; "she put up a fearful fight, tore up a lot of papers from a desk drawer, and lit into the policemen like a tiger cat! She tried to bite Hudson, and yet, he was the one who kind-heartedly let her telephone to her mother."

"What!" cried Rivers, "he let her do that!"

"I did it myself, really," I said; and I told how Sadie had begged for the privilege.

"There you are!" Rivers said, positively. "That telephone message was not to her mother!"

"But I called her up," I explained, "and she said she was Mrs. Kent."

"That may be," and Rivers shook his head; "but, don't you see, that was a code call,—a warning. The person who received it, mother or grandmother, caught on to the state of things and set machinery in motion that resulted in the kidnaping of Miss Raynor."

"What for?" I asked, blankly.

"Revenge, probably, but there may be other villainies afoot. Am I right, Mr. Wise?"

"Yes, and mighty quick-witted. Then the next step is to go to the 'mother's' house."

"Yes, if we can trace it. It may be a call within a call; I mean, the number Mr. Brice got may be merely a go-between—a link —"

"Try it, anyway," implored Zizi; "every minute is precious. I'm so afraid for Miss Olive. You know, she's spunky,—she won't submit easily to restraint, and you don't know what they may do to her!"

"Get Information first," directed Wise, as I started for the telephone. "Find the address of the number you called. You remember it?"

"Yes; of course." And in a few moments I learned that the house was down in Washington Square.

"Get a taxi," said Zizi, already putting on her long black cape, which swirled round the slender figure as she flung one end over her shoulder.

She flew to a mirror, and was dabbing her straight little nose with a powder-puff as she talked.

"We'll all go down there, and I don't think we'll have to look any further. Miss Olive is there,—I'm dead sure! Held by the enemy! But she's game, and I don't believe we'll be too late, if we hustle like a house afire!"

And so, with the greatest speed consistent with safety, we taxied down to the house in Washington Square.

The Kent apartment was on the third floor, and as Zizi dashed up the stairs, not waiting for the elevator, we three men followed her.

Zizi's ring at the bell brought a middle-aged woman to the door, who looked at us rather blankly.

I was about to speak, when Zizi, insinuating her small self through the partly opened door, said softly:

"We've a message from 'The Link.'"

It acted like magic, and the woman's face changed to an expression of welcome and serious anxiety, as we all went in.

It was rather a pretentious apartment, with fine furnishings in ornate taste. We saw no one save the woman who admitted us, and heard no sound from other rooms.

"You expected it?" and Zizi's air of secret understanding was perfect.

"Expected what?" said Mrs. Kent, sharply, for she was apparently on her guard.

"Sadie's arrest," and Zizi's black eyes narrowed as she looked keenly at the other.

But the woman was not to be trapped. She glanced at us each in turn, and seemed to conclude we were not friendly visitors for all Zizi's pretense.

"I know nothing of any arrest," she said, evenly; "I think you have mistaken the house."

"I think not," and Penny Wise looked at her sternly. "Your bluff won't go, madam,—Sadie, 'The Link,' is arrested, and the game is up. Will you answer questions or will you wait until you, too, are arrested?"

"I have nothing to say," she mumbled, but her voice trembled, and her nerve was deserting her. Inadvertently she glanced toward the closed door of the next room, and Zizi's quick eyes followed the glance.

"Is Miss Raynor in there?" she flung out so quickly that Mrs. Kent gasped. But she recovered her poise at once and said, "I don't know what you mean,—I don't know any Miss Raynor."

"Oh, tut, tut!" and Zizi grinned at her; "don't tell naughty stories! Why, I hear Miss Raynor's voice!"

She didn't at all, but as she listened, with her head cocked on one side, like a saucy bird, Mrs. Kent's face showed fear, and she listened also.

A muffled scream was heard,—not loud, but clearly a cry for help.

Without further parley, Rivers made a dash for the door and though it was locked, he smashed into the rather flimsy panel and the old hinges gave way.

There, in the adjoining room was Olive Raynor, a handkerchief tied across her mouth and her angry eyes flashing with rage.

Holding her arm was George Rodman, who was evidently trying to intimidate her, but without complete success.

Zizi flew to Olive's side, and snatched off the handkerchief.

Rodman was perfectly cool. "Let that lady alone," he said; "she is my affianced wife."

"Affianced grandmother!" retorted Zizi. "You can't put that over, Mr. Rodman!"

"Save me!" Olive said, looking from me to Penny Wise and back again. Her glance fell on Rivers, but returned to me, as her face assumed a look of agony.

I couldn't quite understand, as she must know that with us all there her danger was past.

"Are you his betrothed?" Case Rivers said, bluntly.

"No!" Olive replied, in an indignant tone; "never!"

"Then—" and Rivers seemed about to remove Rodman's hand from Olive's arm by force, but Rodman himself spoke up:

"One moment, please," he said, quietly, and bending over, he whispered in Olive's ear.

She turned deathly white, her lips quivered, and she seemed about to fall. Whatever the brief words were, they wrought a marvelous change in the girl's attitude. She lost her air of

defiant wrath, and seemed a helpless, hopeless victim of the man who held her.

"Are you engaged to me?" Rodman said, looking at Olive, with a threatening scowl.

"Yes," she managed to whisper, but so agonized was her face that it was palpable she spoke under coercion.

I was uncertain what to do; Wise, too, looked nonplussed, but Rivers, though a stranger to Olive, seemed imbued with an irresistible chivalry, and drawing nearer to her, he said:

"Is that man forcing you to say that against your will?"

Rodman's grip tightened on Olive's arm, and his glowering face looked sternly into hers. She made no reply in words, but her piteous glance told all too clearly that Rivers' assumption was correct.

And yet, what could we do? Olive had assented to Rodman's assertion, and we could scarcely demand a girl from her fiancÃ©.

Zizi mastered the situation by saying, triumphantly: "We've got 'The Link!' She's under arrest!"

"What!" cried Olive, and then, dropping her arm, Rodman whirled toward her:

"There!" he cried, "your secret is out! Unless—" He made a gesture as if to put his arm round her.

With a cry of revulsion, Olive shrank from him, and her face showed that she preferred his threatening attitude to his endearing one.

"You let that lady alone, unless she desires your attentions," said Rivers, his innate desire to protect a woman in distress showing in his repressed eagerness to get at Rodman.

"You mind your own business!" shouted Rodman, angrily, as he put out his arm and drew Olive to him. "You're mine, now, aren't you, dearie?"

The disgust on the girl's face, and the shrinking of her form as she tried to draw away from the leering face so near hers was too much for Rivers. He assumed a threatening attitude, and said, "You take your hands off that lady! She doesn't want—"

In defiance, Rodman drew Olive nearer, and raising her bowed head was about to kiss her angry, beautiful face, when she uttered a despairing scream.

That was the match in the powder-keg!

Unable to hold back longer, Rivers sprang forward and wrenched Olive from Rodman's grasp.

With a snarl, Rodman lunged at Rivers, who deftly stopped him with an uppercut. Rodman came back with a smashing facer, and Rivers replied in kind.

Zizi, who had flown to Olive's side, and was tenderly soothing her, watched the two men, breathlessly. Something savage in her nature responded to the combat, and she flushed and paled alternately as one or the other of the angry men seemed to have the upper hand.

Olive hid her face in her hands, not wanting to look, but Zizi was with the fight, heart and soul.

It was give and take, with such rapidity that I trembled for Rivers' safety. Rodman was a formidable antagonist, and far heavier than the gaunt man who met and returned his blows.

But Rivers was skilled, and made up in technique what he lacked in strength.

So desperate was the struggle, so blindly furious the two men, that Pennington Wise and I were fearful of results. With a simultaneous impulse we made a dash to separate the combatants, but were obliged to get back quickly to save ourselves from the rain of blows.

Never had I seen such a wild, unbridled fight compressed into such a short time, and I wondered what Rivers had been in a fighting way before he lost his identity.

Fighting and boxing had never been favorite forms of entertainment with me, but this contest absorbed me. It was primitive, instinctive,—the rage of Rodman pitted against the angry indignation of Rivers.

I had not thought of the latter as a weakling, but neither had I looked upon him as a strong man, and I should have judged that in a bout with Rodman he would have gone under.

But not so; his lean, gaunt frame was full of latent strength, his bony fists full of dexterity.

He rushed in, fell back, sidestepped, with the dazzling quickness of a trained fighter. He showed knowledge and skill that amazed me.

Rodman, too, fought for all he was worth, but he impressed me as being not an experienced fighter,—and not a fair one.

Wise, too, was watching Rivers with wonder and admiration, and he also kept his alert gaze on Rodman.

Fascinated, we watched as Rodman clinched, and Rivers with a smile, almost of contempt, threw him off. Then Rodman, bellowing like an angry bull, made a head-on rush for Rivers, who neatly sidestepped, letting his furious antagonist have it on the side of his head.

Even this didn't knock any sense into Rodman, and he was about to plunge again, when Wise, seeing a chance, said:

"Now, Brice!"

Springing in, I hooked my arm around Rivers' neck, and yanked him away from Rodman, now struggling, half-spent, in Wise's grasp.

"Let up, Rivers!" I cried, sternly; "what do you mean?"

He glared at me, not sensing what I said, and then, Rodman, breaking loose, came at him madly, Rivers slithered out of my clutch and caught the other a smashing blow on the ear. This, landing just as Rodman was off his balance from his break-away from Wise, spun him around and sent him down with a crash which knocked all the fight out of him, and he made but a half-hearted attempt to rise.

Satisfied, Rivers turned to me, and then, with a half-apologetic glance at Olive, murmured: "Sorry! Couldn't help it, Miss Raynor. Brute!"

The last was addressed to his fallen foe, and was met by a vindictive glance, but no other retort.

Rodman, however, was pulling himself together and we were of one mind as to our next procedure, which was to get Olive Raynor away from that house.

"Beat it," Wise decreed; "you're a good one, Mr. Rivers! My hat's off to you. Now, if you're fit, and you look it, will you and Mr. Brice take Miss Raynor home, and I'll stay here and clear up this little disturbance. Hop along with them, Ziz; I'll join you all at the house as soon as I can."

The faithful taxi was waiting, and Rivers and I put the two girls in, and followed them. Rivers was very quiet and seemed preoccupied. He looked not at all like a conqueror, and I guessed that the fight had stirred some chord of remembrance, and he was now struggling with his lost memory. In silence we went most of the way home.

Before we reached the house, however, he shook off his reverie with an impatient gesture that said, as clearly as words could have done, that he had failed to catch the elusive thread that bound him to the past and that he had returned to the present.

Olive saw it, too, and putting out her hand, said, frankly:

"I owe you deep gratitude, Mr. Rivers. I suppose I was in no real danger, with you men there, but I must confess I was glad to have that wretch punished."

Her lovely face glowed with righteous indignation, and Zizi's pert little countenance showed deep satisfaction.

"You gave it to him, good and plenty, Mr. Rivers," she fairly crowed; "it was a treat to see you put it all over him! Now, you've knocked him out physically, Penny Wise will mop up the

floor with him mentally and morally! What did he do to you, Miss Olive? Why did he make you say you were his girl?"

The look of agony returned to Olive's face, as if she had just recollected what the man had said to her.

"He threatened me," she said, slowly; "with an awful threat! I can't think about it! Oh, I don't know what to do! I can't tell it—I can't tell it to anybody—"

"Wait till you get home," I counseled her, and Rivers added, "And wait till Mr. Wise comes. He's the man you must tell, and he will advise you. But, I say, we're getting at things, eh, Brice? 'The Link' under arrest, Wise onto Rodman, and he won't let go of him, either, and Miss Raynor safe,—whew! I feel as if we should just forge ahead now!"

"Sure we will!" declared Zizi, her little face glowing with anticipation. "Never you mind. Miss Olive, dear; whatever that man threatened, Penny Wise will look after him."

"But—" began Olive, and then stopped, for we had reached her home.

"Oh, my darling child," exclaimed Mrs. Vail, as we went in, "where have you been? I've been nearly crazy!"

I think we all felt a sudden twinge of shame, for none of us had thought to relieve the poor lady's suspense as to Olive's fate! We ought to have telephoned, at least. But she was now smiling and happy at the safe return of her charge and eager to know all the details of the adventure.

Both Olive and Zizi went off with Mrs. Vail, who was chattering volubly, and I was left alone with Rivers.

"The fight,—on which let me congratulate you,—stirred some old memory?" I said, inquiringly.

"For a few moments, yes;" he returned, looking deeply thoughtful. "But it was both vague and evanescent, I couldn't nail it. Oh!" and he made an impatient gesture, "it is maddening! I seem just on the edge of complete recollection,—and, then,—it's gone again, and my mind is a positive blank regarding it. But, it's no use worrying, Brice," and he spoke cheerfully, "I'm sure it will come, some day. Until then I shall be Case Rivers, and if I die under the name, I'll try, at least, not to disgrace it."

"You didn't disgrace it today," I said, heartily. "You put up a first-class fight, and in a righteous cause."

"I couldn't stand it to see Miss Raynor bullied by that brute," he returned, simply, "and then, too, I felt a natural antagonism toward him on my own account. No," as I started to speak, "I know what you're going to say, and I don't think I knew him before I lost my memory. Maybe I did, but it wasn't that that startled me to thinking back. It was something else,—some other impression, that made me have a fraction of a reminiscence of something,—oh, I don't know what, but I'm going to take it as an omen of future good fortune."

CHAPTER XIV
Where is Manning?

"YOU'RE to stay for dinner," a voice said, speaking from the shadows at the other end of the long room.

As I looked toward it, Zizi's little white face gleamed between the portiÃ¨res, and in another moment she slid through and was at my side.

"Miss Raynor says so, and Mrs. Vail adds her invitation. They're going to keep Penny Wise when he returns, and Miss Raynor—"

"Miss Raynor wants to thank Mr. Rivers for his good work," and Olive herself followed in Zizi's footsteps. She was smiling now, but her lips were tremulous and her eyes showed unshed tears.

"Nothing to thank me for," returned Case Rivers, quickly, "on the contrary, I want to apologize for such an exhibition of wrath before a lady. But I confess I lost all self-control when I saw that brute intimidating you. If you absolve me of offense, I am thoroughly glad I did him up! And you do?"

"Indeed, yes!" and Olive's frank gaze was sincere but sad, too. "I was terribly frightened,—and,—I am still."

"Why?" cried Rivers, abruptly, and then added, "but I've no right to ask."

"Yes, you have," Olive assured him, "but—I've no right to tell you. Mr. Rodman holds a threat over my head, and—and—"

Just then Wise arrived, and Mrs. Vail came into the room with him.

Olive welcomed him gladly, and then, as dinner was announced, we all went to the dining-room.

"No discussion of our momentous affairs while we eat," Wise commanded, and so we enjoyed the occasion as if it were a social affair.

The conversation was interesting, for Pennington Wise was a well-informed man and a good *raconteur*; Rivers proved to be most entertaining and clever at repartee; and though Olive was very quiet, Mrs. Vail kept up an amusing chatter, and Zizi was her own elfin self and flung out bits of her odd talk at intervals.

We returned to the big library for coffee, and then, almost abruptly, Wise began to question Olive as to her adventure that afternoon.

"Mr. Rivers was quite right," he said, "in assuming the telephone call sent by Sadie Kent to her 'mother' was a trick. Mighty clever of you," he turned to Rivers, "and it led to the arrest of Rodman. The woman called Mrs. Kent is not Sadie's mother, but a companion in crime. For Sadie, 'The Link,' is a criminal and a deep one! But first, Miss Raynor, let us have your story."

"When I answered the telephone call," Olive began, "a man's voice said, rather brusquely, 'We have Amory Manning here. If you want to see him, come here at once.' I said,—of course, I was terribly excited,—'Where are you? who are you?' The voice replied, 'Never mind all that. You have to make quick decision.

If you want to see Manning, a taxi will call for you in five minutes. Tell nobody, or you will queer the whole game. Do you consent?' I may not give his exact words, but that was his general meaning. I had to think quickly; I *did* want to see Mr. Manning, and I feared no harm. So I said I agreed to all the stipulations, I would tell no one, and I would go in the taxicab that would come for me."

"But you told me," put in Mrs. Vail, who liked to feel her importance.

"Yes," went on Olive, "I felt I must leave some word, for I had an uneasy feeling that all was not right. If Amory Manning was there, why didn't he telephone himself? But, I reasoned, he might be, well—in fact, I thought he was,—held for ransom, and in that case I was ready and willing to pay it. So, I said nothing to Zizi, for I knew she would tell—"

"Wow! Yes!" came from Zizi's corner, where she sat on a low ottoman.

"And so, I went alone. The taxi was at the curb when I left this house. I got in, and was taken to the house in Washington Square. I felt no fear until, after Mrs. Kent admitted me, she showed me into a room where I found myself confronted by Mr. Rodman. Mrs. Kent remained with me, but I saw at once she was not friendly.

"'Where is Mr. Manning?' I asked. Mr. Rodman only laughed rudely and said he hadn't the slightest idea. And then I knew it was all a trap,—but I didn't know *why* I was tricked there. And then," Olive paused, and a deep blush came over her face, but

she shook her head and went bravely on, "then he tried to make love to me. I appealed to Mrs. Kent, but she only laughed scornfully at my distress. He said if I would marry him he would protect me from all suspicion of being implicated in—in the death of my guardian! Of course, that didn't scare me, and I told him I wasn't suspected now, by anybody. Then he dropped that line of argument and told me if I didn't marry him,—he would—oh, that part I can't tell!"

"Blackmail!" said Wise, looking at her intently.

"Yes," she replied, "and it was an awful threat! Then, he saw I was indignant and not to be intimidated—oh, I pretended to be much more courageous than I really was,—and he began to talk more politely and very seriously. He said, if I would call off Mr. Wise and make no further effort to run down my uncle's murderer, he would send me home safely, and molest me no further. I wouldn't agree to this; and then he grew ugly again, and lost his temper, and—oh, he talked dreadfully!" Olive shuddered at the recollection, and her lips quivered.

With quick sympathy, Zizi moved noiselessly from her place, and, kneeling at Olive's side, took her hand. With a grateful glance at the comforting little fingers caressing her own, Olive went on:

"He stormed and he threatened me, and that Kent woman joined in and said terrible things! And I was so frightened I couldn't pretend I wasn't any longer,—and I didn't know what to do! And then the bell rang, and Mrs. Kent went to the door, and as I looked hopeful,—I suppose, for I welcomed the thought of

anybody's coming,—Mr. Rodman threw a handkerchief around my mouth and tied it behind my head. 'There, my lady,' he said, 'you won't scream for help quite as quickly as you planned to!' And I couldn't make a sound! Then, when I heard familiar voices,—Zizi's and Mr. Wise's, I knew I *must* make myself heard, and with a desperate effort, I got out a groan or wail for help, though that awful man stood over me with his hand raised to strike me!"

"You poor darling!" exclaimed Mrs. Vail, putting her arm round Olive, "it was fearful! Why, once I heard of a case like that—no, I read it in a book,—and the girl fainted!"

"Well, I didn't faint, but I almost collapsed from sheer fright lest I couldn't make a loud enough sound to be heard by you people."

"Oh, we were coming!" said Zizi, "I saw by the old hen's face she had you boxed up in there, and I was going to do some ground and lofty yelling myself, if Mr. Rivers hadn't smashed in the door just as he did."

"I couldn't hold back," said Rivers, "I gave way to a blind impulse,—and I'm glad I did!"

"I'm glad, too," and Olive gave him a grateful smile.

"But then," cried Zizi, "he made you say you were engaged to him—"

"Yes," and Olive paled as with fear. "I can't tell about that—"

"You said you weren't, and then he whispered to you, and then you said you were," went on Zizi, remorselessly reviewing the scene.

"I know it,—but—oh, don't ask me! Perhaps, I'll tell—later,—if I have to,—but—I can't—I can't."

Olive's head drooped on Zizi's shoulder, and the eerie little voice said, "There, there,—don't talk any more now, Miss Olive, dear. Penny Wise, you carry on the conversation from this point."

"All right," said Wise, "I'll tell my story. George Rodman is in the hands of the police, but I doubt very much if they can prove anything on him. He's a sly proposition, and covers his tracks mighty well. Moreover, as to the murder of Mr. Gately, Rodman has a perfect alibi."

"Your First Lessons in Sleuthing always say, 'distrust the perfect alibi,'" murmured Zizi, without looking up from her occupation of smoothing Olive's softly banded hair.

"Yes,—manufactured ones. But in this case there seems to be no question. A Federal detective, who has had his eye on Rodman for some time, was in Rodman's office at the very time Mr. Gately was killed."

"But Mr. Rodman went down on the same elevator I did, soon after the shooting," I exclaimed.

"How soon after?"

"Less than half an hour. And Rodman got on at the seventh floor."

"That's all right, the Federal Office man knows that. They went down together from the tenth,—Rodman's floor,—to the seventh, and then after they looked after something there, Rodman went on down alone."

"All right," I said, for I knew that Wise and the Federal Detective were not being hoodwinked by any George Rodman!

"And here's the situation," Wise went on; "Sadie Kent is a German telegraph spy. She is called 'The Link,' because she has been an important link in the German spy system. A trusted employee and an expert operator of long experience, she has stolen information from hundreds of telegrams and turned it over to a man who transmitted it to Berlin by a secret avenue of communication. A telegram has been sent to Washington asking for a presidential warrant to hold her until the case can be investigated. She is also one large and emphatic wildcat! She bites and scratches with feline ferocity, and is under strong and careful restrictions."

"And she is the one," I said, "whose identity we learned from Jenny—and,—oh, yes, whose identity you guessed, Mr. Wise, from some cigarette stubs, and—"

"Oh, I say," Wise interrupted me, shortly, "we must get the truth from her by quizzing, not by clews. We've arrested her, now, and—"

Olive stirred uneasily, and Zizi, after a quick, intelligent glance at Wise, which he answered by a nod, rose to her feet, and urged Olive to rise and go with her.

"You're all in, Miss Olive," she said, gently, "and I'm going to take you off to sleepy-by. Tell the nice gentlemen good-night, and come along with your Zizi-zoo. Upsy-diddy, now," and smilingly, Zizi persuaded Olive to go with her. "You come, too, Mrs. Vail," Zizi added, because, I noticed, of an almost

imperceptible nod from Wise in the elder lady's direction. "We just simpully can't get along without you."

Pleased at the flattering necessity for her presence, Mrs. Vail went from the room with the two girls. "I'll be back," she called out to us, as she left the room.

"She won't," said Wise, decidedly, after the sound of footsteps died away, "Zizi'll look out for that. Now, Brice, I've important new information. I didn't want to divulge it before Miss Raynor, tonight, for she has had about all she can bear today. But it begins to look as if Sadie Kent sold her stolen telegrams to Rodman, and he—can't you guess?"

"No," I said, blankly, and Rivers said, "Tell us."

"Why, I believe he turned them over to Gately."

"Gately! Amos Gately mixed up in spy business! Man, you're crazy!"

"Crazy does it, then! Haven't we positive proof that Sadie Kent was in Gately's office the day he was killed?"

"How?" I said, wonderingly. "Did she kill him?"

"Lord, no! But didn't I size her up from the hatpin? and didn't your girl trace the powder-paper? and didn't we see cigarette stubs with the S.K. monogram,—in Mr. Gately's private office,—and his own cigar stubs there, too, as if she had been there in intimate chat!"

"Are you sure about the powder-paper?" I cried, impressed by the realization of Norah's hand in the discovery.

"Yes; we know, at least, that she has bought them from that shop. You see, she has lots of money beside her salary from the

telegraph company."

"Rather!" said Rivers, "if she's selling Government secrets!"

"Well," I said, after the whole disclosure began to sink into my brain, "if Sadie Kent sat around in Mr. Gately's office, smoking and chatting, with her hat off, and her powder-papers in evidence, she was pretty friendly with him!"

"Of course she was," and Wise looked grave. "That's what I dread to tell Miss Raynor. For it implicates Amos Gately in some way; either he is mixed up in the spy racket,—or—Miss Kent was his friend—socially!"

"Oh, come now," I said, "don't let's say that sort of thing."

"But, my dear man, unpleasant though it be to assume an intimacy between the bank president and the handsome telegraph girl,—yet, isn't that preferable,—to—"

"To brand him with the shameful suspicion of receiving spy secrets!" Rivers completed the sentence. "Yes, it is! The most disgraceful revelations of a liaison would be as nothing compared with the ignominy of spy work!"

"I know that," I hastened to explain myself, "but I can't connect either disgrace with Amos Gately! You didn't know him, Wise, and you, Rivers, didn't either. Nor did I know him personally,—but I did know,—and do know, that no breath of suspicion can be attached to Amos Gately's whole career! Why, he was a synonym for all that is best in finance, in politics, in society! I'm glad you didn't hint this before Olive Raynor! It would have crushed the poor child."

"She'll have to learn it sooner or later," and Wise shook his head. "There's no doubt about it in my mind. You see, 'The Link' usually took her news to Rodman and he secretly, and by means of the secret elevator, carried it to Gately who gave it over to the agents of the German Government."

"Do you know this?" asked Rivers.

"I couldn't get Rodman to admit it, but when I taxed him with something of the sort, he flew into such a rage that I'm sure I struck the truth."

"Where's Rodman now?"

"The Department of Justice has his case in hand. They'll look after him. But I don't see how we can connect him with the murder of Gately. I don't for a minute doubt he'd be quite capable of it, but he wasn't there at the time."

"Was Sadie Kent?" and Rivers frowned thoughtfully.

"Not at the time of the shooting. Brice, here, can testify to that."

"Not unless she was in hiding," I said, "and she wasn't, for I looked in the cupboards and all that. We seem to have proved Sadie there before the murderer was, but I don't suspect her of shooting Gately."

"Nor I," agreed Wise, "but it was unusual for her to go to Mr. Gately's office. It must be that she had grown more daring of late, and had some hold over Gately, so that she felt safe in going there."

"Can't they get all that out of Sadie?"

"She's a slippery sort. She pretends to speak frankly, but what she tells means little and is misleading."

"Where is she?"

"For the moment, down at Kenilworth House. Detained there till they're sure of the persons working with her."

"She'll get away," said Rivers, "she ought to be in jail."

Now it was a strange thing, but this casual prophecy of Rivers' was fulfilled the very next day!

*

I WAS in my office, absorbedly conversing with Norah on the all-engrossing subject of the Gately case, when Zizi dashed in.

"Alone I did it!" she exclaimed, and tossing the folds of her voluminous black cape over her shoulder, she folded her arms and assumed the attitude of Napoleon; scowling from under her heavy black brows, though her eyes were dancing.

"What have you done?" I asked, while Norah gazed enchanted at the dramatic little figure.

"Returned the missing 'Link' to her rightful owners!"

"What! Sadie?"

"The same. You know, Mr. Rivers said she'd break loose from that Whatchacallit House, and make trouble—also, which she done!"

"Tell us about it," I urged.

"That's what I'm here for. Mr. Wise sent me to tell you that,—and a lot of other messages. Well," and Zizi's black eyes snapped with satisfaction, "somebody called this morning to see Miss Raynor. And that somebody was none other than Sadie, 'The Link!' She sent up a different name,—I forget what, now,—and

Miss Olive went down to see her. And she blackmailed Miss Olive good and plenty! You see, little Ziz was listening from behind a convenient portiÃ¨re, and I heard it all. The whole idea was that if Miss Olive would quit all investigations, there would be no tales told. But if she kept up her detective work,—that is, if she kept Mr. Wise on the job, then revelations would be made about her guardian, Mr. Gately, that Sadie said would blast his name forever. Olive seemed to understand just what these revelations were, for she didn't ask, but she was scared to pieces, and was about ready to give in when I slid into the game. But,—before I joined the confab I called up Penny Wise on an upstairs telephone and invited him to come along hastily and bring a squad of policemen or something that could hold that 'Link'!

"Then I sauntered into the library, where the blackmailing session was being held, and I stood by. We had a war of words,—'The Link' and I,—but it didn't amount to much, for I was really only sparring for time till Penny Wise blew in. But I kept Miss Olive quiet, and I gave 'The Link' a song and dance that made her think some! I told her we knew she wrote the blackmailing letter to Miss Olive, signed 'A Friend,' and that she could be jailed for that! She wilted some, but carried it off with a high hand and soon Penny came and he had his little helpers along. They were in uniform, and they seemed mighty glad to get back their long-lost friend and comrade, 'The Link'!"

"You clever little piece!" cried Norah, "to think of your getting that girl again, after she had broken loose! Didn't they

appreciate it?"

"Yes," and Zizi smiled, modestly; "but it's all in the day's work. I don't care much about appreciation, except from Mr. Wise."

She had thrown off her long cloak, and her slender, lithe little figure leaned over the back of a chair. "But," she cried, twirling round suddenly to me, "I did do one more little trick! When they were taking Sadie away, I sidled up to her, and—oh, well, I s'pose I am a direct descendant of some light-fingered gentry,—I picked her pocket!"

"What did you get?"

"Her pocket,—by which I mean her little leather hand-bag, was never out of her hand for a minute! The way she hung on to it,—fairly clutched it,—made me think it contained something of interest to our side. So I just picked it on general principles. And I got the goods!"

"What?" cried Norah and I together.

"Some stuff in code, or in cipher,—I dunno just what it was. But Penny took it, and he's tickled to death to get it. Gibberish, of course, but he'll make it out. He's clever at ciphers, and it will likely be the final proof of 'The Link's' perfidy,—and,—" here Zizi's head drooped, and her eyes saddened,—"maybe it will show up Mr. Gately or—"

"Or whom?"

"You know! But," she brightened again, "here's something else yet! I'm on the job day and night, you know, and, if you inquire of me, I'd just as lief spill it to you, that Miss Olive is a whole lot interested in that fascinating Mr. Rivers!"

"Oh, now," and Norah looked reproof at the saucy, smiling girl, "Miss Raynor is the *fiancÃ©e* of Amory Manning."

"Nixy! she told me she never was engaged to Mr. Manning. And when I tease her about Mr. Rivers, she blushes the loveliest pink you ever saw, and says, 'Oh, Zizi, don't be a silly!' but then she sits and waits for me to be a silly again!"

"But she hasn't seen Rivers half a dozen times," I said, smiling at Zizi's flight of imagination.

"That's nothing," she scoffed; "if ever there was a case of love at first sight, those two have got it! They don't really know it themselves yet, but if Amory Manning wants Miss Olive, he'd better come out of hiding and win her while the winning's good! And it's my belief he'd be too late now! And here's a straw to show which way that wind blows. The picture of Mr. Manning that was on Miss Olive's dresser has disappeared!"

"That may not mean anything," I said, for I didn't think it right to encourage Zizi's romancing.

"But I asked Miss Olive about it, and she hesitated and stammered, and never did say why she had put it away. And, too, you ought to see her eyes smile when she expects Mr. Rivers to call! He's making a lace pattern for her, and they have to discuss it a lot! OhÃ©, oho!"

The mischievous little face took on a gentle, tender look and Norah smiled with the sympathy of one who, like all the rest of the world, loves a lover.

"But," I said, musingly, "none of this brings us any nearer to the discovery of Amos Gately's murderer, or to the discovery of

Amory Manning,—which are the two ends and aims of our present existence."

"Did it ever occur to you, Mr. Brice,"—Zizi's face grew very serious,—"that those two quests will lead you to the same man?"

I looked at her,—stunned to silence.

Then, as suddenly shocked into speech, "No!" I fairly shouted, "it never did!"

CHAPTER XV
Wise's Pipe Dream

THE mystery was a baffling one. I learned from Pennington Wise that he had a pipe dream that Amory Manning had killed Amos Gately.

But, save for the faithful Zizi, he could find no one to share his suspicion. It was too absurd. In the first place, had Manning done the deed, he never would have hung around the scene of the crime as he did, for nearly an hour. I remembered perfectly his demeanor and expression, as I saw him, with Olive Raynor that afternoon. He was deeply concerned, greatly shocked, and most considerate and thoughtful of Olive, but there was no shadow of guilt on his fine, strong face.

I had looked at him closely both during the excitement of the tragedy itself, and later, as we were in the street-car, and I noted his grave, serious countenance, but though he seemed puzzled and anxious, there was no mark of Cain on his brow.

I told Wise this, and he listened, duly impressed, but, as he finally owned up, he saw no other way to look.

"It wasn't Rodman," he asserted; "that chap is a traitor and a spy, but he's no murderer. And, too, he was in cahoots with Gately, and the last thing he wanted was to lose his patron. It wasn't Sadie, of course; she too, wanted Gately alive, not dead. I know the unwillingness of Olive's guardian to listen to

Manning's suit, seems a slight motive,—yet where can we find a suspect with a stronger one?"

"We haven't as yet," I returned, "but there must be people implicated in that spy business,—if that's a true bill against Gately—"

"Oh, it's a true bill, all right. Amos Gately was a wolf in sheep's clothing! Miss Raynor will have to know it sooner or later. She really knows it now, but she won't let herself believe it."

"What about that paper Zizi took from Sadie Kent?"

"That's what I'm working on. Meet me this afternoon at the Raynor house, and I may be able to tell you."

The big, cheerful library at Olive's house had come to be our general meeting-place of an afternoon. I usually dropped in there about four o'clock, and was pretty sure to find Wise or Rivers or both there. Zizi was a whole vaudeville show herself, and Olive was always cordial and hospitable. Mrs. Vail, too, was a gentle old lady, and I had grown to like her.

*

SO I went, as Wise suggested, and found him poring over the mysterious paper.

Looking at it for the first time, I saw merely a lot of letters, pen-written, and arranged in long rows that ran clear across the sheet.

There were perhaps twenty rows or so, and each row held about thirty letters. They were carefully aligned and evenly spaced, and, without doubt, contained a hidden message.

"I've unraveled a lot of cryptograms in my time," said Wise, "but this isn't a cryptogram. I mean it isn't in cipher code,—there's some other way of getting at it."

We all studied it. Olive, Zizi, Wise, and I bent our heads over the table where it lay, while Mrs. Vail looked on from a little distance, and babbled about some man she knew once, who could solve secret writings.

Suddenly Zizi jumped up, and running around the table, viewed the paper from the other side.

She cocked her funny little head sidewise, and then wagged it knowingly as she took a few steps further and looked at the paper from another angle. All round the table she went, and finally, with a murmur of apology, took up the paper and held it laterally in front of her eager eyes.

"Whee!" she crowed in an ecstasy of satisfaction; "I've got it! You have to have a pattern to read it by."

"A pattern!" I repeated, blankly.

"Yep! A paper with holes in it,—a key-paper."

"Oh!" and Wise looked as if a light had burst upon him. "That's it, Ziz! You're the wonder-child, after all! Stoo-pid! Stoo-pid!" and he beat his forehead in self-abasement. "And, oh! I say, Brice, what did you tell me once about Swiss cheese?"

"Swiss cheese?"

"Yes; don't you remember? A carriage-call check—with holes in it."

"Oh, that thing. Yes; it was on Mr. Gately's desk,—Hudson, the foxy detective, took it."

"Can we get it?"

"Of course, by sending for it."

"I'll go!" cried Zizi; "where? Headquarters?" and she was already flinging on her coat.

"Let her go," said Wise, giving the girl a quick, appreciative glance. "She'll beat any other messenger, and she'll find it."

We heard Zizi's imperative little voice demanding a cab from the telephone, and a bit later heard the street door close behind her.

"You see," and Wise explained it to us, "Zizi noticed,—and then I did,—these letters. At first glance they seem to be perfectly regular, but noted closely there are some, here and there, that are a microscopic fraction of space nearer or farther away from others. And that shows what kind of a cipher it is. We may be mistaken about the carriage check, but I truly believe when we get it we can read the message this paper carries. We certainly can't without it."

This was so true that we laid the paper aside until the return of our winged Mercury.

She came soon, and waved triumphantly the perforated card she had gone in quest of.

"Here you are!" she cried; "let me try it as a reward for getting it."

"All right, go to it," said Wise, and flinging off her cape, Zizi bent over the puzzle.

"It's it! It's it!" she cried, exultantly. "See, oh, Wise One!"

The detective took the paper and the card.

"You see," he said, generously sharing the first sight of the solution with us, "this card has seven holes, at irregular distances. By placing it in the right position on this solid bank of letters, certain ones show through the holes, and these,—I hope,—will spell the message."

And it did. After re-adjusting the key card several times, Wise finally got it right, and the letters that could be seen through the holes in this card, as he moved it along, spelled coherent words and sentences. Of course, the other letters were not to be used.

He read the message aloud, and as we suspected, it was information concerning the shipment of munitions, and told of certain sailing dates.

"Spy work of the cleverest type," Wise exclaimed; "you see, 'The Link' got her information from stolen telegrams, and recorded it in this way, so it would be unintelligible to anyone not having this card,—or a duplicate of it."

I scrutinized with interest the letters as they showed clearly through the little round holes.

"The information is of no particular value now," Wise said; "it refers to yesterday as the sailing date. The point is, that this card,—this key card, was found on—"

He paused: a glance at Olive's agonized face stopped the words he would have uttered. But we all knew. That card, found on Amos Gately's desk, or in his desk drawer, proved that he was implicated in the interception of these messages, that he was guilty of treason to his country!

Wise tried to help matters by saying, hastily, "Perhaps it was a plant! Perhaps this card was put where it was found by some sly scoundrel for the purpose of misleading—"

"Don't!" said Olive, faintly; "you are kind, Mr. Wise, but you are saying that merely to give me a ray of comfort and hope. You know better. You believe,—and I fear I must believe,—my guardian was involved in some wrong, some grave wrong—and —"

She broke down utterly and sobbed in Zizi's arms which were opened to receive her.

*

FEELING that our further stay was an intrusion, Rivers and I took leave, and Wise came along with us. We three went down to my rooms, and continued our confab without the embarrassment of Olive's presence.

"It's clearing itself up pretty quickly in some respects," Wise said as he settled himself with a cigar, and passed the box to Rivers. "I'm not so surprised as some at Gately's perfidy. It seems the Government has been onto him for some time,—at least, they suspected him, and were secretly investigating his private affairs. That Sadie person—"

"By the way, Wise," I interrupted him, "you sized her up perfectly! Did you ever hear about that, Rivers? Mr. Wise saw only the girl's hatpin, and from it he drew an exact portrait of 'The Link' herself. How did you do it, Wise? Tell us the details."

"Like all those deductions it was simpler than it sounded," the detective said, smiling. "You see, Mr. Rivers, the head of the pin was a big good-looking scarab. I don't know yet whether it was a real one, but if not it was a first-class imitation. This argued a person of education and taste. The average young woman doesn't lean toward scarabs. Then, there was a short bit of a human hair caught in the setting. This was black, rather coarse, and strong, denoting a healthy, buxom brunette. Hair is a clear indication of physical appearance, as a rule. That's how I know you aren't Amory Manning," he broke off suddenly and looked at Case Rivers. "I've had his description from Miss Raynor and from Brice, here, and they agree that Manning had dark, heavy hair, rather—footballish type. Yours is light, fine, and a little scant. And you have all the characteristics that belong to it. Oh, yes, I admit I've been trying to fasten Manning's identity on you, but without success."

"Don't apologize," laughed Rivers, "I've been trying to connect up with the missing Manning myself, but I can't work it. So, I'm out for the reward for finding that elusive individual. But I fear he's gone beyond recall."

"By the way," Wise put in, "I've found out who offered the reward. And, if you please, it's none other than the United States Government!"

"Why?" Rivers asked, interestedly.

"Well, it seems Manning is,—or was,—a Secret Service man and he was set on the trail of Amos Gately. He worked secretly, of course, and—"

"And he was kidnaped by Gately's friends!" I cried; "by some of Rodman's underlings, and put out of the way! I don't believe Manning is alive!"

"Go on about the hatpin, Mr. Wise, won't you?" urged Rivers. "I think I'm going to grow up to be a detective and I'm taking notes."

"Well," said Wise, good-humoredly, "as I remember it, I mentioned the lady's good teeth. This, because the prints on the rather soft gold of the pin were straight and even."

"You said she was proud of them," I put in.

"A glittering generality," and Wise laughed. "Aren't all girls proud of good teeth? Also, I assumed she had rather flashy tastes, for the scarab, large, and of a bright greenish-blue color, was not a quiet affair. A strong perfume clung to it, which also indicated a certain lack of refinement."

"And you said untidy habits," I reminded him.

"Because the pin was bent to a real crookedness. Also, it had been broken and mended. The break proving probable carelessness, and the mending seemed to me to show that she was sentimentally fond of it, for it was skilfully mended and the cost of that would have bought a new one, I should judge. I assumed her to be somewhat intellectual to care so much for a scarab, and I deduced her fairly well off to own and to care for the rather valuable trinket. None of these deductions amounted to much by itself, but the combination helped us to find a way to look for the owner. Of course, the cigarette stubs and the powder-paper helped, too. In fact, Miss Kent left pretty strong

evidences of her call on Mr. Gately. But,—she didn't kill him. Now, who did? We are learning lots of things, but not one shred of evidence have we yet found against any individual as the actual murderer."

"No," I agreed. "You see, the shadow of the head that I saw on the glass door couldn't have been Rodman's."

"And so it may have been anybody's. I mean, it shows that heads look pretty much alike, when merely shadowed on a thick, waved glass."

"Yes," I mused, "it may have been anybody's. But whose? It seems as if we ought to have a suspect by this time."

"I'll get you a suspect," spoke up Case Rivers. "I'm going into this thing for all I'm worth. The way lies through the Rodman crowd. 'The Link' sold her information to Rodman and he took it to Gately, but of late, 'The Link' became more bold and went straight to Gately herself. Now, there must be others concerned, and an interview with Miss Kent would give us an inkling of who they are. She's lost some of her bravado, by this time, I've no doubt, and I'm going to chase her up. Then, too, I want to go to Mr. Gately's office. I've never been there yet! Don't think, Wise, that I'm butting in on your game, but sometimes two heads are better than one, if one is a nameless wanderer on the face of the earth."

"All right, Rivers," and Wise nodded genially, "go in and win. We're together on this matter. And when it's over, I'm going to take up *your* case, and see just how, when, and where you fell through the earth."

"I wish you would," and Rivers looked earnestly at the detective, "for I see that trip every night in my dreams. I see myself falling through—oh, I won't bore you with that same old story!"

"It doesn't bore me, but just now we'll put all our energies on the present puzzle. We must get Gately's murderer, and then we must get Amory Manning."

"Zizi says—" I began.

"I know she does," returned Wise, looking thoughtful. "Zizi says Manning is the murderer. But the kid has no reason to say it's but a hunch. She's a witch though for hunches, and I keep her idea in mind."

"No," and Rivers spoke positively, "it doesn't seem to me that Manning is the murderer. If he was in the Secret Service, he may be purposely in hiding now, for some reason entirely unconnected with Amos Gately's murder."

"Very likely," assented Wise. "Only, as I say, I often remember Zizi's notions because they so often pan out correct."

"She's a marvel, that child," said Rivers; "where'd you get her?"

"She's my model. In civilian life, I'm by way of being an artist, you know. I sketch her over and over, but never have I successfully caught her smile. She's a witch child, a sprite."

"Yes; she seems gypsy born. But clever! And of a charm."

"All that," agreed Wise. "And a good little thing. Devoted to me, like a faithful dog, and yet, absolutely impersonal. Oh, I couldn't get along at all without Ziz."

And almost as he spoke the door opened and Zizi came gliding in. Her mode of entering a room was one of her individual characteristics. She slid in softly and unobtrusively, yet one was at once aware of her. It seemed to electrify the atmosphere, and the place was brighter and more vital in feeling. She moved across the room as quietly as a shadow, she said no word, yet her whole presence spoke.

"Hello, Ziz," and Wise smiled at her. "Watcha want?"

"Mr. Rivers," she replied, flashing her black eyes at him. "Miss Olive sent me. And she wants the other crystal."

"A new mystery?" and Wise laughed. "I can't see through the other crystal! Has it to do with a pair of glasses?"

"No," and Rivers took out a pocket-book, from which he extracted some flimsy paper. These proved to be tracings of snow crystals similar to those I had seen him drawing while he was still in the hospital.

"How lovely!" Zizi exclaimed, as she took the traced patterns. "You see," and she showed them to Wise, "Miss Olive is making lace work,—and Mr. Rivers makes her these patterns. Aren't they exquisite?"

They were. They were forms of snow crystals, than which there is nothing more beautiful, and Rivers had adapted and combined them into a delicate lace-like pattern, which Olive was to copy with linen threads, or whatever women use to make lace out of.

"I was going to take them round," Rivers said; "I hope the delay hasn't bothered Miss Raynor."

"Oh, no," Zizi assured him, "but she is impatient to see this new design and couldn't wait. So I offered to run down for it. I knew you were here."

"But I'm just going up to Miss Raynor's," Rivers spoke as if disappointed, "and the patterns are my only excuse for a call! So, if you please, Miss Zizi, I'll take them to the impatient lady, and I'll go at once."

"I think she's gone out, Mr. Rivers, she was about to go as I left. If you telephone you'll likely catch her."

Quite unembarrassed at our knowing smiles, Rivers took up my desk-telephone and called Olive's number. While waiting for the response he picked up a pencil from my pen-tray, and idly drew a snow crystal on the big desk-blotter.

I watched him, for his skill fascinated me. He drew the dainty six-sided figure with the accuracy of a designer. The tiny fronds, all six alike, made a lovely hexagonal form as it grew beneath his fingers.

He was apparently unconscious of what he was doing, and drew without thinking, for he spoke to us several times while waiting for the desired connection.

At last Olive answered him, and he dropped the pencil and talked to her. In a wheedlesome mood, he persuaded her to defer her proposed errand until he could join her and he would accompany her. The kindly familiarity with which he carried on the conversation and the jaunty assurance he showed that she would accede to his request proved to us, listeners perforce, that there was good comradeship between them.

Rivers hung up the receiver, and turned to me with a boyish smile. "I'm going now," he said, "Miss Raynor is waiting for me. I'll see you again, tonight, Brice." And with a general nod of farewell he went off.

Zizi sat staring at my desk.

The strange child was thinking of something,—more, she had made a discovery, or had sensed some new information.

She leaned over the desk, her outstretched hands resting on the big blotter and her black eyes wide with an expression of surprised fear.

"Look!" she cried; "look!"

But her slender finger pointed only to the snow crystal that Rivers had drawn. It was a graceful figure, not quite finished, but a delicate tracery of one of the myriad forms that snow crystals show. How often I had looked at the lovely things as they rested for a moment on my dark coat sleeve when I was out in a snowstorm. And after seeing Rivers draw them so skilfully, several times, they had taken on a new interest to me. But what had so moved Zizi I could not imagine. It was as if the little drawing were fraught with some dreadful significance of which I knew nothing.

Nor was Pennington Wise any more aware than I of the girl's meaning.

He smiled quizzically, and said, "Well, Zizi, girl, what's hypnotizing you? That drawing of Rivers'?"

"Yes," and Zizi turned her big black eyes from my face to Wise's, and gave a queer little sigh.

"Out with it, girlie," urged Wise. "Tell your old Penny Wise what's the matter."

"Will you do what I want?" she asked, her voice tense and thrilled with strong feeling.

"Yes; to the limit."

"Then look at that thing! That snow crystal!"

"Yes, I've looked," and after a moment's close scrutiny Wise turned his eyes again to the eerie face, so vividly emotional, so white with that unnamed fear.

"You look, too, Mr. Brice," and I did.

"Note the design," Zizi went on, "see just how the fronds are marked. Isn't it funny how people always draw or scribble while they're waiting to get a telephone call?"

"Oh, come now, Ziz," and Penny Wise patted her arm, "you're putting up a game on us. We know Rivers draws these things beautifully. Why act as if you never knew it before?"

"Come with me," and Zizi rose and began to put her long black cloak round her, shivering with excitement as she did so. "You come, too, Mr. Brice."

We obeyed the strange child, for I remembered how Pennington Wise respected what he called her "hunches," and before going downstairs she directed that I call a taxicab.

In the cab she said nothing, having already bade us go to Amos Gately's office, and arrange to get into the rooms.

And then, when we were there, when I had obtained the keys from the bank people and had entered the dim, quiet rooms, Zizi went straight to the middle room, straight to Amos Gately's

desk, and lifting the telephone from where it stood on the big desk-blotter, she disclosed the exact counterpart of the snow crystal we had seen drawn at my desk by Case Rivers!

CHAPTER XVI
The Snowflake

I LOOKED at the design with interest, but without at first grasping its true significance.

Pennington Wise looked at it aghast. "Where did it come from?" he exclaimed.

"It's always been there," said Zizi. "I mean, I saw it there one day when I was in this room with Mr. Hudson, I—I—"

"Didn't know you'd ever been here, Ziz," and Wise smiled at the earnest little face.

"Yep, I was; and I happened to move the telephone, and under it was that drawing. I didn't think anything about it, as evidence, but I looked at it 'cause it was so pretty. And I put the telephone back over it again."

"But I searched this room," and Wise looked mystified.

"You probably didn't lift the telephone, then," Zizi returned, shaking her elfin head, while a deep sorrow showed in her black eyes.

"I don't believe I did," Wise mused, thinking back. "I did pick up most of the desk fittings to examine them but I suppose I didn't take hold of the telephone at all."

"'Course not!" Zizi was always ready to defend Wise's actions. "How could you know there was a picture under it? But, oh, Penny, what does it mean?"

"Wait,—let's get at it carefully. On the face of it, it would seem as if Case Rivers must have drawn this figure of a snow crystal. Everybody has some peculiar habit, and especially, lots of people have a habit of drawing some particular thing when waiting at a telephone.

"I've asked half a dozen men of late, and every one says he scribbles words or draws some crude combination of lines. But each one says he always does the same thing, whatever it may be. Now, I imagine, very few men draw snow crystals,—and fewer still, draw them with this degree of perfection. Again, granting they did, would any other individual draw this identical design, with this accuracy of drawing, that Case Rivers drew on the desk-blotter at your house, Brice?"

"I should say it would be impossible that anyone else could have done it," I replied, honestly, though I began to see where our investigation was leading us.

"It *is* impossible," declared Wise. "Two men might draw snow crystals, but they would not both choose this particular one."

"It's exactly the same," Zizi murmured, "for I brought Mr. Brice's with me: here it is."

Calmly the girl took from her little hand-bag a piece torn from my desk-blotter. It held the drawing done by Rivers while he was waiting for his telephone call and it was the precise duplicate of the figure drawn on the blotter of Amos Gately's mahogany desk.

"The same pencil—or, rather, the same hand drew those two," Wise said, positively, and I could not contradict this.

Snow crystals are said by scientists to show hundreds of different shapes, and almost any illustrated dictionary or text-book of natural science shows several specimens. This one we were looking at was of simple but beautiful design and I felt sure Rivers had copied it from some picture as one can rarely keep a real snowflake long enough to copy its form.

Anyway it was stretching the law of coincidence a little too far to believe that two men would idly draw the same form on a desk-blotter while telephoning.

Of course, this sketch on Amos Gately's desk need not have been made while the artist's other hand held the telephone receiver, but its juxtaposition to the instrument indicated that it was.

"Of course, Mr. Rivers drew this," Zizi declared, her little head bobbing as she turned her black eyes from one of us to the other.

She wore a small turban made entirely of red feathers,—soft breast feathers of some tropical bird, I suppose. The hat set jauntily on her sleek black hair, and the motions of her head were so quick and birdlike, that she gave me a fleeting remembrance of the human birds I saw in the play of *Chantecler*.

"Of course he did," assented Wise, very gravely; "and now we must go on. Granting, for the moment, that Case Rivers,—as we call him,—drew this little sketch, he must have been in this office the day of Amos Gately's murder. For I've been told that the blotter on this desk was changed every day, and any marks

or blots now on it were therefore made on that day. If he did it, then,—or, rather, when he did it, he was telephoning to somebody—"

"Well," put in Zizi, "perhaps he was just sitting here, talking to Mr. Gately. Maybe, he might draw those things when he just sits idly as well as when he telephones."

"Yes; you're right. Well, at any rate, he must have been sitting here, opposite Mr. Gately, on that very day. And I opine he was telephoning, but that makes no difference. Now, if he was here, in this office, on that day,—what was he here for, and who is he?"

"He is the murderer," said Zizi, but she spoke as if she were a machine. The words seemed to come from her lips without her own volition; her voice was wooden, mechanical, and her eyes had a far-away, vacant gaze. "I don't know who he is, but he is the man who shot Mr. Gately."

"Oh, come, now, Ziz," Wise shook her gently, "wake up! Don't jump at conclusions. He may be the most innocent man in New York. He may have been in here calling on Gately early in the day, and his errand may have been of the most casual sort. He may have had cause to telephone, and as he sat waiting for his call, he sketched the snowflake pattern, which is his habit when waiting. But that he was here that day is a positive fact,—to my mind. Now, it's for us to find out what he was here for, and who he is. I don't favor going to him and asking him pointblank. That peculiar phase of amnesia from which he is suffering is a

precarious matter to deal with. A sudden shock might bring back his memory,—or, it might—"

"Addle his brain!" completed Zizi. "All right, oh, Most Wise Guy! But when you do find out the truth, it will be that Case Rivers in his right mind and in his own proper person killed Mr. Gately."

"Hush up, Ziz! If you have such a fearful hunch keep it to yourself. I'm not going to believe that, unless I have to! It has always been my conviction that Rivers is,—or was, a worthwhile man. I feel sure he was of importance in some line, —some big line. Moreover, I believe his yarn about falling through the earth."

"You do!" I cried, in amazement. "You stand for that! You believe he fell into the globe at Canada,—or some Northern country, and fell out again in New York City?"

"Not quite that," and Wise smiled. "But I believe he had some mighty strange experience, of which his tale is a pretty fair description, if not entirely the literal truth."

"Such as?"

"Why, suppose he fell down a mine shaft in Canada. Suppose that knocked out his memory. Then suppose he was rescued and sent to New York for treatment, say, at some private hospital or sanitarium. Then suppose he escaped, and, still loony, threw himself into the East River—oh, I don't know—only, there are lots of ways that he could have that notion about his fall through the earth, and have something real to base it on."

"Gammon and spinach!" I remarked, my patience exhausted; "the man had a blow or a fall or something that jarred his memory, but his 'falling through the earth' idea is a hallucination, pure and simple. However, that doesn't matter. Now we must follow this new trail, and see if we can get a line on his personality. He can't tell us what he was here for,—if he doesn't remember that he was here."

"Perhaps he does remember," Wise spoke musingly.

"Nixy!" and Zizi's saucy head nodded positively; "Mr. Rivers is sincere now, whatever he was before. He doesn't remember shooting Mr. Gately—"

"Stop that, Zizi!" Wise spoke more sharply than I had ever heard him. "I forbid you to assume that Rivers is the murderer, —you are absurd!"

"But I've got a hunch—" Zizi's black eyes stared fixedly at Wise, "and—"

"Keep your hunch to yourself! I told you that before! Now, hush up."

Not at all abashed, Zizi made a most wicked little *moue* at him, but she said no more just then.

"We have a new direction in which to look, though," Wise went on, "and we must get about it. You remember, we found a hatpin here that led us to Sadie, 'The Link,' as straight as a signboard could have done."

"Yes," scoffed Zizi, "with the help of Norah and her powder-paper, and Jenny and her tattle-tongue!"

"All right," Wise was unperturbed; "we got her all the same. Now, perhaps the Man Who Fell Through the Earth also left some indicative clews. Let's look round."

"He couldn't leave anything more indicative than the drawing on the blotter," persisted Zizi. "He drew on Mr. Brice's blotter today and he drew on this blotter of Mr. Gately's the day Mr. Gately was killed. That much is certain."

"So it is, Zizi," agreed Wise; "but nothing further is certain as yet. But we may find something more."

As he talked the detective rummaged in the desk drawers. He pulled out the packet of papers that had interested him before.

"I'd like to read these," he said; "you see, they're dated in chronological order, and they must mean something."

"It's where they come from," said Zizi, with an air of wisdom; "you see, Waldorf means a certain message in their code book, and St. Regis means another; Biltmore paper means another, and so on."

"Right you are, as usual," Wise said, so approvingly that Zizi smiled all over her queer little countenance.

"Part of 'The Link's' spy business," she went on, and I cried out in denial.

"Oh, come off, Mr. Brice," she said, "you may as well admit, first as last, that you know Mr. Gately was mixed up in this spy racket. I don't know yet just how deeply or how knowingly—"

"You mean," I caught at the straw, "that he was a go-between, but didn't know it?"

"I thought that at first," said Wise, "I hoped it was so. That, of course, would argue that he was infatuated with Sadie and she wound him round her finger and used him to further her schemes, while he himself was innocent. But the theory, though a pretty one, won't work. Gately wasn't quite gullible enough for that, and, too, he is more deeply concerned in it all than we know."

"Yes," I agreed; "these letters,—I mean, these blank sheets,—were sent to him by mail. One came the day after he died."

"I know it. And, as Zizi says, they mean something definite in accordance with a prepared code. For instance, a sheet of Hotel Gotham paper, dated December tenth, might mean that a certain transport, indicated in the code book by that hotel, was to sail on that date."

"That's a simple, child's-play explanation," said Zizi,—"but it may be the right one."

"Certainly," Wise assented, "there may be other explanations and more complicated ones. But it doesn't matter now. The receipt of these letters,—blank letters,—was of secret value to Gately, and proves him to have been pretty deeply mixed up in it all."

"But what about Mr. Rivers?" spoke up Zizi; "where does he come in?"

"It looks black," Wise declared. "He was here that day secretly. That is, he didn't come in at Jenny's door. She doesn't recognize him, I asked her. Therefore, he came in by one of these other doors, or up in the secret elevator. In either case, he didn't want

his visit known. So he is a wrongdoer, with Gately, and—probably, with Rodman. They're all tarred with the same brush. The trail of the spy serpent is over them all."

"No!" cried Zizi, and her face was stormy, "my nice Mr. Rivers isn't any spy! He hasn't anything to do with that spy matter!"

"Why!" I exclaimed; "you said he was the murderer!"

"Well, I'd rather be a murderer than a spy!" Her eyes snapped and her whole thin little body quivered with indignation. "A murder is a decent crime compared to spy work! Oh, my nice Mr. Rivers!"

She broke down and cried convulsively.

"Let her alone," said Wise, not unkindly, after a brief glance at the shaking little figure. "She's always better for a crying spell. It clears her atmosphere. Now, Brice, let's get busy. As Zizi says, you must admit that there's no doubt that Amos Gately was pretty deeply into the game. Even if he was unduly friendly with Sadie Kent, it was indubitably through and because of their dealings together in the stolen telegram business. The way I see it is that Sadie sold her intercepted messages to the highest bidder. This was George Rodman, but above him was Amos Gately. Oh, don't look so incredulous. It isn't the first time a bank president has gone wrong on the side. Gately never was unfaithful to his office, he never misappropriated funds or anything of that sort, but for some reason or other, whether money gain, or hope of other reward, he did betray his country."

I couldn't deny it,—or, rather, I could deny it, but only because of my still unshattered faith in Amos Gately. I could bring no proof of my denial.

"But," I said, musingly, "we haven't yet proved Gately mixed up in—"

"What!" cried Wise; "isn't this enough proof? These blank letters, for that's what they are,—the proved visit here of Sadie, 'The Link,' and the fact that Gately was shot,—by someone,—with no known reason,—all that goes to show that the murderer had some secret motive, some unknown cause for getting Gately out of the way."

"I see it, as you put it," I said, "but I will not believe Amos Gately a spy,—or conniving at spy business until I have to. I shall continue to believe he was a tool—an innocent tool—of the Rodman and Sadie Kent combination."

"All right, Brice, keep your faith as long as you can, but, I tell you, you'll soon have to admit that I'm right. Gately, as we all know, was a peculiar man. He had few friends, he had little or no social life, and he did have secret callers and a secret mode of entrance and exit from his offices. All this shows something to hide,—it is unexplainable for a man who has nothing to conceal."

"All right, Wise," I said, finally, "I suppose you *are* right. But still we must continue our search for the murderer. We don't seem to progress much in that matter."

"Not yet, but soon," Wise said, optimistically; "the ax is laid at the root of the tree,—we are on the right track—"

"Meaning Case Rivers?" I cried, in alarm.

"Meaning Case Rivers,—perhaps," he returned. "I'm not as sure as Zizi is that the evidence points to him as the murderer, but we must conclude that he was in this room the day of the murder,—and what else could he have been here for?"

"What else?" I stormed. "Dozens of things! Hundreds of things! Why, man alive, every person who set foot in this room on that day didn't necessarily kill Amos Gately!"

"Every person who set foot in this room on that day is his potential murderer," Wise returned, calmly. "Every person must be suspected,—or, at least, investigated."

"Well," I said, after realizing that he spoke truly, "you investigate the question of Rivers' visit here that day. I don't want to do that. But I'm going down to Headquarters now, and perhaps I'll dig up something of importance."

*

AND I did. A visit to the Chief told me the interesting tale of the further discoveries of Sadie Kent's industries. It seems the Federal agents had found a complete and powerful wireless station in a cottage at Southeast Beach, a fairly popular summer resort. The cottage was seemingly untenanted, but some unexplained wires which ran along the rafters of an adjoining house led to the discovery of the auxiliary wireless station.

Experts had broken into the locked house and had found a cleverly concealed keyboard of a wireless apparatus. Further search had disclosed the whole thing, and, moreover, had

brought out the fact, that the adjoining cottage was occupied by two apparently innocent old people, who were really in the employ of Sadie Kent.

"The Link" was a person of importance, and though she passed for a mere telegraph operator, she was one of the most important links in the German spy system in the United States.

In the room where the wireless apparatus was found there were also quantities of letter paper from the various hotels of New York City.

These sheets, abstracted from the writing-rooms of the hotels, were the code system used in forwarding the stolen intelligence.

It all hung together, and the bunch of those hotel papers found in Gately's desk, and especially the fact that one reached his address the day after his demise proved, beyond all doubt, his implication in the despicable business.

Now, I thought, to what extent or in what way was Case Rivers concerned? Surely the man had been in Gately's office on that fatal day. I had no idea that he had killed the banker,—that was only Zizi's foolishness,—but he had certainly been there.

It came to me suddenly that if Rivers could be taken again to the Gately offices, the rooms, the associations, might possibly bring back his lost memory, and let him reinstate himself in his real personality. To be sure, this might prove him the murderer, but if so, it would be only the course of justice; and, on the other hand, if it explained his innocent or casual call on Gately that, too, was what the man deserved.

*

AND so I went at once to see Rivers. I found him in his rooms, the ones he had taken while he was to assist Wise in his work, and he greeted me cordially.

"The plot thickens," he said as I told him of Sadie's wireless station. "I knew that girl was a sly one. She's one of the most important people in the big spy web. She's one of their spyders, who spin a pretty web and attract gullible flies. Amos Gately fell for her charms,—you know, Brice, she is a siren,—and somehow she lured him into the web she so deftly spun. To my mind, Gately was a good, upright citizen, who fell for a woman's wiles. I'm not sure about this, it may be he was mixed up in spy work before Sadie came on the scene,—but I'm certain she was accessory before, during, or after the fact."

"Accessory to his murder?" I asked.

"Not necessarily; but strongly accessory to his wrongdoing in the matter of treason. I think she, for a time, worked Gately through Rodman, but, latterly, she grew bolder or found she could do more by personal visits and she came and went by the secret elevator, pretty much as she chose."

"I hate to have Miss Raynor know this," I said with a covert glance at Rivers, to see how he took the remark.

"So do I," he said, as frankly as a boy; "I may as well tell you, Brice, that I love that girl. She is, to me, the very crown of womanhood. I have worshiped her from the first moment I saw her. But, understand, I have no hopes,—no aspirations. I shall never offer my hand and heart to any woman while I have no

name to offer. And I shall never have a name. If I haven't yet discovered my own identity I never can. No, I'm no pessimist, and I know that some time some sudden shock might restore my memory all in a minute, yet I can't bank on such a possibility. I've talked this over with Rankin,—he's the doctor who's following up my case,—time and again. He says that a sudden and very forcible shock is needed to restore my memory, and that it may come and—it may not. He says it can't be forced or brought about knowingly,—it will have to be a coincidence,—a happening that will jar the inert cells of my brain—or, something like that,—I don't remember the scientific terms."

Rivers passed his hand wearily across his forehead.

I was in a quandary. I had gone to see the man with full purpose of luring him to Gately's office and confronting him with the sketched snowflake on the blotting-pad. Now, since he had confided to me his love for Olive Raynor, I shrank from doing anything that might prove him to be Amos Gately's murderer. For I was fond of Miss Raynor, in a deeply respectful and unpresumptuous fashion. And I had noticed several things of late that made me feel pretty sure that her friendship for Rivers was true and deep, if indeed it were not something more than friendship. This, to be sure, would argue but a fickle loyalty to the memory of Amory Manning, but as Norah and I agreed, when talking it over, Miss Raynor had never shown any desperate grief at Manning's disappearance,—at least, not more than the loss of a casual friend might arouse.

But I knew where my duty lay. And so I said, "Rivers, I wish you'd go round to Mr. Gately's office with me. Don't you think that if you were there,—and you never have been,—you might chance upon some clew that has escaped the notice of Wise or Hudson or myself?"

"Righto!" he said; "I've thought myself I'd like to go there. Not, as you politely suggest, to find overlooked clews, but just as a matter of general interest. I'm out, you know, to find the murderer, and also to trace the vanished Amory Manning."

CHAPTER XVII
Zizi's Hunch

"HE'S afraid," and Norah wagged her head sagaciously, while her gray eyes had an apprehensive expression.

"Afraid of what?"

"Afraid of the truth. You see, Mr. Brice, our friend Rivers is nobody's fool. He's onto most points regarding this case, and now, he's getting onto himself. That astute little scrap of humanity, Zizi, knows he is. Of course, living with Miss Raynor, as she does, she has opportunities every day to see Mr. Rivers, for he's eternally hanging around the Raynor house. Oh, I don't mean he's an idler; not by a long shot. On the contrary, his middle name is efficiency! He puts over a lot of work in a day."

"What sort of work and how do you know so much about him?"

We were in my office, waiting for Rivers, who had promised to come to see me, and to look into the Gately rooms. It was now nearly half an hour after the time he had set for his call, and as it was not his habit to be tardy, I was surprised. I had begun to look upon Rivers as a man of importance, not only in the matters with which we were associated, but he showed so much general ability and force of character that I wondered who or what he would turn out to be. For I felt sure he would find himself, and even if he never discovered who he had been he

would make a new name and a well worthwhile individuality for himself yet.

Norah, too, admired him, and seemed to know as much of his capabilities, or more, than I did myself.

"I don't know just what sort of work, but I think it's connected with the mysteries we're up against ourselves. And I know about him, because Zizi told me. She sees everything he does,—when she's with him, I mean. Not a gesture or motion escapes her notice. And she's watching his attitude toward Miss Raynor. She says,—Zizi does,—that Mr. Rivers is over head and ears in love with Olive, but he won't tell her so because he is, as he puts it, a self-named man! Zizi heard him call himself that when talking to Miss Raynor, and then he just looked away, and resolutely changed the subject. But she thinks,—Zizi does,—that he's working night and day to find out who he is, and she's sure he'll find out. And also, he's working to find Mr. Gately's murderer, and he's hunting for Amory Manning. No wonder the man's busy!"

"Well, why is he afraid to come here?"

"I'm not sure that he is; but you know Zizi has a hunch that he's the murderer, and I think maybe he is. That snowflake sketch proves he was there that day and as his presence isn't accounted for, why may he not have been the slayer? And, why may he not have an inkling or a suspicion of it, and dread to verify his fears?"

"But, good gracious, Norah, even granting he was in Gately's office that day, he needn't have done the shooting. There are

about one million other errands he could have been there on. Perhaps he was a commercial traveler, selling laces, and drew the design for a sample."

"Sometimes, Mr. Brice, you talk like a Tom-noddy! Drummer, indeed! I can tell you whatever calling Case Rivers followed, it was far different from that of a selling agent! I'll bet he was a lawyer, at least!"

"At least!" I mocked her; "understand, pray, I consider my profession somewhat above the least of the professions!"

"Yes, for *you* dignify it to a high standing," and the gray eyes flashed me the smile of appreciation that I was looking for. I may as well admit that I was growing very fond of those two gray eyes and their owner, and I had a pretty strong conviction that after the present case was all settled I should turn my attention to the winning of the exclusive right to the tender glances those eyes could give.

But just now, I had to exclude all distracting thoughts, and forcing my mind back to the present situation, I again marveled at the non-appearance of Case Rivers.

"Perhaps he's fallen through the earth again," Norah suggested; "by the way, Mr. Brice, what do you think about that fall? Mr. Rivers is no doubt under some strange hallucination, but all the same, may there not be some foundation on which he based his dream?"

"Maybe! There must be! That mind of his is too sure-fire to hang on so desperately to a mere dream. He had some

experience of a strange nature, and it included something that he looks upon as falling through the earth."

"Such as?"

"I don't know. But I've a vague idea of a motor accident. Say, a motor car ran into a stone wall, and he was hurled high in the air, and landed in the East River—"

"But I don't see how that implies falling through the earth."

"Well, say he slid down a high bank to reach the river—"

"There's no high bank near the morgue, and he was fished out in that locality."

"But he needn't have fallen in there! In fact, he couldn't have,—he must have floated or drifted a considerable distance to have had his clothing torn from him—and to have reached the state of exhaustion and freezing that so nearly culminated in death."

"Yes, but even yet, you haven't suggested anything like falling through the earth."

"All right, Miss Smarty, what's your idea? I see you're dying to spring something."

"Only what I've thought from the beginning. I believe he was in some cold country, Canada, or somewhere, and fell down through a mine shaft, or into a deep old well, or perhaps merely an excavation for a new, large building. But, anyway, whatever it was, his last impression was of falling down into the ground. Then when he struck he was knocked unconscious. Then, he was taken to a hospital, or somewhere, and as the fall had utterly blotted out his memory, he was kept in confinement. Then, somehow he broke loose and came to New York,—or,

maybe, he was brought to New York for treatment by the doctors and he got away and either threw himself into the river or fell in accidentally, and when he was rescued he still remembered the fall but nothing else concerning his disaster."

"Good enough, Norah, as a theory. But seems to me, in that case, he would have been sought and found by the people who had him in charge."

"Ah, that's the point of it all! They don't want to find him! They know just where he is, and all about him, but they won't tell, for it suits their base purposes to have him lost!"

"Well, you *have* cooked up a scheme! And he killed Amos Gately?"

"Maybe, but if so, he did it unknowingly. Perhaps these people who are looking after him, secretly hypnotized him to do it—"

"Oh, Norah! come off! desist! let up! Next thing you know you'll be having him in the movies! For you never thought up all that stuff without getting hints for it from some slapstick melodrama!"

"Oh, well, people who are absolutely without imagination can't expect to see into a mystery! But, you won't see any Mr. Rivers *this* morning,—I can assure you of that!"

She turned to her typewriter, and I took up my telephone.

I could not get Rivers at his home address, and I next called up Miss Raynor.

She replied, in agitated tones, that Rivers had been to see her for a few minutes, and that he had left half an hour before. She begged me to come around at once.

Of course, I went.

*

I FOUND her in a strange state of mind. She seemed like one who had made a discovery, and was fearful of inadvertently disclosing it.

But when I urged her to be frank, she insisted she had nothing to conceal.

"I don't know anything, Mr. Brice, truly I don't," she repeated. "I mean, anything new or anything that I haven't told you. Mr. Rivers was here this morning for a very short call. He said that while his memory had not returned, he had a queer mental impression of being on a search for a paper when he fell through the earth."

"Did he go down into the earth to seek the paper?" I asked, thinking it best to treat the matter lightly.

"No," she returned, in all seriousness, "but he believes he was commissioned to hunt out a valuable paper, of some sort, and while on the quest he fell through the earth, by accident. It was the shock of that that impaired his memory."

"Sufficient cause!" I couldn't help saying.

Olive bristled: "Oh, I know you don't believe his story,—almost nobody does,—but I do."

"So do I!" and Zizi was in the room. One could never say of that girl that she entered or came in,—she just—was there,—in that silent, mysterious way of hers. And then with equally invisible

motions she was sitting opposite me, at Olive's side, on a low ottoman.

"I know Mr. Rivers very well," Zizi announced, as if she were his official sponsor, "and what he says is true, no matter how unbelievable it may sound. He says he fell through the earth, and so he *did* fall through the earth, and that's all there is about *that!*"

"Good for you, Zizi!" I cried. "You're a loyal little champion! And just how did he accomplish the feat?"

"It will be explained in due season," and Zizi's big black eyes took on a sibylline expression as she gazed straight at me. "If you were told, on good authority, that a man had crossed the ocean in an aeroplane, you'd believe it, wouldn't you?"

"Yes; but that doesn't seem to me a parallel case," I demurred.

"Neither is Case Rivers a parallel case," Zizi giggled, "but he's the real thing in the way of Earth Fallers. And when you know all, you'll know everything!"

The child was exasperating in her foolish retorts and yet so convincing was the determined shake of her little black head that I was almost tempted to believe in her statements.

"You're a baby sphinx, Zizi," and Olive looked at her affectionately, "but honestly, Mr. Brice, she keeps my spirits up, and she is so positive herself of what she says that she almost convinces me. As for Mrs. Vail, she swallows everything Zizi says for law and gospel!"

"And just what is it you say, now, Zizi?" I asked.

"Nothin' much, kind sir. Only that Case Rivers is a gentleman and a scholar, that his memory is on the home stretch and humming along, and that if he's after a paper,—he'll get it!"

"And, incidentally he's Amos Gately's—"

A scream of agony from Zizi interrupted my speech, and jumping to her feet she danced round the room, her forefinger thrust between her red lips, and her little, eerie face contorted as with pain.

"Oh, what is it, Zizi?" cried Olive, running to the frantic girl.

Mrs. Vail, hearing the turmoil, came running in, and she and Olive held Zizi between them, begging to know how she was hurt.

Catching an opportunity, Zizi looked at me, over Mrs. Vail's shoulder, and the message shot from her eyes was fully as understandable as if she had spoken. It said, "Do not mention any hint of Case Rivers' possible connection with the Gately murder, and do not mention the snowflake drawn on the blotter in Mr. Gately's office."

Yes, quite a lengthy and comprehensive speech to be made without words, but the speaking black eyes said it as clearly as lips could have done.

I nodded my obedience, and then Zizi giggled and with her inimitable impudence, she turned to Olive, and said: "I'm like the White Queen, in 'Alice,' I haven't pricked my finger yet, but I probably shall, some day."

"What were you screaming about, then?" asked Mrs. Vail, inclined to be angry, while Olive looked amused and mystified.

"Emergency," and Zizi grinned at her. "First aid to the injured, —or, rather, prevention, which is worth a pound of first aid!"

"You're crazy!" said Mrs. Vail, a little annoyed at being fooled so. "I thought you were nearly killed!"

"When you knew a lady once who was nearly killed did she yell like that?" asked Zizi, with an innocent smile.

"Yes!" exclaimed Mrs. Vail; "but how did you know I once saw a lady nearly killed?"

"Mind-reading!" replied Zizi, and then Pennington Wise arrived, and we all shamelessly ignored Mrs. Vail and her yarns to listen to his report.

"There's a lot doing," he said, "and," he added, gently, "I'm sorry to bring you unpleasant news, Miss Raynor, but you'll have to know sooner or later—"

"I do know," said Olive, bravely; "you're going to tell me my guardian was—was not a good man."

"That is so; it is useless to try to soften the truth. Amos Gately was the receiver of important Government secrets, learned by Sadie Kent, the telegrapher. She carried them to Rodman, who in turn transmitted them to Gately, who, it seems, had a way of getting the information to the enemy. Of course, the secret wireless station, recently discovered, was used, as well as other means of communication. I won't go into details, Miss Raynor, but Amos Gately was the 'man higher up,' who thought himself safe from discovery because of his unimpeachable reputation for integrity, and also because of the infinite precautions he had taken. Indeed, if he had not fallen a victim to the personal

charms of 'The Link,' his share in the wrong might never have been learned."

Olive listened to all this, white-faced and still,—her lips a tense, drawn line of scarlet,—her expression a stony calm.

Zizi, watching her closely, and with loving care, slipped her little brown paw into Olive's hand, and noted with satisfaction the faint answering smile.

"Perhaps," Olive said, after a thoughtful pause, "it is as well, then, that Uncle Amos did not—did not live to be—disgraced."

"It is," said Wise, gravely; "he would have faced a Federal prison had it all been discovered while he lived. That will be Rodman's fate,—if he is not held for the crime of murder. But I think he will not be. For his alibi clears him and it was to escape the graver charge that he has told so much of the spy business."

"And so," I said, "we are as far as ever from the discovery of the murderer?"

"You never can tell," Wise returned; "it may be we are on the very eve of solving the mystery. Rivers is on the warpath—"

"I think I ought to tell you, Mr. Wise," Olive broke in, "that Mr. Rivers was here this morning, and he seems to have a slight glimmer of returning memory."

"He has? Good! Then it will all come back to him. I've been looking up this aphasia-amnesia business, and quite often when the patient begins to recover his memory, it all comes back to him with a bang! Where is Rivers?"

"He went away—I don't know where—" Olive's lips quivered, and so plainly did she show her feelings that we all saw at once

she feared that Rivers had fled, *because* of his returning memory.

"It's all right," declared Zizi, stanchly; "Mr. Rivers is white clear through! He'll come back, soon, and he'll bring the paper he's after."

"What paper?" demanded Wise.

"The poipers! the poipers!" scoffed Zizi; "did you ever know a case, oh, Wise Guy, that didn't revolve round and hinge on a poiper? Well, the dockyments in the case is what he's a-soichin' for! See?"

When Zizi acted the *gamine* she was irresistibly funny and we all laughed, which was what she wanted to lighten the strain of the situation.

Rivers was a mystery, indeed. Every one of us, I think, felt that he might be connected with the Gately affair. All of us, that is, but Olive,—and who could tell what she thought?

But Pennington Wise had a question to ask, and he put it straightforwardly.

"That day you were lured to Sadie 'The Link's' house, Miss Raynor," he began, "you said, or rather, you agreed when Rodman said you were his *fiancÃ©e*. Will you tell us why?"

Olive flushed, but more with anger than embarrassment.

"The man threatened me," she said, "he first tried to make love to me, and when I repulsed him, he told me that unless I would promise to marry him he would tell something that would be a living reproach to the memory of my dead guardian. I declared he could say nothing against Amos Gately. Then he whispered

that Mr. Gately was a spy! I couldn't believe it, and—yet, I had seen just a few things,—had heard just a few words, that filled my heart with a fear that Mr. Rodman was speaking the truth. So I thought I'd better say what he asked me to, though I knew I'd kill myself rather than ever marry him. But I wasn't greatly afraid, except that I knew I was in his power. Oh, I don't like to think about that day!"

Olive broke down and hid her face in her hands, while Zizi's thin little arms crept round her and held her close.

"Only one more query, Miss Raynor," and Wise spoke very gently; "are you,—were you engaged to Amory Manning?"

Olive lifted her face, and spoke composedly: "No, Mr. Wise, I was never engaged to him. We were good friends, and I think he had a high regard for me, but no words of affection ever passed between us. I admire and respect Mr. Manning as a friend, but that is all." And then a lovely blush suffused Olive's face, followed quickly by a look of pain,—and we knew she was thinking of Rivers, and his possible defection. Never have I seen a woman's face so easy to read as Olive Raynor's. Perhaps because of her pure, transparent character, for in my enforced intimacy with her, as I managed her estate, I had learned that she was an exceptional nature, high-minded, fine, and conscientious in all things.

"I cannot think," Olive went on, "that Mr. Manning will ever be found. I think he has been killed."

"Why?" asked Wise, briefly.

"You know, he was a Secret Service man. Many times he has had the narrowest escape with his life, and—I'm not sure of this,—but I think now, he was on the track of the nest of spies with which my—with which Mr. Gately was mixed up. A few slight incidents, otherwise unexplainable, make this clear to me now, though I never suspected it before. My uncle disliked Mr. Manning, and it may have been because he knew he was in the Government's employ. And though I know Mr. Gately would never have moved a finger to put Amory Manning out of the way, yet George Rodman may have done so. Oh, it's all so mysterious, so complicated,—but of this I'm sure, Case Rivers is in no way connected with the whole matter. He is a man from some distant city, he is unacquainted in New York, and he—" here Olive broke down utterly and fell into a hysterical burst of weeping.

Zizi rose and gently urged Olive to go with her from the room.

A silence fell as the two girls disappeared. It was broken by Mrs. Vail, who remarked, dolefully, "I do hope that nice Mr. Rivers will come back, for dear Olive is *so* in love with him."

"What!" cried Pennington Wise, "Miss Raynor in love with Rivers! That will never do! Why, we've no idea who he is. He may be a fortune-hunter of the lowest type!"

"Oh, no, no!" denied Mrs. Vail, "he is a most courteous gentleman."

"That doesn't count," stormed Wise; "although, perhaps, I spoke too strongly just now when I called him names!"

"Especially as he has no name!" I put in; "in fact, he calls himself a self-named man!"

Wise smiled: "He is a witty chap," he conceded, "and I like him immensely. But it's up to us, Brice, to safeguard Miss Raynor's interests, and a possible suitor for the hand of an heiress ought, at least, to know his own ancestors! And then, again, unless he recovers his memory and can deny it, there's a fair chance that he had some hand in the Gately murder. We can't get away from that snowflake pattern drawn on the blotter. Rivers was there, in that room, he sat at Gately's desk, opposite Gately himself,—I mean, of course, this is the way I reconstruct the matter,—and if he didn't shoot Gately then and there, at least, we have no proof that he didn't."

"I think he did," I admitted, for Wise's statement of the matter was convincing,—and beside, Norah thought so, too.

"Well, you think again!" came in a wild little voice, and there was Zizi at my elbow fairly shaking her little clenched fist in my face. "Mr. Badman Brice, you've got a lot of follow-up thinks a-coming to you, and you'd better begin 'em right now!"

She looked like a little fury as she danced around my chair and exploded the vials of her wrath. "That Mr. Rivers is a perfectly good man,—I know! He and Miss Olive are in love,—but they don't hardly know it themselves,—bless 'em! And Mr. Rivers he won't tell her, anyway, 'cause he's a nobleman,—one of Nature's maybe,—and again, maybe he's a real one from Canada, or wherever he hails from. But, anyway, he no more killed anybody than I did!"

"All right, Ziz,—bully for you! As a loyal friend you're there with the goods!" Wise smiled at her. "But after all, you've got only your loyalty to bank on. You don't *know* all this."

"I've got a hunch," said Zizi, pounding one little fist into the other palm, "and when it comes to certainty,—Death and Taxes have nothing on my hunches!"

CHAPTER XVIII
Clear as Crystal

"HELLO, people! What's the matter, Zizi? I'll be on your side! Bank on me, little one, to the last ditch. And, by jumping Jupiter, Brice, I believe the last ditch is coming my way! No, I haven't got a strangle-hold on that eloping memory of mine yet, but I 'ave 'opes. I've had a glimmer of a gleam of a ray of light on my dark, mysterious past, and I beflew myself straight to good little old Doctor Rankin, who's my Trouble Man every time. And he says that it's the beginning of the end. That any day, almost any hour now, I may burst forth a full-memoried and properly christened citizen."

"Good for you, old chap," and thrilled at the elation in his tones, I held out my hand. "Go in and win!"

"Oh, won't it be fine when you remember?" cried Mrs. Vail, wringing her hands in excitement; "why, I knew a man once—"

"Yes," Rivers encouraged her, in his kindly way, "what happened to the lucky chap?"

"Why, he was affected something as you are,—or, as you were —" but Wise couldn't stand for what seemed likely to be a long story.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Vail," he interrupted her, "but, really, I must run away now, and I want a word or two with Mr. Rivers first."

The good lady subsided, but it was plain to be seen she was disappointed.

"May I come in?" and a smiling Olive appeared in the doorway. "Am I wanted?"

"Are you wanted?" the eager, hungry smile Rivers gave her was pathetic. For it was so spontaneous, so gladly welcoming that it was as if a light was suddenly extinguished when the man, on second thought, hid his real feelings and advanced with a courteous but rather formal air.

"You're always wanted," he resumed, lightly, but the joy was gone from his tones, and a mere friendly greeting resulted. Surely, he was a gentleman, but he would make no advances while uncertain of his claim in full to that title.

And then, he looked at her curiously, as if wondering whether she would hold any place in his restored memory,—should the restoration really occur.

It was Zizi who broke the silence that fell on us all.

"I want my way, Penny," she said, in such a wistful, pleading tone, that I felt sure no breathing human heart could refuse her.

"What is your way, Zizi?" Wise said, gently.

"I want us all to go—all of us,—over to Mr. Gately's office—"

"Come ahead!" cried Rivers; "I promised old Brice, here, that I'd go this very day, and I broke my appointment. Sorry, old man, but I had to see Friend Doctor, on the jump. Let's go now, in accordance with the Witch's whim, and we'll take the big wagon, and all go."

He often called Zizi the Witch, or the Elf-child, and she liked it from him, though she usually resented any familiarity.

She smiled at him, but I noted an undercurrent of sadness in her gaze, and I knew she was thinking of the evidence of the snow crystal.

For though Zizi liked Rivers a lot, and though she really had faith in his innocence of wrongdoing, yet her whole fealty was to Pennington Wise, and her hunch about the snowflake drawing might lead to disastrous results in more ways than one.

Olive shrank from going to her guardian's office,—she had never been there since the tragedy,—but a few whispered words from Zizi persuaded her to agree to accompany us.

And to help matters, I told her that if she preferred not to go into Mr. Gately's rooms, she could remain in my office with Norah, while we went.

Mrs. Vail insisted on being of the party, and ran briskly off to get her bonnet.

The atmosphere seemed peculiarly charged with a feeling of impending disaster, and yet, not one of us would have held back. Pennington Wise was very grave and quiet; Zizi, on the other hand, was as one electrified. She sprang about with quick, darting motions, she giggled almost hysterically and then suddenly became most gentle and tender. She ran for Olive's wraps herself, and bringing them, put them on with the careful air of a mother dressing her child.

Olive, herself, was as one dazed. She, now and then, looked toward Rivers with a shy, yet wistful glance, and he looked back with a big, hearty smile that seemed to warm her very soul.

We piled into the big touring car and made a quick run to the Puritan Building.

*

THEN we all went to my office first. Norah did the honors as prettily as any hostess in her own home, and her ready tact helped Olive to overcome her dread of the place.

"Well," said Rivers, at last, "what are we waiting for? I thought we were to go over to Mr. Gately's rooms. Perhaps Miss Raynor and Mrs. Vail would prefer to stay here with Miss MacCormack."

"No," said Olive, firmly, "I want to go, too."

Norah looked at her uncertainly. Then, probably realizing that for Olive to remain behind would be harder than to face whatever might happen, she said, quite casually, "Very well, Miss Raynor, let us all go."

I think we were all imbued with a sense of fear, a sort of premonition that the visit across the hall would be productive of grave results.

Rivers was the most light-hearted of the party, and yet I somehow felt that his cheerfulness was forced.

"The keys, Brice?" he said; "oh, you have them. All right, my boy, go ahead."

And then the same stillness that was on the rest of us fell on him, too, and we entered the rooms in silence.

I went first, through Jenny's room, on to the middle room, and paused just beyond the desk.

Rivers was next, but Zizi pushed her lithe little body through the group, and came through the door just ahead of him.

Rivers entered with the strangest look I have ever seen on any human face. It was a transition,—not sudden but gradual,—from the dark of forgetfulness to the dawn of memory.

And then, just as he neared Amos Gately's desk, Zizi, without seeming insistence,—indeed, without seeming intent,—guided him to the chair opposite Mr. Gately's desk-chair.

Mechanically, almost unconsciously, Rivers dropped into the seat and sat at the great table-desk,—just where, presumably, the slayer of Amos Gately had sat.

With one of her sudden, swift motions, Zizi put the telephone receiver into his left hand, which involuntarily opened to take it, and thus exposed to view the snow crystal drawn on the blotter.

A dead silence fell on us all as Rivers sat there staring at the little sketch. He fairly devoured it with his eyes, his face, meanwhile, becoming set,—like a face of stone.

Then, raising his blank, staring eyes, his gaze sought out Olive and, looking straight at her, he gave a low, piercing cry,—wrung from him as from a soul in mortal agony,—and said:

"I killed Amos Gately!"

I think the scene that followed this announcement was the strangest I have ever experienced. For myself, I felt a sudden sinking, as if the bottom had fallen out of the universe. In fact, a whimsical idea flashed through my stunned brain that I was "falling through the earth,"—or into a bottomless pit.

The white faces that I looked at meant nothing to me,—I saw them as in a dream, so dazed was my intelligence.

And then, they assumed their individuality and I saw that Olive's lovely countenance was a complete blank; like me, she failed to grasp the full meaning of Rivers' confession.

Mrs. Vail, her eyes closed, lay back limply in a chair, and groaned audibly, while Norah buried her face in a nearby silken curtain and sobbed.

Pennington Wise looked like a man who has just heard the worst,—but who expected it. However, the shock had unnerved him, I could see by his tightly clenched hands and set lips, as he strove to control himself.

Rivers sat like a stone statue, only his eyes, desperate in their concentration, showed the fearful mental strain he was suffering.

Zizi,—bless her!—stood behind him,—hovering, watchful,—more like a guardian angel than a Nemesis, and with her eerie, elfin face full of anxious suspense.

Rivers drew a long sigh; he looked round the room, appraisingly, his quick, darting glance taking in every detail, he scanned the desk and all the things on it, he looked through into the farther room,—the Blue Room,—and saw the great war map hanging on the wall, and then he rose, straightened his broad shoulders, and shook himself as one who arouses from sleep.

Breathlessly, we who watched, saw a great light come into his eyes,—a new self-respect, a new sense of importance showed in

his whole bearing and, with a smile of infinite tenderness he looked at Olive and said:

"I am Amory Manning!"

Zizi yelled. There is no other word for it. Her shrieks of joy filled the room, and she danced about waving her thin little arms like a veritable pixy.

"It's all right!" she cried, in ecstacy, "Oh, Penny, it's all right!" and with a spring across the room, she landed in Wise's arms, who patted her shoulder, and said:

"There, there, Ziz, don't flatten out *now!*"

Meantime, Rivers was finding himself. He stood still, with his hands tightly grasping the chair back, and his face working as he received and classified the memories crowding thickly back upon his burdened brain.

"Wait a minute," he said, struggling with his thoughts, "I know all about it, but—"

"Amory!" cried Olive, "that's your *voice!* I know you *now!*"

We could all note the change in his speech. Until this moment Rivers had spoken in the peculiar tones I had noticed the first time I met him. Monotonous tones, almost devoid of inflection. Now, his voice was normal, and even more melodious than the average.

Surely, the man had found himself, but if he was really Amory Manning,—well, my mind refused to go further.

And he had also said that he killed Amos Gately!

But I felt no need of asking questions, or even of wondering, for the man before us looked so responsible, so capable of self-

explanation, that like the rest of the assembly, I merely waited his further speech.

"There's so much to be told," he said, and his smile changed to a look of pain. He gave another glance at Olive, and even took a step toward her,—then he seemed to collapse, and sinking back into the chair he had vacated, he hid his face in his hands and groaned.

"Go on!" whispered an imperious little voice, and Zizi was behind him again, her hand on his shoulder, her tones urgent and encouraging.

"I will!" and Manning, for we felt no doubt of his identity now, —spoke firmly and bravely. He did not look at Olive, and it was clear that this was intentional.

Instead, he turned to Zizi, and seemed to address himself to her.

He couldn't have done better if he wanted helpful sympathy, for the black eyes that gazed at him were soft and tender with something like a maternal sweetness.

This mood of Zizi's, rarely shown, was one of her chiefest charms, and Manning gratefully accepted it, and let it help him.

"Shall I tell all,—now and here?" he asked, glancing at Pennington Wise.

"Yes," said the detective, after a moment's thought. "Yes, if you will."

"Very well, then." Manning was entirely composed now, but it was evident he was holding himself together by a strong effort. Also, he carefully refrained from looking in Olive's direction.

This alarmed me a little, for to my mind, it argued him a guilty man, and, that, in fact, he had declared himself to be.

Norah and I exchanged glances of understanding,—or, rather, of not understanding,—and Manning began his story.

"I think I will begin right here," he said, in a slow, methodical way, and with the air of one who has a disagreeable duty to perform, but who has no intention of shirking any part of it.

"I remember everything—everything,—and it is not all pleasant remembrance! But it must be told, and then I must go at once and report to my superiors.

"I am Amory Manning, a special agent in the Secret Service. I was detailed by the Government to hunt down a certain branch of the enemy spy system in New York City, and in pursuance of my duty, I learned that Amos Gately was the man I sought."

Manning still kept his glance averted from Olive, indeed, he looked almost constantly at Zizi, whose dark little face, lovely in its sympathy, seemed to drink in his every word.

"I knew all about Rodman, I was on the trail of Sadie, 'The Link,' and I came here, that afternoon, primarily to get an incriminating paper, which would have been positive evidence against Gately, and I had orders to arrest him if he was unable to clear himself.

"We had a stormy interview, and I found the man was guilty of the blackest treason. He had been a receiver of the stolen information sold by 'The Link,' and had transmitted it, by secret channels of his own, to the enemy government. I charged him with this, and he put up a fight. I tried to overcome him, and

take him peaceably, but he was desperate and evaded my grasp. He ran toward that map in the other room, and I stood just here, where I am now sitting. I had overturned the chair in our struggle and as I suddenly saw him push aside the map and enter what was beyond all doubt a secret mode of exit, I fired at him. Of course, I meant merely to wing him,—merely to prevent his escape,—but as I fired he turned and received the bullet in his heart. Of course, I didn't know this at the time, nor did I know where he had gone. But I heard the car descend, and knew that it must be a private elevator.

"I ran into that room, and finding the elevator entrance, behind the map, fastened, I flew out to the hall and downstairs. In my haste, there being no car waiting, I thought I could get down faster by the stairs. But after running down two flights, I saw a waiting elevator and got in. I had dropped my pistol somewhere when trying to stuff it into my overcoat pocket as I ran downstairs. But I gave no thought to anything save preventing the escape of my prisoner. Of course, I didn't then know how seriously he was hurt.

"I failed to find the exit from the private elevator, and never dreaming it was in the building next door, I hunted this building for quite a time. I investigated the ground floor, the basement and sub-basement, but couldn't find it. Greatly puzzled, I began the search all over again, and then, Olive,—Miss Raynor, came, and—later, I found that others had discovered the dead body of the man I had shot.

"I waited only to be sure of this, and then started at once to report to the Federal Bureau."

"I know it," I interrupted, unable to keep quiet, as the recollection surged over me, "and you went down Third Avenue on the street-car—"

"I did," Manning's face showed only an intense effort at reconstructing the scene, "I was going to stop at my rooms on the way, for something I needed, and—"

"Wait a minute," Wise said, "I'm interested in the Case Rivers phase of your existence. Don't forget you're the Man Who Fell Through the Earth."

A strange smile passed over Manning's face.

"I'm just coming to that," he said; "I am that man, and I can tell you right now, how, where, and why I made the trip!"

All eyes were upon him. This strange talk,—and he had been so sensible up to now. Was the hallucination of falling through the earth destined to mar his newly returned sanity?

"Go on," repeated Zizi, and the calmness of her voice restored Manning's poise, and also raised my hopes of a plausible explanation.

"You were with me, Brice," Manning looked at me, as if for corroboration.

"Yes; I was in the car with you, but we were not near enough to speak. There was a big crowd,—and I was standing at the rear end, while you were well forward. But I say, Rivers, it's hard to believe that man in the car was you! Why, you're not the same type—"

"Wait a minute," the speaker waved his hand as if to check the interruption, "I *am* Manning,—I'll explain later,—but now I want to get that occasion well in hand. I got off the front end of the car,—I don't know what you did,—and as I stepped off, a sudden fierce blast of wind nearly took me off my feet. I was right in the middle of the street but it seemed the middle of a howling blizzard, and as I took a step,—I went down an open manhole into the sewer.

"This I distinctly remember,—the street cleaners were working there, shoveling the snow into the sewer. They had no business to leave the manhole open and unguarded, but that black squall was so sudden and terrific, no one could see or know anything for the time being.

"However, I knew perfectly well, as I fell in, what had happened, but then,—and I remember this, too,—I fell and fell, —down, down,—it seemed for miles; I was whirled dizzily about,—but still I fell—on and on,—interminably. I felt my consciousness going,—at first, abnormally acute, my senses became dulled, and I had only a sensation of falling—ever falling—through the earth!

"There my memory ceases. And as I next remember finding myself in a bed in Bellevue Hospital, and as I have had detailed to me the full account of my being found floating, nearly dead, in the East River, I can only accept the inevitable conclusion that I was carried by the rush of the sewer, straight out to the river, and picked up for dead.

"That a sign of life was found, after I was taken to the morgue, was of the nature of a miracle, and only the most desperate efforts fanned that little spark into resuscitation. The rest you know. The shock, the exposure, the cold, and perhaps a blow or two on my head, all combined, resulted in a total loss of memory as to my identity or to the events of my former life.

"I had only remaining the positive recollection of that fall—" Manning shuddered,—"that interminable, that never-ending fall through the earth."

"But you fell through water," said Wise, his eyes staring at the narrator of all this.

"Not to my knowledge. My realization of falling only lasted until I struck the water in the sewer. That, doubtless, knocked me out for good and all,—mentally, I mean. I have to thank my wonderful vitality and strong constitution for the fact that I really lived through the catastrophe. Think what it means! Hurtled through that rushing torrent of a sewer half filled with melted snow and water,—flung out into the river, dashed about among the floating cakes of ice, and all with sufficient force to tear off my clothing,—and yet to live through it!"

"Going some!" cried Zizi, and the sparkle of her dancing eyes and the delight on her small, smiling face, made the rude phrase seem quite fit for the occasion.

"And so," Manning went on, quietly, "I have accomplished my quests. I have been working hard to discover three things,—my own identity, the whereabouts of Amory Manning, and—the

slayer of Amos Gately. I, myself, am the answer to all three questions."

A silence fell; and then Olive spoke.

"You are no slayer,—you are no murderer. You shot Mr. Gately by accident, in the pursuance of your duty. You are not only exonerated, but you did a deed, in freeing the world of a traitor, that entitles you to a Distinguished Service Cross! I respected my guardian,—I was fond of him,—but now I know what he was. I have only contempt and hatred of him! You, Amory, are a hero!—my hero."

Olive held out her hands with a beautiful gesture of affection, and Manning strode across the room to her side.

"Now I have the only forgiveness I care for," he said, and his face was radiant. "Now, I must go at once, and report. My duty lies to my country,—to my government! Oh, there are so many things yet to think of! They,—the Government,—offered a reward for me!"

"Which you have won yourself!" exclaimed Penny Wise.

"Yes," chuckled Zizi, "and you've won the reward offered for Mr. Gately's—" she hesitated,—"for the man who freed the world of one more traitorous viper!"

"And, incidentally," I added, "you've cleared up the puzzle of the man who fell through the earth!"

"It is well that Gately is no more," Manning said, musingly; "he was especially dangerous because he was in such a high position and so trusted by everybody. Rodman was an equal scoundrel, but he worked inconspicuously. Gately banked on

his reputation for honor and probity,—used his own well-earned fame to further the meanest cause on earth!

"Whatever happens, I'm glad he is unable to do further harm. I didn't mean to kill him—it was an accident,—but the world is well rid of him."

"Amen," said Olive, softly.

"Well, the end justifies the means," said Mrs. Vail, a little hysterically. "Why, once I heard of—"

Ruthlessly, I shut her off.

"Accept my greetings, Mr. Manning," I said, offering my hand to our new-found friend. "I'm proud to know you!"

And then there was a scene of handshaking and smiling welcome such as any hero might be proud to receive.

"Wait a minute," Manning said, at last, "that day, I was hunting a paper, you know. If it was sent off, there will yet be trouble from it. Has it been found, do you know, Mr. Wise?"

"No; what sort of a paper?"

"One of the stolen telegrams. It was concealed, I had reason to think, somewhere in Gately's desk—"

"Do you know that?"

"I think so—wait,—I had just thought I knew where to look for it, when Gately said something that made me telephone for assistance in his arrest. I was waiting for an answer to my call —"

"When you drew the snow crystal!" Zizi cried.

"Yes," he smiled. "And then, I saw something that hinted a possible hiding-place—ah, here it is!"

He stepped to the desk and picked up the heavy, ornate gold penholder. He fussed with it a moment, and then, unscrewing it in the middle, showed that it was a cleverly constructed place to hide a tiny roll of thin paper.

There was such a roll in it, and pulling it out, Manning grinned with glee. "All right," he cried, joyfully; "this is the paper, a Government secret! See, you read it by that carriage-call check, and it's safe now!"

It was a paper filled with rows of letters, such a paper as had been found in Sadie's possession and also in Rodman's.

"Now, I am satisfied," Manning declared; "and now I must go straight down to the Federal Bureau. But first—"

"Sure!" said Zizi, reading his thoughts; "we're excused!"

And with a saucy smile, she flew over and kissed Olive heartily. Then, with an imperious air, she took command, and almost before we knew it she had herded every last one of us, except Olive and Manning, across the hall to my office.

I was the last to go, and Manning smiled broadly as he called after me, "I want Miss Raynor to say once more that she exonerates me, and then I'll report to my other Superior!"

Laughing happily, I entered my office, and found it a scene of hilarious gayety. Mrs. Vail was positively cavorting about, as Norah waltzed her up and down the room; Pennington Wise was sitting on the corner of my desk whistling dance music for them, and Zizi, her arms waving, executed a sort of glory dance of her own making-up.

After a time, the door of the Gately room opened, and Olive's blushing face appeared, followed by that of the Man Who Fell Through the Earth.

"I want to correct a misstatement of mine," she said; "I told you I wasn't engaged to Amory Manning—but,—I am!"

The two came over to my office, and the ovation we gave them was second only to our reception of Manning himself a few moments before.

"Are you *sure* it is Manning?" Wise teased her.

"Yes," said Olive, most seriously. "You see he was in disguise when he was himself, and so—"

Her voice was lost in the shout that went up at her remark, and she looked around in bewilderment.

"She's right," said Manning, smiling; "I was. You see, when I became a Secret Service man, I had certain peculiar duties assigned me and it was important that I shouldn't be known. So I adopted a permanent disguise,—oh, nothing much,—merely a mild dye for my hair and beard, which washed off easily, and a pair of big, horn-rimmed specs, which were really rather becoming than otherwise. But Olive, and many of my acquaintances knew me only in this way. I wore a Vandyke beard, and a small mustache of the Charles I type.

"Then you see, when I was taken in at the hospital, and shaved, I continued to adopt a clean-shaven face. Also, the dye was thoroughly washed out in the sewer, and as my memory was washed out with it, I experienced no surprise at finding a light-haired man in my mirror.

"Olive tells me, too, that my voice was of a totally different caliber, due, no doubt, to a certain vacuity made in my brain by the loss of my memory. Oh, well, that's the story. And but for my peculiarity of drawing snow crystals,—a thing I've done just about all my life,—and but for Zizi's quick-witted realization of this habit of mine, I might never have regained consciousness of my true personality!"

"Probably something else would have brought it about," said Wise, "but your drawing of the snow crystals began with Brice's first interview with you. I ought to have found that drawing on Gately's desk long ago! Stoo-pid!" and he beat his head in mock self-abasement.

"Yes," said Zizi, giving Wise a smile that was both impudent and affectionate, "you should have, oh, Wise Guy! You ought to have found that snowflake drawing for yourself."

"Oh, that's what I have you for, Ziz, to look up clews for me."

"Of course you do, Penny Wise. I'm only your Pound Foolish, but at least, I can see through a clew that is as clear as crystal!"

THE END

In The Onyx Lobby

Carolyn Wells · First published 1920

CHAPTER I
Such a Feud!

"WELL, by the Great Catamaran! I think it's the most footle business I ever heard of! A regulation, clinker-built, angle-iron, sunk-hinge family feud, carried on by two women! Women! conducting a feud! They might as well conduct a bakery!"

"I daresay they could do even that! Women have been known to bake—with a fair degree of success!"

"Of course, of course,—but baking and conducting a bakery are not identical propositions. Women are all right, in their place,—which, by the way, is not necessarily in the home,—but a family feud, of all things, calls for masculine management and skill."

Sir Herbert Binney stood by the massive mantelpiece in the ornate living-room of the Prall apartment. The Campanile Apartment House came into being with the century, and though its type was now superseded by the plain, flat stucco of the newer buildings, yet it haughtily flaunted its elaborate façade and its deeply embrasured windows with the pride of an elder day. Its onyx lobby, lined with massive pillars, had once been the talk of the neighborhood, and the black and white tessellated floor of the wide entrance hall was as black and as white as ever.

The location, between the Circle and the Square,—which is to say, between Columbus Circle and Times Square, in the City of

New York,—had ceased to be regarded as the pick of the householders, though still called the heart of the city. People who lived there were continually explaining the reason for their stay, or moving across town.

But lots of worthwhile people yet tarried, and among them were none more so than certain dwellers in The Campanile.

Miss Letitia Prall, lessee of the mantelpiece already referred to, was a spinster, who, on dress parade, possessed dignity and poise quite commensurate with the quality of her home.

But in the shelter of her own fireside, she allowed herself latitude of speech and even loss of temper when she felt the occasion justified it. And any reference to or participation in the famous feud was such justification.

Her opponent in the deadly strife was one Mrs Everett, also an occupant of The Campanile, and equally earnest in prolonging the life and energy of the quarrel.

Sir Herbert Binney, an Englishman, knighted since the war, had come to America in the interests of its own business, no less an enterprise than the establishment of an American branch of the great and well-known "Binney's Buns."

Celebrated in England, he hoped and expected to make the admirable buns equally popular over here, and trusted to his engaging personality as well as his mercantile acumen to accomplish this purpose.

Not exactly related to Miss Prall, Sir Herbert was connected by the marriage of a relative. That is, his half-brother's son, one Richard Bates, was also the son of Miss Prall's sister. This young

gentleman, who, by the way, lived with his Aunt Letitia, was another reason for Sir Herbert's presence in New York. He had thought that if this nephew showed the right sort of efficiency he could be set to manage the American branch, or, at least, have a hand in the management.

And so, Binney of "Binney's Buns" had established himself in one of the smaller suites of The Campanile, had had his living-room repapered to his taste, had made arrangements for his proper service, and was comfortably domiciled.

The fly in his ointment was that young Bates didn't take at all kindly to the Bun proposition. For the chap was of an inventive turn, and had already secured patents for some minor accessories and improvements connected with aëroplanes. Without parents or fortune of his own, Richard Bates was dependent, so far, on the generosity of his Aunt Prall, which, though judicious, was sufficient for his bodily welfare. But Bates was ambitious, and desired large sums with which to carry on his inventions, certain that they, in turn, would repay a thousandfold.

As the only legal heir of both aunt and uncle, and with utmost faith in his own powers of success, Richard requested, almost, indeed, demanded advance on his inheritance, sufficient at least to put over his present great piece of work, which was expected to prove of decided value in aëronautic plans.

But such advances were positively refused; by Miss Prall, because Richard declined to accede to an accompanying

condition, and by Uncle Binney, because he wanted his nephew for his Buns.

The recipe for the famous buns was of an age and tradition that made it a historical document in England, and, as yet unattained in this country, it was sought for by bakers and bunners of repute. But it was not for sale. Sir Herbert Binney would establish Binney's Buns in America, and all good Americans could eat thereof, but sell the recipe to some rival bakeshop he would not. This state of things had made necessary much parley and many important meetings of Baking Powers. Among these were the great Crippen's Cake Company, the Vail Bread Concern, the Popular Popovers and others of sufficient importance to get a hearing.

Genial and good-natured, Sir Herbert met them all, discussed their offers and reserved decision. He did not say, even to himself, that he was waiting on the will of one young man,—but, practically, that was the truth. If Bates would give up his fool inventing, and take hold of the Buns in earnest, Sir Herbert would put him through with bells on, would make him heir of the Buns and all the great English properties that the Buns possessed, and would do all in his power to make the life of young Bates a bed of choicest roses.

But Richard Bates had all the obstinacy and stubbornness of the born inventor. He knew he couldn't devote to Bun business a brain teeming with new notions for the furtherance of scientific attainment. And he was too honest and honorable to accept the Bun proposition and then turn to aëronautics on the

side. Nor was a side issue of sufficient importance to satisfy his hunger for his own chosen work. He knew he could put up the goods that he had in mind, if he could only get the presently needed money for his experiments and models. If he could but make either uncle or aunt agree to his views, he could, later, select his own roses for his bed of life.

But Sir Herbert was as obstinate as his nephew and Miss Letitia Prall more so than either of them.

Her unflinching and persistent adherence to her decisions was clearly shown in the matter of the long continued feud. Not every woman could meet an opponent frequently and casually for twenty years or so, and pursue an even tenor of enmity.

In the same social circles, Miss Prall and Mrs Everett attended the same teas, luncheons and bridge parties, yet never deviated one jot or one tittle from their original inimical attitude.

Never, or at least, very rarely, were there sharp words in the presence of others, but there were scathing silences, slighting inattentions and even venomous looks that could not pass unseen.

In fact, they carried on their feud after what would doubtless be conceded by connoisseurs the most approved methods.

And, indeed, after twenty years' experience it would be strange if the two ladies had not attained proficiency in the pursuit of quarreling as a fine art. Not always had they lived under the same roof. The Feud had begun when they were denizens of a small country town, and, fostered in that

nourishing atmosphere, had attained its proportions gradually but steadily.

When circumstances took them to the city to live, and, as if afraid the unsociability of town life might interfere with their hobby, the Feudists acquired homes in two of the most desirable apartments of The Campanile.

Miss Prall, tall, spare and with the unmistakable earmarks of spinsterhood, directed her menage with the efficiency and capability of a general. She was nicknamed among her friends, the Grenadier, and her strong character and aggressive manner made the description an apt one.

Her one weakness was her adored nephew. As an orphaned infant, left to Miss Letitia a bequest from the dying mother, he had been immediately adopted into the child-hungry heart of the old maid and had held and strengthened his position throughout the years until, at twenty-five, he was the apple of one of her eyes, even as her precious feud was the apple of the other.

But hers was no doting, misguided affection. Miss Prall had brought up her nephew, as she did everything else, with wisdom and sound judgment.

To her training the young Richard owed many of his most admirable traits and much of his force of character. No man could have more successfully instilled into a boy's heart the fundamental requisites for true manliness, and only on rare occasions had his aunt's doting heart triumphed over her wise head in the matter of reproof or punishment.

And now, this upstart uncle, as Miss Prall considered him, had come over here from England, with all sorts of plans to take her boy from his chosen and desirable life work and set him to making buns!

Buns,—Binney's Buns! for her gifted inventive genius!

This impending disaster together with a new and regrettable development affecting the Feud had thrown Miss Prall into a state of nervous agitation quite foreign to her usual condition of calm superiority.

"Masculine management and skill!" she repeated, with a fine scorn; "because not every woman is fitted by nature and circumstances to conduct affairs of importance it does not follow that there are not some feminine spirits with all the force and power of the other sex!"

"By gad, madam, that is true," and Sir Herbert watched the Grenadier as she sat upright in her arm-chair, her fine head erect and her straight shoulders well back. "I apologize for my seeming slight to your quarrelsome abilities, and I concede your will and strength to fight your own battles. In fact, my sympathies are for your antagonist."

"Huh!" and Miss Prall looked at him sharply; for he had been known to express satirical sentiments under guise of suavity. "Don't waste your solicitude on her! She, too, is able to look out for herself."

"It would seem so, since she has taken part for twenty years in what is still a drawn battle."

"Let up, Oldsters," laughed young Bates, coming breezily into the room. "You know the main facts of the historic Feud, Uncle Herbert, and, take it from me, sir, no amount of argument or advice on your part will help, or in any way affect it. Aunt Letty will eat up your talk, and then floor you with—"

"Floor me! I think not! Binney, of Binney's Buns, is not of the floorable variety."

"You say that because you haven't yet really met Auntie Let in the arena. Binney's Buns would cut no better figure than,—let us say, Crippen's Cakes."

"Crippen's Cakes! Do you know Crippen?"

"Does she!" and Richard Bates grinned; "why, the Cake Crippen is one of Aunt Letitia's old beaux,—might have been my uncle, if —"

"Hush, Richard!" said the aunt.

"If he hadn't also shined up to Mrs Everett, the rival faction." Richard went on, with open relish of his aunt's discomfiture.

"Hush, Richard!" she said, again, and this time some veiled hint apparently was efficacious, for he changed the subject.

"I say, Uncle Herb, what about the Follies to-night? I've got a couple of seats,—and I know your tastes—"

"Front row?"

"No; couldn't corral those,—but good ones, in the fourth."

"Nay, nay, Pauline*. I don't see well enough to sit so far back. Use those yourself, Richard,—take your aunt, here! But I'll find a seat in the front row,—in some front row, if I have to buy their bloomin' theater to get it!"

[* "Nay, nay, Pauline. You've made your own bed. You've as good as left your happy home an' family cart to steal it. Now you lie on it."—Steam Tactics by Rudyard Kipling.]

"Good for you, Sir Herbert!" exclaimed Miss Prall, who admired determination wherever she met it. "I'll go with *you*. I like the front row, too."

"Sorry, madam, but I'm not taking guests." He winked at Richard.

"Naturally not," Miss Letitia sniffed. "I know why you want to go alone,—I know why you want the front row! You're going to attract a chorus girl, and invite her to supper with you."

"Marvelous, Holmes, marvelous!" Sir Herbert exclaimed, with mock amazement. "I am surprised at your clairvoyance, ma'am, but deeply pained that you should know of and be so familiar with such goings on. Do you learn of that sort of thing from your nephew? Really, Richard, I'm amazed at you!"

"Nonsense, Uncle Bin, I passed through that stage long ago. I used to girl around in my callow days, but I got fed up with it, and now life holds more worthwhile temptations. It's an old story to auntie, too. Why she used to chaperon my giddiest parties,—bless her!"

Sir Herbert's sharp eyes looked from one of his companions to the other.

"You're a pair," he opined, "both tarred with the same brush."

"And the brush?" asked Miss Prall, belligerently.

"Modern sophistication and the present-day fad of belittling everything that is interesting or pleasurable."

"That mental phase is the inevitable result of worldly experience," said the lady, with a cynical smile. "How is it that you preserve such youthful interest?"

"Well—" and the Englishman looked a little quizzical, "you see, the girls are still young."

"Very young," assented Bates, gravely. "There's a new bunch of Squabs at the Gaynight Revue that'll do you up! Better buy that place out, Unkie!"

"Perhaps; but now, young Richard, let's discuss some more imminent, if not more important, questions. Say, Buns, for instance."

"Nothing doing. I've said my last word on the Bun subject, and if you persist in recurring to it, you'll only get that last word over again,—repeated, reiterated, recapitulated and,—if necessary,—reënforced!"

"With some good, strong epithets, I suppose," remarked his uncle, calmly. "I don't blame you, Rick, for being bored by my persistency, but you see I haven't yet given up all hope of making you see reason. Why I do—"

"Well, when you do—what?"

"Time enough to answer that question when it's time to ask it. Instead, let me recount the advantages I can offer you—"

"Oh, Lord!—pardon my interrupting,—but that recounting is an old story, you know. Those advantages are as familiar to my wearied mind as my own name,—or at least as yours,—and your precious Buns—"

"Stop, sir! Don't you speak slightingly of Binney's Buns! They were eaten before you were born and will be eaten after you are dead and forgotten."

"Not forgotten if I put my invention over!"

"You'll never do it. Your success is problematical. The Buns are an assured fact. They were eaten before the war,—they will be eaten again now that the war is over. They are eaten in England,—they will be eaten in America. If not with the help of your interest and energy, then with that of some one else. Think well, my boy, before you throw away fame and fortune—"

"To acquire fame and fortune!"

"To strive for it and fail—for that is what you will do! You're riding for a fall, and you're going to get it!"

"Not if I can prevent it," Miss Prall interposed, in her low yet incisive tones. "I'm ready to back Ricky's prospects to the uttermost, if only—"

"If only what? What is this condition you impose on the lad? And why keep it so secret? Tell me, nephew, I'll let you in on the Buns in spite of any blot on your scutcheon. What is it that troubles your aunt?"

"What always troubles her? What has spoiled and embittered her whole life? Hardened her heart? Corroded her soul? What, but her old ridiculous, absurd, contemptible, damnable Feud!"

"There, there, my boy, remember your aunt is a lady, and such expressions are not permissible before her—"

"Pish! Tush!" snorted Miss Prall, who would not have herself objected to that descriptive verb, since it gives the very

impression she wanted to convey, "If I did not permit such expressions Richard would not use them, rest assured of that."

Bates smiled and lighted a fresh cigarette. These tilts between his elders greatly amused him, they seemed so futile and inane, yet of such desperate interest to the participants.

"Then that's all right," Sir Herbert conceded. "Now, Richard, for the last time, I offer you the chance to fall in with my wishes, to consent to my fondest desire, and attach yourself to my great, my really stupendous enterprise. I want, with my whole soul, to keep Binney's Buns in the family,—I want a worthy partner and successor, and one of my own blood kin,—but, I can't force you into this agreement,—I can only urge you, with all the powers of my persuasion, to see it rightly, and to realize that your refusal will harm you more than any one else."

"I'll take a chance on that, Uncle Bin." Bates gave him a cheery smile that irritated by its very carelessness.

"You'll lose, sir! You'll see the day that you'll wish you had taken up with my offers. You'll regret, when it's too late—"

"Why, what's your alternative plan?"

"Aha! Interested, are you? Well, young sir, my alternative plan is to find somebody with more common sense and good judgment than your rattle-pated, pig-headed self! That's my alternative plan."

"Got anybody in view?"

"And if I have?"

"Go to it! Take my blessing, and stand not on the order of your going to it,—but skittle! You can't go too fast to suit me!"

"You're an impudent and disrespectful young rascal! Your bringing-up is sadly at fault if it allows you to speak thus to your elders!"

"Oh, come off, Uncle Binney! You may be older than I in actual years, but you've got to hand it to me on the score of temperamental senescence! Why, you're a very kid in your enthusiasm for the halls of dazzling light and all that in them is! So, and, by the way, old top, I mean no real disrespect, but I consider it a compliment to your youth and beauty to recognize it in a feeling of camaraderie and good-fellowship. Are we on?"

"Yes, that's all right, son, but can't your good-fellowship extend itself to the Buns?"

"Nixy. Nevaire! Cut out all Bun talk, and I'm your friend and pardner. Bun, and you Bun alone!"

A long, steady gaze between the eyes of the young man and the old seemed to convince each of the immutability of this decision, and, with a deep sigh, the Bun promoter changed the subject.

"This Gayheart Review, now, Richard,—" he began.

"Don't consider the question settled, Sir Herbert," said Miss Letitia Prall, with a note of anxiety in her voice, quite unusual to it. "Give me a chance to talk to Ricky alone, and I feel almost certain I can influence his views."

"A little late in the day, ma'am," Binney returned, shortly. "I have an alternative plan, but if I wait much longer to make use of it, the opportunity may be lost. Unless Richard changes his

mind to-day, he needn't change it at all,—so far as I am concerned."

"Going to organize a Bakery of ex-chorus girls?" asked Bates, flippantly. "Going to persuade them to throw in their fortunes with yours?"

A merry, even affectionate smile robbed this speech of all unpleasant effect, and Sir Herbert smiled back.

"Not that," he returned; "I'd be ill fitted to attend to a bakery business with a horde of enchanting damsels cavorting around the shop! No, chorus girls are all right in their place,—which is not in the home, nor yet in a business office."

"That's true, and I take off my hat to you, Uncle, as a real live business man, with his undivided attention on his work,—in business hours,—and outside of those, his doings are nobody's business."

"With your leanings toward the fair sex, it's a wonder you never married," observed Miss Prall, inquisitively.

"My leanings toward them in no way implies their leanings toward me," returned the bachelor, his eyes twinkling. "And, moreover, a regard for one of the fair sex that would imply a thought of marriage with her, would be another matter entirely from a liking for the little stars of the chorus. To me they are not even individuals, they are merely necessary parts of an entertaining picture. I care no more for them, personally, than for the orchestra that makes music for their dancing feet, or for the stage manager who produces the setting for their engaging gracefulness."

"That's so, Uncle," Bates agreed; "you're a stage Johnny, all right, but you're no Lothario."

"Thank you, Son, such discriminating praise from Sir Hubert Stanley, makes me more than ever regret not having his association in my business affairs."

"Don't be too sure that you won't have him," Miss Prall temporized; "when does his time for decision expire?"

"To-night," said Sir Herbert, briefly, and at that, with a gesture of bored impatience, Bates got up and went out.

CHAPTER II
A Tricky Game

THE Prall apartment was on the eighth floor, but Richard Bates passed by the elevator and went down the stairs. Only one flight, however, and on the seventh floor, he walked along the hall, whistling in a subdued key. The air was an old song, a one-time favorite, "Won't you come out and play wiz me?" and the faint notes grew stronger as he passed a certain door. Then he went on, but soon turned, retraced his steps, and went up again the one flight of stairs. Pausing at the elevator, he pushed the down button and was soon in the car and smiling on the demure young woman in uniform who ran it.

"This car of yours, Daisy," he remarked, "is like the church of Saint Peter at Rome, it has an atmosphere of its own. But if the church had this atmosphere there'd be mighty few worshipers! How can you stand it? Doesn't it make you ill?"

"Ill?" and the girl rolled weary eyes at him; "I'm dead! You can bring the flowers when you're ready, Gridley!"

"Poor child," and Bates looked compassionately at the white face, that even a vanity case failed to keep in blooming condition, so moisty warm was the stuffy elevator. "It's wicked to shut you up in such a cage—"

"Oh, I'm all right," she responded, hurriedly, as her bell sounded a sharp, impatient ring. "I'm not complaining. But people are so trying on a day like this. That's Mr. Binney's ring."

"How do you know. Do you know everybody's touch?"

"Not everybody's,—but lots of them. Mr. Binney, he hates elevator girls—"

"Oh, come now,—my uncle is a great admirer of all women—"

"Not if they work. He talks a good deal, you know,—talks all the time,—and he's everlastingly knocking girls who do the work he thinks men ought to do."

"But it's none of his business,—in this house!"

"Mr. Binney is particularly and especially interested in what's none of his business!"

The girl spoke so bitterly that Bates looked at her in surprise.

But he was at the ground floor, and as he left the elevator he forgot all else in anticipation of a certain coming delight.

He strolled the length of the great onyx lobby, its sides a succession of broad mirrors between enormous onyx columns with massive gilded capitals. Tall palms were at intervals, alternating with crimson velvet sofas and on one of these, near the vestibule, Bates sat down to wait for the delight.

And in the course of time, she came, tripping along the black and white diamonds of the marble floor, her high heels tapping quickly, her lithe gracefulness hurrying to keep the tryst.

Dorcas Everett was of the type oftenest seen among the well-to-do young girls of New York, but she was one of the best examples of that type.

Wise, sparkling eyes, soft, rounded chin held alertly up, dark, curly hair arranged in a pleasant modification of the latest fashion, her attire was of the most careful tailor-made variety,

and her little feathered toque was put on at just the right angle and was most engagingly becoming.

She said no word but gave a happy smile as Bates rose and eagerly joined her and together they passed out through the imposing portal.

"It's awful," she murmured, as they walked across to Fifth Avenue. "I said I wouldn't do it again, you know, and then—when I heard your whistle,—I just couldn't help it! But don't do it any more—will you? You promised you wouldn't."

"Oh, I didn't promise, dear; I said I'd *try* not to. And I did try, but—it seems I failed."

"Bad boy! Very bad Rikki-tikki-tavi. But what are we going to do?"

"First of all, where are we going? Tea Room? Some place where I can talk to you."

"No; it's too stuffy to-day to be indoors. Let's walk up to the Park and go in."

"All right. Now, Dorrie, we must face this thing. We can't go on meeting secretly,—neither of us likes it,—"

"I should say not! I hate it a thousand times worse'n you do. But Rick, mother is more obstinate than ever. She says if I see you again, or speak to you, she'll pack up and move out of New York. Think of that!"

"I can't think of it! It is unthinkable! Now, Dorcas, darling, there's only one thing to do. You must marry me—"

"Hush that nonsense! I don't propose—"

"Naturally not! I'm doing the proposing—"

"Don't think because you make me laugh you're going to bamboozle me into consent! I decline, refuse and renounce you, if you're going to take that tack. I shall never marry you without the consent of my mother and your aunt, and you know it!"

"I do know it, Dork, and that's what breaks me all up. Confound that old Feud! But, I say, Uncle Binney is on our side. I sounded him and he approves of my marrying at once,—doesn't care who the girl is,—and will make me his heir and all that,—"

"If you give up your inventing and go into his Bunny business."

"Yes; that's his game. Shall I do it?"

"No! A thousand times no. I don't want to marry a bakery!"

"And anyway, it wouldn't help the Feud—"

"No; nothing will help that. It would seem that we could move the hearts of those two women, but my mother is hard as adamant."

"And my aunt is hard as nails. After all these years they're not going to be moved by a pair of broken young hearts."

"No; mother says that because I'm so young, my heart will heal up in plenty of time to break over somebody else."

"Pleasant thought!"

"Oh, mother doesn't try to be pleasant about it. She makes my life a burden by harping on my undutifulness and all that,—and when she isn't bally-ragging me, Kate is."

"Kate! A servant!"

"But Kate doesn't look upon herself as a servant, exactly. She's lady's maid now,—to mother and me,—but she was my nurse,

you know, and she thinks she sort of owns me. Anyway, she acts so."

"And she stands for the feud?"

"Rath-er! She believes in the feud and all its works. And she's a spy, too. If she hadn't believed my yarn that I was headed for Janet's to-day, she'd been downstairs trailing me!"

"Clever Dork, to outwit her!"

"That's nothing—I'm clever enough to hoodwink her and mother, too, but I don't want to. I hate it, Rick; I hate anything underhanded or deceitful. Only my love for you made me come out here to-day."

The big, dark eyes looked wistfully into Bates' blue ones. The troubled look on Dorcas' dear little face stirred the depths of his soul, and his heart struggled between his appreciation of her high-mindedness and his yearning love.

"I want you, Dorrie," he said, simply; "I want you terribly,—desperately,—and I—I admit it—would be willing to take you on any terms. I'd run away with you in a minute, if you'd go! To be sure, I honor your truthfulness and all that,—but, oh, little girl, can't you put me ahead of your mother?"

"I don't know,—"

"You're hesitating! You've thought about it! Oh, Dork, will you?"

"There, there, don't go so fast! No, I won't! But, tell me this: Would your uncle stand for it,—and let you go on with your own work?"

"Oh, no! It's Buns or nothing with him and me. But I'm his heir, if he should drop off suddenly, I'd have his whole fortune—"

"Dead men's shoes! Oh, Ricky, for shame?"

"Not at all. If he can make a will, I can talk about it. And he told me he has made a will in my favor,—but he's going to change it if I don't adopt his Buns."

"What nonsense,—even to think about it. Let him change it, then, for you'll never be a Bun man!"

"I wonder if it would help matters if you met Uncle Binney?"

"Let's try it. Though I'm sure I should call him Uncle Bunny! Does he like girls?"

"Adores them,—that is, some sorts. He likes nice girls properly. He likes naughty girls,—perhaps improperly. But the girls in the house,—the elevator kids and the telephone girls, he just hates."

"Hates?"

"They irritate him somehow. He thinks all such positions should be filled by men or boys. He says the war is over, and he wants all the girls taken off those jobs."

"How unjust and unreasonable."

"Uncle Herbert has both of those admirable qualities. But he'd adore you,—unless he found out you disapprove of the Buns, and then he'd turn and rend you!"

"I don't disapprove of them,—except for you."

"That's what I mean,—for me."

"Then I guess I'd better not meet Friend Bunny."

"Oh, Dorcas, I don't know what to do! There's no light from any direction. There's no hope from your mother, my aunt or Sir

Herbert. If you won't cut and run with me,—and if you're in earnest about not meeting me secretly any more,—what *can* we do?"

"Nothing, Rick,—nothing at all."

Dorcas spoke very seriously,—even sadly, and Bates realized how much in earnest she was. They were in the Park now, and by tacit consent they sat down on a bench near the Mall.

Their eyes met dumbly. Though Bates was only twenty-five and Dorcas twenty-two, they were both older than their years, and were of fine temper and innate strength of character.

They had known one another as children in their little home town, and later, as the feud developed and gained strength, the young people had been sent away to schools. Later, the war took Richard from home, and only very recently had propinquity brought about the interest that soon ripened to love. And a deeper, more lasting love than is often found between two young hearts. Both took it very seriously, and each thoroughly realized the tragedy of the attitude of their respective guardians.

"Good gracious, Richard, I shall go straight home and tell your aunt!"

This speech was from the stern-faced woman who paused in front of the pair on the bench.

"Good gracious, Eliza, go straight ahead and do so!"

Bates' eyes shot fire and his face flushed with anger.

Eliza Gurney was his aunt's companion, indeed, her tame cat, her chattel, and partly from charity, partly because of need of

her services, Miss Prall kept Eliza with her constantly.

Of a fawning, parasitic nature, the companion made the best of her opportunities, and, without being an avowed spy, she kept watch on Richard's movements as far as she conveniently could. And in this instance, suspecting his intent, she had followed the young couple at a discreet distance, and now faced them with an accusing eye.

"No, don't," pleaded Dorcas, as Miss Gurney turned to follow up Richard's suggestion. "Oh, dear Miss Gurney, help us, won't you? We're in such a hopeless tangle. You were young once, and —"

Dorrie could scarcely have chosen a worse argument,—for that her youth had slipped away from her, was Miss Gurney's worst fear.

"I am forbidden to speak to this girl, Richard," Miss Gurney said, with pursed lips and heightened color. She addressed herself carefully to Bates and ignored the presence of Dorcas. "You are, too, as you well know, and though you have so far forgotten yourself as to disobey your aunt, I've no intention of committing a like sin."

"Fudge, Eliza, don't go back on me like that. You used to be my friend,—have you forsaken me entirely?"

"If you've forsaken your aunt,—not unless. Leave this girl instantly and go home with me, and there'll be no question of 'forsaking.'"

"Forsake Miss Everett! Not while this machine is to me! Go home yourself, Eliza; be a tattletale, if you want to, but get out

of here!"

Bates became furious because of a malevolent gleam in Miss Gurney's eye as she looked at Dorcas.

"I'll go, Richard,—and I shall not only tell your aunt what I have seen, but I shall feel it my duty to acquaint Mrs Everett with the facts."

"Don't you dare!" cried Dorcas, springing up, and facing the unpleasant faced one with uncontrollable indignation. "What I do, I tell my mother myself,—I don't have the news carried to her by her enemy's spy!"

"Hoity-toity, miss, you're a chip off the old block, I see!"

"And you're a trustworthy soul, to be talking to me when you're forbidden to do so!"

The triumph in Dorcas' tone was quite as galling to Eliza Gurney as her own chagrin at having broken her word. But, once in the moil, she saw no reason for backing out, and proceeded to pick an open quarrel.

"I can explain my speech with you to Miss Prall's satisfaction," she went on, acidly, "and I'll inform you, Miss Everett, that you've spoiled Mr. Bates' life by this clandestine affair of yours. I happen to know that his uncle, Sir Herbert Binney, was just about to make him his heir, but he will change his mind when he hears of this escapade."

"Oh, clear out, Eliza," stormed Bates; "you've given us enough of that drivel, now hook it! Hear me?"

Miss Gurney stared at him. "Your companionship with this young woman has corrupted your good manners," she began,

quite undeterred by his wrath.

Whereupon Bates took her firmly by the shoulder, spun her round, and said, "Go!" in such a tone that she fairly scurried away.

"I vanquished her," he said, a little ruefully, "but I'm afraid it's a frying pan and fire arrangement. She'll tell Aunt Letitia, and either aunt or Eliza herself will go at once to your mother with the tale,—"

"Well, I'd really rather they'd be told. I had to tell mother,—for truly, Rick, I can't live in an atmosphere of deceit. I may be a crank or a craven, but much as I love you, I can't stand keeping it a secret."

"I know it, dear, and I don't like it a bit better than you do, only to tell is to be separated,—at once, and maybe, forever."

"No!" cried Dorcas, looking at his serious face. "Not forever!"

"Yes; even you don't realize the lengths to which those two women will go. I hate to speak so of your mother, I hate to speak so of my aunt,—but I know they'll move out of town, one or both, and they'll go to the ends of the earth to keep us apart."

"But they've always lived near each other,—for years, in the same building."

"Yes; that was so they could quarrel and annoy and tantalize each other. But now the necessity of separating us two will be their paramount motive, and you'll see;—they'll do it!"

"Then—then—"

"Then let's get married, and go off by ourselves? Darling, if we only could! And I'll go into the Buns, in a minute, if you say so.

Much as I hate to give up my own work, I'd not hesitate, except for your sake—"

"No, I don't want to marry a bakery man! And, I've too much ambition for you to let you throw your talent away! Yet, we couldn't live on nothing a year! And, until your inventions are farther along, you can't realize anything on them."

"Bless me, what a little business woman it is! Well, we've both common sense enough not to make fools of ourselves,—but oh, Dork, I do want you so! And if it were not for that foolish, ridiculous feud, we could be so happy!"

"It isn't exactly the feud,—I mean, of course it is that, but it's back of that,—it's the determined, never-give-up *natures* of the two women. I don't know which is more obstinate, mother or Miss Prall, but I know,—oh, Ricky, I know neither of them will ever surrender!"

"Of course they won't,—I know that, too. So, must we give up?"

"What choice have we? What alternative?"

"None." Bates' face was blankly hopeless. "But, Dork, dear, I can't live without you! Can't you look ahead to—to something?"

"Don't see anything to look ahead to. We might say we'll wait for each other,—I'm willing,—and something tells me you are! But,—that's an unsatisfactory arrangement—"

"It's all of that! Oh, hang it all, Dork, I'll go into some respectable business and earn a living. I'll give up my plans and —"

"If you do that, you may as well go in for Buns."

"Buns! I thought you scorned the idea!"

"Principally because I want you to be an inventor. But if you give up your life work,—oh, Rick, what could you do?"

"Nothing much at first. I'd have to take a clerk-ship or something and work up."

"I'm willing to share poverty with you,—in theory,—but you don't realize what the reality would mean to us. Not only because we're both accustomed to having everything we want, but more especially because in these days it's too dangerous. Suppose we lived on the tiniest possible income, and then you fell ill,—or I did,—or you lost your position,—or anything that interrupted our livelihood,—then, we'd have to go back to mother or to your aunt,—and—dost like the picture?"

"I dost not! It's out of the question. I love you too much, and too truly to take such desperate chances. I think, after all, Dork, the Buns are our one best bet!"

"Binny's Buns! 'Get a Bun!' Oh, Rikki, couldn't hold up my head!"

"I know it,—you little inborn aristocrat! And I feel the same way about it. Well, we've got to go home and face the music, I suppose."

"Yes, and we've got to go now. I'll get more and worse scolding for every minute I stay here."

"Also, if Eliza tells your mother, she'll be sending Kate for you."

"Yes, or coming herself. Come along, let's start."

The walk home was saddened by the thought that it was the last. Able to face the situation, both knew there was no hope that they should be allowed to continue their acquaintance, and

knew that now it was discovered, they would very soon be as widely separated as the efforts of their elders could arrange.

Their pace slowed down as they neared The Campanile.

"Dear old place," said Dorcas, as the house came into their ken.

"Dear old nothing," returned Bates. "I think it's an eyesore, don't you? That bunch of Mexican onyx ought to be taken away to make kings' sarcophagi!"

"What a thought! Yes, it's hideous,—but I didn't mean its appearance. Its dear to me because we've lived here together, and I've a premonition that before long widely separated roofs will cover our heads."

"I'll conquer somehow!" Bates declared. "I haven't made many protestations, but I tell you, Dork, I'm coming out on top of this heap!"

"What are you going to do? Something desperate?"

"Maybe so,—maybe only something queer. But get you, I shall and I will! You're intended for my mate by an Omniscient Fate, and I'm going to find some way to help said Fate along. She seems to be sidetracked for the moment."

"I wish I had more faith in your Fate helping. Oh, don't look like that! I've faith enough in *you*,—but helping Fate is a tricky game."

"All right, I'm willing to play a tricky game, then!"

"You are, son! Against whom?"

And the pair entering the wide doorway, met Sir Herbert Binney coming out.

"Oh, hello, Uncle," cried Bates, grasping the situation with both hands. "Let me present you to Miss Everett; Dorcas, this is my uncle."

"How do you do, Uncle Bunny?" said Dorcas, quite unwitting that, in her surprised embarrassment, she had used the very word she had feared she would utter!

And an unfortunate mistake it proved. The smiling face of the Englishman grew red and wrathful, assuming, as he did, and not without cause, that the young woman intended to guy him.

"Daughter of your own mother, hey?" he said to her. "Ready with a sharp tongue for any occasion!"

Apology was useless, all that quick-witted Dorcas could think of was to carry it off as a jest.

"No, sir," she said, with an adorable glance of coquetry at the angry face, "but I have an unbreakable habit of using nicknames,—and as I've heard of you from Ricky, and I almost feel as if I knew you,—I, why, I just naturally called you Bunny for a pet name."

"Oho, you did! Well, I can't believe that. I think you're making fun of my trade! And that's the one thing I won't stand! Perhaps when your precious Ricky depends on those same buns for his daily food, you won't feel so scornful of them!"

"I never dreamed you were ashamed of them, sir," and Dorcas gave up the idea of peacemaking and became irritating.

"Nor am I!" he blazed. "You are an impertinent chit, and I bid you good-day!"

"Now you *have* done it!" said Bates.

CHAPTER III
The Scrawled Message

BUT, as it turned out, Dorcas hadn't "done it" at all. Bates on reaching his aunt's apartment found no one at home. But very soon Sir Herbert Binney appeared.

"Look here, Richard," he began, "I've taken a fancy to that little girl of yours—"

"She isn't mine."

"You'd like her to be?"

"Very much; in conditions that would please us both."

"Meaning Bunless conditions. I can't offer you those, but I do say now, and, for the last time, if you will take hold of my Bun proposition, I'll give you any salary you want, any interest in the business you ask, and make you my sole heir. I've already done the last, but unless you fall in with my plans now, I'm going to make another will and your name will be among the missing."

"But, Uncle Herbert—"

"I've no time for discussion, my boy; I've to dress for dinner,—I'm going out,—but this thing must be settled now, as far as you're concerned. You've had time enough to think it over, you've had time to discuss it with that pretty little girl of yours,—my, but her eyes flashed as she called me Uncle Bunny! It was a slip,—I saw that, and I pretended to be annoyed, but I liked her all the better for her sauciness. Well, Richard,—yes or no?"

"Can't you give me another twenty-four hours?"

"Not twenty-four minutes! You've hemmed and hawed over this thing as long as I'll stand it! No. You know all the details, all the advantages that I offer you. You know I mean what I say and I'll stand by every word. I'm going to meet the head of a big American concern to-night, and if you turn me down, I shall probably make a deal with him. I'd rather keep my business and my fortune in the family, but if you say no, out you go! So, as a countryman of yours expressed it to-day, you can put up or shut up!"

"All right, sir,—I'll shut up!" and Richard Bates turned on his heel, while Sir Herbert Binney went out of the apartment and slammed the door behind him.

Almost immediately Miss Gurney came in.

"My stars, Ricky!" she exclaimed, "I met Sir Binney Bun in the hall and he looked as if somebody had broken his heart! Has his pet chorus girl given him the mitten?"

"No; I gave it to him. He wants me to sell his precious pies over a counter,—and I can't see myself doing it."

"I should say not! It's a mystery to me how the aristocracy of England go into trade, and if it's a big enough deal, they think it's all right. If it's tea or bread or soap, it doesn't matter, so they sell enough of it. Well, young man, what about your escapade in the Park? Shall I tell your aunt?"

"You said you intended to,—do as you like."

"I won't tell her, if—"

"Oh, you'd better tell me—what is it?"

The cool, incisive tones of Miss Prall interrupted the speakers and Richard's aunt calmly gazed at him and then at Miss Gurney, as she came into the room, seated herself, and began drawing off her gloves.

"I'll tell you myself, Aunt Letitia," said Bates. "I'm old enough not to be bossed and ballyragged by you two women! Forgive me, Aunt Letty, but, truly, Eliza makes me so mad—"

"Go out, Eliza," said Miss Prall, and Eliza went.

"Now, Ricky boy, what is it? About Sir Herbert of course. And I'll stand by you,—if you don't want to go into his business, you shan't—"

"It isn't that at all, Aunt Letitia. Or, at least, that is in the air, too, —up in the air, in fact,—but what Eliza is going to tell you,—and I prefer to tell you myself,—is that I'm in love with—"

"Oh, Richard, I am so glad! You dear boy. I've felt for a long time that if you were interested in one girl—some sweet young girl,—you'd have a sort of anchor and—"

"Yes, but wait a minute,—you don't know who she is."

"And I don't care! I mean, I know you'd love only a dear, innocent nature,—but tell me all about her."

Miss Prall's plain face was lighted with happy smiles of interest and eager anticipation, and she drew her chair nearer her nephew as she waited for him to speak.

Bates looked at her, dreading to shatter her hopes,—as he knew his next words must do.

"Well, to begin with,—she is Dorcas Everett."

Miss Prall's eyes opened in a wide, unbelieving stare, her face paled slowly, her very lips seemed to grow white, so intense and concentrated was her anger.

"No!" she said, at last, in a low tense voice, "you don't mean that. Richard! you can't mean it,—after all I've done for you, after all I've hoped for you,—and,—I've loved you so—"

"Now, auntie, listen; just you forget and forgive all this old feud business,—for my sake,—and Dorcas'; be noble, rise above your old, petty quarrel with Mrs Everett, and give us your bond of peace as a wedding present."

His pleading tones, his hopeful smile held Miss Prall's attention for a moment, and then she blazed forth:

"Richard Bates, I cannot believe it. Ingrate! Snake in the grass! To deceive me,—to carry on an affair like this, for you must have done so,—under my very nose, and keep it all so sly! Dorcas Everett! daughter of my enemy,—my long time foe,—the most despicable woman in the world! And, knowing all about it, you deliberately cultivate the acquaintance of her daughter and secretly go on to the point of wanting to marry her! I can't believe it! It's too monstrous! Were there no other girls in the world,—in your life,—that you must choose that one? You can't have been so diabolical as to have done it purposely to break my heart!"

"Oh, no, Auntie, I didn't do that! I chanced to meet Dorcas,—one day at Janet Fayre's,—and, somehow, we both fell in love at once!"

"Stop! don't tell me another word! Get out, Eliza!" as Miss Gurney reappeared at the door. "I told you to get out! Now, stay out! Get away from me, Richard; you can't help any by trying to fawn around me! You don't know what you've done,—I grant you that! You don't know—you can't know,—how you've crucified me!"

Springing up from her chair, Miss Prall darted from the room, and out into the hall. Down one flight of stairs she ran, and furiously pealed the bell of Mrs Everett's apartment on the floor below.

The maid who opened the door was startled at the visitor's appearance, but the angry caller asked for no one; she pushed her way past the servant, and faced Mrs Everett in her own reception room.

"Do you know what's going on, Adeline Everett? Do you know that your daughter is—is interested in my nephew? Answer me that!"

"I don't know it, and I don't believe it," returned Mrs Everett, a plump, blonde matron, whose touched-up golden hair was allowed to show no gray, and whose faintly pink cheeks were solicitously cared for.

"Ask her!" quivered Letitia Prall's angry voice, and she clenched her long thin fingers in ill-controlled rage.

"I will; she's in the next room. Come in here, Dorcas. Tell Miss Prall she is mistaken,—presumptuously mistaken."

The haughty stare with which the hostess regarded her guest continued until Dorcas, coming in, said, with a pretty blush and

smile, "I'm afraid she isn't mistaken, Mother."

"Just what do you mean?" Mrs Everett asked, icily, transferring her gaze to her daughter.

Very sweet and appealing Dorcas looked as she realized the crucial moment had arrived. Now she must take her stand for all time. Her big, dark eyes turned from one furious face to the other as the two women waited her response. Her face paled a little as she saw their attitude, their implacable wrath, their hatred of each other, and their momentarily suspended judgment of herself. Yet she stood her ground. With a pretty dignity, she spoke quietly and in a calm, steady voice:

"I heard what Miss Prall said," she began, "I couldn't help it, as I was so near, and all I can say is, that it is true. I am not only interested in Richard Bates, but I love him. He loves me,—and we hope—oh, mumsie,—be kind!—we hope you two will make up your quarrel for our sakes!"

"Go to your room, Dorcas," her mother said, and in those words the girl read her doom. She knew her mother well, and she saw beyond all shadow of doubt that there was no leniency to be hoped for. She sensed in her mother's expression as she pronounced the short sentence, an absolute and immutable decision. She might as well plead for the moon, as for her mother's permission to be interested in Letitia Prall's nephew.

"Wait a minute," countermanded Miss Prall. "Answer me this, Dorcas. Are you and my nephew engaged? Has it come to that?"

"Yes," the girl answered, thinking quickly, and deciding it best to force the issue.

"Hush!" commanded her mother; "go to your room!"

Mrs Everett fairly pushed her daughter through the door, closed it, and then said: "There is little need of further remark on this subject. We might have known it would come,—at least we might have feared it. One of us must leave this house. Will you go or shall I?"

"You take no thought of the young people's heart-break?"

"I do not! Dorcas will get over it; I don't care whether your nephew does or not. I can take care of my child, and that's all that interests me."

"You think you can,—but perhaps you do not know the depth of their attachment or the strength of their wills."

"It is not for you, an unmarried woman, to instruct me in the ways of young lovers! I repeat, Letitia Prall, I can take care of my daughter. Her welfare in no way concerns you. I am only thankful we discovered this state of things before it is too late. Good Heavens! You don't suppose it is too late, do you?"

"What do you mean?"

"You don't suppose those young idiots are—married!"

"Of course not! My Richard is above such clandestine ways!"

"Your Richard isn't above anything! My Dorcas is, but—he might have persuaded her—oh, well, I'll attend to Dorcas. There is no need for you to tarry longer."

The exaggerated courtesy of her manner goaded Miss Prall to rudeness.

"I shall stay as long as I like," she returned, stubbornly sitting still. "There is more to be said, Adeline Everett. There is more to

be done. I want your assurance that you will move away,—it doesn't suit my plans to leave this house,—and that you will take your forward and designing daughter far enough to keep her from maneuvering to ensnare my nephew."

"I shall be only too glad to take my daughter away from the vicinity of your crack-brained charge! What has Dick Bates ever done? He has never earned a dollar for himself!"

"He doesn't need to. He is a genius; he will yet astonish the world with his inventions. You know me well enough to know that I speak truth. Moreover, he is his uncle's sole heir!"

"Binney, the Bun man!"

"Yes, Sir Herbert Binney, proprietor of the famous Binney's Buns. But, look here, Adeline," the absorption in her nephew's interest blotted out for the moment her scorn of the other woman, "Uncle Binney favors the match."

"What match?" Mrs Everett was honestly blank.

"Between Richard and Dorcas."

"Why, he doesn't know Dorcas."

"He has seen her, and anyway, he'd approve of any nice girl that Rick cared for. You see, Sir Herbert wanted the boy to marry and settle down and become the American branch of Binney's Buns."

"My daughter the wife of a baker! No, thank you! You know me, Letitia Prall, well enough to know my ambitions for Dorcas. She shall marry the man I choose for her,—and he will not be a baker! Nor," and her face was drawn with sudden anger, "nor will he be Richard Bates!"

"Indeed he will not!" and Miss Prall rose and flounced out of the place.

In his own small but attractive apartment, Sir Herbert Binney was dressing for dinner. Always a careful dresser, he was unusually particular this evening. His man, Peters, thought he had never seen his master so fussed over the minor details of his apparel. Also, Sir Herbert was preoccupied. Usually he chatted cheerily, but to-night he was thoughtful, almost moody.

"A cab, sir?" said Peters, half afraid that he'd be snapped at for asking an unnecessary question, yet not quite certain that a cab was desired.

"Yes," was the absent-minded response, and Peters passed on the word by telephone to the doorman below.

Then, satisfactorily turned out, Sir Herbert left his rooms and touched the elevator bell.

Once in the car, and seeing the pretty elevator girl, his mood brightened.

"Good evening, Daisy," he said, "give me one kiss for good luck. This is my busy day."

He carelessly put an arm round her, and kissed her lightly on the lips, even as he spoke. The girl was taken by surprise, and anger surged up in her soul.

"You coward!" she cried, wrenching herself free with difficulty and mindful of her elevator gear. "Take shame to yourself, sir, for insulting a defenseless girl!"

"Oh, come now, chicken, that didn't hurt you! I'm only a jollier. Forget it, and I'll give you a big box of candy."

"I'll never forget it, sir, and if you try that again—"

The dire threat was not pronounced, for just then the car reached the ground floor, and the girl flung the door open.

Nearby at the telephone switchboard was another girl, who looked up curiously as the Bun man came out of the elevator. She had overheard the angry voice that seemed to be threatening him, and she was not without knowledge of his ways herself.

But Sir Herbert waved his hand gayly at the telephone girl and also at the news stand girl. Indeed all girls were, in Binney's estimation, born to be waved at.

He had recovered his good nature, and he went along the onyx lobby with a quick stride, looking at his watch as he walked.

"Taxi ready?" he said to the obsequious doorman.

"Yes, sir,—yes, Sir Herbert. Here you are."

"And here you are," the Englishman returned, with a generous bestowal of silver.

"To the Hotel Magnifique," he said, and his cab rolled away.

During the evening hours the attendants of The Campanile shifted. The elevator girls were replaced by young men, and the telephone operator was changed. The doorman, too, was another individual, and by midnight no one was on duty who had been on at dusk.

After midnight, the attendants were fewer still, and after two o'clock Bob Moore, the capable and efficient night porter, was covering the door, telephone and elevator all by himself.

This arrangement was always sufficient, as most of the occupants of The Campanile were average citizens, who, if at theater or party, were rarely out later than one or two in the morning.

On this particular night, Moore welcomed four or five theater-goers back home, took them up to their suites and then sat for a long time uninterruptedly reading a detective story, which was his favorite brand of fiction.

At two o'clock Mr Goodwin came in, and Moore took him up to the twelfth floor.

Returning to his post and to his engrossing book, the next arrival was Mr Vail. He belonged on the tenth floor and as they ascended, Moore, full of his story, said:

"Ever read detective stories, Mr Vail?"

"Occasionally; but I haven't much time for reading. Business men like more active recreation."

"Likely so, sir. But I tell you this yarn I'm swallowing is a corker!"

"What's it called?"

"'Murder Will Out,' by Joe Jarvis. It's great! Why, Mr Vail, the victim was killed,—killed, mind you,—in a room that was all locked up—"

"How did the murderer get in?"

"That's just it! How did he? And he left his revolver,—"

"Left his revolver? Then he did get in and get out! Must have been a secret passage—"

"No, sir, there wasn't! That is, the author says so, and all the people,—the characters, you know, try to find one, and they can't! Oh, it's exciting, I'll say! I can't guess how it's coming out."

"I suppose you wouldn't peek over to the last page?"

"No, that spoils a story for me. The fun I get out of it is the trying to ferret out the solution, on my own. That's sport for me. Why, you see, Mr Vail,—but, excuse me, sir, I'm keeping you."

The elevator had stopped at the tenth floor, and Vail had left the car, but he stood waiting till the enthusiastic Moore should pause.

"Oh, well, go on,—what were you saying?"

"Only this, sir. To me, a good detective story is not the one that keeps you guessing,—nor the one that keeps you in fearful suspense as to the outcome, but the one that gives you a chance to solve the riddle yourself. The one that puts all the cards on the table, and gives you a chance at it."

"And you can usually work it out?"

"Sometimes,—not always. But the fun is in trying."

"You ought to have been a detective, Moore. You've the taste for it evidently. Well, good-night; hope you discover the clue and solve the mystery. Shall you finish your book to-night?"

"Oh, yes, sir. I'm more than half way through it."

"Well, tell me in the morning if you guessed right. Good-night, Moore."

"Good-night, Mr. Vail."

The elevator went down, and Bob Moore left the car to return to his book.

But he did not return to the story. A more engrossing one was opened to him at that moment. A glance toward the front doorway showed him a figure of a man, lying in a contorted heap on the floor, about half way between himself and the entrance.

He went wonderingly toward it, his heart beating faster as he drew near.

"Dead!" he breathed softly, to himself, "no, not dead!—oh, my God, it's Sir Herbert Binney!"

In the onyx lobby, at the very foot of one of the tall ornate capitaled columns was the prostrate Binney. Apparently he was a dying man; blood was flowing from some wound, his face was drawn in convulsive agony, from his stiffening fingers he let fall a pencil, but his lips were framing inarticulate words.

Bob Moore's wits did not desert him. Instead, his thoughts seemed to flash with uncanny quickness.

"Binney's dying," he told himself, "he's been murdered! Gee! what an excitement there will be! He's babbling,—he's going to tell who killed him! If I scoot for Doctor Pagett, this chap'll be dead before I get back,—if I wait,—I'll be called down for not going—but I must get it out of him,—if I can—what is that, Sir, try to tell me—"

Bending over the stricken man, Moore listened intently, and caught the words,—or words which sounded like,—"Get—them —get J—J—anyway,—get—J—"

With a sudden gasping gurgle, the man was dead.

Bewildered, but striving hard to grasp the situation and do his exact duty, Moore looked about, and quickly concluded his next move was to call the doctor.

Pagett, on the second floor, was the physician of the house, and Moore raced up the stairs to his apartment.

Ringing the bell continuously brought the doctor to the door.

"What's happened?" he said, sleepily.

"Murder!" answered Moore, briefly. "Hike into some clothes and get downstairs. Sir Herbert Binney's been done for!"

Not waiting, Moore ran back down the stairs, and took his station guarding the dead man. He resolved to touch nothing, but his attention at once fell on a bit of paper, on which Binney had evidently been scrawling some message, with the pencil that had at last fallen from his nerveless fingers.

Careful not to touch the paper, Moore devoured it with his eyes.

This is what he read:

CHAPTER IV
The Busy Police

BUT even the astonishing disclosure of the scrawled statement did not cause Bob Moore to lose his head. Excited and startled though he was, he was also alertly conscious that he must conduct himself with care. He had a vague fear that he might be connected with the case and weirdly enough he had a secret fear that he might not!

Already in fancy he saw himself doing marvelously clever detective work that should result in getting the criminal of whom the dying efforts of the victim strove to tell him. But he must be careful not to put himself forward, not to overstep his privileges, and, above all, not to seem too eager to help in the search for the murderer, for he felt sure his offers of assistance would be deemed presumptuous.

Doctor Pagett came running down the stairs, knotting his necktie as he descended.

"Binney!" he exclaimed; "the Englishman who makes Buns. What's this paper?"

"I haven't touched it, Doctor; I haven't touched anything. You can see for yourself what the paper says."

"Women did this," said the doctor, his eyes fairly bulging; "what—what does it mean? Where were you?"

"Up at the tenth floor, taking Mr Vail up. He came in,—there was no Binney about then!—and I took him up in the elevator

to his floor, and when I came down, Mr Binney was there just as you see him now,—only, he was still alive."

"Alive!"

"Yes, sir,—just dying. He mumbled a word or two—"

"What did he say?"

"He said—'Get—get—' but he couldn't say who. That's all,—then he drew a long breath and died."

"You came straight to me?"

"Yes, sir. I flew! I thought it my duty to hesitate that moment, in case he might get out the name of the murderer."

"I think you did all right, Moore. He's surely dead,—and, just as surely, he was murdered. And by women! But how is it possible? However, that's not my province. We must get the police, and also, notify his people. He lived in the Prall apartment, didn't he?"

"No; he was there a lot; they're his relatives, I believe, but he had his own apartment, a small one on the eighth floor. Miss Prall, she's on the eighth, too, shall I call her up?"

"Oh, that's pretty awful. Call the nephew, young Bates, first."

"Shall I telephone or go up there—?"

"Go up—no, telephone,—somebody might come in, and want you."

"Hello," Richard Bates responded to Moore's telephone call.

"Mr. Bates?"

"Yes."

"Will you come downstairs, sir, right away? There's been a—an accident. Mr. Binney,—that is, Sir Binney, you know,—he's—he's

—"

"Well, he's what?"

"He's—oh, come down, sir, *please*!"

Moore hung up his receiver, for his nerve suddenly deserted him when it came to telling the dreadful fact of the tragedy.

In a few moments the elevator bell sounded and Moore went up to bring Bates down.

"What is it?" Bates asked. "Is my uncle—er,—lit up?"

"Oh, no, sir," and Bob Moore looked shocked, "it isn't that, at all. It's worse than that,—it's an accident."

"What sort of an accident? Taxi smash-up? Any kind of a stroke?"

But by this time they were down to the street floor, and the two men stepped out of the car.

Seeing the doctor, who was still bending over the inert figure on the floor, Bates hurried along the onyx lobby till he reached the scene, and could see, without being told, what had happened.

A moment he gazed in silence at his uncle's face, and then said, excitedly, "Who did this? How was he killed? Why should anybody—"

Silently the doctor pointed to the paper on the floor at the dead man's side.

Bates read it, and looked up wonderingly.

"Don't touch it," warned the physician as the young man stretched out his hand. "It's a clew,—the police must take charge of it."

"The police! Oh, yes,—of course,—it's a murder, isn't it?"

"You bet it's a murder!" exclaimed Moore. "And done by women! Oh, gee! what a case it will be!"

"Hush up!" Bates cried, angrily. "Don't talk like that in the presence of the dead! We must send for an undertaker."

"Not yet," demurred Doctor Pagett. "In a case like this, the police must be notified first of all."

"Not first of all," said Bates, slowly, as his mind began to work; "we must tell my aunt, Miss Prall."

"Yes, of course, but the police must be sent for."

"Sure," put in Bob Moore, who was gaining confidence in his own importance, "I must get this matter hushed up before people begin to get around. Lucky it happened in the night! It's none too good an advertisement for the house!"

"I think I'll go up and tell my aunt myself," said Bates, thoughtfully. "You stay here by—by the body, Doctor. And, I say, —what—how was he killed?"

"Stabbed," said the doctor, shortly.

"What with?"

"I don't know,—except that it was with a sharp blade of some sort. There's no weapon in sight."

"No weapon! How queer!"

"Queer or not, I can't find any. It's a pretty strange affair, to my mind. Yes, I'll stay here, you go and tell your aunt's people, and, —Moore, you come right back after you take Mr Bates up."

In silence the return trip was made in the elevator, for Bates was thinking how he should break the news to the two

excitable women upstairs, and Bob Moore's thoughts were in such a riot, that he was trying hard to straighten them out.

In front of Miss Prall's bedroom door, her nephew hesitated for some time before knocking. Not only was his courage weak but his brain was receiving so many sudden jolts that he could scarcely control his voice. Why, now, he was his uncle's heir. Unless he had already changed that will! Had he?

At last, with a gentle knock, repeated more loudly, and finally with a fusillade of raps, he succeeded in rousing Miss Prall, who demanded, with asperity, "Who's there?"

"Me; Rick. Open the door, please."

"What's the matter? You sick?" his aunt exclaimed, as she unlocked her door.

"No; now, listen, Aunt Letitia, and don't faint—for anything. Uncle Binney is—has been—why, somebody killed him!"

"Killed him! Is he dead?"

"Yes, ma'am"; both were unaware of the absurdity of the words, "he's downstairs,—in the lobby,—and he's been stabbed."

Richard's teeth were chattering from the tension of his nerves, and the horror of the situation, but Miss Prall's nerves were strong ones, and she said, "I'll dress and go right down. And I'll tell Eliza,—you needn't. Go in the living-room and wait for me there."

Rather relieved at not being sent back downstairs and decidedly willing to let his aunt break the news to Miss Gurney, Bates went to his own room and added some finishing touches

to the hasty toilet he had made. Then he awaited his aunt, as directed, and in an incredibly short time she appeared, all dressed and impatient to go downstairs.

"We won't wait for Eliza," she said; "come along. Oh, no, wait a minute!" She returned to her bedroom, and shortly reappeared.

Her vigorous push of the elevator button brought Moore quickly, and he took them down.

Miss Prall strode rapidly along the lobby and spoke brusquely to the doctor.

"What are you doing? Why do you touch him before the police arrive?"

"Good Lord, how you startled me!" exclaimed Doctor Pagett, who in his absorption had not heard her approach. "I have a perfect right to examine the body, ma'am," he went on indignantly. "Do you suppose I don't know my business?"

"I've always heard no one must touch a murdered man until —"

"Then how are we to know it is a murder?" he countered, looking at her keenly. "Will you read that paper, Miss Prall? Don't touch it!"

"Women did this," she read, aloud. "Well, I'm not surprised. If ever a man was mixed up with women,—of all sorts, it was Sir Herbert! But what women did it? Where are they?"

She looked about, as if expecting to see the criminals cowering in the shadows or behind the great columns of the lobby.

"They have disappeared,—not an uncommon procedure," returned the doctor, dryly. "And they have taken with them the

weapon with which the crime was committed, thus removing a most important clue! Have you any suspicion—in any direction?"

Doctor Pagett shot this query at her with such sharp suddenness that Miss Prall almost jumped.

"I!" she exclaimed loudly. "How could I know anything about this man or his women? He's nothing to me!"

"He is your nephew's uncle."

"Well, that makes him no kin of mine, does it? Don't you dare mix me up in this thing!"

"Nobody's mixing you up in it, ma'am," and, indifferently, the physician returned his attention to the dead man, and became engrossed in studying the writing on the paper.

And then, as three men from Police Headquarters appeared at the front end of the long lobby, Eliza Gurney stepped from the elevator at the other end. Apparently she was holding herself well in hand, for, though her face was white and drawn with fear, her firm set lips and clenched hands betokened a resolve not to give way to nerves in any fashion.

"Let me see him," she said, in steady tones.

"Who are you, madam?" said Officer Kelsey, resenting her determined push forward.

"I'm Miss Gurney, the companion of Miss Prall," and the air with which she made the announcement would have fitted a grand duchess.

Impressed, the policeman made way for her, and then continued his questioning.

"Who's in command here?" he said. "Who's nearest of kin?"

At the first question, Miss Prall stepped forward, but at the second, she fell back in favor of Richard Bates.

"I am," Bates said, quietly. "He is my uncle, Sir Herbert Binney."

Further statistics were ascertained and then the police began actual investigation. The detective was the smallest and least conspicuous man of the three, and his unassuming air and somewhat stupid-looking face would have carried a conviction of his utter incompetency, save for his alert, darting black eyes, that seemed to look in several directions at once, so rapidly did they roll about.

Corson was his name, and he asked questions so quickly and so continuously that he scarce waited for answers.

"Where had he been?" he flung out. "Who saw him come in? Who was on door duty? What's *your* name? Moore? Well, did you admit this man?"

"No," said Bob Moore, "I was up in the elevator taking one of the tenants to his floor. There's only me on, late at night."

But Corson seemed unheeding. Already he had turned to Miss Prall.

"Does this man live with you? Did he, I mean. Where did he set out for when he left home? What time did he go?"

"Now you look here!" said Miss Letitia, angrily. "I can't answer forty-seven questions at once! Nor other people can't, either. You talk more slowly, sir, and more rationally."

But Corson heeded her not at all. He turned to Bates.

"Your uncle, eh? You his heir?"

"Yes, he is!" Miss Prall answered for him, and Corson's roving glance took her in and returned to Bates. "Where were you when he was killed?"

"In bed," replied Richard, shortly.

"Oh; all right. Now, I'll take charge of this paper, for there's little doubt but it's mighty important." He folded it carefully into his pocket-book. "Was this gentleman—er, addicted to ladies' society?"

"That he was," Moore spoke up, involuntarily.

"I didn't ask you," said Corson. "I asked Mr. Bates."

"Why, yes," said Richard, "he did like the society of ladies,—but most men do."

"We're not discussing the matter, Mr. Bates," and for once Corson looked steadily at him, "we're just looking into it. And—" he paused, impressively, "and these immediate, right-away-quick questions are pretty good first aid, as a rule."

"Go ahead, then," and Richard folded his arms, in a resigned manner.

Doctor Pagett motioned the two ladies to take seats on the red velvet sofa and seated himself also.

"There's no doubt," Corson went on, "that this writing is the true explanation. Dying men don't leave anything but truth as a last message. It seems pretty steep to believe that women managed this affair, but that's the very reason he made such a desperate effort to let it be known."

"And he tried to tell me who it was," broke in Moore, irrepressibly.

"He did?" and Corson's eyes flashed toward the speaker. "What did he say? Did he mention any names? How did you come to be listening? Were you here when—"

Miss Prall interrupted. "If you'd listen a minute, and not talk all the time, you might learn something, Mister Detective!"

"Thank you, ma'am. Answer me, Moore. Just what did this man say after he was hurt,—that you heard?"

"He said 'Get—get—' and that was all, except that he tried hard to say a name,—or it seemed like that,—and he said something like something beginning with a J."

"Well, you're guarded in your statements. But I understand. I suppose he was struggling for breath, really—"

"He could just speak and that's all. He kept saying 'J—J—' and then he gave a gasp and died."

"How do you know he died?"

"Why, he sort of relaxed—limp like,—and stopped trying to speak."

"And he seemed to be after some name beginning with J,—say James or John."

"That's the way it sounded."

"All right. Now, how long had you been absent from this place when you returned and found him?"

"Just long enough to take Mr Vail up to his floor,—the tenth."

"Vail? Who's he?"

"One of our tenants. He lives on the tenth floor. He came in and I took him up—"

"And came right down again?"

"Yes; and when I got down, I saw the—the heap in the lobby."

"You knew at once who it was?"

"Not who it was, but I saw it was a man, evidently knocked down, or fallen in a fit,—as I thought. So I ran to see, and—I've told you the rest."

"What time was all this?"

"It was twenty minutes after two."

"When you found him?"

"When I found him."

"How do you know so certainly?"

"I'm—I'm fond of detective work, and I thought there'd be some in this matter, and so, I did everything I could think of to help along."

"Oho, fond of detective work, are you? What have you done in that line?"

"Nothing! I didn't mean practically. But, well, theoretically. You see, I've read a great many detective stories—"

"Yes; you were reading one this evening? Where is it? Let me see it."

Slightly embarrassed at Corson's manner, Bob got the book and passed it over.

"'Murder Will Out.' H'm—Say, Mr. Bates, do you know where your uncle spent the evening?"

"I do not." Richard was not at all pleased with Corson's way, and he had turned sullen.

"No idea? Have you, Miss Prall?"

"I've an idea, but I suppose you want only definite statements. Such I cannot give."

"Well, well, what *do* you know about it? Remember, evasion or refusal to answer is by no means a point in your favor."

"What! Are you implying there's anything in my disfavor? Am I being questioned as a possible suspect?"

"Lord, no, madam! Don't jump at conclusions."

"She didn't!" put in Eliza Gurney. "Seems to me you're an addlepated young fellow for a detective."

"Yes? Does any one present know where Mr Binney—is that the name?—spent this evening? Or any way to learn of his whereabouts?"

"He went out about before I came on," volunteered Moore. "The day doorman will know, or the elevator girl who brought him down."

"All right. That'll keep. Now, I want to get at the actual facts of his discovery here. It would seem, Moore, that you're the only one who can give any information in that respect."

"I've already told you all I know."

"And this Mr Vail you took upstairs,—he wouldn't know anything?"

"I can't answer for that, but when Mr Vail came in, and I took him up in the elevator, there wasn't any sign of Sir Herbert Binney about, dead or alive!"

"No; that's so. Well, then, when you came down, and found the wounded man, you went at once for the doctor?"

"Almost at once. I paused a moment, because he was trying so hard to speak, and I reasoned that if he succeeded it would be of utmost importance that some one should hear his words."

"H'm—yes, that's so. Well, and then, he gave over trying and died, you say; and then?"

"Then I ran up at once to Doctor Pagett's apartment, it is only one flight up, and he came down as soon as he could."

"Go on from there, Doctor."

"I came right down, as soon as I could hurry on some clothes. I found Sir Binney dead, and can asseverate that he had been dead but a few moments."

"He was stabbed?"

"Yes, and the weapon used was removed and must have been taken away by the murderer, as it cannot be found."

"H'm there are other explanations. But never mind that. The wound was such as to cause almost instantaneous death?"

"Apparently it *did* do so. Death was, of course, hastened by the immediate removal of the knife. Had that remained in the wound, the victim would doubtless have lived long enough to make a clear dying statement."

"What was the weapon? Can you divine?"

"A sharp knife, dagger, or some such implement."

"A paper-cutter, say?"

"Not likely. Unless it was an unusually sharp one. The cut is so cleanly made that it presupposes a very sharp blade."

"And your diagnosis of the killing corresponds in all points with this night porter's story?"

"So far as I can judge, there is no discrepancy in his narrative."

Dr Pagett was of the pompous school, and dearly loved to be in an important rôle. But he was evidently a learned and skilled physician and his words were spoken with a positive air that carried conviction.

"There is little more to be learned from viewing the scene," the detective said, at last, after he had put a few more direct questions to Bob Moore and had advised some with his companion policemen.

"Nope; might as well let in the undertakers," agreed Kelsey.

"Oh, do," urged Moore. "It's really imperative that we get all traces of the tragedy away before daylight. And it's almost four o'clock now!"

"Good gracious, so it is!" exclaimed Miss Prall. "Well, I suppose I shall be consulted as to the funeral, at least! I seem to be of little importance here!"

"Don't talk like that, Aunt," urged Bates. "These inquiries are necessary. The funeral services and all that, will of course be under our control."

"I should hope so," the lady sniffed; "I shall stay here until the undertaker arrives. I want some say in these matters."

"I think, Letitia," suggested Miss Gurney, "you'd better go to your room and tidy up a bit. You dressed very hastily."

"What matter! Such things are unimportant in a crisis of this sort! Oh, I can't realize it! The awful circumstances almost make one forget the sadness of death! Poor Sir Herbert! He enjoyed life so much!"

Miss Prall buried her face in her handkerchief, and so was unable to see the quizzical glances given her by Detective Corson.

CHAPTER V
Who Were the Women?

THE usual and necessary routine was followed out. The Medical Examiner came and did his part; the undertakers came and did theirs; and at last Bob Moore's nervous restlessness was calmed, somewhat, by a hope of getting all signs of the tragedy obliterated before the morning's stir began in the house.

"I'll wash up these blood stains, myself," Moore volunteered,—speaking to Corson, after the body had been taken away to a mortuary establishment and the Prall family had gone up to their rooms.

"Oh, I don't know," demurred Corson. "It's evidence, you know —"

"For whom? Can't you get all the deductions you want, and let me clean up? We can't have the tenants coming down to a hall like this! If there's any evidence in these blood spots, make a note of it. You know yourself they can't be left here all day!"

This was reasonable talk, and Corson agreed. "All right," he said. "I'll make pencil marks around where the spots are,—pencil won't wash off, you know,—and as I can't see any trace of footprints, I suppose there isn't anything further to be learned from the condition of the floor."

"Thought you Tecs got a lot from looking at the scene of the crime," Moore jeered. "You haven't deduced a thing but that the man was stabbed,—and Dr. Pagett told you that."

Corson took the taunt seriously.

"That finding of tiny clues, such as shreds of clothing, part of a broken cuff-link, a dropped handkerchief, all those things, are just story-book stuff,—they cut no ice in real cases."

"I'll bet Sherlock Holmes could find a lot of data just by going over the floor with a lens."

"He could in a story book,—and do you know why? Because the clews and things, in a story, are all put there for him by the property man. Like a salted mine. But in real life, there's nothing doing of that sort. Take a good squint at the floor, though, before you remove those stains. You don't see anything, do you?"

Elated at being thus appealed to by a real, live detective, Moore got down on hands and knees and scrutinized the floor all about where the body of Sir Herbert had lain.

There was nothing indicative to be seen. The floor of the lobby was always kept in proper condition and beyond the slight trace of dust that naturally accumulated between the diurnal washings, the floor gave up no information.

So the gruesome red stains were washed away, and once again the onyx lobby took on its normal atmosphere.

"How you going to work on the case?" asked Moore, eagerly interested.

"I'm going to get the truth out of you!" declared Corson, so suddenly and brusquely that Moore turned white.

"What!" he cried.

"Yes, just that. You know a lot about the matter that you haven't told,—so you can just out with it!"

"Me? I don't know anything."

"Now, now, the thing is too thin. How could Binney get in here, and then his murderer come in and have the whole shooting-match pulled off in the short time it would take you to run Vail up to the tenth floor and drop your car down again?"

"But—but, you see, I—I stood quite a while talking to Mr Vail after we stopped at his floor."

"What'd you do that for?"

"Why, we were talking about the book I was reading—"

"You were both talking—or you were talking to him?"

"I guess that's it. I was so crazy about the book I'd talk to anybody who'd listen, and Mr Vail was real good-natured, and I guess I let myself go—"

"And babbled on, till he was bored to death and sent you away."

"Just about that," and Moore grinned, sheepishly. "I'm terribly fond of detective stories."

"Yes, so you've said. Well, your book is called, I believe, 'Murder Will Out,' so, as that's pretty true, you might as well own up first as last."

"Own up to what?"

"That you killed Sir Binney! Where's the knife? What did you do it for? Don't you know you'll be arrested, tried, convicted and sentenced? Yes—sentenced!"

Corson's habit of flinging out rapid-fire questions took on new terror from the fierce frown with which he accompanied his speech, and Bob Moore's knees trembled beneath him.

"W—what are you talking about? I—I didn't k—kill him!"

"Yes, you did! You got all wrought up over those fool story books of yours and you went bug, and killed him in a frenzy of imagination!"

"Oh, oh! I didn't—I,—"

"Then explain your movements! You came down from your talk with Vail, full of murder thoughts. You saw Binney come in, and, moved by the opportunity and obsessed with the murder game, you let drive and killed him, in a sort of mania!"

"Oh, no! no!" and Moore fell limply into a seat and began to sob wildly.

"Stop that!" Corson ordered. "I've got to find out about this. I believe you did it,—I believe I've struck the truth, for the simple reason that there's no other suspect. This man Binney had no enemies. Why, he's a peaceable Englishman, in trade,—and a big trade. I know all about him. He wanted to place his Bun business over here. He'd confabbed with several Bakery men in this city, and was about to make a deal. He was on good terms with his people here,—sort of relatives, they are,—and he was a gay old boy in his social tastes. Now, who's going to stick up a man like that? There was no robbery,—his watch and kale were all right there. So there's no way to look, but toward you! *You!*" A pointed forefinger emphasized Corson's words and Moore broke into fresh sobs.

"I tell you I didn't! Why, it's too absurd—too—"

"Not absurd at all. I know something of psychology, and I know how those murder yarns, read late at nights,—when you're here alone, get into your blood, and—well, it's a wonder you didn't stick Vail! But I suppose his indulgent listening to your ravings helped along your murder instinct, and you—"

"Oh, hush! If you keep on you'll make me think I did do it!"

"Of course,—you can't think anything else. Now, here's another thing. You say you went up for Dr Pagett at twenty past two."

"Or a few minutes later."

"Well, Pagett said,—I asked him privately,—that it was at least quarter to three! What were you doing all that time?"

"It wasn't—I didn't—oh, Mr Corson, I told you the truth. I waited to catch the last words of—"

"Yes, of your own victim! And then, frightened, you hung around twenty minutes or so before calling the doctor."

"I did not! But," and Moore pulled himself together, "I'm not going to say another word! You've doped out this cock-and-bull story because you don't know which way to look for the real murderer. And you think you can work a third degree on me—and railroad me to the chair, do you? Well, you can't do it!"

Moore's eyes were glittering, his cheeks were flushed and his voice rose to a shrill shriek as he glared wildly at his tormentor.

"Shut up on that!" Corson flung at him. "Calm yourself down, now. If you're innocent, it's all right. But I'll keep my eye on you, my boy. Now, tell me any theory you have or can invent that will fit the facts of the case."

Corson asked this in the honest hope that Moore could give him a hint. The detective was a good plodding sleuth when it came to tracking down a clew, but he was not fertile of imagination and had little or no initiative. He really believed it might have been Moore's work, but he thought so, principally, because he could think of no other way to look.

"The facts are not so very strange," began Moore, looking at the detective uncertainly. He didn't want to give any unnecessary help, for he had a half-formed theory that he wanted to think out for himself, and he had no intention of sharing it with an avowed enemy. But he saw, too, that a few words of suggestion of any sort might lead Corson's suspicions away from himself and might make for leniency.

"Wait a minute," he said, on a sudden thought. "The writing the dying man managed to scribble said that women did the murder."

"That's my best bet!" cried Corson; "I've been waiting for you to mention that! You wrote that paper! That's what occupied you all that time. Of course women didn't do a deed like that. You conceived the fiendishly clever idea of writing such a message to mislead the police!"

"You—you—" but words failed Bob Moore. He reverted to his plan of silence and sat, moodily staring in front of him, as the dawn broke and the time drew near for the day shift of workers to come on.

"Don't you think so?" and Corson now spoke almost ingratiatingly. "I mean don't you think it pretty impossible for

women to put over such a crime?"

"No, I don't," Bob blurted out. "Nor you wouldn't either, if you knew Binney! Why, his life just one—h'm—one woman after another! And they were all after him!"

"What do you mean?"

"Why he was a regular feller, you know. He took the chorus girls,—or some of their sort,—out to dinners and all that, and, here in the house, he jollied the elevator girls and the telephone and news-stand Janes,—and yet he detested girls' service. Many a time he'd blow out to the manager about how he'd ought to fire all the girls and put back men or boys,—like we had before the war."

"Your story doesn't hang together. Binney seemed to adore and hate the girls, both."

"That's just it, he did. He'd storm and rail at Daisy,—she's on his elevator, and then he'd turn around and chuck her under the chin, and like as not bring her home a big box of chocolates."

"Oh, well, I've heard of men like that before."

"But not so much so. I don't believe anybody ever went for the girls rough-shod as bad as he did. He called them down for the least thing,—and then, sometimes he'd make it up to them and sometimes he wouldn't."

"And the chorus ladies? But I suppose you don't know much about them."

"Don't I? Well, I guess I do! Why, Mr Binney—Sir Binney, I mean,—he used to tell me the tallest yarns I ever heard, about his little suppers,—as he called 'em. He'd come 'long about two

G. M. pretty mellow, and in an expansive mood, and he'd pour out his heart to old Bob,—meaning me. Yes, sir, I know a thing or two about Binney's lady friends, and there's a few of them that wouldn't mind knifing him a bit,—if they were sure they wouldn't be found out. And,—if you ask me, that's just what happened."

"H'm; you mean they followed him home, and slipped in after him—"

"Yep."

"But how did they know they'd find the coast clear,—that you'd so very conveniently be up in the elevator, and would stay up there such an unusually long time? You'd better shut up, Moore. Everything you say gets you deeper in the net. If your chorus girl theory is the right dope, you were in on it, too. Otherwise it couldn't have been worked!"

"All right, Mr Corson, I'll shut up. You'll see the time when you'll be mighty glad to turn to me for help. Till then, work on your own; but you needn't aim this way, it won't get you anywhere."

Meantime there was consternation among the nearest of kin to the dead man.

In the Prall apartment, Miss Letitia was conducting conversation ably aided and abetted by Eliza Gurney, while young Bates sat listening and joining in when there was opportunity.

"Worst of all is the disgrace," Miss Prall was saying. "There's no use my pretending I'm over-come with grief,—personal grief, I

mean, for I never cared two straws for the man, and I'm not going to make believe I did. But the publicity and newspaper talk is terrible. Once it blows over and is forgotten we'll be able to hold up our heads again, but just now, we're in the public eye,—and it's an awful place to be!"

"But who did it, Aunt Letitia," said Bates. "We've got to get the murderer—"

"I don't mind so much about that," his aunt returned, with a sharp sniff. "All I want is to get the thing hushed up. Of course, you're the heir now, Ricky, so you must put on suitable mourning and all that, but those things can be attended to in due course."

"Where you going to have the funeral and when?" asked Eliza. "I don't think I'll go."

"You needn't, if you don't want to," Miss Prall agreed. "I don't blame you,—I don't want to attend it myself, but I suppose I ought to. It will be in the undertaker's chapel, and it will soon be over. Let's have it just as quickly as possible, Rick. To-morrow, say."

"Oh, Aunt Letitia! Do observe the rules of common decency! We can't hurry the poor man into his grave like that. And I shouldn't wonder if there'll be a lot of red tape and inquiry before we can bury him at all."

"Maybe the body'll have to be sent back to England," suggested Eliza, and Richard was just about to say he supposed it would, when the doorbell of the apartment rang.

As Miss Prall's maids did not sleep in the house, Bates opened the door and found Corson there, with a bland but determined look on his face.

"Sorry to trouble you people," he said, stepping inside without being asked, "but I've some talking to do, and the sooner the quicker."

He smiled, importantly, and, selecting a comfortable chair, seated himself deliberately and looked in silence from one to another.

"Well," said Miss Prall, stiffly, "what do you want to know?"

The angular, spare figure of the spinster, upright in a straight-backed chair, was not of a demeanor to put a man at ease, but Corson showed no uneasiness, and almost lolled in his seat as he cast a slow glance at her.

"Naturally," he began, "what I want to know is, and what I propose to find out is, who killed Sir Herbert Binney. And what I want to know here is, anything any of you can tell me that will throw any light, side light, or full glare, on the question."

"We don't know anything that is illuminating in any way," Miss Prall informed him.

"I will be the judge of the powers of illumination if you will tell me what you know," was the suave retort. "Will you make a statement or shall I ask questions?"

"Neither," and Letitia Prall rose. "You may bid us good-night, sir. This is no time to intrude upon the ladies of a family,—especially a family in deep and sudden mourning."

"You weren't mourning very deeply as I entered." Corson made no move to get up, although Bates rose as his aunt did. "I think, Miss Prall, you'd better sit down again, and you, too, Mr Bates. This may be a lengthy confab."

"I think you'd better listen to this man, Letitia," advised Eliza. "He's got a right to be heard, and I, for one, want to know how matters stand."

Whereupon Letitia sat down and Bates came and stood behind her chair.

"First, Mr Corson," Richard said, "let me understand just how far your authority goes—"

"All the way," returned Corson, promptly. "I'm the police detective on this case. I shall have a helper,—a colleague, undoubtedly, but for the moment I'm working alone. However, I've all the authority in the world. I represent law and justice, I represent the government, I represent the United States!"

"The United States is honored, I'm sure," said Miss Prall with unconcealed sarcasm.

Such things never ruffled Corson, and he went calmly on.

"This man's relation to you?" he said, interrogatively, looking at Letitia.

"He was no kin of mine," she snapped; "he was the uncle of my nephew, Mr Bates, and Mr Bates is the sole heir."

"Indeed; he is to be congratulated. Now, this man,—Sir Binney —"

"Don't call him that!" put in Eliza. "It does annoy me so! Say Sir Herbert Binney or Sir Herbert. Have you never known a

knight?"

"No, ma'am, I never have. Well, Sir Herbert, then,—did he live here?"

"In this building,—not in this apartment," Richard answered, as the two haughty ladies seemed disinclined to accommodate their inquisitor.

And then, by dint of slow and persistent questioning, Detective Corson drew out the vital statistics of the deceased gentleman and of the members of the Prall household.

"Now as to the 'women,'" Corson went on. "You know Sir Herbert left a paper stating that women killed him. This is a most peculiar message for a dying man to leave."

"Why so, if it is true?" and Letitia Prall's eyes gave him a curious look.

"Yes,—that's just it,—if it is true."

"It's got to be true," burst out Bates, impulsively. "No man is going to write a thing like that with his last ounce of dying strength unless it's true!"

"I agree to that," and Corson nodded, "if he did write it."

"What?" Miss Prall started up in amazement. "Who says he didn't write it?"

"Nobody says so, I only say it might be so. Suppose the murderer himself wrote it to turn suspicion toward some one else,—some woman."

"I never thought of that!" and Miss Prall fell into a brown study, as if the new thought moved her profoundly.

"Nor I," said Bates, looking intently at the detective. "But, I say, that writing looked to me amazingly like my uncle's."

"And the porter,—Bob Moore, you know," broke in Eliza,—"he said, the pencil dropped from Sir Herbert's fingers just as he fell back dead—"

"Oh, no, he didn't say that! That's the way stories get repeated. There's no such thing as direct, undistorted evidence! Moore didn't see the pencil in Sir Herbert's fingers at all. He saw it lying on the floor beside the dead man's hand,—or, he says he did."

"Good Heavens! You don't suspect Moore!" cried Richard. "Why, he's the best chap going!"

"I don't say he isn't, and I don't say I suspect him, but I want you people to understand that he *might* have done it all,—might have committed the murder and might have written the scribbled paper to turn suspicion away from himself. As for the handwriting, that trembling, shaky scrawl can't be identified with anybody's ordinary writing."

"Oh, I can't think it," Richard objected. "Why, Bob Moore couldn't do such a thing, and, besides, what would be his motive?"

"We haven't come to motive yet. We're finding out who had opportunity."

"Any passer-by had that," Miss Prall said, positively; "while Moore was up in the elevator, what was to prevent any pedestrian going by from stepping in and killing Sir Herbert?"

"Nothing; but there are few pedestrians at two o'clock in the morning, and fewer still who have a reason for a murder."

"Oh, it must have been prearranged," said Bates, thoughtfully. "There's not the slightest doubt," he went on hurriedly, "that whoever killed him,—man, woman or child!—came in from the street to do the deed."

"Why, of course," agreed Miss Prall; "where else could they have come from? Nobody in the house would do it!"

"No; I suppose not," admitted Corson. "Well, then, ma'am, we have the assassin coming in from the street, while Moore is upstairs. And, according to the victim's own statement, the assassin was feminine and there were two, at least, of them. For I've studied that paper, and it says, clearly, 'women did this.' Want to see it?" his hand went toward his breast pocket.

"No,—oh, no," and Miss Prall shuddered.

"Well, supposing a couple of women came in, having, we'll say, watched their chance, what more likely than that it was two chickens,—beg pardon, ma'am, that means gay young ladies,—with whom Sir Herbert had been dining? Why, like as not they came in with him. They didn't hang round outside waiting for him. You see, they'd been with him, and he had in some way offended them, let us say, and they wanted to kill him—"

"Seems to me you're drawing a long bow," and Bates almost smiled at the mental picture of two gay chorus girls committing the gruesome deed.

Corson spoke seriously. "No, Mr Bates, I'm not. If we take this written paper at its face value, and I don't know why we

shouldn't, it means that women killed that man. And *if* women, who more likely than the chorus girls? Unless you people up here can suggest some other women,—some, any women in the man's private life who wished to do him harm or who wished him out of the way. That's why I'm here, to learn anything and all things you may know that might aid me in a search for the right women—the women who really killed him. Chorus girls are wholly supposititious. But the real women, the women who *are* the criminals, must and shall be found!"

CHAPTER VI
The Little Dinner

THE next morning at eight o'clock, Morton, the day doorman, came on duty.

Corson eagerly began at once to question him, and he told the story of Sir Herbert Binney's departure from the house, but there his information ended.

"All I know is, Mr Binney went away from here in a taxicab, 'long about half-past six, I think it was. And he went to the Hotel Magnifique,—at least, that's what he told the driver. And that's the last I saw of him. But his man, Peters, is due any minute,—maybe he'll know more."

"Peters? A valet?"

"Yes, and general factotum. He comes every morning at eight, and takes care of his boss."

And in a few moments Peters arrived. His shocked astonishment at the news was too patently real to give the slightest grounds of suspicion that he had any knowledge of it before his arrival.

"Poor old duffer!" he said, earnestly, "he was awful fond of life. Now, who would kill him, I'd like to know!"

"That's what we all want to know, Peters," said Corson. "Come, I'll go up to his rooms with you, and we can look things over."

Up they went, and the detective looked about the apartment of the dead man with interest. There were but two rooms, a

bedroom and bath and a good-sized sitting-room. The furniture was the usual type of hotel appointments and there were so few individual belongings that the place gave small indication of the habits or tastes of its late occupant.

"Nothing of a sybarite," commented Corson, glancing at the few and simple toilet appurtenances.

"No," returned Peters, "but he was accustomed to finer living in his English home. He's no brag, but I gathered that from things he let drop now and then. But when he was on a business trip, he didn't seem to care how things were. He was a good dresser, but not much for little comforts or luxuries."

"What about his friendships with ladies?"

"Aha, that was his strong point! As a ladies' man he was there with the goods! He liked 'em all,—from chorus girls to duchesses,—and he knew English ladies of high life, I can tell you."

"But over here he preferred the chorus girls?"

"I don't say he preferred them. He went out a lot to fine homes and hobnobbed with some big people. But he was in his gayest mood when he was getting off for a frolic with the girls."

"As he was last night?"

"Yes; he didn't say much about it, but he did tell me that he was to take a couple of peaches to dinner, and afterwards see them in a Review or something they dance in."

"Can't you be more definite? Don't you know what revue? Or the girls' names?"

"No; I've no idea. Sir Herbert didn't mention any names, and of course I didn't ask him anything."

"Then, I'll have to go to the Magnifique to get on with this. First, I'll take a look around here."

But a careful investigation of the late Sir Herbert's papers and personal effects cast no light on the mystery of his death. There were several photographs of young women, quite likely theatrical people, but none had a signature. However, Corson took these in charge as well as some few notes and letters that seemed significant of friendships with women.

"As young Bates is, I believe, the heir to Sir Herbert's estate, I suppose he'll take charge of these rooms, but, meanwhile, I'll lock up as I want to go downstairs again now. You're out of a job, my man!"

"Yes,—why, so I am! It's the first I've realized that!"

"Maybe Mr Bates will keep you on."

"Not he! Those young chaps don't want valets. He doesn't, anyhow. No, I'll be looking for a new berth. Oh, it'll be easy enough found, but I liked Sir Herbert mighty well. He was a queer dick, but a kind and easy-going man to live with."

"And he never chatted with you about his young lady friends?"

"Never. He was a reserved sort, as far as his own affairs were concerned. You could go just so far and no farther with Sir Herbert Binney."

"Well, he left a paper stating that his death was brought about by women."

"He did? Why, how could that be?"

"That's what I've got to find out. He tried to write a message, and died in the very act. But he wrote clearly and distinctly the words, 'Women did this,' and we've got to believe it."

"Oh, yes; if it was the other way, now, if women did it, he might try to put it up to a man, to shield the girls. But if he wrote that, it's so, of course. Must have been some of those skylarking kids, and yet, it ain't likely, is it now? Some vamp, I should say."

"That's it! Not a young chorus chicken, but an older woman, or women. Adventuresses, you know."

"Yes, that's what I mean. I suppose your first move is to trail his steps of last evening."

"Yes, and I must get about it before the trail gets cold. I've so many ways to look. You know, Peters, he wasn't liked by the girls of this house."

"Well do I know that,—and small wonder. The girls in this house are as nice a bunch of young ladies as ever lived. And the tenants are decent men,—they don't chuck an elevator girl under the chin or try to kiss her every time they ride up or down in her car alone with her!"

"And Sir Herbert did?"

"That he did! I heard it time and again. All the girls were right down mad about it. They're not that sort of girls."

"But I suppose they're not the sort of girls to stab him in their righteous wrath?"

"Oh, good Lord, no! Though there's one of 'em, now,—"

"Which one?"

"No, I'll mention no names. Why, I've no right to hint at such a thing."

"But if you know anything—"

"I don't. Go ahead with your investigations. If there's anything to start your suspicions, let me know which way you're looking."

Corson went downstairs again, and rounded up all the girls employed in the house who might be apt to come in contact with the tenants.

Daisy Lee, an elevator girl, and Julie Baxter, a telephone girl, were the only ones who seemed to have rancorous or vindictive feelings toward the dead man.

Daisy, a frail, pale girl with a soft pretty face and lovely eyes, said frankly she was glad he was dead, for he bothered the life out of her with his attentions.

"He'd wait till I took other people up or down," she said, angrily, "so's he could ride with me alone, and then he'd kiss me."

"Why didn't you report his actions to the management?" Corson said, sharply.

"Well," Daisy blushed and hesitated.

"Speak up, Day!" said Julie. "I'll tell you, sir. She didn't tell 'cause he brought her candy and flowers if she wouldn't."

"That's so," Daisy admitted, pouting. "I like flowers and candies as well as anybody, and they're scarce nowadays."

"Where were you last night?" Corson inquired, suddenly.

"Home and in bed," declared Daisy, and when Julie gave her a quick, surprised look she said, defiantly, "Well, I was!"

"And where were you?" The detective turned to Julie.

"Home and in bed," she said also, but her tone was not convincing.

Corson was about to ask further questions of them, but just then Mr Vail came down in the elevator, and the detective turned to him.

"What!" Vail exclaimed, as the news was told him. "Binney! Why, who did it?"

"Women," said Corson, succinctly, and Vail looked mystified.

"Women! What women? And how do you know?"

He was enlightened as to the written message, and he looked utterly amazed.

"I never heard of such a thing! How could he write all that after he was stabbed with a stroke that killed him?"

"Well, he did! He was just dying when Bob Moore came down from taking you up."

"Oh, then? Yes, Moore and I chatted a few moments about detective stories, and do you mean to say that at that very moment poor old Binney was being murdered a few floors beneath us?"

"Just that, sir."

"What an awful thing! Have you any idea of the identity of the women? How *could* women do it?"

"That's what everybody says! To me it's just as easy to think women did it as men,—and a heap more logical! Why, a man

wouldn't have dared to come into a brightly lighted place like this and stab somebody and get away again! But an angry woman—that's just what she would do!"

"That's true: I mean it's true no man would take a chance like that,—no sane man. But a woman, in a towering rage or insanely jealous or something—well, anyway, it's the most astonishing case I ever heard of!"

"It's all of that! You knew Sir Herbert Binney pretty well, didn't you, Mr Vail?"

"In a business way; not socially. We had several conferences as to his Bun bakery. I've a Bread business of my own, and we talked about a combine, but we finally gave up the plan and Sir Herbert took his offers to the Crippen concern,—or, said he was going to do so."

"You and he friendly?"

"Oh, yes; the affair was entirely amicable. The whole thing resolved itself into the fact that his Buns were really more cake than bread,—at least, from the American point of view,—and so better adapted to Crippen's use than to ours."

"And you came in last night just before Sir Herbert came?"

"So you tell me now. Naturally, I didn't know he followed me in."

"Where'd you spend the evening?"

"With a friend, Dr Weldon, in Fifty-first Street."

"Mind if I call him up and ask him?"

Vail stared at the detective.

"Meaning you're questioning my veracity, or connecting me with the crime?"

Corson reddened, but stuck to his suggestion. "No, sir, but,—well, you're the nearest I've found to a material witness, and—"

"Well, do you know, it strikes me you don't know what a material witness is! However, I've not the least objection to your calling up my friend,—go to it! Here's his number."

A little sheepishly, Corson took the number and called up Dr Weldon. The hearty response of a genial voice assured the inquirer that Mr Vail had spent the evening before with the doctor, that he had arrived late, having been to a theater, and that the two had played chess until nearly two o'clock, when Mr Vail, surprised at the lateness of the hour, had started for home. That was the extent of Dr Weldon's information.

"And quite satisfactory," Corson said, with a relieved air. "I had to know, sir, that you weren't with Sir Herbert. Now, I must find out who was with him,—of either sex."

"You're all right, Corson," Vail said; "I think you see your duty clearly, and if I can help you in any way, call on me. And, look here, don't you let any suspicion fasten itself on Bob Moore. That chap's all right. He's everlastingly reading murder yarns, but he's interested in the detective side of them, not the crime side. I wouldn't say this, but I heard something about his being questioned and I want to stand up for him. In a general way, I mean. And as to this case, it's very strange, I know, but don't let its strangeness lead you into impossible theories. You know,

already, that at the time of Sir Herbert Binney's murder, Bob Moore was up at the tenth floor,—I can testify to that,—"

"Now, I don't know, Mr Vail," and Corson looked deeply perplexed. "What you say's true enough, but look here, we've only Moore's word that he found that man dying when he came down. Suppose Sir Herbert came in and Moore stabbed him—"

"And Sir Herbert wrote a paper saying it was women?"

"Well, no,—but maybe Bob wrote that paper himself—"

"You're getting pretty well tangled up, Corson. Why don't you put a handwriting expert on that paper, and see if it's in the dead man's fist or not?"

"Good idea, Mr Vail! I never thought of it!"

"Try it, and, excuse me, Corson, but I say this in all honesty, I think you'd better get some help. I believe this is a big case and a mysterious one, and it wouldn't do you any harm to have a colleague to advise with. Do as you like, or as you're told, but that's how it looks to me. Now I must be off, but I'll come home early, for I'm interested to know how things go."

"Hold on a minute, Mr Vail; you know Moore pretty well. Do you think it's possible that he knows who did it, knows who the women are, even perhaps saw the thing done, and then helped them to get away and disposed of the weapon?"

"Anything is possible, Corson, but I think what you suggest is exceedingly improbable. I know Moore only from my chats with him now and then in the elevator, and that's all I can say. To me, anything crooked in that young man seems decidedly unlikely."

Vail went off leaving a sadly perplexed detective behind him, who felt that he didn't know which way to turn, and was inclined to follow the advice he had received regarding a colleague.

Corson was anxious for further talk with the members of the Prall household, but they had not made an appearance yet and he hesitated to call them.

He decided to run down to the Magnifique at once, when he received unexpected help from the telephone operator, Julie Baxter.

"Sir Herbert has a lot of telephone calls from ladies," she said, with a meaning glance.

"Is that so? Did he have any yesterday?"

"Yes, he did. About five o'clock, a skirt called him up and they had a merry confab."

"Who was she?"

"Dunno; but he called her 'Babe.'"

"Not very definite! Most girls get called that! What did she say?"

"How should I know that?" and Julie's big eyes stared haughtily at him.

"By the not unheard of method of using your ears. What did she say?"

Really eager to tell, Julie admitted that she listened in, and that an appointment was made for dinner at the Magnifique. Further details she could not supply.

Whereupon Corson carried out his plan of going to the big hotel at once.

He hunted down the head waiter of the grill room of the night before, and, having found him asleep in his room, waked him up and proceeded to interrogate him.

"You bet Sir Herbert Binney was here," the man declared, when he got himself fully awake; "he had two of the prettiest little squabs I ever saw, along, and they had a jolly dinner."

"And then?"

"Then they all went off to the theater, and after the show he brought them back, also two more,—four of 'em in all,—and they had supper."

"All amicable?"

"Oh, yes,—that is, at first. Later on, the girls got jealous of each other, and—well, the old chap's a softy, you know, and they pretty much cleaned him out."

"Just what do you mean?"

"Well, he made them presents, or promised them presents,—he's terribly rich,—and each of those girls was afraid somebody else would get more than she did. So, they squabbled quite a lot."

"Sir Herbert was good natured?"

"Yep; he just laughed and let 'em fight it out among themselves."

"Now, look here, did any of those four girls get angry enough to wish Sir Herbert any harm?"

"Did they? Why, I heard Babe Russell say she was going to kill him, and Viola Mersereau, she said, if she was sure it would never be discovered, she'd shoot him herself."

"Are you sure of these things? Because—somebody did kill Sir Herbert Binney about two o'clock this morning."

"What! Who did it?"

"We don't know, but we've reason to suspect women."

"That's the bunch, then! Lord, I didn't think they'd go so far as that! But that Viola is a ring-leader,—she's a vamp, if there ever was one! And little Russell! Well, she's soft and babyish looking but she's got the temper of a wildcat! And they were out for the goods, those young she's! They're all straight, you know, but they're just little greedies. And that man was their natural prey. Why, they could get anything out of him! Not pearl necklaces and diamonds,—I don't mean that,—but fans and vanity-cases and silk stockings and lockets and such trifles. Not trifles in the aggregate, though. That man must have spent a good big roll on 'em last night."

"How do you mean, spent it?"

"Why, he'd give this one or that one a yellowback to buy a new hat, say,—and then the others would tease for new hats. And maybe, if he didn't have the kale, he'd give 'em checks, or he'd tell 'em they could have the hat or the scarf or whatever charged to him. But he was strict. He told each one the limit she should pay, and if she paid more, they couldn't be friends any more. It was a queer mix-up, but all friendly and decent. He

was just like a big frolicsome boy, and the girlies were like soft little kittens, playful,—but, kittens can scratch."

"And they did?"

"Yes, there was more real ill nature shown last night than ever before. Sir Herbert wasn't as generous as usual; I daresay he's tired of the game,—anyway, they couldn't bamboozle him to more than little trinkets, and I think Viola was out for furs. And furs mean money. But he only smiled when she hinted and she spoke more plainly, and then when he didn't agree she got mad."

"You seem to know all about it."

"Couldn't help knowing. They took no pains to be quiet, and I was around most of the time, and finally I became interested to see how it would come out."

"And how did it?"

"They all went off together,—I mean the girls did. He bundled 'em into a taxicab, gave the driver a bill and said good-night. That's the way he always does. He never escorts 'em home. Then he came back in here, settled his account, lit a cigar and strolled off by himself."

"At what time was this?"

"About one, or a little before. Not very late. Sir Herbert's no villain. I read him like a book. He just liked to see those girls enjoy a good supper, same's he liked to see 'em dance on the stage. Anyway, there's the history of the evening, so far as I know anything about it."

Corson went away, went to the theater where the girls belonged,—found out where they lived and went there.

The four lived in the same boarding house, and one and all refused to appear at any such unearthly hour as ten A. M.

But the strong arm of the law was used as an argument, and, after a time, four kimonoed and petulant-faced maidens put in an appearance.

Corson meant to be very intimidating, but he found himself wax in their hands. One and all they denied knowing anything of Sir Herbert Binney after he had entertained them at supper and sent them home in a cab.

They expressed mild surprise at his tragic fate, but no real regret. They seemed to Corson like four heartless, brainless dolls who had no thought, no interest outside their silly selves.

But in the dark eyes of Viola Mersereau and in the blonde, rosy face of Babe Russell he saw unmistakable signs of fear,—and, working on this, he blustered and accused and threatened until he had them all in hysteria.

"You've not got a chance!" he declared. "You're caught red-handed! You two said in so many words that you wished the old chap was dead, and after you got home, you sneaked out,—whether there were others to know it, or not, I can't say,—but you two sneaked out, went to The Campanile, waited your chance, dashed in and stabbed the man and dashed away again. And you'd been safe, but for his living long enough to tell on you! 'Women did this!' Of course they did! And *you're* the women! Who else could it be? What other women,—what other

sort of women would commit such a deed? Come now, are you going to own up?"

CHAPTER VII
Enlightening Interviews

THE avalanche of denial, the flood of vituperation and the general hullabaloo that was set up by the four girls at Corson's accusation reduced the detective to a pulp of bewilderment. The girls saw this and pursued their advantage. They stormed and raged, and then, becoming less frightened they guyed and jollied the poor man until he determined that he must have help of some sort.

Moreover, he felt sure now that these youngsters never committed murder. Even the Mersereau girl, the vamp, as she had been called, was a young thing of nineteen, and her vampire effect was only put on when occasion demanded.

"S'posen I did say I'd like to kill him!" she exclaimed, "that don't mean anything! S'posen I said I died o' laughin', would you think I was dead? Those things are figgers of speech,—that's what they are!"

She paraded up and down the room with a tragedy-queen air, and rolled her practiced eyeballs at Corson.

And Babe Russell was equally scornful, though her soft, gentle effects were the opposite of Viola's ways.

"Silly!" she said, shaking her pinkened finger at the detective. "To think us nice, pretty little girls would kill a big grown-up man! First off, we *couldn't* do it,—we wouldn't have the noive!

And we'd be too 'fraid of getting caught. And we, wouldn't do it anyway,—it isn't in the picture!"

They seemed so straightforward and so sensible that Corson began to think it was absurd to suspect them, and yet the two he watched most closely were surely afraid of something. They talked gayly, and babbled on smilingly, but they glanced at each other with anxious looks when they thought the detective wasn't looking.

Whatever troubled them concerned them anxiously, for beneath their gayety they were distinctly nervous.

Corson convinced himself that they had no intention of running away and could always be found if wanted, so he left, with immediate intention of following the advice of Mr Vail and attaching an assistant.

"Not in a thousand years!" was the opinion of the assistant, one Gibbs, after he heard Corson's tale of the chorus girls. "Those little chippies might be quite willing to kill a man, theoretically, but as for the deed itself, they couldn't put it over. Still, they must be remembered. You know, the statement that women did it, is surely the truth. Dying messages are invariably true. But it may mean that women caused it to be done,—that it was the work of women, even though the actual stab thrust may have been the deed of a man."

"I don't think so," mused Corson. "You haven't seen the paper. It said, not only, 'Women did this,' but it said afterward, 'Get—' and then there were two letters that looked like b-o—"

"No; I hadn't heard that! Why, it might have been Ba—and might have meant Babe Russell, after all!"

"No; it's bo,—but it isn't a capital B. I studied it closely, and I have it put away. I'll show it to you."

"But the capital doesn't matter. A man writing, in those circumstances, with his last effort of fading strength, might easily use a small letter instead of a capital. Know anybody beginning with Bo?"

"No—why, oh, my goodness! Bob Moore!"

"Well, there's a chance. You've had your eyes on Moore, haven't you?"

"Only because he was right there. But Mr Vail,—George Vail, of the Vail Bread Company,—stands up for Moore. To be sure, it was only in a general way,—we only talked a few moments,—but he seemed to think Moore is on the detective order,—not of a criminal sort."

"Why must Moore necessarily be either?"

"Only because he's a detective story shark. Reads murder yarns all the time, and goes to detective story movies."

"That proves just nothing at all. But the 'Get Bo—' is important. Anybody else around, beginning with Bo,—or Ba? You see, he naturally wouldn't form the letters perfectly."

"Ba? There's Julie Baxter, the telephone girl."

"He'd hardly speak of her as Baxter."

"But,—oh, I say, Gibbs, Moore testifies that, as the man died, he tried to say something and it sounded like 'Get J—J—' some name beginning with J!"

"Hello! We must inquire as to the fair Julie. Any one else?"

"No; no women, that I know of. Young Bates, the heir, begins his name with Ba, but he's not a woman."

"Have you looked up his record for last evening? What was he doing?"

"No, I haven't. A man can't do everything at once!"

"This thing seems to have a dozen different handles. First of all, I think we want to see the family."

"But he hadn't any family."

"Well, relatives, connections, anybody most interested. Especially the heir."

So the two went to the apartment of Letitia Prall, and there found the family connections of Sir Herbert Binney in a high state of excitement.

It was nearly noon, and Richard Bates was impatiently waiting the arrival of the detective, whom he had been expecting all the morning.

"Look here," he said to the two men when they came in, "I want you to take hold of this case with me,—if you can't do it, I'll get somebody who can. I don't want you to be off skylarking on a wild goose chase, while I sit here waiting for you—"

"One moment, Mr Bates," said Corson, sharply; "we're not detectives in your employ; we're police officers, and we're conducting this case in accordance with orders."

"Well, well, let's get at it, and see where we stand. What do you know?"

"Only the message on the paper left by your uncle, and such testimony as we could gather from the employees downstairs. Now, we want to interview you."

"And I want to be interviewed. Go ahead."

"Interview all of us," put in Eliza Gurney, who with Miss Prall had sat silent during the men's colloquy, but was quite ready to talk.

"One at a time," and Gibbs took up the conversation. "Mr Bates, where were you last evening?"

"That," said Richard, "I decline to state, on the grounds that it has no bearing on the question of my uncle's death. If you ask me where I was at the time of the tragedy, or shortly before, I will tell you. But last evening or yesterday afternoon or morning are not pertinent."

"You refuse to state where you spent last evening?"

"I do."

"Not a good thing for you to do," Gibbs shook his head, "but let it pass for the moment. Where were you at two o'clock this morning?"

"In bed and asleep."

"You can prove this?"

"By me!" spoke up Letitia Prall. "I heard him come in about twelve and go to his room."

"H'm. Proof to a degree. How do you know he didn't leave the apartment later?"

"Because I didn't hear him do so."

"Where is his room, and where is your own?"

After being shown the respective bedrooms, Gibbs remarked that in his opinion Bates could easily have left his room without Miss Prall's knowledge, if she were asleep at the time.

"Unless you are unusually acute of hearing, are you?"

Now this was a sensitive point with the spinster. Her hearing was not what it had once been, but she never acknowledged it. She greatly resented the busy finger of time as it touched her here and there, and often pretended she heard when she did not. Both her nephew and her companion good-naturedly humored her in this little foible, and at Gibbs' question they looked up, uncertainly.

"Of course I am!" was Miss Prall's indignant reply to the detective's question. "I hear perfectly."

"Are you sure?" said Gibbs, mildly; "for I have noticed several times when you have seemed not to hear a side remark."

"Inattention, then," snapped Letitia. "I am a thoughtful person, and I often take little notice of others' chatter."

"But you are sure you could have heard your nephew if he had gone out of his place last night after—"

"But I didn't go out!" declared Bates. "You're absurd to imply that I did, unless you have some reason on which to base your accusation!"

"We have to locate you before we can go further, Mr Bates," insisted Gibbs, who had assumed leadership, while Corson sat, with folded arms, taking in anything he found to notice.

And Corson, though lacking in initiative, was a close observer, and he saw a lot that would have escaped his notice had he

been obliged to carry on the inquiry.

"Let's try it," Corson said, suddenly. "Go into your room, please, Miss Prall, and shut the door, and see if you can hear me go out."

"Of course I can!" and with a determined air, Miss Prall went into her room and closed the door quite audibly.

Lifting his finger with a gesture of admonition, Corson made every one sit perfectly still and without speaking for about two minutes.

Then, rising himself, he opened Miss Prall's door and bade her come out.

"Now," he said, "I admit I made as little noise as possible, but did you hear me go out of the front door?"

"Of course I did!" declared the spinster, haughtily. "I heard you tiptoe to the door, open it stealthily and close it the same way."

She looked calmly about, and then seeing the consternation on the faces of Richard and Eliza and the amused satisfaction on the countenances of the detectives, she saw she had made a false step, and became irate.

"What is it?" she began, but Richard interrupted her.

"Don't say a word, Auntie," he begged; "you see gentlemen, Miss Prall is a little sensitive about her slight deafness, and sometimes she imagines sounds that are not real."

"I'm not deaf!" Letitia cried, but Eliza interposed:

"Do hush, Letitia. You only make matters worse! Will you be quiet?"

The tone more than the words caused Miss Prall to drop the subject, and Gibbs proceeded.

"Now, you see, Mr. Bates, we can't accept your aunt's testimony that you didn't leave your room last night."

"I didn't ask you to," retorted Richard; "nor do I need it. I tell you I was in bed by or before midnight, and did not leave my bed until I was summoned by Bob Moore after the tragedy had occurred. Now, unless you have some definite and sufficient reason to suspect me of falsehood, I have no need to bring any proof of my assertion."

"That's so, Gibbs," said Corson, meditatively. "There's no reason, I know of, to inquire into Mr Bates' doings."

"There's reason to inquire into the doings of everybody who had the slightest connection with this matter," said Gibbs severely. "But unless there's a doubt, we needn't yet ask for proof of their words."

He glared at Miss Prall, with the evident implication that he might feel a doubt of her word.

However, when she and Miss Gurney stated that they had retired at about eleven and had not left their rooms until called up by Richard to hear the tragic news, no comment was made by Gibbs and Corson merely looked at them abstractedly with the air of a preoccupied owl.

"Then," resumed Corson, "now that we've placed your whereabouts and occupations, will you state, any or all of you, what opinion you hold as to the identity of the women who are responsible for the death of Sir Herbert Binney?"

"Those chorus girls," said Miss Letitia, promptly. "I always told him he'd get into a moil with them, and they'd fleece him. They are a smart lot, and Sir Herbert, though a shrewd business man, was putty in the hands of a clever or designing woman!"

"But these girls are mere children—"

"In years, perhaps," Miss Prall broke in, "but not in iniquity. A gentleman of Sir Herbert's mild and generous nature could be bamboozled by these wise and wicked little vampires until they'd stripped him of his last cent!"

"You seem to know a lot about them, Madam."

"Because Sir Herbert has told me. He often described the cleverness with which they wheedled and coerced him into undue generosity, and though he laughed about it, it was with an undercurrent of chagrin and vexation. And so, the time came, I feel certain, when Sir Herbert, like the worm in the proverb, turned, and what he did or said, I don't know, but I haven't the slightest doubt that it led, in some way, to such hard feeling and such a deep and desperate quarrel, that the affair resulted in tragedy."

Gibbs looked at the speaker.

The Grenadier, as some people called her, sat upright, and her fine head nodded with stern denunciation of the young women she accused.

Her tight-set lips and glittering eyes showed hatred and scorn, yet her fingers nervously interlaced and her voice shook a little as if from over-strained nerves.

Even more nervous was Miss Gurney. Unable to sit still, she moved restlessly from one chair to another,—even now and then left the room, hurrying back, as if afraid of missing something.

"Do sit still, Eliza," said Miss Prall, at last; "you're enough to drive any one distracted with your running about like a hen with its head off!"

"I feel like one! Here's poor Sir Herbert dead, and nobody paying any attention to it,—except to find out who killed him! I think our duty is first to the dead, and after that—"

"Keep still, Eliza," ordered Bates, who was never very patient with his aunt's irritating and irritable companion. "Sir Herbert's body and his affairs will be duly taken care of. It's necessary now to discover his murderer, of course, and the sooner investigation is made the more hope of finding the criminal."

"Or criminals," put in Gibbs. "Since seeing that paper, I feel convinced that the dying man tried to write 'get both,' meaning to insure punishing to the women who killed him."

"Then you think women really did the deed?" asked Bates, a strange fear in his blue eyes.

"Yes, I do;" Gibbs stated, "but Corson thinks women were merely at the root of the trouble. However, that isn't the point just now. That will all be learned later. First, we must get an idea of which way to look. And, too, I may be wrong. The illegible word on that paper may mean, as Corson thinks, the beginning of some name. The fact that the B is not a capital

doesn't count for much when we realize the circumstances of the writing."

"I should say not!" and Miss Prall looked straight at him. "Think of that poor dying man trying to write, while his life blood ebbed away! And can you fail to heed his dying message? Can you fail to get those wicked, vicious little wretches who heartlessly lured him on and on in their wild orgies, until it all resulted in his fearful end! I, for one, shall never be satisfied until those foolish, flippant little things are punished—"

"Oh, Letitia," wailed Miss Gurney, "bad as they are, you wouldn't want to see them all stuffed into an electric chair, would you, now?"

The mental picture of the chorus girls crowded into a single electric chair was almost too much for Richard's sense of humor, and he smiled, but Miss Gurney went on:

"But, anyway, if a pack of girls did do it, don't think it was the chorus girls. They're too frivolous and light hearted. I think you'd better look nearer home. The girls in this house were all down on Sir Herbert. None of them liked him, and he was always berating them, both to us, and to their very faces. That telephone girl, now,—"

"Eliza, *will* you keep still?" fumed Miss Prall. "Why do you suggest anybody? These detectives are here to find out the murderers and they not only need no help from you, but they are held back and bothered by your interference. Please remain quiet!"

"I'll talk all I like, Letitia Prall; I guess I know what's best for your interests as well as my own."

"You haven't any interests separate from mine, and I can look after myself! Now, you do as I tell you, and say nothing more on this subject at all. If Sir Herbert was the victim of his foolish penchant for those light young women, I'm not sure it doesn't serve him right—"

"Oh, Auntie!" exclaimed Bates, truly pained at this. "Don't talk so!"

"What right have you got to dictate to me? You keep still, too, Rick,—in fact, the least we any of us say, the better."

"Oh, no, Miss Prall," said Gibbs, suavely, "if there's anything you know, it will really be better for all concerned that you should tell it. As to your opinions or ideas or theories, I hold you quite excusable if you keep those to yourselves."

"And you'd prefer I should do so, I suppose! Well, I will. And as to facts, I know of none that could help you, so I will say nothing."

"Miss Gurney," and Gibbs turned toward her with a determined glance, "you spoke of the young women employed in the house; had you any one in mind?"

"Eliza—" began Miss Prall, but Gibbs stopped her.

"Beg pardon, ma'am, but I must request that you let Miss Gurney speak for herself. You have no right to forbid her, and I insist upon my right to ask."

"Nobody in particular," Miss Gurney asserted, as she looked timidly at Letitia. "But Sir Herbert's chambermaid,—"

"Yes, go on."

"Well, she refused to take care of his room, he was so cross to her. But I don't suppose she'd kill him just for that."

"I'll look up the matter. Glad you mentioned it. And they gave him another maid?"

"Yes, the same one we have."

"I must have a talk with her. Much may be learned from a room servant. That's what I want, facts,—not theories. We've got the big primal fact,—'women did it.' We've got a possible fact,—an uncertain statement,—'get both'—or, maybe, get some particular person. Now any side lights we can get that may throw illumination on that uncertain bit of writing is what is needed to show us which way to look. Isn't that right, Mr. Bates?"

"Why, yes, I suppose so. Personally, I can't seem to see women doing such a deed—"

"That, sir, is the result of your own manly outlook and your lack of experience with a desperate woman. You know, 'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned,' and we can readily imagine a woman scorned by this Sir Herbert."

"He could do the scorning, all right—"

"And they could do the rest! Oh, yes, sir, it isn't a pleasant thing to believe, but it is a fact that women can be just as revengeful, just as vindictive, just as cruel as men,—and can commit just as great crimes, though as we all know, such women are the exception. But they are in existence and that fact must be recognized and remembered."

"But the circumstances—" demurred Bates, "the time—"

"My dear sir, it seems to me the circumstances and time were most favorable for the work of women. Granting some women wanted to kill that man, or had determined to kill him,—or even, killed him on a sudden irresistible impulse, what more conducive to an opportunity than this house late at night? The great lobby, guarded, as it is at that hour, by only one man and he often up in the ascending elevator car. You see, the women could easily have been in hiding in that onyx lobby. The great pillars give most convenient and unobservable places of concealment, and they could have been tucked away there for a long time, waiting."

"Oh, ridiculous! Supposing my uncle hadn't come in?"

"Then they could have slipped out again. They may have been hidden there night after night, waiting for just the chance that came last night."

"But, suppose Moore had been downstairs when Sir Herbert entered—"

"Just the same," Gibbs explained, wearily. "Then they would have gone away and tried again the next night. A woman's perseverance and patience is beyond all words!"

"It's all beyond all words," and Richard folded his arms despondently. "I can't get a line on it."

"Well, I can," asserted Gibbs; "they came, no doubt, prepared. Else, where'd they get the knife? Now, naturally one criminal would be assumed,—that's why *women* was written so clearly. Several who know, have agreed the handwriting is positively

that of Sir Herbert Binney,—so, there's nothing left to do but *cherchez les femmes*."

CHAPTER VIII
Julie Baxter

RICHARD BATES and the two detectives stood waiting for the already summoned elevator to take them downstairs.

"You see," Gibbs was saying, "in nearly every investigation there's somebody who won't tell where he was at the time of the crime."

"I will tell that," exploded Bates, "only I won't tell where I was through the evening, and, you know yourself, that has nothing to do with the case."

"I know, and, nine times out of ten, it doesn't matter what the people were doing who refuse to tell. But it might make a difference, and it's always a bother to be worrying about it."

"Why worry?"

"Because it may pay. According to Corson's hunch, two of those chorus chicks don't want to tell where they were at the time of the crime—"

"Oh, well, they wouldn't—"

"I know; but it's an uncertainty. Now, take your aunt. She falsified about hearing your front door close just now. I've a full belief that was merely because of a piffling vanity about her deafness,—a thing nobody wants to admit,—but, I wish she hadn't, for it proves that she is not above prevarication."

"I don't think she would fib in any serious matter," vouchsafed Richard.

"You don't think so because you don't want to think so. That can't cut any ice with me, you know."

The elevator stopped and the three went down.

In a business-like way, Gibbs rounded up all the girl employees available and put them through a rigid investigation.

They were a voluble lot, and it was easier to get information than to prevent it.

Daisy Lee was among the most vindictive. Although a frail, pale little thing, she was full of indignation at the late Sir Herbert's ways, and expressed herself without reserve.

"He was an old nuisance!" she averred; "he was free with his presents and he was a gentleman,—I'll say that for him,—but he thought he could pat any girl on her shoulder or even snatch a kiss, without making her mad. He made me so mad I wanted to kill him,—and I told him so, lots of times. I didn't, and there's no way I could have done it, so I am not afraid to say that I would have stabbed him myself if I'd had a good chance!"

"You don't mean that, Miss Lee," said Gibbs, coolly, "and you're only saying it to make a sensation."

"Why, what a story!" and Daisy turned on him. "Well, that is, I don't suppose I really would have done the actual killing, but I'd have the will to."

"Quite a different matter," said the detective, "and your will would have fizzled out at the critical moment."

"Of course it would," put in Julie Baxter, the telephone girl. "Daisy's an awful bluffer. None of us girls would kill anybody.

But one and all we are glad to be rid of Sir Herbert, though I can't help being sorry he's killed."

"You mean you'd have been glad to be rid of him in some more peaceable fashion?"

"That's exactly what I mean. He was insufferable—"

"In what way?"

"Not only, as Daisy says, because he had free manners, but he was silly, beside. Always saying, 'Well, little one, how do you like my new necktie?' or some foolishness like that."

Richard Bates looked uncomfortable. "Need I stay?" he inquired. "You must realize I dislike to hear this talk about my uncle."

"Stay, please," returned Corson, briefly; "and, young ladies, don't give us any more of your opinions of Sir Herbert, but tell, if you know, of any circumstance bearing on his death."

Apparently none knew of any such, and the girls looked at each other in silence.

"And now, tell me where you were at two A. M., each of you, and then you may be excused."

Every one declared that she had been home and in bed at that hour, except Julie Baxter. She, with a fine show of independence, refused to disclose her whereabouts at that time.

"There it is again," said Corson in despair. "Now, Miss Baxter, I don't think that your reticence necessarily incriminates you at all, but it leaves room for doubt. Take my word for it, it would be wiser and far better for you to tell frankly where you were, even if it calls for criticism from your mates."

"But I won't tell," and Julie looked very stubborn.

"You'd rather be arrested and held on suspicion?"

"You can't arrest me without a speck of evidence! Nor you can't scare me by such threats."

"It isn't an idle threat, and you can be held for further inquiry, if I say so."

"You won't say so, and anyway I won't say where I was last night. But I will say I was up to no harm, and had no hand in the death of Sir Herbert Binney."

"I don't, as yet, think you did; but let me remark that if you *were* implicated in the matter you would act and speak just as you do now. You would, of course, asseverate your innocence—"

"Of course I should. So, now, Mr Smarty-Cat, what are you going to do about it?"

Julie's eyes snapped with anger that seemed almost vicious, and she tossed her head independently, while the other girls showed little or no sympathy. She was not a favorite with her fellow-workers; they called her stuck-up, and she not only refused to take them into her confidence as to her amusements and entertainments, but she often whetted their curiosity by mysterious hints of grand doings of which she never told them definitely.

She lived in herself during her hours on duty, and even in the rest room she was never chummy or chatty like the rest.

Wherefore, there were surprised glances and nodding heads in her direction, and Daisy Lee sniffed openly.

"Huh," she said, "Julie Baxter, you're too smart. You were more friendly with Sir Binney than any of us. He gave you twice the candy he did any one else, and I know you've been out to dinner with him!"

"I have not!" declared Julie, but a flush on her cheeks and a quiver of her eyelids left room for doubt as to her truthfulness.

"Also," and Corson flung this at her, "also, on the paper was written 'get B-a-' and *also*, we've been told that the dying man tried to articulate a name beginning with J!"

"Now, Miss Baxter, do you still deny all implication in the affair?" Gibbs leaned forward and stared into her eyes.

"I do!" she cried, but her voice was hysterical and her manner agitated. Vainly she strove to keep her self-control, but, unable to do so and broke into a fit of uncontrollable weeping.

"Oh, I say, Corson," said tender-hearted Bates, "you oughtn't to bully her! That's nothing short of third degree!"

"Well, I'll put it through, if I can get the truth that way. Now, Miss Baxter, if you'll tell us, in your own self-defense where you were that night, you may go. If not, I think we'll have to ask you to go away with us to—"

"Don't take me away!" moaned Julie, "and don't ask me about last night! I didn't kill him—truly, I didn't!"

"But you know something about it,—you must be detained as a material witness—"

"Wait till I talk to somebody—ask somebody's advice—"

"She means Bob Moore," Daisy informed them; "they're engaged, and Julie'll say just what Bob tells her to."

"Oho! You're engaged to Moore, eh?" and Gibbs gazed at her with fresh interest.

And then, stepping from the door of the elevator, came Dorcas Everett, and Richard Bates lost all desire to hear further evidence from the questioned girls.

With a brief but determined apology, he left the alcove, where they had been talking, and hurried to Dorcas' side.

"Have you heard?" he said, as he fell into step and walked with her toward the door.

"Yes; I can't talk here,—I can't breathe! Can we go for a walk?"

"Of course, why not?"

"I thought you were busy with those—people."

"Perhaps they think so, too, but I don't care! Come on; hasten your steps just a little and don't look back."

Apparently carelessly, but really with a feeling of stealth, the pair made their way to the street, Bates feeling guiltily conscious of the detectives' disapproval, and Dorcas afraid of her action being reported to her mother.

"I've been waiting so to see you," she exclaimed, as soon as they were at a safe distance from The Campanile. "Do tell me all about it! My mother has gone to call on your aunt,—and I thought I'd come down and see if I could run across you. Mother'll be there some time, I've no doubt, and I took a chance."

"Bless you! But, tell me, how did your mother hear? What do you know? I mean, what's the general report?"

"Nothing definite, but all sorts of rumors,—which mother tried to keep from me. But she and Kate were talking, and I found out that the chambermaid told them that women had killed Sir Herbert. Mother told me he had died suddenly, but she didn't know I overheard about the murder."

"Yes; it's true. He was murdered and he left a dying statement that women did it. It's a horrible affair, and I wish you needn't know the details. Can't you go away or something till it is all past history?"

"Oh, I don't want to. I'm no child to be put to bed like that! But Mother has been urging me to go away,—and yesterday she said she's going to move anyway. If she should send me to Auntie Fayre's—but she won't—"

"If she should, what?" cried Richard, eagerly; "Do you mean that in that case, we might meet now and then?"

"Yes, that's what I meant,—but, we couldn't if this matter is public property, and I suppose it is, or will be?"

"Yes, of course; but it can't last long. You see, dear, there's bound to be an awful disclosure of some sort. Women don't kill a man without some big reason,—at least big to them."

"But who did it? What women?"

"We don't know. The probabilities are that it was some girls he had flirted with. Oh, Dork, don't ask questions; it's a disgraceful affair, I fear. I don't know,—if a man had done it, I should think it merely the result of Uncle's wild temper. He was awful when in a rage. But the feminine element makes only unpleasant theories possible. And yet, Uncle was a gentleman and a decent

one. I believe it was the work of some women who had a fancied grievance and who were jealous or revengeful for some foolish reason. But, of course, there's no telling what evidence will turn up. And I must be prepared for embarrassing disclosures."

"You're the heir, aren't you, Rick?"

"So far as I know. Uncle made me that, but he may have changed his mind. His lawyers have his will, and I've made no inquiries as yet. You see, Dork, there's so much to see to. Why, I've got to take care of Aunt Letty and Eliza,—I mean, shield them from publicity and reporters and all that. I've no business to sneak off here with you, but I couldn't help it!"

"But tell me this; what women are suspected? What ones are possible suspects?"

"Some chorus girls and the house girls, so far."

"House girls? You mean the elevator girls—"

"Yes, and telephone operators and perhaps chambermaids,—oh, Dorrie, Uncle Bin was the sort of a man who is jolly with any woman. I'm willing to bet there was never a really wrong idea in his head, but he was so carelessly gay and chummy with them all, that a vicious or wicked woman could play the devil with him!"

"Poor Sir Herbert,—I rather liked him."

"He liked you,—he said so. And he was in favor of our marriage, which is more than we can say for any of our nearer relatives."

"Yes, indeed! Mother gets more and more wrathy about Miss Letty every day of her life,—and I expect this matter will just about finish her!"

"I suppose so. Now, we must get back, for my reasons and your own good. When can I see you again?"

"Oh, I don't know. It all depends on the outcome of the present meeting of the two. If your aunt seems to want sympathy or help I daresay Mother would feel kindly toward her in this trouble. But if Miss Letty is uppish and reserved,—as I fear she will be,—then Mother will go for her! I'm only imagining all this; I've no idea what will really happen."

Poor little Dorcas, it was well for her present peace of mind that she hadn't!

The two walked slowly back to The Campanile, almost forgetting the tragedy that had come so close to them, in the contentment of being together.

Corson met them at the door.

"Been looking for you," he said to Bates. "And, Miss Everett, your mother is inquiring where you are. She left word for you to go to her the moment you appeared."

"Yes," Dorcas returned, and then, shyly, "Please don't say I was with Mr Bates, will you?"

Corson looked at her, with interest. Pretty Dorcas, her shy, brown eyes falling at the idea of asking for secrecy, but her judgment, already trained in diplomacy, telling her it was necessary.

"I won't," and Corson smiled at her, "if, you'll answer a question or two. Where were you last night at two o'clock?"

"In bed and asleep," said the girl simply.

"Thank goodness you don't refuse to tell! And at what time did you retire?"

"About eleven."

"And where had you spent the evening?"

"Oh, I say, Corson," and Bates interrupted, "that's in the class with your grilling of me. You know Miss Everett isn't implicated, you know you're asking her that because you've got the habit. Run along, Dorcas, you don't have to be quizzed any more."

Dorcas turned quickly, and just managed to catch an up-bound elevator as its door was about to close.

"Now, you let her alone, Corson," said Bates, sharply. "I don't mind telling you she's the girl I intend to marry, but we're not really engaged. That is, it isn't announced. And I ask you, as man to man, to say nothing of it, to say nothing to her, and to keep her out of it all you can. Lord knows, you've no reason to think of her in connection with the horrible affair!"

"No; except as she's interested in you, and you're the heir."

"Forget it. Who told you I was the heir?"

"Everybody knows it,—it's in all the papers."

"I haven't looked at a paper! Lord, I don't think I can!"

"Better not; they're not pretty reading."

"What do you mean? Any aspersions against my uncle's character?"

"No, not that. But when the word women occurs in connection with the murder of a rich and influential man, there's bound to be surmise,—at least."

"Oh, I suppose so. Well, do you want me down here? I'd like to go up to see my aunt."

"Wait a minute. Have you ever thought, Mr Bates, that the feud between your aunt and Mrs Everett is a mighty queer affair?"

"I've often thought that, but,—pardon me,—don't get outside your own proper boundaries!"

"Oh, I'm not. Now, a queer thing, like that feud, has to be taken into consideration."

"Not in connection with the murder of my Uncle Binney."

"Maybe not in direct connection, but as a side light. You know the feud has a decided bearing on your affair with Miss Everett."

"I object to your use of the word 'affair.' My friendship with Miss Everett is in spite of, even in defiance of, the feud between her mother and my aunt. I make no secret of it to you, but as I advise you, the matter is confidential. I'm treating you as a fellow-man, Corson, and I don't want you to abuse my confidence in your fellowship, or your—manliness."

Corson fidgeted a little and returned, "I've got to do my duty, Mr Bates, and part of my duty seems to me to be to tell you that I'm not allowed to observe confidences if they affect my orders."

"They don't! How can your investigations of this murder case be affected by my friendship for Miss Everett?"

"They can,—in a way. You see, I know a lot about this feud business. I know how inimical, how full of vicious hatred those two women are, and have been for years. And I know how your recent special interest in Miss Everett has roused the renewed anger of not only your aunt, but her mother—"

"Phew! You do know it all, don't you?"

"I do. Therefore, I felt I must inform you of the extent of my knowledge, so you and I can understand each other. Now, drop the subject for the moment, for I've other matters to speak of. Where do you suppose the weapon is?"

"I've not the slightest idea! How could I have?"

"Do you know what the weapon was?"

"Only what the doctor said, a very sharp knife of some sort."

"Yes; now did you know that the doctor has also said that the stroke delivered by that same sharp knife was so well planted, so skillfully driven home, that it implies the work of some one with a knowledge of anatomy?"

"A doctor?"

"Not necessarily,—unless a woman doctor. But, what other idea suggests itself?"

"Oh, I don't know. Don't ask me riddles."

"A nurse, then. Can't you see the reasonableness of suspecting a trained nurse, after Dr Pagett's opinions?"

"All right; where's your trained nurse in Sir Herbert's bright galaxy of beauty?"

"That's a point to be looked up. But, I may tell you that Julie Baxter studied nursing before she took up telephone work."

"H'm. Might be coincidence."

"Of course it *might*. But we have to investigate coincidences. You don't know of any nurse or ex-nurse in your uncle's circle of friends?"

"Friends seems to me an inappropriate word."

"Look here, Mr Bates, you let my choice of words alone, and answer my questions."

"All right, I will. I don't know of any nurse at all and I shouldn't tell you if I did!"

"Not a very wise remark on your part, Mr Bates," and Corson looked at him meaningly.

"I don't care whether it's wise or not. You make me disgusted with detective work! Why do you go around sneaking up on any woman you can hear of? Why don't you go about it from the other side? Find a motive for the murder and then find the criminal who had the motive! Don't suspect this one because she studied nursing and that one because the old gentleman kissed her! It isn't a unique case, my uncle's fancy for chorus girls,—but it by no means indicates the result of murder! Get the weapon, then find its owner. Get a clue,—a real, material clue, and then trace the criminal. Get some evidence,—actual, spoken or circumstantial,—and deduce your facts from it. For heaven's sake, do some real detective work, and not just dance around questioning any kiddy-girl you happen to see!"

"Your words are not without reason," and Corson gave Bates a peculiar smile. "Indeed, I had some idea of doing just what you suggest. But one of the first things to do in the hunt for evidence

is to find out where your uncle was last night between twelve and two. You see, the people at the Magnifique say he sent the girls home by themselves and then soon after went off himself in the neighborhood of midnight. Next he's heard of at two A. M. dying on the floor of the onyx lobby! Where was he in the meantime?"

"That's truly a most important question to be answered," said Richard, very seriously. "On that depends far more than on the frightened admissions or denials of a lot of excited young women."

"I quite agree with you," said the detective.

CHAPTER IX
The Library Set

BUT it proved no easy matter to trace the whereabouts of Sir Herbert Binney between the hours of twelve and two on the night he met his tragic death.

The detectives were aware that he said a pleasant good-night to the chorus girls he had entertained at supper, and had left the Magnifique, alone, about midnight, but then all trace was lost. Naturally enough, for peaceable citizens are not noticed if they follow a beaten or usual path.

Nor could it be discovered whether he came into the onyx lobby alone, or accompanied by the person or persons responsible for his death. The absence of the weapon precluded all thought of suicide, therefore, he had been murdered and the murderer was still at large.

There was no witness to his dying moments but the night porter, Bob Moore. His testimony was not doubted, for, so far, no reason was apparent for his having any ill will toward the victim of the tragedy.

The two police detectives on the case worked well together. Corson was the more clever minded of the two, and Gibbs more energetic and active. But they felt decidedly baffled at the stone wall they found themselves up against.

Sir Herbert had left the Hotel Magnifique, walking. Where had he gone or whom had he met? A highwayman or thug was

improbable, for such a person would not follow a victim into his own home before attacking him. This added plausibility to the written statement incriminating women.

Angry or vindictive women might accompany him to the lobby of his own hotel, pleading or threatening in their own interests and then, in their final despair at gaining their point, stab him and run away.

Which, the detectives concluded, was just what had happened, and the thing now, was to find the women.

In default of any other way to look, they were still investigating the women employed in The Campanile.

But they had narrowed their search down to a few of those. Principally of interest was Julie Baxter, the telephone girl,—but more for the reason of her relations with Moore, than because of her own admissions.

A persistent quizzing of Moore had proved to the detectives' satisfaction that he did not know where Julie was the night of the murder, and that he was himself anxiously worried at her refusal to tell.

For the girl would not tell even her *fiancé* where she had been. She persisted in her story that she had been up to no harm but she was determined to keep her secret. This, in connection with her strong will and blunt manner, convinced the detectives that, though she need not have been criminally implicated, she, at least, knew definite and indicative facts about the murder.

Moore said he was in a quandary. Full of detective interest, he longed to work on the case, and felt sure he could be of use to

the police, but the attitude of Julie deterred him.

"You see, she's my girl," he said frankly to Corson. "And she does act queer! I don't understand her, but I can't dig into this thing and maybe run up against something she doesn't want me to!"

"You have faith in her own innocence, then?"

"Oh, yes,—that is, she wouldn't kill a man! And yet,—who can say that? In a fit of anger a woman would do anything,—more especially, if she wasn't alone."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean a woman, working alone, would hardly dare to kill a man,—but, accompanied, maybe egged on by another woman, she'd be daredevil enough to—"

"Who would? Julie Baxter?" Corson flung the question at him.

"Yes," Moore declared, "Julie or any woman of her fierce, intense nature. I know Julie well, and I love her, and I'm going to see her through,—but it's quite in the picture that she knows something about this thing."

"You're pretty frank for a man engaged to—"

"That's just it! I'm going to save her from herself! Julie is stubborn,—she's positively pig-headed, if she takes a notion. Now, if she's keeping something back,—and she is,—it's to shield some friend, or,—or to shield herself; but not from conviction of crime,—rather from some circumstances that might falsely incriminate her—or some one else."

"But if she knows who did this thing—"

"Oh, she doesn't. At most, she only suspects. But I'll find out. She's my girl, and I'm going to discover the truth about her,—and then about the murder."

"Oho, you're going to be a detective!"

"Not so's you'd notice it. But I'm going to do a little sleuthing on the side and if I find out anything that will help justice along, I promise to tell you,—let the chips fall where they may."

"I haven't any too much faith in Moore's protestations," Corson confided to Gibbs. "He's crazy to be a detective, but he's afraid he'll catch his own girl in his net. That's the truth in a nutshell. I do think, though, he'd be good help to us, for he knows all about this house and its occupants, and I can't help thinking the murderers belong here."

"I don't think so," returned Gibbs. "I'm sure they are rank outsiders. They were with him during those missing two hours and they followed him home, hoping to get what they were after,—black-mail, most likely, and then at the last minute opportunity presented itself and they killed him."

"Must have been prepared for it, as they had a weapon, used it deftly, and carried it off."

"They did that, and there's an important clew. None of those little chorus babes could have stabbed with that deft touch, which the doctor vows shows skilled medical or surgical knowledge."

"Maybe, and maybe it was a chance blow. Well, I'm going off on a new tack. I'm going up to see the dead man's people and get, if I can, some new angle on the case."

Corson went up to the Prall apartment and found the members of that household in a high state of excitement.

Miss Letitia Prall paused in what was evidently an angry harangue and somewhat grudgingly accorded a greeting to the caller.

"Must you have an interview just now, Mr Corson?" she asked, acidly. "I'm sure you know all we can tell you."

"I'm not sure of that, Miss Prall. There are, I think, some points yet to be cleared up."

"The whole case is yet to be cleared up. I can't see that you detectives have solved any part of the puzzle."

"I doubt it can be solved in parts. I think we must ferret about here and there and at last we will strike the truth all at once."

"Well, can't you go and strike it somewhere else?" spoke up the pert voice of Eliza Gurney. "We have much to attend to, with funeral arrangements and business matters."

"As to business matters, you are sole heir, I understand, Mr Bates?"

"Yes, I am so informed by the lawyer who has my uncle's will in his keeping," answered Richard, with an air of cold politeness.

"And you will take up the Bun business?"

"He will not," Miss Prall replied for him. "He will devote himself to his great work of inventing—Mr Bates is a genius and now he will have the means and the opportunity to carry on his life work."

"Just so. And you will be getting married?"

"Of course he will," Miss Prall still gave the responses; "not at present, of course, but as soon as he finds the right young lady —"

"He won't have to look far afield for that!"

"Leave me out of the conversation," Richard growled. "These private affairs of mine in no way affect your detective work."

"But, you must pardon me if I seem intrusive, I am assuming that we are at one in this matter of investigation?" Corson spoke sharply.

"Of course," agreed Bates.

"Then I must ask if you are engaged to Miss Everett."

"He is not!" Miss Prall almost shrieked the words. "He is not and never will be. The death of his uncle, deplorable as are the circumstances, leaves Mr Bates free to pursue his occupation with all his time and attention. He will not think of other matters for a year at least, and then the lady in the case will *not* be Miss Everett!"

The Grenadier sat stiffly upright, and her black beady eyes, darted from her nephew's face to that of the detective as if challenging contradiction from either of them.

Bates replied only by a shrug of his shoulders, but Corson said, "I assume then, Miss Prall, that outside the natural shock of the tragedy you feel a certain relief that your nephew is now the heir to great wealth and can pursue his career? But I understand his uncle wished him to associate himself with the Bun business."

"Quite so," Letitia snapped. "The late Sir Herbert was deeply interested in my nephew, but he did not understand or appreciate his achievements and possibilities in his own chosen line. Wherefore, I am rejoiced that now my nephew can proceed unhindered."

"But, I believe the late Sir Herbert favored the match between Mr Bates and Miss Everett?"

"Drop that!" Richard blazed forth. "Leave that lady's name out of this conversation!"

"Yes, indeed!" Letitia cried; "I forbid the mention of the name of Everett in my presence!"

"Yet it may be necessary," Corson went on, calmly. "You know, Miss Prall, the ends of justice may call for the mention of a name—"

"What in the world can the mention of that name have to do with justice?" Eliza broke in. "You don't connect the Everetts with the murder, do you?"

"I don't connect any one with the murder, as yet," Corson replied, "but it is my great desire to find some connection, and so I have to make inquiries."

"If that's your motive, I still must request that you omit the name of Everett from your conversation," said Bates. "Look here, Corson, are you getting anywhere, or aren't you?"

"I am," was the quiet reply; "now, Miss Prall, you'll be obliged to answer a few questions, whether you like it or not."

Corson's tone, though courteous, was severe, and the Grenadier, while not frightened, gave him a look of curiosity

and intense interest.

"Go on," she said, briefly.

"This feud between yourself and Mrs Everett is a matter of long standing, I believe. You can't, therefore, object to my reference to it. What was its cause?"

"Oh, it's so old now, that its cause is sunk in oblivion." Letitia smiled sourly. "But it has been added to by other causes as time went on, and thus new fuel has kept the fire burning."

"Keep the home fires burning," said Richard, with a mocking smile at his aunt, who heeded it not.

"And so," she went on, "the feud, as it has come to be called, is as strong and well-nourished as ever."

"Yet you two ladies elect to live under the same roof."

"To nurse the feud along," Bates asserted, and the Grenadier nodded assent.

"However," she added, "Mrs Everett is about to move away."

"What!" cried Richard.

"Yes," repeated his aunt, evidently pleased with the fact, "she is going soon."

"Thus," offered Corson, "you will be relieved of two undesirable people at once."

"Meaning Mrs Everett and her daughter?" queried Eliza.

"Not at all. Meaning Mrs Everett and Sir Herbert Binney."

"Oh!" gasped Miss Prall. "Don't put it that way!"

"Why not? Since it's the truth. You now can have the pleasure of seeing your nephew pursue—"

"Don't talk about me as if I weren't here!" exclaimed Richard. "Or as if I were a minor or an incompetent! I'm devoted to my aunt; I love, honor and obey her, but I'm a man with a mind of my own. And when it runs counter to the desires or plans of my aunt—well, we must fight it out between ourselves. However, Mr Corson, I can't see that the affairs of my aunt and myself, or the affairs of my aunt and her fellow-feudist, Mrs Everett, have any connection with or bearing on the murder of Sir Herbert Binney. If they seem to you to have such a bearing, I think it is right that you should tell us all about it."

"I take it, then, that we are working in unison,—at least, in concord?"

"You may certainly assume that as far as I am concerned," said Bates, but the two women present seemed by their silence to reserve judgment.

"First, Miss Prall, I'd like to hear from you what plans Sir Herbert had, so far as you know, regarding the sale of his great bakery business."

"I know a great deal about that, Mr Corson, as Sir Herbert not only discussed the matter with me, but did me the honor to ask my advice, considering that my judgment was of value."

"No doubt. And you advised him?"

"I advised him to sell out to Crippen,—of *Crippen's Cakes*. You know of the firm?"

"Yes, indeed; who doesn't? It's the largest of its sort in the country."

"Unless one excepts the Vail Bakery. But that's bread."

"And aren't buns bread?"

"That was part of the controversy. However, Sir Herbert and Mr Vail had their bout before the matter was taken up by the Crippen people. Mr Vail didn't see his way clear to combine his bread with Sir Herbert's buns. But Mr Crippen thought the buns would go well with his cake business, and they were on the point of coming to an agreement in the matter. Indeed, Sir Herbert told me he expected to see Mr Crippen last evening—"

"He didn't. I've interviewed Mr Crippen and he told me so."

"Might they not have met after the Magnifique supper?"

"What!" Corson looked at Miss Prall in surprise. "You mean—"

"Oh, nothing,—nothing connected with the—the tragedy, of course. But perhaps the interview did occur, and for some reason Mr Crippen doesn't want it known—can't you see, Mr Corson, that it's a queer thing that nobody comes forward to tell where Sir Herbert was those last two hours of his life? Well, mightn't he have been with Mr Crippen,—remember, he told me he expected to see him,—and whatever their conference resulted in, might not Mr Crippen have wished it kept quiet—"

"And so, denied it? Why, it might be so, Miss Prall,—but in such a serious case Mr Crippen would hesitate before he would be anything but sincere in his story. It's a risky matter to falsify when a murder case is being investigated!"

"I know it," and Miss Prall smoothed the folds of her gown placidly. "But, you see, I know Mr Crippen."

"Oh, come now, Auntie," broke in Richard, "just because Crip was an old beau of yours, don't say things against him."

"I'm not saying anything against him, Ricky, I only say I know him. If that's a damaging admission, it's his fault, not mine."

The Grenadier set her lips in a straight line, and looked sternly at Corson. "You can draw any deductions you wish, Mr Corson," she went on, acidly, but positively; "I tell you that I know Mr Crippen very well, and I wouldn't believe a word he says, unless I had the corroboration of another."

"Be careful, Letitia," warned Miss Gurney.

"You shut up, Eliza! I'll say what I choose."

"Do, Miss Prall," urged Corson. "You're decidedly interesting. May I be forgiven if I look about a little. What unusual curios and treasures you possess."

"I do; but this is no time to examine or comment on those. If you have questioned me all you wish,—though, for my part, I don't think you've questioned me at all,—suppose we consider this interview at an end."

"Why, Aunt Letitia, have you no wish to find out who killed Uncle Herbert?" asked Richard.

"I can't say that I have. He's dead; no punishment of his murderer can bring him back. He was no relative of mine, nor was he such a friend that I'm thirsting to avenge his life. For my part, I only want to have the matter hushed up. The unavoidable publicity and notoriety are most distressing!"

"I haven't questioned you much, I admit, Miss Prall," observed the detective, "but I have found out a great deal since I have been here."

"Yes?" she returned, coolly, with a haughty nod.

"Yes; are you interested to know what I have learned?"

"I am not. It is all beneath my notice. I assume you will use your information in any way you see fit—but the way, nor the result, interests me not at all."

"Don't talk like that, Letitia," and Eliza looked deeply concerned. "Mr Corson will think you a hard-hearted woman."

"He has my permission to do so."

"Oh, stop, Auntie!" Bates cried, earnestly. "You get yourself misunderstood by such talk. You're not hard-hearted,—except regarding your foolish feud. In all other ways you're normally kind and generous minded."

"Thank you, Rick, but I don't care for compliments."

Corson was fingering some library appointments on the large table near which he sat.

"These brass sets are convenient things," he remarked, referring to an elaborate array of fittings spread out on the large green blotting pad. "These long clipping shears are most useful, and the pen-holder, letter opener and ink eraser, all to match, are of admirable workmanship."

"Yes," said Miss Prall, carelessly, "I had the set made to order. It is, I think, unique."

"Why are you interested in them?" Miss Gurney said, abruptly.

"Oh," Corson returned, easily, "I love desk fittings. They always have a peculiar fascination for me. I have several sets myself, but none so fine or costly as these."

"Why don't you stick to your subject, Corson?" said Bates, a little impatiently. "Are you and Gibbs going to make a success of

this case or not? And I wish you'd let me know all you've done. You have a frank air about your disclosures, but I can't help thinking you're sounding us."

"Sounding you?" and Corson looked mystified.

"Yes; as if you suspected us of knowing more than we've told. I assure you *I* don't."

"No, I never dreamed that you did. You've been most outspoken, Mr Bates, and, while I can't plume myself much as yet on my findings or those of Mr Gibbs, you must remember that the matter is not many days old, and it is not what is called an 'open and shut' case."

"No; and yet, it ought to be. For a man who does not belong to this country to come over here and be killed, seems to imply not such a very large number of possible suspects."

"As to that," and Corson sighed, "I don't know of even one possible suspect. I wish I did,—it might lead to others. But we have the assurance that the deed was done by women; that simplifies the search."

"Yes and no, to that," spoke up Miss Prall. "Sir Herbert, of course, wrote that in good faith, but may he not have meant by the influence of women, or at the orders or desire of women,—and not, necessarily, that women committed the actual deed?"

"Granting all that," returned Corson, "it is the women we want. If they hired gunmen,—as they may be called,—we must find out the identity of the women all the same. And if they actually committed the deed—"

The ringing of the telephone interrupted his speech and proved to be a message for the detective to come downstairs at once.

Corson went and on reaching the ground floor he was met by Gibbs, who took him to a small reception room and closed the door.

"Here you are," Gibbs said, and handed the other a paper-wrapped parcel which when opened proved to contain a long sharp paper-cutter. The blade, apparently hastily wiped, still showed traces of what was unmistakably blood.

"Where'd it come from?" Corson said, staring at the thing.

"A boy connected with the service department found it stuck between the palings of a fence near the delivery entrance. It may have been placed there by the murderer of Sir Herbert Binney."

"Where is this entrance? Why wasn't this found sooner?"

"The place is around the corner,—a sort of obscure entrance on the side street, used only by the tradesmen, for delivery. A cleaner found this just a short time ago."

"Well," said Corson, very gravely, "this is the paper-cutter belonging to a set of writing implements on Miss Prall's library table; and I have just come from there, and I noticed that, though the sheath of this was up there, the paper-cutter was missing!"

CHAPTER X
Seek the Women

Late that night,—in fact it was about midnight, when the onyx lobby was practically deserted save for an occasional late home-comer,—the two detectives arrived for a confab with Bob Moore.

This greatly pleased the night porter for he hoped to be looked upon as a sort of assistant detective, and felt sure he could be of valuable help.

"You know, Moore," Gibbs began, "there are people who are looking askance at you, with a sort of half-formed suspicion that you know more about this thing than you have told. But I don't think that,—at least, I think you are willing to tell all you know, if you haven't already done so. How about it?"

"Why, it's this way, Mr Gibbs. I am ready to tell all I know, and I think I have done so, but you can't expect me to tell what I suspect or surmise or imagine. Can you, now? It might lose my place for me. Also, I might injure an innocent person."

"I think," spoke up Corson, "you ought to tell us anything you suspect; it need go no further and if your suspicions are mistaken ones, they can't harm the innocent."

"Well, then, I've got my eye on two of the chambermaids. They are great chums, and one is on the seventh and eighth floors, the other on the ninth and tenth. But floors don't matter; they chum around with each other. Well, these two are the most

canny old hens you ever knew. They're no chickens, and they have an eye out for the main chance all the time. I mean they toady to the people who are rich or generous and they scamp their work in places where they're not 'remembered.' Also they're specially attentive to the work of gentlemen who live alone. Why, Sir Herbert's rooms were kept as neat as a bandbox. And Mr Goodwin and Mr Vail,—they're both up on the tenth,—their rooms are immaculate. And yet, there's the Prall place neglected, 'cause Miss Prall don't believe much in fees, and as for the Everetts, why, *she* says she can't get anything tended to!"

"Doesn't she 'remember' the housemaid, either?"

"Some; but in her case, it's more her sharp tongue and her fussy ways. Miss Prall, now, she's on the outs with Mrs Everett,—I know that,—but she's decent-spoken to the maids. Only, she's stingy. Well, what I'm getting at is, those two chambermaids are regular devils, if you ask me, and though Sir Herbert Binney was generous enough when he liked the work people, he didn't like his chambermaid, and he was as ugly as Cain to her. Used to call her down for the least thing and laid her out cold if she sauced him back."

"Then you think the 'women' might have referred to these two maids?"

"That's just it. I only think it may have done so. I've no evidence except that they are more the type of women it seems possible to suspect. These little girls,—it don't seem's if they could manage the deed. But Jane and Maggie could have worked it if they'd wanted to. They're big, husky women and

they've dogged, sullen tempers. And, of course, what made me think most about it, was your finding that paper-knife of Miss Prall's. Now, if Miss Prall had killed Binney,—which is ridiculous on the face of it!—she'd been too cute to leave the knife around, but those ignorant chambermaids—"

"I don't agree," Corson interrupted. "The woman,—which one is the Prall's chambermaid?"

"Maggie."

"Well, Maggie then,—she couldn't have taken the knife from Miss Prall's table without its being missed, and Miss Letitia is not the one to lose her property without a word! No, sir, that paper-knife points straight to Letitia Prall. Moreover, she had motive; she wanted the old gentleman out of the way for two reasons. First, so Pet Nephew could inherit the old man's money, and, second, because the uncle was in favor of the marriage of young Bates with Miss Everett, the daughter of Miss Prall's deadly enemy!"

"Where'd you get all that dope, Corson?" Gibbs said in astonishment.

"Partly by quizzing round and partly by putting two and two together. Anyway, it's all true, the motives, I mean. Now, confidentially, just among us three here, could she have done it? I mean, was it physically possible?"

"Anything is possible for Miss Prall," said Moore, quite seriously. "She is a Tartar, that lady is. And whatever she sets out to do, she does,—irrespective of whether it can be done or not!"

"I mean this. Could she have come downstairs from the eighth floor without being seen—"

"Of course she must have been seen," broke in Moore. "Whether she came down in the elevator or walked down the stairs she must have been seen. She could have come down the servants' stairs, but that would have been even more conspicuous."

"At two in the morning?"

"No; there'd probably be no servants around then."

"So she could have done that, and waited, say, outside,—"

"Oh, nonsense! Waited out in the street at that hour?" Gibbs demurred; "that's too much to swallow!"

"But she may have known just about the hour Sir Binney expected to return. Anyway, suppose she did do that, and then, having succeeded, she slipped back to the servants' entrance and hid the knife where it was found and then scuttled back upstairs the way she came."

"But the paper said, 'women,'" mused Moore.

"That companion person was with her," declared Corson, triumphantly. "Those two are great in team-work. Miss Gurney doubtless acted as scout and kept a lookout and Miss Prall did the deed."

"Oh, Mr Corson, I can't think it!" exclaimed Moore.

"Because you know Miss Prall only as a tenant of this house. You know nothing of what she may be capable of when her spirit is fired. And as far as I'm concerned, it's far easier to believe that she did it, than that it was the work of some foolish

little girls scarcely out of their teens! Miss Prall is not only a strong-minded woman, and a strong-muscled woman, but she has a strong personality with practically illimitable powers of loving and hating. For her the sun rises and sets in young Bates, and in the other direction she is all wrapped up in her hatred of Mrs Everett.

"What's Mrs Everett got to do with the murder?" growled Moore.

"Nothing, that I know of, but she works in this way. Her daughter is in love with Richard Bates, and neither of the women will stand for the marriage of the two young people. Why, I think Mrs Everett and Miss Prall would see their young charges dead rather than married to one another. Now, Sir Herbert Binney favored the match. Therefore Miss Prall wanted him out of the way. Again, he favored young Bates going into the Bun business instead of sticking to his inventions. Therefore, again, Miss Prall wanted Binney out of the way. So, what would a woman of her caliber and her determination do, but put him out of the way?"

"Plausible enough," and Gibbs thought deeply.

"And so, I'm asking Moore," Corson went on, "how he thinks Miss Prall could have compassed her awful plan and he's solved any uncertainty by suggesting the servants' staircase at an hour so late that it was almost certain to be unused."

"I don't say I believe she did do it," Moore began, "but I have to say she could have done it that way. She must have known just about the time he'd come home—"

"That's not difficult to assume," Corson defended his theory, "he probably told her that. And she could have waited around some time,—it was a mild night."

"But how could she be sure she'd have the chance in the lobby?" asked Gibbs, his incredulity fast dwindling.

"Oh, she wasn't sure. She took a chance. I mean, she may have waylaid him outside, don't you see, and kept him there talking until she saw Moore go up in the elevator with somebody. This place is so brightly lighted that any one outside could see that. Or they could have been inside, standing in the shadow of the big pillars for a long time,—unnoticed."

"Have you any clews?" asked Bob Moore of the detectives.

"Dropped handkerchiefs and such like?" asked Gibbs, mockingly. "No; and if there were footprints, they're washed away now. But those things are only for story-books,—such as you're eternally reading, Moore."

"I do read a lot of 'em, and it's astonishing, but most always a criminal leaves some trace."

"In the stories,—yes. In real life, they're not so obliging. But let's look at the spot. We might get an idea,—if nothing more tangible."

The three went along the lobby till they reached the place where Sir Herbert had breathed his last. Marks had been drawn to indicate the blood spots that were so quickly washed off, and these still showed clearly. The body had been found crumpled on the floor, in the angle made by the great square base of an onyx pillar and the wall.

They saw, of course, no traces of any personality, but as they looked each began to reconstruct the scene mentally.

"I think they were concealed here for some time," Corson said. "If they stood here talking, the pillar would partly shield them from view of others entering. Nor could they be easily seen by Moore, in the back of the lobby."

"Maybe," Moore agreed hesitantly, "but if Miss Prall and Sir Herbert had come in together I bet I'd seen 'em."

"Not if you were up in the elevator," said Corson.

"No; of course not. That might have been the case."

"And then, when you took Mr Vail up, was no doubt the moment she chose to stab him and immediately pulled out the knife and ran away."

"We know," said Moore, positively, "that whoever did it, did it while I took Mr Vail up, and that the murderer then pulled out the knife and ran away. But that's not saying it was Miss Prall. And I've got to have some sort of evidence before I'll believe it was. Her desire to be rid of Sir Herbert isn't enough, to my mind, to indicate that she killed him. Can you tie it onto her any more definitely?"

"Her ownership of the knife, and her making no effort to find it, though missing, are evidence enough for me," said Corson doggedly. "And, how'd those little chorus chickens get it, if they're the ones?"

"I don't think they're the ones," Moore declared; "but I do think it was those two chambermaids. They could get the knife from the Prall apartment easy enough, and maybe Miss Prall did

question Maggie about the missing knife and maybe Maggie gave a plausible explanation for its disappearance."

"Maybe and maybe and maybe not!" observed Gibbs, cryptically. "This sort of talk gets us no-where—"

"Yes it does," Corson interrupted. "It's shown us how Miss Prall could have done it. And when you remember that Sir Herbert declared with his dying heartbeats that women did it, and when we have no other women with half as much motive,—those little girls' jealousies are puerile by comparison,—I think we are bound to conclude we're on the right track."

"If so, let's forge ahead," and Gibbs nodded energetically. "What's the next move?"

"Don't move too fast," advised his colleague. "And, too, we want to interview those chambermaids. Though I think Miss Prall is at the back of the thing, she may have been aided by those women. They might have been paid—"

"Now, look here," put in Moore. "I know Miss Prall better than you two do. And I know if she undertook a thing of this desperate nature, she never called in any outside help. She'd be afraid to trust those women. And that companion of hers is all the help she'd want. No, sir, if the women Sir Binney recognized were Miss Prall and Miss Gurney, that's all there was of them. Likewise, if it was those two chambermaids, that's all there was of *them*. But they never combined forces; no, sir, they didn't!"

"I believe that." Gibbs nodded his head. "Now, let's take a look at this paper again."

The paper left by the dying man had been carefully placed between two small panes of glass, in order to keep it intact and undefaced.

As Gibbs studied the passe-partout, he said, thoughtfully, "We must make up our minds what he meant in this second line. It's unintelligible, but what *could* he have meant? 'Get bo—'"

"I think it means get both," said Corson, positively; "but it mayn't be that at all. As it was the very last effort of his spent muscles, it is far from likely that he wrote just what he meant to write. He might have intended that second letter for a or o or g or, in fact, almost any letter! He lost control of his fingers and the pencil fell away from them."

"All right; I grant you all that," Gibbs agreed. "But we've got to start somewhere. Now we know women killed him; he states that. Next, if this word is both, we know there were two women and two only."

"Marvelous, Holmes, marvelous!" guyed Corson. "And Miss Prall and Miss Gurney count up just two! Correct, so far."

"Don't be funny. The chambermaids in question number two also. And there were most likely only two, for women don't go round murdering in squads. But the point is, he says, get both,—if the word is both. That would seem to imply that one is more probable as a suspect than the other, but he adjures us to get the other one also."

"There's something to that, Mr Gibbs," and Bob Moore looked at the detective admiringly. "Now, if it was a case of Miss Prall and Miss Gurney, they're so much together, that such a message

would be practically unnecessary. So it may point to the chambermaids. You see, Maggie is on his floor, but he may have meant that Jane, too, was implicated."

"Oh, rubbish!" cried Moore. "A dying man isn't going to use his last gasp to tell the police to get a certain chambermaid! That word isn't 'both' at all. It's something far more significant. I think it's a name. I think it's a name that begins with Ba or Bo. Now, I'm as well aware as you two men are, that my own name begins with Bo and my girl's last name with Ba. But I'm not afraid, for I didn't do it. I was upstairs at the time, and anyway I'd no grudge against the old fellow. Nor did Julie do it. And he never would have called her Baxter, if she had! So, I say that I think it represents some name, and all possible names ought to be investigated."

"The trouble is it might represent so many names," Gibbs said. "I think myself that he might have meant to make a capital letter and only achieved a small one, but never mind that. Ba could be Babe Russell,—but I can't seem to think he'd take that method of accusation. If it had been a man who killed him he would be more likely to feel revengeful."

"Good heavens, Gibbs!" and Corson's eyes opened wide; "I guess if you'd just been fatally stabbed by your lady friends, and had enough spunk to tell that women killed you, you wouldn't hesitate at bringing a name into the limelight! I've had a hunch it was that Baby Doll all along,—but it looked like an impossibility."

"So you see," offered Bob Moore, "you can't deduce much from that second line. And we may be 'way off. It might have been meant for, 'Get busy' or 'Get Bob Moore to find the criminal,' or lots of things."

"This is no time for fooling, Moore," said Corson, gravely, "but you're right that it's wasting time to puzzle over that phase of the message. We're lucky in having the clear direction as to the sex of the criminal,—"

"Unless it's all faked," suggested Gibbs. "How about the murderer being a clever man, who had this paper all ready, and brought it with him and laid it beside his victim?"

"Not a chance," said Corson. "I've checked up that handwriting and it's his. Mr Bates says so, and I've compared it to his writing,—lots of it. That's Sir Binney's fist, all right."

Feeling they had learned all they could from Moore, and also feeling decidedly tired and sleepy, the two detectives went home and to bed.

Not at once to sleep, however, for each had lots of thinking to do and each felt that there were more ways to look than had yet appeared.

But, also, each thought the Prall suspicion justified, and each planned to keep a wary eye in that direction.

Next morning, after waiting till such an hour as he thought late enough, Gibbs went to see Miss Prall.

He found a visitor already there, and he was presented to Mrs Everett.

To his surprise, Miss Prall made the introduction as casually as if it had been a meeting of social acquaintances, and Gibbs felt a little awkward at being expected to join in a general conversation.

But he was alertly interested in meeting Mrs Everett, and especially in circumstances where he might hear or see some manifestations of the feud he had heard of.

"My friend, Mrs Everett, is about to move away, so you're lucky to chance upon her here," Miss Letitia said, in honey-sweet tones.

"As to your luck, I express no opinion," said the other lady, "but as to moving away, I've not the slightest intention of such a thing."

Mrs Everett was inclined to be fair, afraid of being fat and unwilling to admit being forty. She was pretty in a soft, faded way, and her voice, though low and pleasant, had a sharp tang to it, which, one felt sure, could increase at will.

"You said you would!" Miss Prall declared, "but I long ago learned to put no faith in your assertions."

"You're saying I lie?" asked Mrs Everett, and her voice was still placid.

"If the shoe fits, put it on," Letitia laughed. "Only, you can't blame me for saying that of you, when you know it's the truth."

"Dear friend," murmured Mrs Everett, "how can you think I'd go off and leave you while you're in such trouble? I feel I must stand by."

"That's quite like you! Don't lose a chance to gloat over any sorrow or grief I may have!"

"Do you call it sorrow and grief? I didn't know you thought so much of the departed nobleman—he was a nobleman, wasn't he? Tut, tut, Letitia! and at your time of life! Well, I suppose it's habit that makes you set your cap for any man you chance to meet."

"You always were the greatest for judging others by yourself, Adeline. You were the celebrated cap-setter of your day. Ever since you worried poor, dear Mr Everett into his untimely grave, you've pursued the honorable business of cap-setting, alas! to no avail."

"Don't you dare call my husband dear! I'll let you know, Letitia Prall, he was not in the habit of calling you dear!"

"Tee hee," tittered Eliza Gurney. "Don't be jealous of Letty, Mrs Everett. She's had more beaux than you ever saw, with all your yellow curls and red—a little too red cheeks!"

"Hush, Eliza," admonished Miss Prall, "our caller will think we're quarrelsome neighbors. As a matter of fact, Mr Gibbs, we're—"

"Dearest enemies?" he suggested, smiling, for he saw he was expected to recognize the situation.

"Yes," assented Letitia with a nod at Mrs Everett that seemed to convey all sorts of inimical intent, undiluted by friendliness.

Gibbs realized that these two women took such pleasure in their bickerings and faultfindings that they really enjoyed their antagonism.

And Miss Eliza Gurney was equally interested in the exchange of sarcastic repartee.

They kept on with their sparring until Gibbs began to feel not only uncomfortable but impatient.

"I called, Miss Prall," he began, but Mrs Everett interrupted:

"Oh, I know what for," she cried, clasping her fat hands, and giving an unpleasant little giggle, "to talk about the murder! Yes, yes, and please don't mind me. I want to hear the details; have you found out who did it? Who was it? Was it those sweet little dancing girlies? I can't think it!"

"Keep quiet, Adeline," said Miss Prall; "how you do run on! I should think you'd have the tact to take your leave,—but you never had even ordinary good manners. I can scarcely invite you to depart, but I do feel privileged to say you may go if you feel you must."

"Oh, I don't feel I must at all! On the contrary, I want to stay and hear the news. For I'm sure this gentleman has some news. I can see it sticking out all over him! Go ahead, sir, tell your story. I feel I'm entitled to be in the audience."

She settled herself in her chair and looked as if nothing less than a really severe earthquake would move her. Her big round eyes danced from Letitia's face to the detective's. Her smile broadened as she enjoyed the discomfiture of her enforced hostess. And she positively reveled in the awkward and embarrassed silence that fell on all in the room.

Then Eliza Gurney said, "Adeline Everett, if you take my advice, you'll go away before you're put out!"

"I've never taken your advice yet, Eliza, and I don't propose to begin now. Also, you'd better not put me out, for if you do, I shall think that what Mr Gibbs is about to reveal is something you don't want known,—something incriminating to some of your own people!"

Apparently she had heard something, Gibbs thought quickly, and he was more than ever anxious to get her away. But, not knowing how to manage such an unusual type of womankind, he said instead that he thought he should retire and make his call some other time.

CHAPTER XI
The Old Feud

AND Detective Gibbs did retire and did make his call some other time, but he made it not on Miss Prall, but on Mrs Everett.

He had fancied from her attitude that he could learn much from her if he could manage to gain her attention and enlist her sympathies.

With this end in view he went to see her later the same day, and found her not unwilling to talk with him.

"I thought I should die," she exclaimed, clasping her plump little hands and rocking back and forth in a becushioned wicker chair, "to see Letitia Prall wriggle around! Why, Mr Gibbs, it's clear to be seen she knows more than she has told or means to tell! Aren't you going to make her talk?"

"Why do you think she knows something?" countered the detective.

"Oh, I know her so well. When she purses up her thin lips and then widens them out to a straight line again, several times in succession, that's a sure sign she's terribly upset. Didn't you notice her do that? It's a peculiar habit, and I know what it means! Letitia Prall was nearly frantic for fear you'd find out something she doesn't want you to know!"

"Now, mother," interposed Dorcas, who was present, "I don't think you ought to say such things about Miss Prall,—this is a

serious matter, and talking to a detective is very different from your every-day spats and squabbles with Miss Letty."

"Hold your tongue, Dorcas; and you'd better leave the room. This is no subject for a young girl to be mixed up in. Go to Kate and let her fit your new guimpe."

"I'm just ready to try it on," and Kate, the maid, appeared in the doorway, her mouth full of pins, and her hands full of voluminous breadths of tulle.

"But I'd like to hear what this man has to say," she went on, dropping her work on a table as she took a chair for herself. "I know a thing or two about this murder," she declared, as she looked curiously at Gibbs, "and it would be to your advantage, sir, to listen to my tale."

"Oh, nonsense," put in Mrs Everett, "you don't know anything, Kate. She's a visionary creature, Mr Gibbs, and greatly given to romancing."

"Nothing of the sort," spoke up Kate, briskly, and Gibbs wondered at the strange apparent relation between mistress and servant.

But as he listened further, he gathered that Kate had been so long the stay and dependence of the Everett household, that her position was more that of a housekeeper and general manager than an underling.

It seemed that Mrs Everett depended on the woman for service, yet was chummy with her as with a companion. Kate sewed for Dorcas and kept her clothing in order, looked after Mrs Everett's social engagements and was useful in so many

ways that it was not difficult to see why she was made much of by her employer.

Then, too, it was clear that she was entirely conversant with the feud, its progress and present condition. She was deeply interested in the murder mystery and, though Gibbs rather doubted it, she might have something of importance to tell him.

So, as Dorcas obeyed her mother and left the room, the detective listened to the chatter of the two women, and from the volume of inconsequent talk he gleaned much of interest.

Especially he learned the character of Miss Prall, or, rather, the traits of her character that interested the Everett household.

Their tales may have been exaggerated, probably were, but he decided they contained internal evidence of Letitia's insincerity and untruthfulness.

He found out to his own conviction that he could not rely implicitly on the word of Miss Prall, and, this granted, her whole story might fall to the ground.

The feud was talked over and detailed to him until he was positively sick of it, but he persevered in the talk, trying to lead it toward the murder.

But the women were wary of this subject. Whether it was too grewsome for their taste or whether there was some other reason, Gibbs tried hard to find out.

"But you told me you had something to communicate," he insisted, to the canny-looking Kate.

Her sharp eyes scrutinized him.

"Oh, I don't know anything definite," she said, with a somewhat defiant glance at Mrs Everett. "And if I did, I'm not allowed to tell it."

"If you know anything at all,—definite or suggestive, you're to tell it, whether you're allowed or not!" Gibbs cried, willing to try intimidation. "Don't you know, woman, that you can be jailed if you withhold information from the police?"

Mrs Everett giggled. "You can't frighten Kate," she said; "she has no fear of anything."

"Why should I have?" and Kate looked belligerent. "I know all about the police. I'll tell anything I see fit to, and nothing more."

Calmly, she took up the mass of white tulle, and began to sew on it.

"That attitude won't do, Kate," said Gibbs, seriously. "Bluff and bravado won't get you anywhere."

"I don't want to get anywhere; I haven't set out for anywhere," and with a flippant swish of the tulle stuff, Kate rose and started to leave the room.

"Wait a minute," ordered Gibbs. "You've gone too far to back out now. You said, or implied, you had something to tell,—now, you tell it!"

"Goodness, Kate, tell it,—if you've anything to tell!" Mrs Everett spoke with a sharp glance at the woman.

"Well, I will, then. But it's no tale of happenings or that. It's only that I know Miss Prall was wishing Mr Binney out of the way. She was wishing it so hard that I myself heard her say, 'If I was sure I wouldn't get caught, I'd kill him myself!'"

"She said that?"

"Yes, sir, she did. Mrs Everett heard her, too."

"I did," admitted Mrs Everett as Gibbs looked at her inquiringly. "But don't take it too seriously. Letitia Prall and I are enemies, have been for years,—but I'm not the one to brand her with the mark of Cain! That I'm not."

"Well, I will," declared Kate. "She's quite capable of it, she has expressed her willingness, and she had strong motive. What more do you want?"

"What was her motive?" asked Gibbs in a casual tone, hoping to draw further light on these remarkable statements.

"Why,—" Kate hesitated, but Mrs Everett smiled and nodded permission, and Kate went on; "why, you see Miss Dorcas and young Mr Bates are friendly-like, and old Binney—"

"Sir Herbert," prompted Mrs Everett, pointedly.

"Well, Sir Herbert, then, he was in favor of the two marrying."

"And neither Mrs Everett nor Miss Prall approve the match?" Gibbs put in quickly.

"Of course they don't! Well, Miss Prall, she's one who would try and try to persuade Sir Herbert to change his mind—"

"And his will," suggested Gibbs.

"And his will," agreed Kate, "and then, when she couldn't persuade him,—he had the devil's own stubbornness,—"

"And so has she," observed Mrs Everett.

"That's right! Well, when she couldn't do anything with him, she up and killed him."

"Women, he wrote."

"Of course; Eliza Gurney helped. Probably Eliza did the actual deed. She'd cut off anybody's head that Letitia Prall told her to! But those are the women you're looking for, and if you want to jail me for telling you, go ahead!"

"No," Gibbs told her, "you won't be jailed for telling that,—if it's true. But, if it isn't,—you want to be careful about slander, you know."

Kate looked a little startled, but Mrs Everett laughed.

"Don't be afraid, Kate; Mr. Gibbs can't punish you for an opinion. You haven't stated any facts."

"Except that she heard Miss Prall's threat to kill Sir Herbert," Gibbs reminded her.

"It wasn't a threat at all. I heard her say it, and it was merely an outburst of anger. I doubt if she meant it—"

"Do you doubt her capable of committing such a crime?" the detective asked, so suddenly that he took his listener by surprise.

But she was not to be caught. "My theory is," she smiled, "that as Goethe says, 'We are all capable of crime, even the best of us.' I truly think that most human beings could commit crime, given sufficient motive and opportunity."

"All very fine in theory," said Gibbs, smiling, "but are you willing to assert that Miss Prall or—or yourself, would be capable of the murder of Sir Herbert Binney, if you had a perfect opportunity and if you considered your motive strong enough?"

"Oh, *I* wouldn't have done it!" and Mrs Everett looked shocked, indeed, "but,—well, maybe I do think Letitia Prall would have done it."

"Aided and abetted by Miss Gurney," the detective egged her on.

"Yes; Eliza would have been not only a help but a commander, —a tyrant, even."

"And Miss Gurney wished the old gentleman out of the way?"

"Oh, yes; as much, perhaps, as Letitia. You see, if he died just now, his fortune would be young Bates' and the boy could go on with his chosen career, without being pestered to make buns! Moreover, Sir Herbert favored Rickey's marriage—"

"To your daughter?"

"To anybody,—any nice young woman. My daughter is out of the question and not to be spoken of in this connection."

Mrs Everett drew herself up in with an effect of injured dignity and looked scornfully at Gibbs.

"But you seem to eliminate the young people themselves as factors in the romance part of it all."

"They are not factors. My daughter has sufficient confidence in my judgment to agree to my advice. She knows my attitude toward Miss Prall and she would not encourage or accept the attentions of her nephew."

"You're sure of this?"

"Of course I'm sure of it! Dorcas is a sweet, obedient child, and she would not deceive her loving and beloved mother. Also, she

knows the despicable and unworthy nature of Miss Prall, and she assumes, as I do, that Richard is of the same stamp."

"Then you don't know the young man? You only assume his character? Is that quite fair?"

"Fair enough for anybody belonging to the Prall family! They cannot expect fairness! They wouldn't even appreciate it! Letitia Prall is a mean, low type of womanhood,—a deceitful, unjust, disloyal, contemptible snake in the grass!"

"That's so," chimed in Kate; "she's proved all that over and over,—and more too! She has no notion of common decency toward her neighbors; she is a two-faced, backbiting, sneaky, tattletale!"

"But this doesn't prove young Bates—"

"Yes, it does!" the detective's argument was cut off; "she brought him up, and she taught him all her own evil principles, and her own way of thinking and talking—"

"But you scarcely know the man,—"

"That's doesn't matter! He's the nephew of Letitia Prall,—and that's enough for me! My daughter shall never speak to him,—never meet him,—and lest such a chance should occur accidentally, I am planning to move away."

"You don't think your daughter is—is interested in Mr Bates?"

"I know she is not! Dorcas is a wayward-tempered child, but she is loyal to her mother and her mother's wishes. She wouldn't dream of seeing Richard Bates against my will."

Now, as it happened at that very moment, the loyal child was apparently quite oblivious of the wishes of her beloved mother,

for she was sitting by the side of the objurgated Richard on a bench in Central Park.

When told to leave the room by her mother, she had also left the Everett apartment, and later, the house.

By some discreet telephoning she had summoned the despised young man and the two had sauntered out of The Campanile, separately, and joined company soon after.

"It's a risk," Dorcas was saying, "and if mother, catches on, she'll give me Hail Columbia, but I just had to see you! Do you know what they're saying about your uncle's murder, now?"

"No; and I don't want to hear from you. Please, dear, let's leave all that horror out of our conversation. We get so few moments together and I need every one of them to tell you how I love you."

"Then," the red lips pouted, "when am I to tell you how much I love you?"

"Oh, Dork! you do say the sweetest things! Tell me, darling, tell me, first, then I'll tell you—"

"We may as well both talk at once," Dorcas laughed. "We can say the same things,—it'll really be a duet!"

"All right, say with me,—I love you. Ready, one, two, three, go!"

"I love you!" they said in concert.

"No fun," decided Dorcas; "I want you to tell me separately."

So Richard did, to such an extent and with so much detail and reiteration that the moments flew by, and it was time to go home before the other side of the shield was painted.

"But, Ricky, dear," Dorcas said finally, "I must talk a little about this awful thing. I've heard a lot of hints and whispers,—for mother and Kate shut up as soon as I come into the room,—and I want to know this: Is your aunt, Miss Prall, suspected of killing Sir Herbert?"

"Good Lord, no! What an awful idea! Where did you dig that up?"

"I've heard a lot, I tell you. And some people do think so!"

"But it's absurd! Impossible! Also, I won't have such talk going around! You must tell me, Dork, where you heard it! Tell me all you know."

"I don't *know* anything, Rick, but I think you ought to do something definite in the way of detective work. Those men don't get anywhere?"

"Why, what do you mean? What do you know about that, Little Peachbloom?"

"I don't know anything. And you don't, either. But unless you find out something there'll be trouble. Now, Rick, stop treating me as a baby and talk about it. Who do you think killed him?"

"Honestly, Dorrie, I think, just as he wrote, some women did it. I don't know who they were, and I'm not sure I care to know,—for they were, no doubt, some—some people with whom we have no concern."

"That may be," said the girl, very soberly, "and it may not be. You must realize, Rick, that those silly little chorus girls might have had reason to hate the man, but they could scarcely compass that killing."

Bates looked at her in astonishment.

"What *do* you mean?" he said, slowly; "that is, what are you hinting?"

"Only that I think the murderers are of a higher type of women than giddy youngsters,—"

"Murderers can't be of a very high type—"

"I don't mean high type of character, but of brains. To my mind, that deed implies women of cleverness and mental power."

"Such as,—?"

"Oh, I don't know. But girls in our house are all older and wiser than a lot of giddy chorus girls. Why not suspect them?"

"Why suspect anybody? I mean, what do we care? In one sense, I'd like to see the death of Uncle Herbert avenged, but on the other hand I'd hate to see women's names dragged through the police court—"

"But if they were guilty?"

"That's just the point! Ten chances to one they wouldn't be. I mean those dunder-headed detectives are quite capable of getting the wrong ones and then railroading them through."

"Perhaps so. But I think you ought to do more than you have done. Why, Rick,—if,—if you don't, first thing you know they'll suspect you!"

"What! Don't be foolish, dear. I'm not a woman."

"I know, but some people think that's a blind,—"

"It can't be a blind. There's Uncle Bin's writing,—and I know him well enough to be sure that with his dying breath he didn't write anything but the truth. No, sir, women are responsible for

that murder, and directly, too. Uncle Bin never flung that accusation at women if they were merely implicated. Now, don't you see, dear, that investigation must result in tragedy for *some* women,—and, as I say,—probably not the guilty ones."

"But it must be fastened on the guilty ones. They must be found—"

Dorcas' red lower lip quivered, and the big tears gathered in her eyes. She strove to keep her calmness but she was rapidly losing control over her emotions.

"Why, Dorrie, darling, what is it? Tell me,—I'll do whatever you want,—whatever you say! Do you know something you haven't told me? Something you don't want to tell me? What *is* the matter, dearest?"

"That's it; I do know something,—or I fear something, I don't want to tell you,—at least not yet,—but—Rick, let's do something, you and me,—toward solving the mystery."

"Oh, no, dear. Please don't mix your own sweet self into this horrid moil. I'll do what you tell me to, but don't dip into the trouble yourself,—I beg of you, don't!"

"Richard," and Dorcas stood up, her face taking on a determined look, "come on home with me, and go with me to talk to a woman,—one of the maids of the house. Don't interfere,—don't even interrupt, just stand by me, and be ready if I call on you for help."

Bewildered, and not entirely willing, Bates consented and the two went back to The Campanile.

Unhindered by any message from Dorcas' mother or Richard's aunt, they went up in the elevator and on one of the highest floors, Dorcas sought out the head chambermaid's office.

"I want to know about Maggie and Jane," she said, straightforwardly. "Maggie is our chambermaid, and Jane is a friend of hers. I have a reason, that I don't wish to state at present, but I ask you frankly if those two girls are honest and reliable?"

The woman addressed hesitated.

"They are, miss, so far as I know. But I think it's my duty to tell you, that I've heard other whispers of complaint. We're very particular about the help in this house, and I can't keep any girl on, who's even so much as suspected. Have you any definite complaint to make, Miss Everett?"

"There, you see," broke in Bates. "You mustn't harm those girls' reputation by a vague suspicion, Dorcas. If you know anything against them, that's one thing. But a hint goes so far, and it may be against an innocent girl."

"I know it," Dorcas looked very earnest, "so I ask you, Mrs Malone, not to mention this. But tell me, where were those two girls the night of the murder of Sir Herbert Binney?"

"Oh, that!" and Mrs Malone looked greatly relieved. "They were in their own beds asleep,—both of them. That I can swear to. I thought you meant they'd been dishonest,—stealing something."

"No, I didn't," said Dorcas, frankly. "I really wanted to know just what I asked. Will you forget it,—since you've answered me

as you have?"

"Yes, indeed, miss," the woman agreed, her decision influenced perhaps by the bill that was quietly slipped into her not unready hand.

"Well, I must say," and Bates looked at his companion as they went slowly along the hall to the elevator, "you did stir up a tempest without even a teapot! What's the big idea?"

"Don't speak like that, Rick," Dorcas implored. "Try to see things as I do. Or must I tell you right out that if there's no chorus girl, no chambermaid, no elevator girl to fasten suspicion on, it is going to be fastened on some one else. Can't you guess who?"

"That I can't," and Bates looked blankly at her. "Do you mean some of Uncle Bin's English people came over here and did for him?"

"I do not. I mean that there are people who will think,—who are already thinking there's reason to direct their inquiries toward—toward your aunt."

Bates stared; "Aunt Letitia?" he said, half understandingly; "she didn't do it."

"I don't think she did!" Dorcas was irritated at his bewilderment. "But I tell you the detectives think so!"

"Oh, Dork, what awful rot! Dear child, you must keep out of this affair. It makes you crazy."

"I'm not crazy! But you're blind. I tell you, Rick, the detectives *do* suspect Miss Prall,—I heard them tell mother so,—and you *must* wake up and look into things."

"I should say so!" Bates seemed to get awake all at once. "You heard this, Dorcas? I'm glad you told me. Go home, dear, and I'll look up Gibbs or Corson at once!"

CHAPTER XII
One Woman and Another

BATES' search for Gibbs or Corson resulted in finding the former in the rooms of the late Sir Herbert Binney. Peters was also there, packing up the personal effects of the dead man preparatory to vacating the apartment.

As sole heir, Bates was in authority regarding these effects, but he had paid little attention to them beyond giving orders to have them packed and stored for the present.

"Thought I'd dig around a bit," Gibbs vouchsafed, "but there's no indicative evidence that I can find. No papers of an incriminating sort, no sign of any special woman friend—or feminine enemy, for that matter."

"Never mind generalities or suppositions. Look here, Mr Gibbs, what about my aunt's connection with this matter?"

Gibbs looked up quickly. "Just what do you mean by that?"

"Only that I've heard that you are considering the possibility of her being implicated. Are you?"

"I'm considering any possibility I can find to consider. Yes, since you ask me, I am looking into the question of your aunt's connection with the case. I know you want me to be frank."

"I do. Have you any real evidence to work on?"

"Only talk. Only somewhat vague reports that I have yet to investigate."

"Reports, no doubt, from Mrs Everett, my aunt's longtime foe."

"Yes, that's the source of the hints I had given me. But Mrs Everett does not accuse your aunt—"

"She'd better not!"

"Oh, she doesn't. But the matter must be looked into, for there is a motive, and your aunt—Really, I can't discuss this thing with you, Mr Bates!"

"But you must. I'm in charge,—I'm going to find out who killed my uncle. I admit I hadn't a great desire to know his murderer, when I supposed it was some girls or women with whom he was mixed up in a frivolous way. But if my aunt's name is so much as breathed, of course, I must discover the real murderer to save her reputation. She no more did it than I did,—but I daresay the people who suspect her would also implicate me!"

"Don't speak like that. I've only a hint to go upon, and though I must follow it up, it's an easy matter, no doubt, for all your aunt's household to state an alibi and that settles it."

"Real alibis are not always easy to prove. It's your faked alibi that's glibly detailed and sworn to. There's no one in my aunt's household but herself, myself, and Miss Gurney, her companion. We three were in our beds and asleep at the time of the murder, but we can't prove it by eye witnesses! Naturally, there's no one to swear to it, except ourselves. Now, where does that lead you?"

"To further investigation. You know your aunt's paper-cutter was found—"

"That proves nothing. You must connect that knife undeniably with the crime before you can use it against her."

"I grant that. But first, let's look into the motive. Your aunt did want Sir Herbert out of the way. She did say she wished he was dead. She did say she would kill him herself if she were sure she'd never be found out."

"I know she said those things, for I heard her,—not once, but repeatedly. But my aunt is a quick-tempered and thoughtless-speaking woman. She has time and again wished various people dead. She has often expressed her willingness to kill certain people. But it meant no more,—as she said it,—than for another to wish bad luck to them, or say they hate them. She is most unguarded in her expressions and exaggerates always. These things must be understood by you before you accuse her. She has frequently wished herself dead, but she didn't mean it any more than she meant it regarding Sir Herbert."

"All that will be considered and remembered, but we must question her."

"You'd better question me. I can tell you anything she can, and in a more satisfactory manner."

"Tell us all you like,—all you will, but we must also question Miss Prall and Miss Gurney."

"All right, but there are other directions in which to look. Don't be too sure that women committed the deed."

"No use your trying to throw over that dying statement. No use looking for a man in the case, with that note before our eyes. You know yourself if a man or men had killed Sir Herbert nothing could have influenced him to write a denunciation of

women. Why would he? What possible circumstance could explain it? Have you any theory that would fit the facts?"

"No, unless a man killed him at the instigation of or in behalf of some women and Sir Herbert wanted the deed traced to its true source."

"Even that doesn't seem to make plausible a positive assertion that 'women did this.' No, there's no getting away from that avowal. And, you must see that the use of the plural,—women,—signifies collusion. Two or more must be implicated. Not necessarily two or more present at the moment of the crime, but two or more to be found and punished."

"Yes, I see all that,—and I want to find the criminals as much as you do. Especially now, since Miss Prall's name has been dragged in. But I do want you to understand how little her hints at 'killing' anybody really mean. You know what an extravagant talker she is."

"I do know that, and I assure you I'll make all allowances. But I can't leave any stone unturned."

The man Peters had been in and out of the room and, as he reappeared, Richard said, "You know Miss Prall, Peters. You know how carelessly she speaks of serious things?"

"Yes, sir, I do. But you needn't tell me them little chickens ever had any hand in the murderin'! Why, they just couldn't have had."

"Anything is possible, Peters," said Bates, sternly. "And I don't want you to make those definite statements. They mean nothing, save that such is your opinion."

"But my opinions is pretty sound ones, Mr Bates, an' founded on a lot of personal knowledge of Sir Herbert,—rest his soul. And I tell you, gentlemen, that that deed could never ha' been done by young girls,—neither the little ladies that Sir Herbert was fond of kitin' round with nor yet the girls employed in this house. No, sir, that fearful crime was planned and carried out by older heads than theirs. Men or women might 'a' done it,—but never little half-baked flappers like them you're suspectin'."

"There's sense in that," mused Gibbs, and Bates flared out: "I suppose that leads you more certainly to suspicion of my aunt. But you're wrong, Gibbs, all wrong! Now, look here, suppose, just for a moment, there had been no written message,—which way would you look then?"

"Toward some business complications," said Gibbs, promptly. "You see, Sir Herbert Binney was putting over an awful big deal in that matter of his Bun business. He had dickered with several big bakery companies and he was a shrewd man at a bargain."

"And he was in bad with some of the men he was bargaining with," vouchsafed Peters, who was a privileged participant in the conversation, because Gibbs hoped by this means to learn something from the valet.

"Who, for instance?" demanded Bates.

"Graham, of the Popular Patisserie concern; Vail, here in the house, and Crippen of Crippen's Cakes."

"Nothing doing," returned Gibbs, shortly. "I've dug into all those issues. He was off with the Patisserie people weeks ago.

He finished discussion with the Vail company some days since, and the only one pending was the Crippen bunch."

"Yes, and my aunt says he expected to see Crippen the night he was killed."

"Well, he didn't," returned Gibbs. "I've looked up Crippen's alibi and it's gilt-edged. Vail was in the elevator with Bob Moore at the time of the murder,—that lets him out and the Patisseries are back numbers. I mean they got through with Binney's Buns as a working proposition, long ago."

"They might have come back to it," suggested Bates.

"Sure they might,—so might Crippen or Vail. But they didn't,—or if they did, we've no tiniest speck of evidence of it. If you can get any, go ahead. You don't know of anything against the Bakery men, do you, Peters?"

"No, sir. But Mr Crippen and Mr Vail have both been here—"

"Here! In Sir Herbert's rooms?" cried Bates. "What for?"

"Mr Vail, he just dropped in, as he was passing by, and he looked round the room, like in idle curiosity. He said, 'Poor old chap, he was a good sport,' and went away. That wasn't so strange, for he often used to drop in for a chat with my master. But Mr Crippen, now, he never came here, that I know of, while Sir Herbert was alive. But the day after he died, Mr Crippen comes with a sort of determined air, and he wants to look round,—and more, he wants to look over Sir Herbert's papers. Of course, I didn't let him do that, but it seemed sorta queer,—didn't it, now?"

"Maybe and maybe not," said Gibbs. "I suspect there might have been a letter from himself that he wanted to get possession of, or something like that. I say, as I have said from the first, if it were not for the written paper, I might have suspected these business men, but I'm sure that's the very reason Sir Herbert did write the paper, so we would not go off on a wrong tack. It proves to me the determination of his strong mind to lead us in the right direction and not let us pursue the most obvious but mistaken course of looking into the Bun matters."

"I agree with you on the face of things," said young Bates, with a sigh, "and if you hadn't mentioned Miss Prall, I'd let you go your own gait, but now you have mentioned her, I shall get into the game myself and spare no effort or expense to dig up the truth! And, first of all, I'm going back to Bob Moore. I don't think he knows anything more than he's told, but I do think I can learn more from him now I've got my mad up!"

"Come on, I'll go with you," and Gibbs accompanied the young man to the elevator.

Moore was not in the house, and Bates, determined to learn something, went to Julie Baxter, who was at her switchboard.

He took her, Gibbs following, to a small reception room, where they could be by themselves.

"Now, Julie," Bates said, "you've got to come across with the true story of your doings the night of the murder. You are not suspected, but you will be if you don't 'fess up. It's a fool thing to

do, to refuse to tell, when continued silence may get you in very bad. So, out with it."

"You did the same thing yourself, Mr Bates," and Julie glared at him. "You refused to tell—"

"But I'm not a woman; they can't suspect me. Also, I'll tell, if I have to. My story won't incriminate me. Go ahead, now,—let's hear."

"I'll tell where I was, if you'll promise not to tell anybody else." Julie looked obstinate, though evidently a good deal frightened.

"I'll promise, if the secret can be kept without hindering our investigation. Agree to that, Gibbs?"

The detective agreed, and Julie went on. "Specially, I don't want Bob Moore to know. We're engaged and he's awful particular about where I go, when he isn't along. And I've never gone any place or done anything he wouldn't want me to, except that very night. I went with a crowd on a trip to Chinatown. It wasn't any harm, but we were out late, and if he knew it, he'd give me the dickens. You won't tell, will you? And, too, if the manager knew it, he'd think I was a different sort of a girl from what I am. So, please don't tell."

"No; we won't tell," promised Bates. "Unless, of course, we find you haven't told the truth, or the whole truth,—in that case, you'll be shown up! I never suspected any connection of yours with the whole matter, but if you've told the truth just now, it will go no further. I know you're not given to frisking about, and I think myself it's just as well Moore shouldn't know of this one occasion. By the way, did you study to be a nurse?"

"I began the course of training, but the work was too hard for me and I gave it up the first year and took up telephoning."

"Did you," asked Gibbs, suddenly, "did you know any one else in the hospital, or wherever you were, who studied nursing, and who is in any way connected with the people interested in this murder?"

Julie hesitated and her face flushed a little.

"I don't think I ought to mention it,—" she began, and Gibbs cried:

"Of course you ought to mention it! If you're innocent it can do you no harm, and if the one you tell us of is innocent it can do her no harm."

"But it may stir up suspicion quite wrongly," objected the girl.

"Then the suspicion will fall to the ground. Don't be afraid; you are only helping justice along. If it's a real help you must give it, and if not, it won't be followed up."

But Richard Bates looked grave.

"Oh, I don't know, Gibbs," he said; "somebody must have started this trend toward my aunt, and it's made me pretty miserable already. Now, need we take up a new trail with only a sort of surmise on this girl's part. For, surely, she is by no means ready to make a positive accusation."

"Out with it, Julie," commanded the detective with no apparent notice of Bates' demurrer.

"Well, it's only this," and Julie looked relieved at the thought of unburdening herself; "when I was in training, the girls used to talk of Kate Holland, who was there many years before, but

who seemed to be a sort of a star pupil. I don't remember much that they said, only she was renowned for her surgical skill, and when I heard Bob tell how the murderer of Sir Binney was a knowing one, I couldn't help thinking about her. You know she's Mrs Everett's maid."

"Oh, Lord!" Bates groaned, "don't drag the Everetts into this thing! It's bad enough to have my people spoken of without attacking the Everetts too!"

"Nobody has attacked them yet," said Gibbs, dryly; "don't go too fast."

"But you will! You'll suspect Kate because of what Julie has said, and then you'll go on to Mrs Everett and—"

"H'm,—you seem to inherit your aunt's trait of hasty speaking. Better stop where you are, Bates. Don't put ideas into my head!"

"I don't have to! You're all primed to take up this new outlook. I knew Julie's tales would upset things! Just because Mrs Everett's maid has had training, doesn't argue her a murderess!"

"Nobody said it did!" exclaimed Gibbs, angered at the young man's words, partly because they were so in line with his own thoughts.

"In fact," and Bates looked very sober, "in fact, Gibbs, I'd rather you'd suspect my aunt than the Everett crowd!"

"But nobody has voiced any suspicion of the Everett crowd—"

"You don't have to voice it, for me to know what you have in your mind—"

"And that Kate Holland is a terrible woman—" began Julie.

Richard silenced her with a look.

"Julie," he said, sternly, "don't you dare mention one word of Kate Holland in connection with this matter! If you do, I'll tell both Moore and the house management of your Chinatown trip."

"That's right," agreed Gibbs. "You're not to mix into this thing in any way, Julie. You run along now, and remember, it's just as Mr Bates said; if you breathe a word of anything you've heard or said in here with us, we'll show you up good and plenty, and we may do a little exaggerating, too! Is it a bargain?"

"Yes, sir, it is!" and Julie Baxter went out of the room, glad to be assured of the safety of her own secret.

"Now, Bates, you may as well face the music," Gibbs began. "You must know that in the back of everybody's head has been an unspoken thought of higher up people than chorus girls or elevator attendants. Those youngsters don't commit murder,—such a thing is unknown. But older women with deeper motives must be considered. You say you want to find the murderess in order to relieve your aunt from any hint of suspicion. Do you want to do so if the trail leads toward the Everett household?"

Richard Bates seemed suddenly to have grown years older. His good-looking young face turned to an ashen hue, and his eyes were wild and staring.

His voice shook as he replied, "I say, Gibbs, I don't know what I want! I'm knocked galley-west. I don't believe for the thousandth part of a second that either Miss Prall or Mrs Everett have one speck of knowledge of the deed, but you know

the very mention of their names would be like fire to tow in the newspaper reports."

"Of course it would. Yet what can we do? However much I keep my investigations quiet, there's a gang of reporters nosing about everywhere. They've likely got hold of Julie already—"

"She won't tell anything."

"She won't mean to,—but they'll frighten or trap her into it. There's nothing so dangerous as a woman with a secret of her own to guard. She'll babble of everything else."

"What do you advise?" Bates was clearly at the end of his rope. He was beseeching of manner and despairing of tone.

"Straightforwardness, first of all. I'm going at once, either to Miss Prall or to Mrs Everett, and make them come across with something definite. If they don't know anything,—I'll find that out, at least."

"Go first to my aunt, then. I'll go with you,—come along. Get all you can out of her, I'm not in the least afraid!"

The two men went up to the Prall apartment and Bates opened the door with his own key.

"Here's Mr Detective, Aunt Letty," he said, trying to speak lightly; "he wants a little chatter with you."

Miss Prall looked up from her book.

"Be seated, Mr Gibbs," she said, with quiet dignity. "How do you do?"

"How do you do?" the detective returned, not quite at ease, in the presence of her forbidding manner. "I'm sorry to intrude—"

"Then don't," interrupted Letitia, her large, strong face frowning at him. "Why make us both sorry?"

"Because it must be done." Gibbs gathered firmness from her own attitude. "This matter of the murder of Sir Herbert Binney is of sufficient importance not to wait on convenience or pleasure."

"Quite right. And what have you done? Nothing, as usual? When one remembers that the crime occurred nearly a week ago, and no steps have yet been taken to apprehend the criminal—"

"Pardon me, Miss Prall, many steps have been taken, and they have led in a definite direction."

"Good gracious, where!" The spinster was startled out of her calm and a look of concern spread over her face.

"First, tell me if you have any suspicions?"

"I have not, but if I had I'd never tell you, so long as they were merely suspicions. If I could prove them, I'd tell quick enough!"

"But I may help you to prove them—or disprove them."

"That's just it; if you disprove them, I'm covered with shame and confusion at having hinted them."

"All right, I'll do the hinting. Or, rather, I'll speak right out. What did you do with the paper-cutter from your library table, —I see there is an empty sheath still there?"

"That?" and Miss Prall glanced casually at the sheath in question.

"The paper-knife was broken and I gave it to Sir Herbert Binney, who had promised to get it mended for me at some

specialty place he knew of. Why?"

"Because that was, probably, the weapon that killed him."

If Gibbs had expected any sudden telltale blush or confusion on Miss Prall's part, he must have been disappointed, for she only said:

"Indeed! How could that happen?"

"I don't know, but the knife has been found, in peculiar circumstances, and I'd like to know just when you gave it to him to get it mended."

"Oh, I don't know; several days before his death. Perhaps four or five days, or a week. Go on."

"The knife,—if that was the one,—was driven into the body in such a way as to make it likely that the hand that thrust it was the hand of some one experienced in surgical lore—"

"Hah!" the exclamation given by Miss Prall was full of meaning. It seemed to imply a sort of triumphant surprise, a welcome knowledge, a looked-for and longed-for state of things.

"This gives strength to your suspicions?" insinuated Gibbs.

"It does," and the Grenadier sat up even straighter and her face was even more indicative of elation as she added, "it does, indeed!"

"And perhaps you will tell us to whom your suspicion points?" urged the detective.

"That I will do," she declared, but Bates broke in with a "Hush, Aunt Letitia! I command you not to speak!"

CHAPTER XIII
Motives

"I'VE got to speak, Ricky," Miss Prall said, but her tone was not angry now. She seemed to have changed her mood and was half frightened, half sad. "I've got to speak, to save myself. Don't you see that if that paper-cutter points towards me,—as Mr Gibbs implies, I must tell what I know—"

"What you know," assented Bates, "but not what you suspect."

"Yes, ma'am, what you suspect," directed the detective. "The time has come, Miss Prall, when suspicions must be voiced, whether true or not, in order that we may prove or disprove them."

"Then get up your own suspicions," cried Bates. "Find your own suspects and prove their guilt or innocence."

"We're doing that," Gibbs said, quietly, "but we necessarily depend also on the statements of witnesses."

"But Miss Prall isn't a witness."

"Not an eye-witness, perhaps, but a material witness, if she knows anything that we want to know."

"She doesn't know anything you want to know," exclaimed Eliza Gurney, coming into the room. "But Kate Holland does! If you're anxious for information get that girl and quiz her!"

"Hush up, Eliza," stormed Letitia. "What did you learn in at the Everett's, Mr Gibbs?"

"I learned that you said you'd kill Sir Herbert Binney yourself, if you were sure you wouldn't be found out."

"What!" Miss Prall turned perfectly white, but whether with rage or fear, Gibbs didn't know. "She said that! The little devil! Just let me get at her, once!"

"Didn't you make that remark?"

"I did not; but she did, and then, I said I would, too. Neither of us meant it, really, but that's what was said. The woman is so clever it makes her doubly dangerous!"

"But it's a queer thing for two ladies to be talking about killing anybody."

"Nonsense! It's done all the time. It doesn't mean they'd really do it—though sometimes I have thought—"

"Aunt Letty!" put in Bates, beseechingly.

"I will speak, Richard! Sometimes I have thought that Adeline Everett would be capable of—of anything! Those sleek, fat, complacent people are the very worst sort! I bluster out frankly, but that oily, deceitful woman,—and that Kate of hers,—well, if you want to know my suspicions,—there they are."

"Then, Miss Prall," Gibbs looked straight at her, "here's the situation. Both you and Mrs Everett expressed a willingness to kill Sir Herbert Binney,—no matter if it was not meant. Both of you may be said to have had a motive; both of you could have found opportunity. And, finally, each of you claims to suspect the other. Now, granting for argument's sake that one of you is guilty, would not the plausible procedure be to pretend to suspect the other?"

"Of course it would," Eliza Gurney declared. "And since Mrs Everett is the guilty party,—I see it all now! She casts suspicion toward Miss Prall! Of course, Mrs Everett didn't do it herself, but that Kate Holland did! She is a fiend incarnate, without heart or soul! She is—"

"There, there, Eliza, you'd better be still," Miss Prall warned her. "If you go on like that, Mr Gibbs will think you're protesting too much!"

As a matter of fact, that's just what Gibbs was thinking, and he looked sharply at Letitia, marveling at her cleverness. If she had been instrumental in the death of Sir Herbert, surely this was just the way she would conduct herself. She was deep as well as clever, and Gibbs began to see light.

He was convinced now that the criminals were of a more subtle type than young girls in their teens could possibly be, and the affair, to his thinking, was narrowed down to the households of these two women who were each other's enemies.

He reasoned that the only way to learn anything from such dissemblers as they all were, was to catch them off their guard, and he greatly desired to get the rival factions together, in order that anger or spite might cause one or other to disclose her secret.

"Perhaps," Gibbs said, "it might be well for us to go to Mrs Everett, or send for her to come here, and so get the testified statement as to these assertions of willingness to kill. I don't think they're customary among the women of your class."

"You doubt my word!" flared up Letitia Prall. "Let me tell you, Mr Gibbs, that I refuse to have it corroborated by that woman! I tell you the truth,—she is incapable of that!"

"That's why I want to give you a chance to refute her, to deny her to her face—"

"Never! I don't want to see her! She shall not enter my door! Her very presence is contaminating! Adeline Everett! She is a slanderer—"

"Wait a moment, Miss Prall. What she has said of you, you have also said of her!"

"But I speak truth; she tells falsehoods. Nobody ever believes a word she says!"

"Of course not!" chimed in Eliza. "Adeline Everett is a whited sepulcher,—a living lie!"

Even more belligerent than the words was the tone and the facial expression of the speaker. Miss Gurney was not a beautiful woman at best, and her rage transformed her into a veritable termagant. Her sparse gray hair fell in wisps about her ears and her head shook in emphasis of her objurgations, while her pale blue eyes blinked with fury as she strove to find words harsh enough.

"Eliza!" and Miss Prall's warning tone was quiet but very stern. "Stop that! You only make matters worse by going on so! If you can't keep still, leave the room."

Eliza sniffed, but ceased her talk for the moment, at least.

"Now, Miss Prall," Gibbs resumed, "it is necessary, in my opinion, to have an interview at which both yourself and Mrs

Everett are present. I have a right to ask this, and I offer you the choice of going there, or sending for her to come here."

"I won't do either," snapped Letitia. "I refuse to go to her home, and I certainly shall not let her enter mine."

"But, don't you see that is most damaging to your own side of the story."

"What do I care? Don't think you can frighten me, young man! Letitia Prall is quite able to take care of herself."

"That may be, but you are not able to defy, successfully, the course of the law. If I insist on this interview, I think, Miss Prall, you will be obliged to consent."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then, I am sorry to tell you, your refusal must be set aside, and you will, I am sure, see the advisability of accepting the situation."

"Oh, come, Auntie," said Bates, "you're making a lot of unnecessary trouble. Neither you nor Mrs Everett had any hand in this murder,—the mere idea is ridiculous! and if you have the interview Mr Gibbs wants, it will soon be over and then you will both be freed from suspicion and can go on with your silly 'feud.' That is a foolish thing, but trivial. This other matter is serious. You *must* get it over with at once,—for all our sakes."

"I won't." And Miss Prall set her lips obstinately.

Gibbs rose abruptly and left the room.

"He's gone for Mrs Everett," said Richard, looking severely at his aunt. "Now, you must be careful, Aunt Letty. If you don't look

out, they'll accuse you of the murder, and though you'll disprove it, it will mean a whole lot of trouble for us all."

Letitia Prall adored her nephew, and, too, she saw there was no use of trying to avoid the meeting with Mrs Everett. It was bound to be brought about, sooner or later, by the determined Gibbs, and it might as well be gone through with.

She sat still, thinking what attitude it was best to assume, and she decided on continued silence.

"Eliza," she warned, "don't talk too much. You'll get us in an awful predicament if you're so free with your tongue. First thing you know, you'll tell—"

"Hush, they're coming!" and in a moment Gibbs rang the bell.

Richard admitted him, and with him came both Adeline Everett and the maid, Kate.

"I didn't invite your servant," was Miss Prall's only word of greeting, accompanied by a scathing glance at Kate.

"You didn't invite me," Mrs Everett returned, pertly, "and I shouldn't have come if you had, except that I was commanded to appear by a representative of the law. I don't see, though, why I should be mixed up in your murder case."

"It isn't my murder case any more than it is yours, Adeline Everett," her enemy faced her. "I understand you're suspected of being—"

"Oh, don't, Aunt Letitia," begged Richard, who was always distressed if obliged to be present when the two "got going," as Eliza called it. "Now, please, auntie,—please, Mrs Everett, can't you two forget your private enmity for a few minutes and just

settle this big matter? Disarm the suspicions of Mr Gibbs by telling the truth, by stating where you all were at the time of the murder, and so, get yourselves out of all touch with it. Truly, you will be sorry if you don't. You don't realize what it will mean if you have to be mixed up in all sorts of witness stands and things."

"Go ahead, Mr Gibbs," and Miss Prall glared at the detective. "We owe this unpleasant scene to you,—make it as short as possible."

"I will," and Gibbs' sharp eyes darted from one face to another, for this was his harvest time, and though he expected to learn little from the wily women's speech, he hoped for much from their uncontrollable outbursts of anger or their involuntary admissions.

It was a strange gathering. Letitia Prall sat on a straight-backed chair, erect and still; but looking like a leashed tiger, ready to spring.

Beside her, trying hard to keep quiet, was Eliza Gurney, small, pale, and with a distracted face and angry eyes that darted venomous glances at the visitors.

Mrs Everett had chosen for her rôle an amused superiority, knowing it would irritate Letitia Prall more than any other manner. She smiled and quickly suppressed it, she stared and then dropped her eyes and she would impulsively begin to say something and then discreetly pause.

All this Gibbs took in and Richard, seeing the detective's interest, became alarmed. He felt sure there was something

sinister concealed in the minds of some or all of the women present and his heart sank at the possible outcome of things.

It was inconceivable that his aunt was in any way concerned in the murder, yet it was even worse to imagine the mother of Dorcas mixed up in it. Of course, it couldn't be that either of them was really implicated, but he had to recognize the fact that Gibbs was sufficiently convinced of such implication to call this confab.

And it was a confab. The detective did not ask direct questions, but rather brought out voluntary remarks by adroitly suggesting them.

"Now, that paper-knife—" he began, musingly.

"Is what they call a clue," said Mrs Everett. "I know nothing of such things,—I can't bear detective stories, but if a paper-knife was used to kill somebody, I should think the owner of the weapon must be more or less suspected."

"Of course you think that, because you're suspected yourself," said Letitia, coldly; "naturally you think you can cast suspicion toward me, but you can't, Adeline Everett! I gave that paper-cutter to Sir Herbert to get it mended—"

"Oho! Is *that* the story you've trumped up! Clever, my dear, but too thin. Can't you see, Mr Gibbs, that that is a made-up yarn? She knows Sir Herbert can't deny it, and no one else can. So she thinks she's safe!"

"Well, she isn't," and Kate Holland gave Miss Prall a triumphant glare. "That knife will hang her yet! She not only tried to make up a plausible story about the thing, but she tried

to fasten the guilt on me by saying I have surgical skill! Ha, ha, —because I took a nurse's training,—I'm to be suspected of murder! A fine how-do-you-do! Let me tell you, Miss Prall, you overreached yourself! I've been to see Dr Pagett about it, and he says that while the fatal stroke may have been delivered by somebody who knew just where to strike, yet, on the other hand, it might have been the merest ignoramus, who chanced to strike the vital point! So, your ladyship, your scheme to inculpate *me* falls through!"

Gibbs listened eagerly, gathering the news of Dr Pagett's decision, and learning, too, that this maid of Mrs Everett's was of a far higher mentality than the average servant.

"I scorn to reply," Miss Prall said, looking over the head of the triumphant Kate. "I do not converse with servants."

"Perhaps it would be well to dismiss both my servant and yours," drawled Mrs Everett, maliciously. "Let Kate and Eliza both leave the room."

"I'm no servant!" cried Miss Gurney, bristling; "I'm Miss Prall's companion, quite her equal—"

"And think yourself her superior," interrupted Mrs Everett, with her most annoying chuckle. "Well, Eliza, I look upon you as just as much a servant as my Kate,—more so, indeed, for you can't hold a candle to Kate for intelligence, education or—"

"Or viciousness," Letitia broke in. "Now, Mr Gibbs, I decline to talk to or with either of my unwelcome visitors. If you have to conduct this official inquisition, go on with it, but I refuse to

speak except to answer your questions. Eliza, you are not to talk, either."

"Good!" said Gibbs, "just what I want." And he spoke sincerely, for he began to see that he would learn little from the display of rancor and temper that moved them all.

He put definite and straightforward questions, and elicited the information that they were all in their beds and asleep at the hour of the murder. This could not be corroborated from the very nature of things, but he let it pass.

There was fierce disagreement as to which had first declared a willingness to kill Sir Herbert Binney, and which had said she, too, was inclined to the deed, but it was admitted that such hasty and unconsidered declarations had been made.

In fact, the gist of the long and difficult grilling was an apparent determination on the part of each one of the two factions to accuse the other, and a most plausible and complacent assumption of innocence by both.

This seemed a non-committal situation, but Gibbs did not deem it such. He was definitely persuaded as to the guilty party, and his satisfied nods and approving smiles showed Richard Bates plainly which way the detective's opinions leaned.

And the young man was thoroughly frightened. Though, for his part, it would be a difficult matter to make a preference between the belief in the guilt of his aunt or the guilt of the mother of the girl he loved.

And the trend of Gibbs' investigation led surely to one or the other. The use of the paper-cutter that Miss Prall admitted

having given into Sir Herbert's keeping gave wide-spread opportunity. Any one desiring to kill the man had a means provided, that is, reasoning that Sir Herbert had the knife with him for the purpose of getting it mended.

Again, that story might be pure fabrication, in which case the suspicion swung back to Miss Prall and Eliza.

It was Gibbs' theory that the unintelligible letters of the dead man's message implied two women and the attempted direction was to get both. This, he argued, meant either Miss Prall and Eliza Grundy or Mrs Everett and her faithful aide, Kate Holland.

It seemed to him that the case narrowed itself down to these women, either pair of which had both motive and opportunity.

The affair between Bates and Dorcas was, of course, known to both guardians, though they tried to disbelieve it, and probably didn't know to what lengths it had already gone. But Mrs Everett knew that Sir Herbert approved the match and doubtless feared that her modern and up-to-date daughter might take the reins in her own hands. Therefore her desire to have Sir Herbert removed was explainable. She felt sure that without his Uncle's insistence on Richard's entering the Bun business, the young man would return to his inventions and so forget Dorcas in his work. At least, that's the nearest Gibbs could come to her motive, though he felt sure there was more to be learned regarding that. Mrs Everett was deep and very plausible of manner. She had, he knew, underlying motives and hidden capabilities that would lead her, with the assistance of the Amazonian Kate, anywhere.

On the other hand, Miss Prall wanted the old man out of the say, so that her nephew would lack his advice and assistance concerning the affair with Dorcas, and the aunt felt that, with Sir Herbert out of it, she could easily persuade Richard to return to the great work in which he was so deeply interested and forget the girl. Moreover, she knew that Mrs Everett, no more desiring the marriage of the young people than she did herself, was planning to move away, and then all would be well.

The motives were not altogether clear, but, Gibbs reasoned, there must be many points that were hidden and would remain so, with these clever women to guard them.

He tactfully tried to draw them out, but with even greater tact they evaded and eluded his questions and contradicted each other and occasionally,—and purposely,—themselves, until the detective began to think the determined masculine mind is no match for the equally determined Eternal Feminine.

Indeed, involuntarily and almost unconsciously, they joined forces against him, and presently found themselves aiding each other, which, when they realized it, made them more angry,—if possible,—than before.

At last Mrs Everett looked at her watch.

"I've an appointment that I'm anxious to keep," she said, drawlingly; "as you don't seem to be getting anywhere, Mr Detective, can you not let me go, and finish up this absorbing discussion with Miss Prall?"

"You're quite mistaken in assuming that I'm not getting anywhere, Mrs Everett," returned the nettled detective, "but

you may go if you wish. In fact, I allow it, because I have learned about all there is to learn,—not so insignificant an amount as you imply."

Mrs Everett looked at him sharply and was momentarily disconcerted enough to gasp out:

"Oh, have you a clue?"

"Several," Gibbs returned, carelessly. "Nothing that I care to make known, but I've found out enough to set me on the right track."

Covertly he watched the faces to see how this struck the two principals.

With little result, for Mrs Everett, regaining her poise, merely smiled in an exasperating way, and Miss Prall looked coldly disinterested.

"Wonderful characters," Gibbs commented to himself, for he had never before met women who could so perfectly hide their feelings.

And he was sure that one of them, at least, was hiding her emotion; that one of them was really aghast at the thought of exposure and was trying with all her powers to conceal her dismay.

The maid, Kate, and the companion, Eliza, merely mirrored the other's calm. Eliza, glancing at Miss Prall, took her cue and looked disdainful of the whole affair. Kate Holland curled a scornful lip and nodded her head in Miss Prall's direction.

And yet, if one pair were guilty the other two were innocent. Collusion between the two factions was unthinkable. But Gibbs

had made up his mind, and he rose and opened the door.

"If you must keep your appointment, Madame, you are excused. I may say that you are under surveillance, but I have little fear of your trying to get away secretly, and unless you do, you will not be bothered in any way."

"Your surveillance does not interest me," and, with a sublime disregard of all present, Mrs Everett swept out of the room, followed by the large and somewhat ungainly Kate.

"I don't want to discuss this thing," Gibbs began, as he himself prepared to leave,—"but—"

"I don't want to discuss it either," said Bates, and his tone was full of indignation. "There is no room for discussion after this asinine performance of yours! You're not fit to be a detective! You get some ladies together and badger them into all sorts of thoughtless, unmeant admissions and call that testimony! I'm surprised at you, Gibbs. And I tell you frankly what I mean to do. I'm going out,—right now,—to get a detective who can detect! A man who knows the first principles of the business,—which you don't even seem to dream of! I've had enough of your futile questioning, your unfounded suspicions, your absurd deductions! I'm off!"

CHAPTER XIV
Penny Wise

WHEN Richard set out to do a thing, he did it, and without consulting anybody he went at once for Pennington Wise, the detective, and by good luck, succeeding in obtaining the services of that astute investigator.

Bates told him the whole story, and Wise saw at once that though the young man was fearful of his aunt's implication in the matter, he was even more alarmed at the idea of his sweetheart's mother being brought into it.

"I look at it this way," Bates said; "Mrs Everett and Miss Prall are so bitterly at enmity, that either of them would be willing to further a suspicion of the other. I know neither was really guilty —"

"Wait a minute," put in Wise, "how do you know that?"

"Oh, I know they couldn't be! They're—they're ladies—"

"That doesn't deny the possibility,—what else?"

"Why,—they,—oh, they're women,—women couldn't do a thing like that!"

"But, 'women' did do it,—according to your story."

"Of course; but it must have been a lower class of women,—not ladies, like my aunt and Mrs Everett."

"Is that 'feud' of which you've told me, a distinctly ladylike performance?"

"No; it isn't. It's a—"

"I gather, from your report of it, it's a regular old-fashioned hair-pulling sort of feminine spitefulness."

"That's just what it is; and it is in bad taste and all that sort of thing. But murder! That's different!"

"Of course it's different, and must be treated differently. If your aunt's name is so much as hinted at in connection with crime, you must clear it,—if possible. Here we have a murder,—a mysterious murder. The police have been notified, that puts it into the public's hands. You can't afford to hold back anything now. Nor can you afford to conceal or gloss over anything. That would be to invite suspicion. Absolute frankness on your part and on the part of your aunt is imperative."

"You'll get it from me, but Solomon himself couldn't understand my aunt if she chose to be secretive."

"Why should she be secretive?"

"Oh, it's such a mix-up, Mr Wise. You'll see when you meet the two women. Either of them would do or say anything,—anything at all, if it would annoy or disturb the other."

"I think I understand, but I think I can discriminate between the truth and the pretense."

"You'll be pretty smart if you can," Richard sighed. "But get busy as soon as possible. Can you get over to-day?"

"Yes; and I must bring my assistant,—a young lady."

"You're to use Sir Herbert Binney's rooms. Where shall I put the girl?"

"Is there a matron or housekeeper? Yes? Then the girl will attend to all that herself. Don't bother."

"All right, I won't. Now, see here, Mr Wise, I want you to get at the truth, of course, but—if it leads—"

"Stop right there, Mr Bates. If I take this case, it's to get the truth, no matter where it leads. You've mentioned the two women most important in your life,—oh, yes, I see the importance of Mrs Everett. You are, you must be, interested in her daughter, for you showed it in your face when you spoke her name. Now, so far, I've nothing to connect those two women with the case, except that they are women, and the written paper accuses women. I believe that paper implicitly. I've had wide experience and no word of his murderer left by a dying victim is ever anything but the truth. I must see the paper as soon as I can; it may be informative. But, remember, the processes of justice are inexorable,—where the truth leads, I must follow, absolutely irrespective of personal prejudice."

"If you're sure it *is* the truth—"

"Right. I must be sure, beyond all doubt. And I will be before I make any important decisions. You are sole heir?"

"Yes, except for some minor bequests."

"Suspicion hasn't attacked you?"

Bates started at the question, but Pennington Wise seemed to think it a casual one, so Richard replied, frankly, "No, it hasn't,—and I rather expected it."

"Yes, it would not be strange. While, as I say, I believe, so far as I know now, that women killed him, yet others may feel the written message is faked."

"Oh, it's positively Sir Herbert's writing; it doesn't need an expert to see that."

"Were it not for the message, I should be inclined to look into his business relations."

"I think that's the reason he wrote the note. My uncle was a quick thinker, and I can see how, knowing he must die, he did all he could to assist justice. I've no doubt he realized that attention would be turned toward men, and he wrote the truth, as far as he had strength to do so, in order to facilitate the work of his avengers. Without doubt he was intending to write the names of his murderers when his muscles or his brain power gave out."

"That's the way I see it, but I can't be sure till I see the paper. There are many motives for murder, but they can all be classed as affairs of the heart, the mind or the purse. The first class takes in all love interests; the second, business deals, and the third, robbery. The last, I understand, we may eliminate; the second seems to be knocked out by that message, and we come back to some affair of the heart, which may not be love, but jealousy, revenge or a sudden, impulsive quarrel. To look for the women is not an easy task, but it is a help to be started in the right direction."

And so, Penny Wise established himself in the comfortable rooms lately occupied by the victim of the crime he was to investigate, and Zizi, his capable and picturesque assistant, found her quarters in the domain of the housekeeper.

Mrs Macey was a shrewd, capable woman, or she would not have been housekeeper at The Campanile. She looked in cold disdain at the glowing little face of the girl who unceremoniously invaded her room, and stared with increasing interest as the visitor talked.

"You see," Zizi said, nodding her correctly hatted little head, "I've just simply got to be taken in somewhere in the house, and it might as well be here. I'm too young to have an apartment by myself, and I'll promise you won't regret any 'small kindnesses' you may show me. In fact, Mr Pennington Wise, my sponsor in baptism, is the greatest rememberer of small kindnesses you ever saw!"

"My goodness!" remarked Mrs Macey, dazzled by the girl's beauty and animation, and bewildered by her insistent manner.

"Yep," sauced Zizi, with her irresistible smile, "it's your goodness that'll turn the trick. I'll confide to you that I'm here on business, most important secret business, and if your goodness pans out well and you put me up properly, you'll be what is known as handsomely rewarded. So, which is my room?"

The girl whirled through a doorway and spied a neat little bedroom. "This'll do," she said, and setting down her small handbag proceeded to push things around on the dresser and fling her gloves and veil into a drawer, then with what was indubitably a farewell smile, she gently pushed Mrs Macey out, and closed the door after her, pausing only to say, "You've good horse sense,—use it."

"So far, so good," commented Zizi, to her pretty reflection in the mirror. "That woman's a joy. Easily managed, but full of initiative. Just the sort I like."

She flew around, adjusting the appointments to suit her taste; she telephoned downstairs for her further luggage to be sent up, and soon she was as fully established in the room as if she had been there weeks.

"And now," she spoke finally to the pretty girl in her mirror, "I shall sally forth, as they call it, and see what's what in The Campanile."

Her progress through the house was so inconspicuous and casual that no one noticed her especially. It was Zizi's forte to go around unnoticed, when she chose. Though she could, on the other hand, make a decided stir, merely by her appearance.

A slender wisp of a girl, black of hair and eyes, demure without self-consciousness, and gentle-mannered, she glided here and there as she listed and none said her nay. She quickly learned the location of rooms and people, the ways of the house and certain of its tenants, and, without effort, made friends with elevator girls and other employees.

She arrived at last at the Binney rooms, now occupied by Wise.

He was not in then and she found a chambermaid dusting about.

"I belong here," Zizi said, quietly. "I am Mr Wise's assistant; and, as he has doubtless already told you, you are not to chatter about him or myself. We are here on important business

matters and if you carry tales you will get into serious trouble. Do you see?"

"Yes, miss," said the woman, impressed by Zizi's air of wisdom and authority. "Mr Wise told me the same."

"Very well, then; go on with your work."

Zizi began forthwith to study the rooms. She found little of interest, for Sir Herbert had lived in them but a few months and had not cared to add any personal comforts or luxuries to those provided by the management. Therefore, the appointments were the conventional ones of furnished apartments, and were quickly passed over by the girl, who was looking for stray bits of evidence.

She didn't go through the papers and letters still on the writing table, for she felt sure they had been examined over and over by the police detectives and probably by Wise himself.

She was musing when the detective came in.

"Caught on to anything, Zizi?" he asked.

"Nope; that is, only one small hint of a possible question to be asked,—later. Where are you?"

"Progressing with the opening chapter. That's about all. But it's a corker of a case. I've seen the paper left by the dying man, and I'd stake my reputation that it's the real thing. I mean that it is the dying statement of a murdered man, and was written in a desperate effort to help along the discovery of his murderers. If he'd only been able to go on with it and tell the names!"

"Then there wouldn't have been any case, and we wouldn't be here. Go on, Wiseacre."

"Well, the two women at feud,—I told you of them,—are great! Miss Prall, spinster, and aggressively unmarried, loathes and despises Mrs Everett, a fascinating widow."

"Fascinating to whom."

"Dunno. Except to herself. But she's the dressy sort and is a blonde cat, while the Prall person is—well, I understand they call her the Grenadier."

"Who calls her that?"

"Dunno. It's in the air."

"How about these two women being the women meant on the paper message?"

"No. I thought of that, but I can't see yet how they could have joined forces, even though they both wanted the old chap out of the way. Nor can I connect them with the case separately,—as yet. But it seems to me that one faction or the other must be at fault, for there are no other women on the horizon."

"Chorus girls? Elevator girls?"

"I can't see it. To be sure, I've only dipped into things so far, but the crime is so skillfully planned and carried out—"

"It might have been impulsive and unpremeditated—"

"At the time it happened, yes. I mean, it may not have been planned for that moment, but it was planned beforehand and the criminal sprang to take his chance when it offered."

"Her chance."

"I use the common pronoun. When I say his or him, I merely mean the hand that struck the blow."

"Have you seen the paper,—the message?"

"I have it with me."

Wise produced the glass-protected paper and together they studied the writing.

"It's positively Binney's," Wise declared. "I've compared lots of his writing with it, and it's surely his. Again, it was surely written at the moment of his death, for Moore found him dying, and the pencil just dropping from his fingers."

"Oh, I don't doubt all that," Zizi said, impatiently, "but what does it mean? I've gone past the fact that women did it; I thoroughly believe that,—in fact, I think it means that women used the knife, but it may not, it may be merely that they were the primary causes. However, he knew, he was *sure* of the criminals who were to be punished. Now, if that *bo* means 'get both' there were only two. If it means something else there may be more than two women implicated."

"Oh, Lord, Ziz, don't gather in more than two suspects. Women don't form a club for murder."

"Women don't murder, as a rule, anyway. You know yourself, the small proportion of feminine murderers."

"That ought to make it easier."

"Not at all. These weren't professionals, who might be listed; they were women, two, most likely, who had a personal matter to settle with the Englishman, and—settled it."

"I grant you all that, except the personal matter. I can't help thinking the bun business is a factor, and though women did the murder, it may be they were interested in the sale of the buns."

"Reasons?"

"Because Sir Herbert Binney was a man who jollied round with little chorus youngsters and such, and they couldn't and wouldn't kill anybody. Don't look for the impossible, or so improbable as to amount to the same thing."

"I agree."

"Nothing has turned up to hint at Sir Herbert's connection, even acquaintance, with any older women or indeed any woman of a different stamp, of his own station in life, or in society at all. No woman who could be mentioned by name has ever had to do with Sir Herbert since he came to New York,—that we know of."

"There might be somebody though."

"Of course, there might. If there is, we'll find her. But we can't hunt a needle in a haystack. If she materializes, we'll spot her."

"Then, excluding the squabs, the only women tagged onto the case are the two Feudists."

"You've said it."

"And they didn't act in collusion?"

"Never!"

"Then it comes down to a decision between Miss Prall and her companion or Mrs Everett and her maid."

"Not necessarily her maid."

"Crickets! Not her daughter!"

"Oh, I don't know. I've just started, Ziz. Help me, don't jump around so."

"Well, bless his heart, he shouldn't be tormented. He should just be guided, counselored and befriended by his faithful

helper. Now, to start straight, what's the motive in each of these two cases?"

"Merely to get rid of the man who was for furthering the marriage of the two young people. Miss Prall knew that if Sir Herbert were dead, his fortune would be young Bates' without any conditions and the boy could go on with his inventing in peace. Then, she felt, he'd get so engrossed he'd forget about the Everett girl, and as the Everett mother plans to move away all would be well."

"If the Everetts are leaving, why should Miss Prall go to the trouble of eliminating the Bun man?"

"Point well taken, Zizi; but, you see, as long as the Bun man was around he nagged at nephew to go into Buns and give up his more congenial occupation."

"Pretty slim reason for a real live murder, I think."

"So do I. But it's the best we can get in that direction. Now, coming to the Everett suspects, the widow may have more reason for wishing Sir Herbert dead than we yet know of."

"All we know of is so he can't push along the romance of the youngsters."

"Exactly. And here's the conclusion of the whole matter. I conclude that those two women are the ones to be looked up, not, of course, acting together, but one or the other of them. If we can get anything on either, let's do so."

"And the business men?"

"I want to look those up, too. There's one Crippen, who considered buying out Sir Herbert's business. Also, he was an

old beau of the two enemy women. There may be a complication worth studying there."

"What is this bun business? I mean, does he merely sell the good will,—of what?"

"Oh, no; he sells his recipe. It's a secret process,—the making of Binney's Buns,—and the recipe is the thing. No one has ever been able to imitate them successfully. All attempts are dismal failures. But with the formula any one can make them. It's Sir Herbert's great source of anxiety lest the recipe, or formula, whatever they call it, should be discovered."

"Or stolen!"

"Stolen?"

"Yes, don't you see, he had the recipe and he was murdered for it."

"Oh, don't go off wild-goose chasing! It might be,—or it might be he was murdered for his watch and chain, which they didn't take after all,—but we have to have some shred of evidence to go upon."

"Sure we do. And, therefore, I ask you, where *is* this recipe?"

"Why, I don't know,—truly I don't."

Wise smiled at her as at a foolish child, but the saucy little brown face looked very sober as she said, seriously: "and you call yourself a detective! Why, Penny-piece of Wisdom, that recipe is the bone of contention. At least, if it isn't found, it is."

"And did the women murder him for that?"

"Like as not."

"Zizi, you're a smart little girl, but sometimes you don't see straight. Now, drop the recipe, or consider it by yourself some other time. Your stunt is to interest friend Bates."

"The nephew?"

"Yes. Don't flirt with him,—that isn't the *rôle*, but talk kindly to him, and thereby find out all you can about the Everett bunch. If you admire his sweetheart—"

"Haven't seen her yet."

"Well, you will. And then be real nice and girly-chummy with her, and so get both the lovers on your side. Then we can find out things otherwise out of our reach."

"Meaning the oldsters won't give up."

"Of course not, if they're guilty. I'll take hold of the Crippen end,—and then, if your hunch about the recipe has anything to it, it will come out,—and you sidle up to the lovers. We want to get quick action, for the murderer may get scared and run away."

"Shall I insinuate anything about the older women to—"

"Mercy, no! You see, Bates is scared to death now, for fear it was his aunt, and even more scared for fear it was Dorcas' mother! And those very real fears let Bates himself out,—if anybody ever had a thought of him."

"Oh, nobody could."

"No; well, there's your work cut out for you. Also—"

"Also I'll keep at the servants. I've got the housekeeper just where I want her, but there's a head chambermaid who'll bear watching and I'm rather interested in the night porter."

"Yes, he's a knowing one. Flirt with him—"

"Oh, no, he's not that sort. And, too, he's engaged to a Tartar named Julie, who would scratch out my not altogether unattractive eyes."

"Vanity Box! Well, your eyes do set off what would otherwise be a commonplace face."

Zizi made a face at him that was far from commonplace, and the talk went on.

They were indefatigable workers, these two, and what they planned carefully they carried out with equal care.

And even while she talked, Zizi was looking about the room for a possible hiding-place for the recipe, which, so far as she knew, existed only in her imagination,—and, she had a dim idea that she had found a direction in which to look.

CHAPTER XV
And Zizi

IN her own room, Zizi was holding a confab with the chambermaid, for whom she had sent.

"Yes, miss," the girl said, staring into Zizi's magnetic eyes. "I had the care of them rooms all the time Sir Binney was in 'em."

"Yes, Molly, I know you did, and I want to know a few things about Sir Herbert Binney. Was he a fussy gentleman, about germs, say, and—"

"Germs? miss, how do you mean?"

"Was he afraid of imperfect drains, unaired mattresses or careless cleaning?"

"He was not! Lordy, the germs coulda carried him off and he'd never noticed it. He wudden't know whether I swept or dusted rightly, or whether I gave the place a lick and a promise. He was wrapped up in his own affairs so's you could hardly get his attention to ask him anythin'. Why, miss?"

"Don't ask me why,—ever!" Zizi spoke sharply but not unkindly, and the girl remembered. "Now, Molly, the day before Sir Herbert moved in, he had the sitting-room cleaned and repapered. If he wasn't afraid of germs, why have new paper?"

"Well, the old stuff was a sight, miss. All over, a dark green sorta lattice work pattern with smashin' big red roses."

"Sounds rather effective—"

"A nightmare, that's what it was. Well, Sir Herbert, the minnit he looked at it he said, 'Rip it off!'"

"Did you hear him say it?"

"No, miss, the bellboy told me. He was luggin' up bags and things and he said the new man was a peppery cuss."

"Was he?"

"Why, no, he didn't seem that way to me. Easy-goin', I sh'd say. Absent-minded, now an' then,—av'rage generous, an' not payin' much attention to his surroundin's. That's the way *I* size up Sir Binney."

"And who do you think killed him?"

"Oh, Lordy, don't ask me that!" The girl looked frightened, and quick-witted Zizi, instead of pursuing the subject then, turned it off with, "No, indeed, when detectives are busy on the case, small need to ask outsiders."

"Not that I'm exactly an outsider, neither," and Molly bridled as with a sense of self-importance. "Of course a chambermaid, now, can't help seein' a lot of what goes on."

"Of course not," Zizi said, carelessly. "But she isn't supposed to tattle and I shouldn't dream of quizzing you."

"No, ma'am. Not but what I could tell things—"

"But you wouldn't. You might get into serious trouble if you did."

Molly looked at her sharply.

"As how, miss?" she said.

"Well, you see, it's very hard to tell anything just exactly as it happened, and if you should vary a shade from the truth, and

then tell it differently next time you might get arrested for—for perjury."

"Arrested! Do you mean that?"

"I certainly do. I've known girls to tell stories under stress of excitement and then try to repeat them and get all mixed up, and, oh, well, it's a dangerous performance."

"But if I just told *you*, now, miss?"

"What have you to tell? And why do you want to tell anybody?"

"I thought—I thought if I told I might get something for it."

"I like your frankness, Molly, and I don't mind offering you a fair price for your goods, *if* you can put 'em up. But can you?"

"Ma'am?"

"Do you really how anything of importance, that might lead to the discovery of the people who murdered Sir Herbert Binney? I don't want any hemming and hawing, but a straight answer."

"Well, I can't give you a positive answer, because I don't know myself. But I do know somebody has been in the rooms since, several times, searching about for something."

"What did this person seem to be looking for?"

"Belike it was a paper, for I could tell as how the desk drawers and the boxes in the cupboard had been moved."

"That's the sort of thing I want to know, Molly." Zizi spoke quietly and earnestly. "You can tell when things are moved as no one else can. You mean, of course, before Mr Wise took the rooms?"

"And once since. Why, last evening, when Mr Wise was out, somebody got in there."

"Who could it be, Molly?"

The earnest, chummy attitude of the inquirer made Molly feel at ease, and also anxious to please.

"I'm not sayin'," the chambermaid replied, a cloud passing over her face, "for I've no wish to get in jail, but it's somebody from the floor below."

Zizi knew the Everetts' apartment was on the floor below, but she said, "H'm, seventh floor, then. Who's down there?"

"I don't know, ma'am," and Molly's vacant stare proved her a good actress, and one determined not to give away any information.

This attitude showed Zizi that the girl was shrewd and canny, and she changed her tactics.

"There you go, Molly!" she exclaimed. "How do you *know* some one came up from the seventh floor? You state these things, and if you're not able to prove them—well, you know what I told you."

"But I heard the—the person come up the stairs."

"Stairs! A likely story! Why not use the elevator?"

"That's just it,—the—the person didn't want to be seen. So—"

"The person?"

"Yes'm, the person sneaks up the stairs and into the sitting-room—"

"Opening the door with a key?"

"Well,—you see, ma'am, I was in the bathroom,—and—"

"And the person didn't know you were there, and you made no sign?"

"Yes," eagerly. "Yes, that's the way it was; I thought I'd find out something—"

"And did you?"

But that time Zizi's eagerness proved her undoing.

For some reason or other Molly took alarm and shut up like a clam.

"No," she averred. "I couldn't see who it was, and as I peeked out, the—person ran away."

Zizi knew from the sly and obstinate look in her eyes that Molly was lying and that she intended to stick to it. She was nobody's fool, this Molly, and though Zizi was sure that she would yet sell her secret to the highest bidder, it was not altogether wise to begin the bidding at once. Also, Zizi felt certain that what the girl knew was of serious importance and it was imperative that Pennington Wise should learn the truth. But Zizi's ways were devious and she chose now to treat the matter lightly.

"Molly, you're a fraud," she said, laughingly; "you've built up a person of mysterious appearance and unknown sex, but I can't fall for your plan. I don't blame you for wanting to make a little easy money,—who doesn't? But you didn't pick a winner when you selected *me* to try it on! Go to somebody else with your wares. Try Mr Bates or Miss Prall."

The girl's face fell and Zizi smiled in satisfaction. But Molly grew belligerent and exclaimed, "Oh, very well, miss, but you'll be sorry. I *will* go to some one else with my story, but it will be to—"

"I know! To the person herself! Well, go on, if you can get to her undiscovered!"

"I can! With no trouble at all!"

"Not forgetting the danger you run of being arrested?"

"Danger! Pooh! You can't scare me that way? Beside, you'll never know—"

"Who the person is? I know already. Kate Holland!"

This was a mere guess on Zizi's part, and she said it to learn from Molly's expression how near right it might be.

To her surprise, Molly looked mystified.

"Kate Holland!" she whispered. "You—you don't suspect her, do you?"

"Do you?" Zizi shot back.

"Yes, I do,—or I did, until—"

"Until you saw the person?"

"Yes, that's it."

Zizi was about to insist on the name of the person when there was a tap at the door, and the head chambermaid insisted on having the services of Molly at once. The girl went away and Zizi went straight to tell Penny Wise all about it.

She tried the door of Wise's rooms and as the knob turned she walked in. But to her surprise the man sitting at the table in the sitting-room, and reading the newspaper, was not Wise but Mr Vail.

"Good afternoon," he said, a little blankly, as he rose.

"How do you do?" Zizi returned, with one of her attractive smiles. "I'm Mr Wise's assistant. Can I do anything for you?"

"I'm waiting here in hope he'll come in. I'm Vail,—I've rooms on the tenth. You may have heard of me; I'm interested in the Binney case, and I'd like a little talk with Mr Wise,—that is, if he cares for it."

"He will," and Zizi nodded confidently. "Have you any knowledge, suspicion or evidence?"

"None of those important commodities,—merely straws that may or may not show the direction of the wind."

"There's no knowing when Mr Wise will show up," Zizi observed; "don't you want to tell me? It'll be all the same."

"All the same! Are you and Mr Wise partners?"

Zizi flashed her best smile as she returned, "Practically. I'm only assistant, but what is told to me goes to him just as I get it."

"Accurate and careful, eh? Well, my information is regarding a woman I saw skulking in the halls the night of the murder. You see, it chanced that I came into the house and up in the elevator just before the tragedy occurred. I stood a few minutes at my door, before leaving the car, because Bob Moore and I were discussing the book he was reading. He's a good sort, and often when I come in late I give him a jolly to help along his weary watch hours."

"All right," chirped Zizi, "what followed?"

"Only that as we came up I heard some one on the stairs. They surround the elevator, you know, and though indistinct, I know I heard a tread on the stairs as we were at or near the eighth floor. But we came on up and then, as I say, we stood a bit talking. Then Moore went down again, and I, feeling curious

about the footsteps on the stairs, went around to the staircase and looked down."

"How far could you see?"

"Not far, because the stairs wind around the elevator well. But I went down farther and I caught sight of a woman with a shawl over her head—"

"What kind of a shawl?"

"Lord, I don't know! Grayish and softish, it looked, but the night lights are dim and I only caught a glimpse of this hooded figure moving stealthily along the hall. That's all, and if it's of any importance—"

"It doesn't seem to me to be of much,—what do you think?"

Vail stared at her. He was not accustomed to have his suggestions so lightly received. But he only shrugged his shoulders, and said:

"I don't think anything about it. I merely offer the information that there was a mysterious seeming woman lurking in the halls that night: If it means nothing to anybody, there's no harm done."

"No; certainly not. How tall was she?"

"Above average height, and gaunt of figure."

"About like Miss Prall?"

"Good heavens, I wouldn't say that!"

"Why not? Is it a crime to be of Miss Prall's appearance?"

"You're a funny little piece! Well, then, I may say the shape was somewhat like Miss Prall's, but I'm sure it was not she."

"How can you be sure it was not she unless you are sure who it was?"

"I can be sure anything is not anything else, without knowing positively what anything is!" and Vail glared at her an instant, and then both broke into laughter.

"It's all right," Zizi informed him; "I'm only pursuing my investigations according to orders."

"Oho! Am I being put through a third degree?"

"Sort of. But I think I've learned all you know. Or, wait, was the beshawled one of Kate Holland's style? You know to liken one woman to another in appearance doesn't necessarily accuse her of murder."

"No, that's true. Well, the woman I saw could be said to be like Kate Holland or Miss Prall either, in general outline, which is all I could discern of face or figure. But I can't see what either of those women would be doing prowling about the halls at two A. M."

"Unless it was in connection with the murder," Zizi said, straightforwardly. "They all have declared they were in bed and asleep but who's to witness that?"

"In the very nature of things, nobody," Vail said. "And now, I'll be going. I won't wait for Mr Wise just now, but I'll see him soon, if he cares to talk to me."

But just as Vail was leaving, Richard Bates appeared, and Vail tarried to speak with him.

"Any developments?" Vail asked.

"No," said Bates, despondently. "That is, nothing of importance. I say, Vail, what do you think about the Crippen deal? You know my uncle planned to see him that night regarding a sale of the business, and—"

"Did he see him?" Vail spoke eagerly.

"I don't know. Crippen's out of town—"

"He is! Don't you think you ought to keep tabs on him?"

"Why?"

"Only because he was interested in the Binney business."

"So were you."

"True, but Sir Herbert and I had our meeting and got over it long ago."

"He wanted to sell out to you?"

"You know all about it, Bates. Binney wanted to sell his Buns to anybody who would pay enough. Of course, in the event of your sticking to your refusal to Bun with him. If you'd agree to do that, he told me, he'd have no reason to sell. But he didn't want to carry it on alone, nor did he want to go in with anybody else. He wanted to sell outright to me, but his price was prohibitive and he wouldn't ease up on it a bit, so there was nothing doing. That's all our story."

"What did he want to sell you?"

"The good will, the bakery and fixtures,—in England,—why, the Buns, the Binney Buns, lock, stock and barrel."

"Didn't he have the recipe for sale?"

"I don't know. I assume that was included in the business, of course. As I couldn't dream of meeting his figures, we didn't go

into details."

"Did Crippen?"

"Dunno. I never heard what kind of a discussion they had. But what are you getting at? Why drag in Crippen?"

"Oh, hang it all, Vail, I don't want to drag in anybody; and yet I'd be willing to drag in anybody, if I had a trace of suspicion against anybody. For, unless a new suspect turns up pretty quick, I'm afraid they'll pitch on my aunt."

"Ridiculous!"

"I know it seems so to you and me, for we know Aunt Letitia, but these strangers, this Wise and Miss Zizi, here," bowing in her direction, "they are already looking—"

"Now, Mr Bates, that's too bad!" cried Zizi, her black eyes shining with real sympathy, as she saw the young man's distress. "Please be sure Mr Wise and I never look seriously in any direction unless something definite points us that way. And by elimination not many suspects are left."

"Who are eliminated?" asked Vail, gravely.

"We have cut out all thought of the chorus girls, and the girls employed in this house," Zizi began.

"All the house girls?" asked Vail, quickly.

"I'm not sure about that, but I mean the elevator girls, the telephone girls, the news-stand girls and the pages. I don't know anything about the upstairs maids, chambermaids, cleaners, and such. But there's been no suggestion of those."

"Why should there be?" said Bates, impatiently. "I know myself, no stupid little servant killed my uncle. It was done by

some one with brains, with power, with influence. He was not a man to be killed for some petty reason; he was a man of big interests in a business way, and of wide experience socially. His murderers—or murderesses—must be found, but I don't think we've got on the right track yet."

"And do you think Crippen is a promising way to look?" asked Vail, scrutinizing Bates' anxious face.

"I don't know. But he was mixed up in the Bun matter; he hadn't finished the deal, as you had, and as one or two other companies had, and it seems to me he ought to be looked up, at least, before we go on."

"I've looked him up," and Wise's form came into view around the corner of the hall. He joined the group that still stood by the door of the Binney apartment. "I've looked into the Crippen connection with the Bun deal, and there's nothing doing. Binney and Crippen were on the outs but not because of Buns. *They* were settled some time before the murder. Still, Crippen did want the recipe, and was willing to buy that without the bakery or any paraphernalia of the business."

"Is that so?" and Vail seemed interested. "Wouldn't Binney sell that?"

"I'm told not."

"Who told you?"

"Crippen's people,—down at his office. I talked with a secretary, and I've talked with some of the 'Crippen's Cakes' directors. They want the recipe and nothing else."

"Queer," mused Zizi, "that a recipe should be so valuable! Why can't they buy a bun and analyze it, and so find out how it's made?"

"That's been tried," Vail informed her. "But the secret can't be learned that way. There's an unknown ingredient, or the things are put together in some unknown order or way,—but no one has yet been able to imitate successfully the Binney Bun. I'm a bread man, and I know that."

"Well, if you've struck off Crippen's name, where do we stand?" Richard said, looking gloomily at Wise.

"We stand pat for the women," the detective declared. "And *I* have from the first. I can't doubt or disbelieve a dying statement,—can you, Mr Vail?"

"Surely not. That is, on general principles. But if this pursuit of women leads to—"

"No matter where it leads," Pennington Wise said, firmly, "the trail must be followed up. Murder demands a life for a life. The danger is that suspicion may be directed toward the wrong women. But that is our great care, and I can't think it will happen."

"It must not happen," said Vail, sharply, and, with a sympathetic glance at Richard Bates, he went away.

"Now, Mr Bates," said Wise as the others returned to the sitting-room and closed the door, "I've been pretty busy and I've some good news for you. I think we can say positively there is no danger of suspicion coming to rest on your aunt or her companion, Miss Gurney."

"Thank God," cried Richard fervently.

"The matter of the paper-knife is, I think, just as Miss Prall explained it; she did give it to Sir Herbert to be mended, and he did have it in his pocket the night he was killed."

"And the assailant did use it?" asked Zizi.

"Yes; or so it seems to me. But all this has nothing to do with the owner of the knife, for you see, Binney himself was the temporary owner to all intents and purposes."

"Then that makes the deed seem unpremeditated and impulsive," said Bates.

"Yes, it makes it seem so,—though it may not have been. But since my day's work, I've gathered suggestions and testimony,—though no material evidence, to turn my thoughts strongly toward the women on the seventh floor, Mrs Everett and her—"

"Her maid!" Bates interrupted, speaking with a desperate haste, as if afraid Wise would say some other word.

"No," said Wise. "Her daughter."

"You lie!" Bates cried, and Zizi, her face white and drawn, said "Oh, Penny, she *couldn't*!"

"Couldn't strike the blow, maybe, but she helped her mother, and did it by keeping watch. She was seen in the hall with a scarf over her head."

CHAPTER XVI
Testimony

"IT'S inconceivable, it's impossible, it's incredible!" Richard Bates declared. "I'll never believe it! Mrs Everett, even if she had the will, could never accomplish such a deed!"

"But that Kate person could," Zizi suggested, and Bates turned to her.

"But Mr Wise doesn't accuse the maid,—he accuses the daughter! A gentle, innocent young girl—"

"Now, wait a minute," put in Wise; "I don't say the daughter was at fault,—she might have been a tool without knowing it. I mean, she may have kept watch for her mother—"

"What do you mean,—kept watch? Miss Everett is not a numskull to be told to 'keep watch' and blindly obey."

"Nor is Mrs Everett ninny enough to expect that," Wise returned. "But the lady is clever enough to persuade her daughter to keep a lookout on some plausible pretense—"

"But I don't understand," Bates persisted; "just how do you reconstruct the crime,—on that theory?"

"Why, say Mrs Everett was in waiting, till Binney should come in—"

"Where was she?" Bates demanded.

"Perhaps behind one of the big pillars in the onyx lobby,—a dozen people could hide behind them—"

"Rubbish! But go on."

"Well, say she hid there with the knife, which she had procured from Binney earlier,—he admired her, you know—"

"He admired every pretty woman. Go on."

"And then, when Vail came in, and Moore took him up, the coast was clear, and just then Binney happened in—"

"Strange that he should happen in just then!"

"Well, but he *did*, didn't he? He *had* to, didn't he, to get there at all? You don't think he was hiding there *waiting* to be killed, do you? Well, then Binney came in, and the lady,—or her maid, Kate,—stepped out and stabbed him, and then ran up the stairs, —and in the halls Miss Everett was watching to see that there was no one looking on. She need not have known what her mother was up to,—but—she was seen in the halls that night by two separate witnesses."

"Are you sure it was Miss Everett they saw?" asked Bates in a tone of anxiety rather than surprise.

"Positive; they described her dress and ornaments exactly."

"But she might have been in the halls for any purpose—"

"At two o'clock in the morning?"

"She might have missed her mother from the apartment and stepped out to look for her."

"But then she would have been in negligée or with a wrap over her nightclothes. She was seen fully dressed, as she had been in the evening."

"Well," and Bates spoke defiantly, "what does it prove? You haven't fastened the crime on Mrs Everett yet. You haven't even any real evidence against her."

"Oh, yes we have,—but look here, Mr Bates. It won't do for you to take that antagonistic attitude toward me and my work. As you know, I told you I must follow wherever the trail leads, and this indicative direction must be followed up. It may be that the Everetts are not the 'women,' and if so, I'll find that out. But I may say, that so far, there are, to my mind, no women suspects but the Everetts or—your aunt."

"I'd rather you'd suspect my aunt! I'd rather the criminal should be my aunt—"

"But, Mr Bates, I can't consult your preferences as to the identity of the criminal!"

"Now, don't you worry, Mr Bates," Zizi said, gently, "I don't believe your sweetheart or her mother are mixed up in this thing at all."

"Why, Ziz?" and Wise turned a mild, questioning glance her way. He had great faith in the opinions of his little helper, and was always ready to revise his own judgment if hers contradicted it. For Zizi never spoke thoughtlessly or without reason. And this last remark of hers indicated some knowledge or indication that might turn the trend of suspicion.

"Because that little fluff of a Mrs Everett is too good-natured to kill or to direct the killing of anybody."

"She isn't so awfully good-natured!" exclaimed Bates, involuntarily. "You should hear her talk to my aunt!"

"Oh, yes, I know about that feud thing," and Zizi smiled tolerantly; "but that's a sort of obsession or idiosyncrasy of the two women. Really, Mrs Everett is a good-natured lady, and you

needn't have any fights with your mother-in-law, unless you make them yourself."

"Don't be flippant, Zizi," warned Wise. "This isn't the time for banter."

"It's the time for action," said Zizi, springing from her seat. "I'm going straight to Miss Prall with the whole story, and I think we'll learn a lot. Are you men coming with me?"

Like sheep, Bates and Wise followed her.

Pennington Wise was really more at a loss than he had ever before found himself. The indisputable evidence of the dying man's message was all he really had to work on, and his work on that was not productive, so far, of success. The women accused *must* be found. But Wise, while he realized there were no other suspects, couldn't think the two ladies of Feud fame were the ones.

True enough, they could both be said to have had motive, and, in the house, anybody could be said to have had opportunity, yet both motive and opportunity were slight ones, and the latter largely dependent on a convenient chance.

It seemed absurd to think of Mrs Everett,—or Kate Holland,—waiting behind a pillar, and then seeing the victim walk in! And yet he had walked in; somebody had met him and stabbed him, so the other suppositions were, at least, plausible.

The three went to the Prall apartment, and, strange to say, found Miss Letitia in a quiet, placid mood.

She looked at them with a sort of wondering interest, and bade them be seated.

"You've been here several days, now, Mr Wise," she said; "have you made any real progress?"

"It's hard to say, Miss Prall," the detective replied; "but if you'll give me the benefit of your opinions I may derive help from them."

"Opinions on what?" and the sharp old face began to show its more usual expression of asperity.

"On whether the murder of Sir Herbert was the work of Mrs Everett or not."

"Of course it was! I don't say Adeline Everett held the knife, but she was the instigator and commander-in-chief."

"What makes you think so?"

"Because I know her. I know her soft, purring ways, and I know of the tiger's claws that are inside her velvet grasp."

"Well, it seems strange, does it not, that she says pretty much the same about you?"

"Me! Adeline Everett accuses me?"

"Yes; she says that perhaps you didn't actually strike the blow, but that you were aided and abetted by your companion—"

"That Eliza! She wouldn't kill a fly, and Adeline knows it!"

"She suggested that your nephew might have helped you in the actual crime—"

"Look here, Mr Wise, you're talking mighty queer talk. I suppose murders and killings are so much a part of your life that you think little of one more or less; but it isn't so with quiet, law-abiding citizens. And if you think I'm going to take this accusation of another woman calmly, you're very much

mistaken. I'm going at once to see Adeline Everett, and if she did say that to you,—if you haven't misrepresented or exaggerated —"

"But wait a minute, Miss Prall. You are angry,—and perhaps justly so,—at her accusation of you. Remember that you've also accused her of the same crime!"

Letitia Prall looked at him. "That's true," she said; "now, as a detective, you can judge between us. I'll go to her rooms or you may bring her here, and let us accuse each other. We can't both be guilty, and I can judge from her manner whether she is or not, even if you can't do that."

"It would be a good test," agreed Wise. "But I'm pretty sure that if either of you really is the guilty person that you will be able to pretend you are not, so plausibly as to deceive Sherlock Holmes himself!"

"I could easily fool you if I wished to," said Miss Prall, with dignity, "but in this instance I've no occasion to do so."

Zizi looked up at this, and said, "You could fool a man, Miss Prall, but you couldn't fool me."

"Why not, child?" and the older lady looked at her curiously.

"Because one woman understands another. And I know that if you planned to or wanted to kill a man, you would choose to do it in some less conspicuous place than the onyx lobby."

"Nonsense, Zizi," Wise said, "no one would choose their own apartment—"

"No; but Miss Prall would have waited for a chance on some of these upper floors,—she never would have arranged the scene

downstairs."

"You're right, girl," said Letitia Prall, "though it's uncanny for you to think that out. I've wondered many times why any one chose so public a place."

"But that showed cleverness," Wise insisted. "You see for yourself how difficult of solution it makes the mystery. It gives room for assumption that some one came in from the street."

"There's room for that assumption, if you like," Zizi declared, "but what've you got to back it up? Nothing."

"What have you got to back up any theory?" cried Bates. "Nothing."

"Then let's get something!" exclaimed Letitia, rising from her chair. "Come on with me to Mrs Everett's and we'll get something to back up some theory, I'll be bound!"

Glad of the chance,—for which he had maneuvered,—to see the two inimical women together, Wise followed the others to the Everett apartment.

The meeting between the two would have been comical, but for the underlying element of tragedy that pervaded the whole situation.

"Why are you here, Letitia Prall?" was Mrs Everett's greeting.

"To ask you why you accused me of murder," answered Miss Prall, her manner more the Grenadier than ever. "I'm told you sit in judgment on me and I ask an explanation."

"The facts explain themselves," returned the blonde little lady; "it's not hard to understand why I think you killed a man whom you had often expressed a desire to see dead!"

"Huh!" sniffed Miss Prall. "I've often expressed a desire to see you dead,—but I haven't killed you—yet! You know perfectly well, Adeline, that saying I wish a person dead, is merely a habit of mine,—as you say 'I nearly died when I heard it!' Now, you didn't nearly die at all, and death is not so trivial as we seem to think it, when we talk so at random. Lots of people, especially women, throw around phrases such as, 'I thought I'd die,' or 'I could kill you for that,' without any real meaning to the words at all. So, once and for all, Adeline Everett, stop using those silly phrases as evidence of my criminal tendencies! And suspicion thus being lifted from me, I denounce you as the one who killed Sir Herbert. And I have far more reason, for you were not only interested in his demise because of the affair between your daughter and my nephew but you had an ax of your own to grind. You wanted Sir Herbert for your husband. Yes, you may well blush—"

"Hush up, Letitia Prall! Am I to be insulted in my own house? Are the raving words, the wicked thoughts of a misguided, vicious woman to be believed by those who hear them? I protest! I,—shut up, Letitia!"

For Miss Prall was talking at the same time, and her biting, scathing words were only unheard because of the higher pitch and louder tone of Mrs Everett's voice.

The audience undertook to pour oil on the troubled waters but with no success.

"Keep still, Richard," Miss Prall ordered, when Bates began, "Please, Auntie—"

And Mrs Everett screamed "Shut up!" to Zizi, who, almost laughing at the strange scene, endeavored to placate one or both the combatants.

"You know you tried your best," declared the irate spinster, "you know you inveigled him in here, you wheedled and cajoled and fawned and flattered—"

"How well you know the process!" screamed Mrs Everett; "because you tried all your own pitiful, ineffectual cajoleries,—and all to no avail! I didn't have to make any effort to entice Sir Herbert to call on me,—indeed, he came so frequently, I was forced to dissuade him, lest people talk—"

"People always talk about you,—and rarely in flattering terms! You are well known through the house for what you are, and if you weren't already planning to leave, you would be put out,—that I happen to know."

"You don't know any such thing. You made that up—"

"I didn't!"

"You did!"

"Hush!" Wise's peremptory tone brought a momentary silence. "Now that you've reached the stage of silly vituperation, it's time to call a halt. This foolishness is uninteresting as well as unpleasant. You two ladies will answer a few questions,—in the name of the law!"

The last phrase, high sounding and threatening, had its desired effect. Like most women, they had a hearty and healthy fear of that mysterious thing called the law, and when it was held over their heads it acted as a rod.

"You have accused one another of the murder of Sir Herbert," Wise began, trying to sound formal and awe-inspiring. "Have you, Mrs Everett, any grounds for such accusation other than a foolish speech about wishing the man was dead?"

"No," was the sulky answer; "that is, I have no definite grounds, but I've known Letitia Prall for many years and I know her to be quite capable of murder or any other crime!"

"A belief in capability is not evidence," said Wise, sternly, and turned to Letitia.

"Have you, Miss Prall, definite evidence against Mrs Everett that you accuse her?"

"She wanted the man dead—"

"That's not evidence!" Wise fairly thundered; "answer my question."

"Well, then, I've no eye-witness proof of her crime, but I do know that her daughter was out in the hall, keeping watch—"

"Keeping watch over what—or whom?"

"Keeping watch to see that the way was clear; that her mother might return unseen from the ground floor to her own apartment by way of the stairs."

"You mean you think Mrs Everett walked up seven flights of stairs after the deed?"

"I couldn't do it," admitted plump Mrs Everett, drawing deep breaths at the mere thought of such a thing.

"Nonsense!" retorted Miss Prall. "There's only six flights, and they're easy steps. But, if not for that, what *was* Dorcas out in the hall for, all dressed, at that time of night?"

"She wasn't, so far as I know," replied the mother.

"It all hinges on that," declared Wise, with as much earnestness as if he believed himself what he was saying.

As a matter of fact he was striving, so far in vain, to gather some hint, some side light as to which way to look for the criminal, for he did not really think either of these women guilty, in deed or intent.

"What do you mean—all hinges on that?" Zizi asked, in rather a loud, clear tone.

Wise took her hint,—it was a standing arrangement with them,—and answered in an equally loud voice:

"I mean, that if the presence of Miss Everett in the hall that night can be innocently explained, it will save Mrs Everett from—"

"From arrest!" spoke up Letitia, grimly.

"Arrest!" Mrs Everett gasped, and burst into hysterical weeping.

Zizi's covert glance toward an inner door was rewarded and Dorcas flung it wide open and ran into the room.

"I can explain it!" she cried, "I've been listening, and I'll tell. I was in the hall late that night, but it wasn't as late as two o'clock. Whoever says it was tells an untruth. I was in the hall about midnight to,—to meet somebody."

"Me," said Bates, calmly. "This is no time for hiding any facts. I wanted to see Dorcas on a special and important matter. She had tried all the evening to get away from her mother but that lady was too watchful, so Dorcas sent me word by a maid that

she would grant me a moment's interview in the hall after her people were asleep. This she did, and while we have no wish to exploit it, yet it was nothing wrong. Dorcas is my affianced wife, and as her mother is not in favor of our union it has been necessary for us to meet clandestinely."

"And this was about midnight?" asked Wise, apparently not interested in the clandestine part of it.

"Yes, not any later."

"It was twelve when I got back to my room," averred Dorcas. "Any one who tells a different story is making it up."

There was no doubting the statement of the clear young voice or the truth stamped on the sweet young face, and all present believed her.

Mrs Everett forebore to chide, so interested was she in learning if this confession would clear her from suspicion.

"We must look up the girl who told the story," said the detective. "The statement was about a veiled figure, and the assertion that it was Miss Everett was not from a dependable source. But I believe Miss Everett implicitly, and I want to see about some other details before I go further in the matter at all.

"I'll see that girl who told you the yarn, Penny," Zizi said, thoughtfully; "you go and look up those other people,—you know—"

"Very well, go ahead. It was Molly."

"Of course it was. She's a *News-Herald*. If you want to know *anything* ask Molly. I'm going to ask her now."

"I'll go with you," volunteered Dorcas, looking a little nervous and agitated.

"Come along," said Zizi, smiling at her, and Zizi's smile was full of comfort and cheer.

Mrs Everett began to say, "Oh, no, my child," but before she could protest Dorcas and Zizi had left the room.

"You see," Zizi began to the other girl as they went to Zizi's room, "Molly is crooked."

"Lame?"

"No," and Zizi smiled at such ignorance of crime slang. "No, that means she isn't honest or, rather, honorable. She makes up yarns to suit herself, and often to suit some one else who pays well for being suited. Now, we'll get her in here and quiz her, and you say little or nothing at first, until we see what's doing."

Molly was summoned and Zizi began in a straightforward way:

"Molly, you saw some one in the halls the night of the Binney murder. You've said it was Miss Everett. Here's Miss Everett, do you still say so?"

"Lord, no, Miss. I've found out who it was, and it was a man."

"You said a woman."

"I know I did, but I—I made a mistake. It was sorta dark, you know."

"And you take back the statement that you saw a woman?"

"I do, miss."

"Who paid you to do that?"

"Nobody, miss." Molly's round, blue eyes seemed truthful, but Zizi was not sure.

"Well, now that you've decided you saw a man, who was the man?"

"That I don't know—for sure."

"Who do you think it was,—or, might have been?"

"I'm not saying,—for why should I make trouble for an innercent human bein'?"

"You're stalling until you see whether we'll pay you more for your information or he'll pay you more to suppress it! Now, you're foolish to act like that, for nine chances out of ten it was an innocent man, anyway."

"Oh, no, miss; oh, no!"

"What do you mean by that?"

"The man was up to no good. He was searching in Sir Binney's room."

"Oh, he was. Then tell us his name, or the Law will make you do so."

"You ain't the Law, miss. I'll be goin' now, and when the Law has anythin' to say to me, lemmeno."

"But wait a moment," said Dorcas; "just tell me this. Did the man get what he wanted from Sir Herbert's room?"

"Yes,—I mean, I don't know. How should I know?"

Angry at the slip she had carelessly made, Molly ran away and was down the hall and around a corner before the girls realized she had gone.

"I know what they're after," said Dorcas. "Suppose I tell you,—and perhaps we can do something to help along."

CHAPTER XVII
A Woman Scorned

"WHOEVER was searching in Sir Herbert's room," Dorcas began, "was after that recipe for the Binney Buns."

"What's that?" asked Zizi, to draw the girl on.

"Why, there's a special recipe for the buns, of course, and it's very valuable,—the buns can't be made without it,—and I can't help thinking that Mr Crippen or some messenger of his has been hunting around there for that recipe."

"Why not a messenger from some other of the bakeries interested? The Popular Popovers, or whatever it's called,—or Mr Vail's company?"

"Maybe. But I know that Mr Vail and Sir Herbert decided not to make a deal, and I think that Popular company also decided not to. Well, anyway, I'm sure whoever was prowling in the Binney apartment was in search of that recipe, which was hidden there."

"Well, but what good does it do to surmise that? Or even to know that?"

"I don't know, but I thought if Mr Wise knew somebody was hunting there for a definite purpose, he could find out who the somebody was, and it might be the murderer."

"A woman,—or women?"

"No—I suppose not—and yet, why not? A messenger from the bakery people,—any of them,—of course, *could* be a woman,—

one of the maids, or some employee of the house."

"Suppose we go and search."

"Look here, Miss Everett, you are a sensible girl, and I'm going to speak frankly. You know that suspicion now is directed toward the aunt of Mr Bates or—"

"Or my mother! Yes, I do know it, but either supposition is so ridiculous—"

"Wait a minute; no matter how ridiculous a suspicion may seem to the people involved, it must be met and denied or it remains. Now, if suspicion in the two directions mentioned are so absurd, we must prove their absurdity."

"How?"

"Either by making it clear that the suspected women could not have been guilty or, better still, finding the guilty party."

"Let's do that, then! I know my mother had no hand in it,—and I'm equally sure that Miss Prall didn't—"

"But your surety and your certainty are of no evidential value."

"That's why I say let's find the real women! You are a detective just as much as Mr Wise is one,—I'm an interested principal, just as much as Richard Bates is,—can't we do something big?"

"Good! That's the talk! We'll try, at least. Let's go to the Binney rooms now, and see what we can see."

"Small chance of seeing anything in rooms that Mr Wise has already searched."

"Oh, I don't know. Set a woman to catch a woman! If women have sought and found that recipe, we'll find their traces. If it's

still there, we must find the paper ourselves."

Zizi looked at Dorcas in surprise.

"You're a trump!" she exclaimed; "good for you! Come along, we'll see what we can do."

The two girls went to the Binney rooms and began their search. But it seemed useless to look through papers in the desk or books on the book shelves after Wise and the other detectives had gone over that ground.

"Was Sir Herbert sly and canny?" asked Zizi, thoughtfully.

"Oh, yes, indeed. He was never caught napping. If he hid that paper, he hid it in a good place. It won't be found easily. We must think of some inconspicuous place,—in the back of a picture, or tacked up above the inside of a drawer."

"Clever girl!" and Zizi's admiration increased. "Here goes, then."

They both looked in all such places as Dorcas had suggested, but with no success at all.

Wise came in while they were thus busy, and smiled approval at the work in progress.

"Hello," he said, suddenly, as Dorcas peered behind a picture that was hung low, "the wall paper isn't faded at all in this room. Must be new."

"It is," Dorcas told him. "Sir Herbert had this room repapered when he took the apartment."

"Why?"

"Said he didn't like the paper that was on."

"And yet he could stand that frightful Cubist nightmare on the wall of the bedroom! H'm! Well, well! Very interesting—ve-ry interesting! See, Ziz?"

The black eyes of his little assistant sparkled. "Of course I do! He had the room papered in order to hide his precious recipe."

"Right! Now, we may have to peel off the paper from the whole room,—for it's not probable he kindly left it folded, in order to help us along."

Dorcas listened with growing surprise. Here was a clever detective, indeed, to jump to this important conclusion,—if it was the true one.

"Let's feel around," Zizi said, and began passing her little brown paw over the walls.

"Not in plain sight, Ziz," said Wise, and he started moving out a bookcase to look behind it.

They felt nothing that seemed like a paper behind the wall paper, but if the recipe had been placed without folding at all it would doubtless cause no appreciable extra thickness.

"Maybe he left a memorandum," suggested Zizi, "or even a cryptogram in his desk telling where he hid it."

"Not likely," said Wise. "You see he wouldn't forget and he had no reason to make the thing clear to anybody else."

"Molly said somebody was in here prowling," Dorcas reminded, "so somebody knew there was a paper to look for."

"But all this paper business presupposes the bread or cake people, and they aren't women," objected Wise.

"That paper about the women may be misleading," Zizi said, thoughtfully. "They may have been back of the murder, or, on the other hand, they may have been the tools of men responsible for the murder."

"But you can't get away from women's connection with the crime. Whether directly or indirectly guilty, they are the people to look for,—they are our quarry, and they must be found."

Dorcas paled and her red lower lip quivered. "Oh, Mr Wise," she begged, "do be careful! It would be so awful if you suspected innocent women just because of the paper! Even granting it is a genuine dying message, it may mean so many things—"

She broke down and Zizi ran to her and threw her arms around the shaking form.

"Come, dear," she said; "you're all unstrung; don't look around here any more now. If there's a paper to be found, Penny will find it."

She led Dorcas away and took her back to her own home, and, urging her to lie down, she soothed the throbbing forehead with her magnetic finger-tips and soon Dorcas fell asleep.

Zizi tiptoed from the girl's bedroom, and encountered Mrs Everett on her way out.

"Do sit down, Miss Zizi," the lady urged. "I'm pining for some one to talk to. Tell me now, do you think Letitia Prall is at the back of all this? Not of course, the actual criminal, but in any way implicated?"

The plump little blonde lady fluttered about and finally settled herself among some cushions on a couch and turned an inquisitive gaze on her visitor.

"What would be her motive?" Zizi parried. "To say she did it for young Bates' sake sounds poppycock to me."

"Me, too," and Mrs Everett smiled. "If she did it, she had a deeper motive than that! A more disgraceful one."

"Meaning?"

"Well?—not to put too fine a point upon it,—breach of promise!"

"Was there such a breach?"

"Oh, I'm not saying,—but Letitia certainly wanted to marry Sir Herbert—"

"Why, I thought he was your admirer—"

"Oh, well," and the lady bridled, "I'm not saying anything about that—but if he did admire me, that doesn't mean I smiled on him. I'm no husband hunter,—and poor Letitia is and always has been—without success, poor thing!"

"And it went as far as an engagement?"

"I only surmise that from what Miss Prall has hinted—not, I must say, from anything poor Sir Herbert said! But you know what old maids are—"

"How comes it that, while you and Miss Prall are at such odds, you have the same admirers? I'm told Mr Crippen is a beau of both."

Zizi sensed the widow's willingness to exploit her conquests and utilized the knowledge.

"Oh, he didn't care for Letitia! He was rather polite to me, but I had to discourage him. One can't be too careful. And if you give a man a kindly smile, he thinks he may presume on it."

"Was Sir Herbert like that?"

"Yes, indeed! Although he was Richard's uncle, he was no kin to Richard's aunt Letitia, and he didn't hesitate to tell me how little he admired that Grenadier type of woman."

"Preferring more feminine natures?"

"Yes," Mrs Everett preened herself. "How you do understand, Miss Zizi! I expect you're a heart-breaker yourself."

"Oh, rather!" and Zizi's big dark eyes rolled roguishly. "But I say, Mrs Everett, if this breach of promise case is a true bill, it's a straw to show which way the wind might have blown,—at least."

"Well, don't quote me,—but I do know Letitia Prall's nature and you know it's said, 'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.'"

Zizi faced her squarely and with a sharp look said, "You know, Mrs Everett, you're making a very grave accusation. Do you really think Miss Prall is—"

"Yes, I do! That man was killed. He said women did it. There are no women sufficiently interested in his death to be suspected of it except Letitia and Eliza Gurney. So, much as I hate to think so dreadfully of any woman, I've no choice but to suspect them. Of course, it's a grave accusation, but you asked me and it's my duty to say what I think."

From all this Zizi gleaned one bit of satisfaction. She felt positive that Mrs Everett herself was innocent. She had never really suspected the little widow but her name had been mentioned as a possible suspect, and Zizi wondered. Now, she decided that, whatever might be true about Letitia Prall, Mrs Everett could not, were she guilty herself, talk the way she did about her enemy. Not so much the accusation as the way it was said. Had Mrs Everett killed the man, or assisted or directed the murder, she would have shown fear, secretiveness, or at least a harassed demeanor. Instead of which, she had apparently no interest in the matter save a vindictive desire to see her enemy in the clutches of the law.

Anyway, thought Zizi, I cross her off from my list of suspects, and now for the Prall side of the story.

Leaving the Everett apartment Zizi went up the stairs to the eighth floor, and though she was headed for Letitia Prall's, she paused at the Binney rooms.

"Come in," called Wise, as the sleek black little head peeped in at the door; "I've struck it!"

"Where?" asked Zizi, intuitively knowing that he had found the hiding place of the paper.

"Here," and Wise drew her attention to a fairly large mirror that was above the mantel in the sitting-room.

"Why, that thing was screwed fast," the girl said, "and we couldn't move it."

"I unscrewed it—and, behold."

Loosening the screws, which he had only partially readjusted, Wise lifted down the mirror, and disclosed a rectangular space where the wall paper had been cut away.

"The bakery men!" Zizi cried. "Why 'women,' then?"

"Now, look here, Ziz," and Wise replaced the mirror, "get it in your head that women may have been interested in getting this recipe. To suppose a woman may have been acting for a man, while possible, is not probable."

"Why not? Suppose a woman, say a working girl, so devoted to a man that she'd commit murder at his bidding—"

"No man could be such a coward as that!"

"Oh, Penny, what an exalted opinion you have of your sex! Of course he could! A man who would murder would use a woman to help him murder. Of course he offered a big inducement,—marriage maybe—"

"You're romancing—"

"No, I'm not; I'm reconstructing. I see a man wanting that recipe desperately. He sets a woman to get it. He may not have meant her to go to such lengths as murder, to get it, but—"

"All right, but stick to facts. The recipe has been stolen by someone in the know. Some one who realized why Sir Herbert had his room repapered—"

"Clever trick, wasn't it?"

"Yes, but unnecessary. He could have put the thing in safe deposit."

"Englishmen are queer that way. And he may have distrusted our American institutions—"

"Well, anyway, there's no doubt he did hide the paper behind the new wallpaper, and there's no doubt somebody has stolen it. I suppose you agree to that?"

"Yea, my lord! But it may have been taken after the murder."

"Of course it was. Why kill the man, else?"

"Why kill him at all?"

"To get him out of the way, in order to get the recipe and manufacture the buns."

"For whom?"

"That's just it. There are several bakeries interested,—others beside the principal ones, of which we know. Now we must find out which baker could have worked his deadly scheme through women."

"Does this let out the Prall or Everett suspects?"

"To my mind, yes. But I never suspected them, anyway."

"Nor I. And I've exonerated Mrs Everett to my satisfaction, and I'm going to find out for sure about the Grenadier. Now, there's that Molly,—"

"Yes, she's in it, up to the neck, I believe. And she's such a liar —"

"Oh, Penny, you can't let a lady liar fool you, can you? Get her up here, and put her through an inquisition. *I'll* tell you if she's telling truth or not."

"Yes, you're first class at that."

Molly was summoned and when she appeared Zizi saw at once something had happened. The girl's demeanor was entirely changed. She was more self-important and self-assertive, and

Zizi wondered if she had learned something definite against some suspect.

"Molly," began Wise, "we've found that some one has been—prowling round in here, just as you said,—and you are to tell us who it was."

"That I don't know, sir," the girl replied, speaking with a flippancy that was careless and almost impertinent.

"Then tell us all you do know. Was it a man or a woman?"

"A woman, sir."

"Why, Molly!" Zizi cried, "you told me it was a man, and that he was up to no good. Those were your very words."

"Oh, no, you don't remember correctly. I said it was a woman."

"That is an untruth," Zizi stated, calmly. "So, now we know you are telling us falsehoods, we must find out why. Has some one paid you for it? We will pay you more for the truth. Might as well, Penny. This girl only sells her statements, true or false."

"All right, Molly. But we only want to buy the true ones. Now, what'll you take for all you really know about the matter, and guarantee to be the strict truth?"

"I don't want any pay. And the truth is that the person I saw was a lady—I mean a woman."

"Care to mention names?"

"I don't know who it was. I just saw a veiled figure—"

"Cut out the veiled figure!" cried Zizi. "You're making it up. There never was any veiled figure,—you saw a man hunting around here, while you were hidden in the bathroom. You know he was looking for something of value hidden in these

rooms. And—" Zizi's black eyes fairly seemed to bore into Molly's own as she went on, "you know he got it. Also, you know who the man was,—and you won't tell, and you say it was a woman, because—because what, Molly?"

"I don't—I mean—" Molly blushed scarlet and dropped her eyes; then, with a revived bravado she cried, "It *was* a woman, —I tell you it was a woman!"

"Stop lying!" said Zizi sternly, "she's doing that, Pen, because the man she saw has ordered her to."

"No, he hasn't," Molly declared, but Zizi said:

"Yes, he has, and what's more, he has bribed you by—"

Zizi's penetrating glance overcame Molly's boldness and she trembled in silence as Zizi said, "by marriage!"

Even Wise looked up in amazement; "What *do* you mean, Zizi?"

"Just what I say. Molly is wearing a very bright, new wedding ring. She didn't have it yesterday. Molly knows the truth we're looking for, and she won't tell because it implicates a man who has married her to keep her quiet! Is it Bob Moore, Molly."

"Yes, ma'am," said the girl, in a low tone, and with a very apparent look of relief.

"Then it isn't," said Zizi triumphantly; "I know by the way you speak! Who is it?"

"It isn't anybody," Molly said, but she said it with a furtive glance at their faces in turn; with a hesitating air of uncertainty as to what course to take; with a futile attempt at her old

impudent manner. "I'm not really married; lots of us girls wear a wedding ring to fool people."

"Rubbish!" said Zizi, contemptuously. "There's no sense in that! You are married,—or, you think you are—aha, I thought so!"

For Molly's scared glance betokened that Zizi had struck on the truth. Quite evidently she was apprehensive lest the aspersion should prove a correct one. "He married you in an extremity of fear,—fear that you would tell of his visit to the room,—now, who could it be, Penny? It's easy enough to judge if we guess right,—but I can't think of any one. It must be some employe of the house,—or—"

"Or some tool of some of the bakery people," said Wise.

"Look higher," jeered Molly, her self-confidence returning, as she realized their uncertainty.

"Good heavens!" cried Zizi, "you can't mean Richard Bates!"

"Yep," said Molly, and her eyes danced with a wicked glee.

"Oh, incredible!" wailed Zizi. "Yet I've been afraid of him all along. You see, he's shielding his aunt. I'm sure Miss Prall is—"

"You said you didn't believe her guilty," spoke up Wise.

"I know I did, but what other way can we turn? It can't be any less important person who married Molly to shut her up. There can't be any reason that would make Bates do so, but to shield his aunt from suspicion. Molly says now it was a woman searching the room,—of course, she didn't want the recipe,—that's a side issue; she wanted some letters or something in connection with the breach of promise—"

"Come, come, Zizi, you can't take that little yellow-topped widow's yarn of a breach of promise too seriously—"

"Why not? She is innocent herself, I know. She suspects Miss Prall, I know. She gave a perfectly good motive,—why, Pen, if women killed that man where's another motive that can hold a candle to the 'woman scorned' idea? Come, Molly, own up; was it Miss Prall searching the room?"

"Oh, no, miss!" and Molly's eyes bulged with such real surprise that there was no doubting her sincerity this time.

"But how could you tell, if the figure was a veiled one?" asked Wise.

"Oh, I could tell it wasn't Miss Prall,—gracious, no!"

"What was the—the person looking for,—I mean where was the search made?"

"All around."

"In the desk?"

"Yes, and in the table drawers and the cupboards,—and—and—everywhere." Molly waved a vague hand about the room.

"And behind the mirror?" Wise sprang this at her suddenly.

The girl's face blanched. "How—what made you think of that?" she gasped, her voice quaking with fear.

"Ah, that brings back the picture, does it? You saw the—the person, hunting about; you saw him go to the mirror, gaze at it thoughtfully, then unscrew it, and then—then he succeeded in his search? Eh?"

"Yes," Molly breathed, fairly hypnotized into the truth by Wise's suggestive air and tense, compelling voice.

CHAPTER XVIII
Fitted to a T

"NOW, look here, Molly," and Wise fixed her with his piercing gaze, "you say Richard Bates married you. I don't believe it for a minute, but I do believe somebody married you, or pretended to, to keep your mouth shut on an important matter. It may have been Bob Moore, or—but I'm going to find out who it was, and I'm going to find out now. If, as you say, it was Richard Bates, why did he do it?"

Molly gulped in a scared, desperate fashion and her eyes rolled wildly about as she replied, "To shield somebody else."

"Who?" Zizi snapped at her.

"You know well enough," the girl sullenly answered.

"But you said it was *not* Mr Bates' aunt."

"Oh, no, it wasn't."

"Then,—it was—"

"Yes, it was."

"Dorcas Everett, she means," Zizi said, scornfully. "As well accuse me! You must know, Molly, you can't put over any such a bluff as that!"

"All right, you needn't believe it if you don't want to. But Miss Everett and her mother are the 'women' you are after."

"That child couldn't do such a thing!"

"Oh, *she* didn't do anything but obey her mother's orders blindly. Mrs Everett and her maid, Kate Holland, committed the

murder and Dorcas kept watch in the hall without knowing why she was doing it. Now, Mr Bates knows all about it,—and he knows that I know. And I said I'd tell if he didn't marry me, so rather than have his girl accused, or his girl's—"

"Zizi, why do we listen to this pack of lies?" exclaimed Wise. "This girl is making up as fast as she can talk,—"

"Indeed I'm not!" cried Molly, seemingly in desperation; "I can prove all I'm saying! Here's my wedding ring—"

"Yes, but Mr Bates didn't give it to you," said Zizi, scornfully. "I know who did, though, and if you'll own up it will be better for you."

Now Zizi didn't know at all,—in fact, she wasn't sure that Molly hadn't bought the ring herself, but both Wise and Zizi were at a loss to know which way to turn next, and they were omitting no possible chance at a stray bit of information.

"How do you know?" demanded Molly, and again she looked frightened.

"Now, see here, Molly," Wise tried again, "if you'll tell us the truth you'll be rewarded. But if you don't, you'll not only lose your reward but you'll find yourself in the biggest pickle you've ever been in."

"I'm not afraid," was the pert reply. "My husband will look after me."

"Yes, if he *is* your husband," Zizi jeered, and saw again that Molly's greatest fear was that the wedding had not been a real one.

Therefore, Zizi argued, there had been a ceremony and why would it have taken place except to shut Molly's mouth? And who could have been the bridegroom except the one interested in suppressing Molly's secret, whatever it might be?

"Clear out, Molly," said Wise, suddenly. "Don't clear far, for if you try to leave this house you'll be arrested. Merely go about your work as usual, and say nothing to anybody. If you'll take my advice you'll run pretty straight, for I don't mind telling you you're in deep waters!"

"It's a bad lookout, Ziz," said Wise after Molly had gone; "any way you take it it comes back to either the Pralls or the Everetts. There's no other bunch of women implicated. I've been into everything thoroughly and if we go by that written message of Binney's,—and how can we ignore it?—we've got to get women, and the women are the—"

"The Everetts," said Zizi moodily.

"Oh, no, the Pralls!"

"When you say the Pralls, you mean Miss Letitia and Miss Gurney, I suppose."

"Rather Miss Gurney and Miss Letitia. If they did it, the Gurney woman struck the blow at the bidding of the other. If the Everetts did it, the Holland woman stabbed at the order of her mistress. But I incline to the Pralls, and that explains Bates' anxiety to shield his aunt."

"He'd be equally desirous of shielding his sweetheart's people, but in any case, I can't believe *he* married Molly, either really or by a fake ceremony."

"It isn't like the chap,—he's an all-round straight one; but he's young, and in a desperate emergency,—well, anyway, things must be brought to a head. I'm going for Bates now."

The detective found his quarry and asked him for an interview.

The two men went into a small reception-room on the ground floor and Wise closed the door.

"There's no use in my going on, Mr Bates," he began, "unless you want to see the thing through to a finish. I must tell you the evidences are pointing to women,—whom you would be sorry to see accused."

"I know—I know—" and Richard bowed his head in his hands and groaned. "It isn't my aunt, I'm positive of that. I've not only satisfied myself by confidential talks with her, but I've proved it by definite facts and testimony of servants and others. Now, I suppose you hold that the only other possibility is—"

"Yes, I'm obliged to think that. I know what you mean, and this is no time to be squeamish. We both mean Mrs Everett and her maid, Kate. If there were any doubt about the written paper,—"

"There isn't. It's my uncle's writing, undeniably. He was found with the pencil just falling from his nerveless hand. There's no escape from all that. I've been over and over it. There's no chance of the chorus girls or house girls,—oh, I've been over all the possibilities,—and there's only Mrs Everett left. Honestly, Wise, I'd rather it had been my aunt! That may sound dreadful to you, but after all, she's only my aunt, while Mrs Everett is Dorcas' *mother*! And I'd rather bear sorrow and disgrace myself

than to have my little love bear it. Can we drop the whole thing?"

"Not very well now. Bates, are you in any coil with Molly?"

"Molly? The chambermaid? No. Why?"

"Good! I believe you. She says you married her."

"What does she say that for? Is she crazy? But it doesn't bother me; I've troubles of my own. I can't think anybody will believe her."

"No; she said it to shield someone else. And of course, a man. So, that's our one hope. Who is that man?"

"What matter? We're looking for a woman."

"But the man might be a help. Why could Molly make a man marry her, unless he were desperately afraid of what she could tell?"

"But it may all have no connection with our case."

"I've got a hunch it has. And I'm going to find out. And, first of all, I want to go over the ground again of scrutinizing the place where Sir Herbert died."

"No evidence there. The floors have been scrubbed many times."

"But the marks remain."

The marks that had been drawn round the blood spots at the scene of the crime were still faintly visible, and Wise knelt down to study them. It seemed utterly useless to Bates, for what could possibly be gained from scrutinizing the floor where the dead man had lain?

Yet Pennington Wise found something!

The body had fallen at the base of one of the great onyx columns, near the side wall of the lobby. In fact, the head and shoulders had fallen against the wall, as if the victim had been driven back by his pursuers till he could go no farther.

And, after scanning the floor, Wise's eyes traveled on to the onyx wall itself, to the heavy surbase of wide, smooth onyx blocks, and on the pinkish, mottled surface his trained eyes descried a pencil mark.

"Gee!" he cried, explosively, "oh, I say!"

Quickly he ran for the paper the dead man left, stripped from it the protecting glass panes, and with the utmost care he laid the paper itself against the onyx block that showed a pencil mark.

His eyes bulged with surprise, his face flushed with excitement, and he jumped up from the floor, where he had pursued his quest unnoticed save for a disinterested passer-by.

"Bates!" he cried, as he returned to the little reception-room and found the young man still there and still in deep dejection, "Oh, Bates!"

"What?" and Richard lifted his head to see the excited detective brandishing the paper in a wave of triumph.

"What do you think? Listen, man, put your whole mind on this! When Sir Herbert was stabbed he fell to the floor."

"Yes."

"He rolled over toward the wall,—or fell against the wall,—and he had just sufficient strength left to get a pencil and a scrap of paper out of his pocket and write that message."

"Yes,—good heavens, Wise, I know all that!"

"Sure you do. Well, now hark. He didn't place that paper on the floor to write on it; he held it up against the wall."

"Well?"

"Well, and part of the writing,—the first part, fell on the wall and not on the paper—"

"What!" shouted Bates. "What was it? Does it change the meaning?"

"*Does* it! Well, rather! The part on the wall is one letter,—the initial letter of what he wrote—"

"What was it? Tell me, Wise, don't keep me in suspense!"

"I don't mean to. It was a T,—a capital T."

"Well? I don't see—"

"Why, it makes the message read 'Two men did this,' instead of 'women did this.' The words are run together, for he couldn't lift the pencil—"

"He always did that,—his writing always shows connected words!"

"So, there's the message as clear as print! The T on the onyx just fits to the first mark on the paper,—any one can see that,—and we have the dying statement, 'Two men did this.' With what is undoubtedly the further instruction, 'get both'."

"What a revelation! Who can they be?"

"It ought to be easy to find out. They are, of course, some of the bakery men. And Sir Herbert's idea was that doubtless one would be apprehended, but for us to get both of them."

"And the women are out of it!"

"Ab—s—lute—ly! But we must go warily. You see, the guilty men have been glad to hide behind the idea of 'women' which came to their rescue by the merest chance. It's all so easily understood now. Sir Herbert, with dying effort and failing eyesight, wrote hurriedly, and efficient, though he was, his haste made him begin his writing off the paper instead of on it. His habit of connecting words, or his inability from weakness to lift his pencil, made the words 'Two men,' the capital missing, seem to be 'women.' Think how delighted the two men must have been at this! I doubt if they realized what did happen,—more likely they thought Sir Herbert denounced women for some reason of his own. Now, to catch them we must walk delicately, like Scriptural Agag, and spring on them unawares."

"Which way shall we look?"

"Take the Bakery men in turn. Crippen first, I should say."

"Vail?"

"Vail's out of it. You see, he was in the elevator with Moore when it happened."

"Unless Vail and Moore were the two men, and trumped up the whole story."

"I don't think that. Moore's no criminal; he had no motive, and the whole weight of evidence and testimony goes to prove Moore truly interested in the solution of the mystery. He's worked harder on it than you know. I've watched him. No, Bob Moore is not the man! And that lets Vail out."

"Well, then—but I won't suggest. You can dictate."

"First let's get Zizi and tell her."

The girl was summoned and when Wise told her what he had found her big, black eyes danced with delight.

"Who's the criminal, Zizi?" asked Wise.

"The man who married Molly," she returned, promptly. "Also the man who hunted and found the recipe. Molly saw him doing that, and made him marry her or she'd tell. If he could contrive a mock marriage of course he did. Or it may have been a real one. That doesn't matter. It's his identity that matters. Two men! That man, then, and another."

"Vail's out of it," Wise informed her, and told why. "Then, there's Crippen,—"

"No;" Zizi interrupted, "don't go further afield. It's—wait a minute,—get Bob Moore in here."

This was accomplished and Zizi did the interrogating.

Care was taken not to divulge the new evidence and when Zizi asked him to detail his actions at the exact time of the crime, the man wonderingly recounted his oft-told tale.

"Did Mr Vail seem about as usual when he was talking to you, going up in the elevator?" Zizi asked, casually.

"Yes, but very chummy and talkative, more so than I ever knew him to be before."

"Yes? And did he detain you at this floor,—or did *you* keep *him*, talking about the detective story you were reading?"

"Why, I don't know. Come to think of it,—I should say he detained me,—for he was so interested,—and, too, I never would have presumed to talk to him so familiarly if he hadn't egged me on."

"Think back, now. Did he really keep you from going back by talking to you? Could you say he did that purposely?"

"I can say that may have been the case," Moore averred, thinking hard. "But he seemed really interested—"

"As he never had been before," commented Zizi, and adding, "and as he never has been since?"

"No; he's never been so chummy with me since. I've tried to talk to him about the Binney murder case, but he almost snubbed me,—at least he shut me off mighty quick."

"That's all, Moore, and not a word to any one of anything that has been said in this room!"

"Now," said Zizi, after Moore had disappeared, "Vail's one; who's the other?"

"Why, Zizi, Vail was in the elevator—"

"Penny, I've known that 'Vail was in the elevator' all through this whole matter. I've been told a thousand times that Vail was in the elevator! It's been fairly rubbed into my noddle that Vail was in the elevator! Why, don't you see, that's Vail's alibi! His being in the elevator is his safeguard! Oh, Penny-poppy-show, sometimes I despair of *ever* making a detective out of you! Well, my dear child, Mr Vail is one,—as I remarked,—and I found him; now you may find the other, and then we'll have the 'two men' who 'did this.' Get busy."

"S'pose, since you're so smart, *you* find the other one," said Wise, with no trace of jealousy in his tone. He was as elated at Zizi's cleverness as if it had been his own, and he believed her implicitly.

"I can do it," she said, calmly. "Send for Molly."

"Yes, there's the key to the situation," Wise agreed.

Richard Bates sat still, wondering if the joyful news that no one he cared for was implicated could really be true! He awaited Molly's coming with impatience, longing to get the whole matter cleared up.

"And so, Molly," Zizi began, when the girl came into the room and Wise had closed the door behind her, "and so it was Mr Vail who married you!"

A suppressed shriek answered them, and Molly glared like an angry tiger. "No!" she screamed, "*no*!"

"Useless talk," said Zizi, "your fright and your excitement give the lie to your words! Though your words are oftener lies than not. Now, Molly, you don't dare go contrary to Mr Vail's orders, I know, but don't you think you'd better do that than to go to jail?"

"I don't know—Oh, I don't know *what* to do," and the girl broke down and wept so piteously that Zizi was sorry for her.

"There, there, Molly," she said, "I'll take care of you. You're only a tool in the hands of a villain; you stay by me, and I'll look after you. Penny, we want Vail."

They got Vail. At first he brazened it out, and finally, when he was cornered, he turned state's evidence to save what he could of his own skin.

It seemed, Vail was determined to make the deal for the Binney Buns, and, as a last resort, had waylaid Sir Herbert on

his way home from the Hotel Magnifique after the dinner to the chorus girls.

With Vail on that occasion was a friend of his, one Doctor Weldon, who was a skillful surgeon, more careful in his surgical operations than in his mental or moral ones. He was Vail's tool, by reason of past historic incidents, and the scheme had been planned by the two conspirators.

Binney was invited to Dr Weldon's home, not far from The Campanile, and there, from midnight on, both Vail and Weldon tried to persuade the Englishman to consent to Vail's terms.

But Binney was obdurate and finally went home, accompanied by the two men. When near The Campanile, Vail darted on ahead, and managed adroitly to get into the elevator with Moore and be on the way up when Binney and Dr Weldon entered the onyx lobby.

The rest was easy. Binney had the Prall paper-knife with him and the Doctor knew it. With it, the skilled surgeon stabbed his victim and made away at once. Sir Herbert, dying, but with mind alert, wrote the fact that two men were responsible for his death; and whether he tried to continue with 'get both' or 'get Bob's evidence' or 'get bakery,' or what was in his fast clouding brain, they never knew.

But when to the surprise of the criminals, women were suspected, they felt so freed from suspicion that they took no care about it.

Vail, however, was keen for the recipe, which was, in part, why he had Binney killed, and he made many attempts to find it in

its clever hiding place. When he did find it, Molly knew of it, and in order to keep the girl quiet he married her, with, however, a mock ceremony.

Discovering this, Molly was so angry that she told on Vail, and he, in turn, told on Doctor Weldon.

All of this was disclosed promptly, and justice took its course with the "Two men."

It would be pleasant to write further that the historic feud of the "women" who had been so keenly suspected was settled as satisfactorily. But not so. The two opposing forces seemed to take on new vim from the revelation of the truth about the murder, and each positively seemed angered that the other had not been found guilty.

This may not have been the real truth at the bottom of the hearts of Miss Prall and Mrs Everett, but certain it is that, though they might not have desired conviction for one another, they greatly enjoyed suspicion.

"At any rate," said Miss Prall, "Adeline did set her cap for Sir Herbert, and I think that's a crime in itself."

And Mrs Everett remarked, "Poor man! but he's better off than if Letitia Prall had caught him! Which she tried her best to do!"

The young lovers, relieved of all fears that their people or each other's people were implicated in crime, were so emancipated from fear of any sort, that they dared to plan their marriage without the consent of their elders.

Said Richard, "We're going to be married, anyway, Aunt Letitia; you can understand that! And your own conduct you may

shape as you choose."

Quoth Dorcas: "I'm going to marry Ricky, mother. If you consent all right,—if you don't, I'll elope."

And the Feudists, though incensed to the point of exasperation, had a certain secret feeling of satisfaction that the wedding would add fuel to the flames of their somewhat smoldering fires of wrath.

"Bless 'em," said Bates, as the honeymoon began, "they ought to be grateful to us for giving them something new to fight about."

"They are," said Dorcas.

THE END

The Come Back

Carolyn Wells · First published 1921

CHAPTER I
The Prophecy

EVEN when Peter Crane was a baby boy, with eyes the color of the chicory flowers that grow by the wayside along New England roads, and hair that rivaled the Blessed Damosel's in being "yellow like ripe corn," he was of an adventurous disposition.

His innocent face was never so devoid of guile, his winning smile never so cherubic as when he remarked that he would "jes' run froo the front gate a minyit," and the next instant he was out of sight. Far afield his roving spirit led him, and much scurrying was needed on the part of nurse or mother to bring him back.

At four he achieved a pair of most wonderful russet-topped boots,—aye, even with straps to lift himself over a fence, if a fence came his way. And these so accentuated and emphasized his world-faring inclinations that he came to be known as Peter Boots.

The name stuck, for Peter was always ready to boot it, and all through his school and college days he led his willing mates wherever he listed. He stalked forth and they followed; and, as he stopped not for brake and stayed not for stone, the boys who eagerly trailed Peter Boots became sturdy fellows.

And now, at twenty-seven, Peter Boots was more than sturdy. He was tall and big and strong, and the love of adventure, the

dare-devil spirit of exploration still shone in his chicory blue eyes, and his indomitable will power was evident in his straight fine mouth and firm jaw.

He had traveled some, even before the war, and now, comfortably settled in his chosen niche and civilly engineering his way through the world, he grasped at vacation seasons because they offered him a chance to don his boots and be off.

This year he had a grand plan,—its objective point being nothing short of Labrador.

He had read many books of the North lands, but a delightful chance meeting with a doctor who lived up there gave him a sudden impetus to go and explore a little for himself. His decision to start was instantaneous, and there remained but to make the necessary arrangements.

For Peter Boots these arrangements consisted merely in getting two congenial companions, and to them he left all minor details of paraphernalia and equipment. Not that Peter was lazy or inclined to shift his burdens to others' shoulders, but he was so engrossed with the itinerary and calculations of distance, climate and season that he had no time to engage guides or buy camp outfits.

But the two men he picked,—and who jumped at the chance,—were more than willing and perfectly capable of all this, and so all details of the expedition were carefully looked after.

There had been opposition, of course. Peter's parents were emphatically unwilling to let their only son run dangers, all the more fearsome because only vaguely apprehended.

But their big boy smiled genially at them and went on with his calculations.

His sister, too, pretty Julie, besought him not to go. "You'll get lost in the ice," she wailed, "and never come back to me—and Carly."

Now Carly,—otherwise Miss Carlotta Harper—was a disturbing element in the even tenor of Peter's life, and of late her disturbance had attained such importance that tucked away in a corner of his big, happy heart was a cozy, cuddly little notion that when he came back from Labrador he would take her to embark with him on a certain Great Adventure.

Perhaps her womanly intuition sensed danger, for Carly joined with Peter's sister in her entreaties that he spend his vacation nearer home.

"But I don't want to," stated Peter, with the air of one giving a full explanation.

"That settles it," sighed Julie; "what Peter Boots wants is law in this house."

"Autocrat! Tyrant! Oppressor!" and Carlotta wrinkled her little nose in an effort to express scornful disdain.

"Yes," Peter agreed, with his benignant smile, "despot, demagogue, dictator, oligarch, lord of the roost and cock of the walk! It's a great thing to be monarch of all one surveys!"

"To the surveyor," flouted Carlotta, "but if you knew what the surveyed think of you!"

"I'd be all puffed up with pride and vanity, I suppose," Peter nodded his still golden head, though Time's caressing fingers

had burnished the yellow to a deeper bronze.

"You'll break mother's heart," suggested Julie, but in a hopelessly resigned tone.

"Only the same old break, sister, and it's been cracked and mended so many times, I'm sure it'll stand another smash."

"Oh, he's going, and that's all there is about it," said Carlotta with the air of a fatalist.

"I'm going," Peter assented, "but that isn't all there is about it. I'm coming back!" and he looked at the girl with unmistakable intent.

"Maybe and maybe not," she returned, with crushing carelessness, whether real or assumed.

"Yes, indeed, maybe and maybe not!" put in Julie. "You don't know about the prophecy, Carly! Shall I tell her, Peter?"

"Tell me, of course," and Miss Harper looked eagerly interested. "Who prophesied what? and when?"

"Oh, it was years ago," Julie began, "we met a lot of gypsies, and mother would have them tell the family fortunes. And one of them said that Peter would go off on a long journey and that he would die a terrible death and never come home."

"Oh," Carly shuddered, "don't tell me any more!"

"But the more is the best part of it," said Peter, smiling; "you see, mother was so upset by this direful news, that another gypsy took pity on her and amended my cruel fate. The second seeress declared that I must meet the destiny number one had dealt me, but that to mitigate the family grief, I would return afterwards."

"As a spook?" cried Carlotta, "how interesting!"

"Perhaps; but it doesn't interest me at present You see, this trip is not the fatal one—"

"How do you know?" from Julie.

"Oh, it's too soon. That old prophecy isn't fairly ripe yet. Moreover, I'm not ready for it. I'm going to Labrador,—and I'm coming back,—and then, if all goes well, perhaps I'll never want to go away again. And if not,—" he looked at Carly, "I may be glad to take the last and final trip! But if I go on with the program and return as my own ghost, I'll lead you girls a dance! I'll haunt you in season and out of season!"

"Pooh, I'm not afraid," Carly tossed her head; "I've no faith in any of this spiritist foolery."

"Don't call it foolery, my child," said a serious voice, as Peter's father came into the room.

Benjamin Crane gave the impression of power and gentleness, a fine combination and rarely seen in its perfection. A man of sixty, he looked older, for his thick hair was white and his smoothly shaven face was lined with deep furrows.

He joined the group of young people, and it was indicative of his nature that there was no pause in the conversation or appearance of constraint of any sort.

"But it is foolery, Mr. Crane," Carlotta defended, "I've tried the Ouija Board myself, and it's a silly business."

"Not so silly as to condemn something you know little or nothing about," Mr. Crane said, in his serious, kindly way. "My dear Carlotta, even though you don't 'believe in' the

supernatural, do try to realize that your lack of belief doesn't bar the rest of us from having faith in revelation."

"Oh, that's all right, Mr. Crane," Carly wasn't a bit offended, "don't mind me! Believe all you want to. But, do you believe in this 'Gypsy's Warning' about Peter? That's different, you know, from the usual claptrap."

"It's not exactly a question of belief," Mr. Crane said, slowly. "You will, I am sure, agree that Peter may be killed on some of these wild and dangerous adventures in which his soul delights. Let us hope the day is far off, if it must come at all. And as to his spirit's return,—that is, of course, possible,—to my mind, at least."

"If possible, then extremely probable," declared Peter, laughing; "I've just told the girls, Dad, that I'll haunt them like a continuous performance, if conditions allow. Want me to appear to you, too?"

"Don't be so flippant, Son. If you die while away from us, and if your spirit can return and communicate with me, I shall, indeed, be glad to receive such messages, no matter through what medium."

"Oh, goodness, gracious!" exclaimed Carlotta; "not through a medium, I beg of you, Peter! I don't want spook messages that way! I don't mind a nice little Ouija or Planchette, but a common, blowsy, untidy medium person,—and they're all like that,—I can't stand for!"

"Why, you little rascal, what do *you* know about mediums?" Peter Boots frowned at her.

"I went to a *séance* once,—but, wow! never again!"

"I should hope not! You stay away from such places, or I won't come home to you at all,—dead or alive! How would you like that?"

"Not at all, oh, despot, oligarch, Grand Panjandrum,—or whatever you call yourself. Please come back, and all will be forgiven."

It was tea time in the Crane home, and though the home was only a summer cottage, up Westchester way, yet the big living room, with its hospitable easy chairs and occasional tables, its willow and chintz, gave an impression of an English household. It was late in July and, though warm, it was not sultry, and the breeze coming in at the big windows was crisp and fresh.

Mrs. Crane drifted into the room almost at the same moment two men appeared from outdoors.

A happy complacency was the chief attribute of Peter's mother, and this spoke from every smile of her amiable face and every movement of her plump but still graceful form.

As Peter adjusted the cushions she took a low willow chair and smiled a greeting at all, including the newcomers.

These were Kit Shelby and Gilbert Blair, the two companions of the Labrador trip.

They were good-looking, well set-up chaps, quite evidently unable to talk of anything save the plans for the momentous journey.

"Got a wonder for a guide," began Shelby, as soon as decent greetings had been made. "He's just been let loose by Sir

Somebody of Somewhere, and I nailed him. Name o' Joshua,—but we can stand that. He really knows it all,—without continually proclaiming the fact."

"I'm thankful that you've a fine guide," murmured Mrs. Crane, in her satisfied way. "It means so much to me to know that."

"You're right, Lady Crane," assented young Blair. "And old Peter will have to obey him, too."

"Of course I shall," put in Peter. "I always bow to authority, when it's greater than my own. Oh, won't it all be great! I'm crazy to start. Think of it, Dad,—we three fellows sitting around a camp fire, smoking our pipes and spinning yarns of an evening, after a long day's hike over the ice and snow!"

"Thought you were going in a canoe," said his sister.

"Part of the way,—but, later, we abandon the craft and hoof it."

"Maybe and maybe not," said Shelby. "It all depends on the weather conditions. But the season is just right, and we'll have good going, one way or another, I'm sure."

"You're the surest thing I know, Kit," Gilbert Blair said; "now with no hint of pessimism, I own up I look for pretty hard lines a good bit of the time."

"Calamity Howler!" returned Shelby; "why damp our enthusiasm like that?"

"Can't damp mine," and Peter beamed with glad anticipation. "Let the hard lines come if they like. I'm expecting them and expecting to enjoy them along with the rest."

"Pollyanna Peter!" chaffed Carlotta; "shan't you mind it if the blizzard blows down your tent and the dogs run away with

your dinner and your feets give out?"

"Nixy! I'll set up the tent again, get some more dinner from the larder and rest my feet for a spell."

"That's right, boy," said his father, "that's the spirit. But do take enough provisions and, if they run low, make a dash for home."

"Just my idea, Dad, exactly. And as Shelby's looking after the commissariat, and Blair attending to the tents and cooking outfit, something tells me they'll be top hole. Maybe not such traps as these—" and Peter nodded toward the elaborate tea service being brought in and arranged before Mrs. Crane, who was in her element as hostess.

"No, you poor boys," she said, "I suppose you'll drink out of horrible thick china—"

"Not china at all, ma'am," corrected Blair; "lovely white enamel, though, with blue edges—"

"I know!" cried Carlotta, "like our motor lunch-box."

"Yes, that sort, and not bad, either. Oh, we'll rough it more or less, but it won't be absolutely primitive,—not by a long shot!"

"It'll be absolutely perfect," said Peter, dreamily gazing off into space, and seeing in his mind great white stretches of snowy landscape, or black, gurgling holes in ice-bound rivers.

"You are so ridiculous!" declared his sister. "You're a regular Sybarite at home. You love easy chairs and pillows and fresh flowers all about, and all that,—then you want to go off where you'll have nothing nice at all,—not even a laundry!"

"Right you are, Sis. The Human warious is hard to understand. Come along, Carly, take me for a walk."

Rather slowly the girl rose, and the two sauntered forth, across the wide veranda, across the lawn and down a garden path. Neither spoke until, coming to a marble bench, they sat down and turned to look into each other's eyes.

"Going to say yes before I go, Carly, or after I come back?"

"After you come back," was the prompt response.

"Oh, good! You promise to say it *then*?"

"Well, I don't say how *soon* after."

"I'll decide on the soonness. Then I take it we're engaged?"

"You take it nothing of the sort! You know, Peter Crane, you can't boss me as you do your own family!"

"Heaven forbid! Why, dear, I want you to boss me! Our life together will be one grand boss,—and you can be it!"

"Don't be silly, I'm in earnest. I couldn't be happy with a dominating, domineering man."

"Of course you couldn't. But I assure you I'm not one. You see, I only dictate in my own family because they like to have me to do so. Mother would be awfully upset if I didn't tell her what to do. Dad the same,—although I'm not sure the old dear knows it himself. And as for Julie,—why she just depends on me. So I naturally gravitate to the place of Grand Mogul, because I can't help it. But with you, it's different. You're a whole heap wiser, better and more fit to rule than I. And if you'll rule me, I'll be greatly obliged,—honest, I will."

"Oh, you're so absurd, Peter! I don't want to rule, either. I want us to be equally interested in everything, and have equal say in any matter."

"All right,—equality goes. I'll race you to see which can be the equalest. Now, are we engaged?"

"No, Peter, not till you come back."

"But I want to kiss you, and I can't, I suppose, until we are engaged. Oh, can I?"

"Of course not! Take your hand off my hand."

"Lordy, can't I even touch your hand?"

"Not with that ownership grasp! I am afraid of your possessive qualities, Peter."

"Meaning just what?"

"Oh, that if I do give myself to you, you'll own me so—so emphatically."

"I sure shall! And then some. Don't imagine, my child, that I'll accept you with any reservations. You'll be 'mine to the core of your heart, my beauty'! Bank on that!"

"I do,—and if I'm yours at all,—it *will* be that way. But wait till you come back. There's time enough. I suppose there's no chance for letters?"

"No; not after the first few days. We'll be out of reach of mail very soon."

"And you're returning?"

"I want to be home for Christmas. Kit thinks we'll make it, but Blair is some doubtful. So, look for me when you see me."

"Alive or dead?"

"Carly! What made you say that?"

"I don't know." The girl shuddered and her eyes stared into Peter's. "I seemed to say it without any volition,—the words just

came—"

"Well, don't let them come again. I don't like it a little bit. I'm coming home alive, very much alive,—and I'm coming home to claim you,—remember that."

"Unless either of us falls in love with some one else. Those girls of the far North are beautiful, I hear."

"An Eskimo with a nose ring? No, thank you! My heart is true to Poll! But don't you go and set your somewhat fickle heart on another man, 'cause if you do, I shall have to kill him, much as I'd regret such a necessity."

"My heart isn't fickle! What do you mean?"

"Just what I say. I think it is. I think my little black-eyed, rosy-cheeked Carly is quite capable of being on with a new love whether she's off with the old or not."

"Oh, Peter," and the black eyes showed moisture, "how cruel you are!"

"Isn't it so, Carly? Tell me it isn't,—I'll be so glad!"

But the coquettish glance that answered him was not entirely reassuring.

"Anyway," Peter pleaded on, "tell me you like me better than Kit or Gilbert. Tell me that if I'm a prey to green-eyed jealousy up there in the camp, at least, I needn't envy either of those chaps."

"Of course not!"

"Oh, you torment! Your words are all right,—but your emphasis is a little too strong. Carly, look me straight in the eyes and tell me you don't care for either of them!"

"Either of your eyes?"

"Silly! Well, yes, then, tell me that!"

The chicory flower eyes looked into the great, dark ones, and for a moment there was silence. The blue eyes were sweet and true, and they burned with a strong, deep lovelight. The eyes that gazed into them fell a little and seemed unable to meet them squarely.

"What is it, Carly? What is it, dear?" he begged.

"Nothing," she said, lightly. "I do l-like you, Peter,—better than any man I know—"

"Better than Kit Shelby?"

"Yes."

"Better than Gil Blair?"

"Yes."

"They're the ones I most feared. And mostly because I didn't want to go on a trip with a man I'm jealous of! That would be a fine kettle of fish!"

"Well, you won't do that. Don't worry about them,—or any one else."

"Oh, you blessed little girl! Carly, dearest, why can't you say yes, now? Won't you, Carly,—please."

The caressing voice was low and gentle, the pleading blue eyes were very earnest, but Carlotta still shook her head.

"When you come back," she repeated.

"All right, then," and Peter's face showed one of its masterful looks. "I'll accept your decree,—as I can't very well help myself,

but just as sure as you're sitting there, Carly Harper, I'm going to kiss you!"

And he did; gathering her into his arms with a gentle insistence and kissing her squarely on her surprised red lips.

"There!" he said, "I guess you'll remember now that you belong to me,—whether you call yourself engaged or not! Mad?"

"Yes," she responded, but the one swift glance she gave him belied her words.

"You'll get over it," he said, cheerfully. "I'd like to kiss you again, though. May I?"

"When you come back," she said, and Peter waited.

CHAPTER II
The Labrador Wild

IT was late in July before Peter Boots marshaled his merry men and let himself be marshaled by the guide, Joshua, on the trip of exploration and recreation.

A liner took them as far as Newfoundland, and at St. John's, a smaller steamer, the *Victoria Lake*, received them for their journey farther North. This ship belonged to a sealing fleet and also carried mails. It was not especially comfortable, and neither staterooms nor food were of the best.

But Peter was discomfort-proof, and his negligence of bothersome details and happy acceptance of existing conditions set a standard for the manners and customs of their party. Joshua, who had come to New York City to meet them, was not, by nature, possessed of the sort of heart that doeth good like medicine. But under the sunny smile of Peter's blue eyes, his customary scowl softened to a look of mild wonder at the effervescent gayety of the man who was yet so efficient and even hard-working when occasion required it.

Shelby was a close second in the matter of efficiency. He was a big chap, not handsome, but good-looking, in a dark, dignified way, and of a lithe, sinewy strength that enabled him to endure as well as to meet hardship bravely.

Not that they looked especially for hardships. Discomfort, even unpleasantness, they did anticipate, but nothing of more

importance than inclement weather or possible colds or coughs. And against the latter ills Mrs. Crane had provided both remedies and preventions to such an extent that some were discarded as excess weight.

For the necessities of their trip, including as they did, canoe, tent, blankets, tarpaulins, duffel bags, shooting irons and cooking utensils,—besides food, were of no small bulk and weight even divided among four porters.

And Blair, though possessed of will and energy quite equaling the others', was less physically fit to stand the hard going.

It was already August when they were treated to a first sight of the Labrador.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Shelby, "and Shackelton, and Peary,—yes and old Doc Cook! What an outlook! If those breaking waves were looking for a stern and rockbound coast to dash on, they missed it when they chose the New England shore instead of this! I've seen crags and cliffs, I've climbed the dark brow of the mighty Helvellyn, but this puts it over all the earth! How do we get in, anyway?"

"Great, isn't it?" and Peter lay back in his inadequate little deck chair and beamed at the desolation he saw.

For the coast of Labrador is nearly a thousand miles of barren bleakness and forbidding and foreboding rock wall. After buffeting untold ages of icy gales and biting storms the bare rocks seem to discourage human approach and crave only their own black solitude.

The one softening element was the fog that rode the sea, and now and then swooped down, hiding the dangerous reefs until the danger was increased tenfold by the obscurity.

"Oh, great!" mocked Shelby. "You can have mine. I'm going to stay on the boat and go back."

"Yes, you are!" grinned Peter, knowing full well how little importance to attach to that speech; "inside of a week, you'll be crazy about it."

"I am now," said Blair, slowly. "Most weird sight I ever saw. The rocks seem like sentient giants ready to eat each other. Termagant Nature, unleashed and rampant."

"Idea all right," said Crane, lazily, "but your verbiage isn't hand-picked, seems to me."

"You can put it more poetically, if you like, but it's the thing itself that gets me, not the sand-papered description of it."

"Nobody wants you to sand-paper it, but you ought to hew to the line a little more nearly—"

"Lines be bothered! Free verse is the thing for this place!"

"I want free verse and I want fresh air," bantered Peter, "and Lasca, down by the Brandywine,—or wherever it was that Friend Lasca hung out."

"You're harking back to your school days and Friday afternoon declamation," put in Shelby, "and Lasca was down by the Rio Grande."

"Only Alaska isn't down there at all," Blair informed them, quite seriously, and the others roared.

* * * * *

After delays, changes and transfers made necessary by the uncertainties of Labrador travel, they came at last to Hamilton Inlet, and the little steamer approached the trading post at Rigolet.

"Reminds me of Hamilton Harbor, Bermuda," observed Shelby, shivering as he drew his furs round him.

"Oh, how can you!" exclaimed Blair; "that heavenly Paradise of a place,—and this!"

"But you'd rather be here?" and Crane shook a warning fist at him.

"Yes,—oh, yes! This is the life!" and if Blair wasn't quite sincere he gave a fair imitation of telling the truth.

"Will you look at the dogs!" cried Crane. "I didn't know there were so many in the world!"

The big Eskimo dogs were prowling about, growling a little, and appearing anything but friendly. Not even to sunny-faced and kindly-voiced Peter Boots did they respond, but snarled and pawed the ground until Joshua advised Crane to let them alone.

"They're mighty good things to keep away from," the guide informed, and his advice was taken.

"I'm glad we have a trusty canoe instead of those villainous looking creatures," Blair admitted, and when, later on, they heard tales of the brutality and treachery of the pack dogs, the others agreed.

At Rigolet final arrangements were decided on and last purchases made for the dash into the wilds.

Peter Boots, in his element, was as excited and pleased as a child with a new toy.

"Here I am, where I've longed to be!" he exulted; "at least, I'm on my way. Buck up, you fellows, and enjoy yourselves, or you'll answer to me why not!"

"I'm for it," Kit Shelby cried; "I hated that dinky little old steamer, but now we're ashore in this live wire of a place, I'm as excited and glad as anybody. I say, the mail from England comes every year! Think of that!"

"Once a year!" wondered Blair.

"Yep; the good ship *Pelican* brought it yesterday, and it's due again next summer! Up and coming, this place, I tell you!"

"It nothing means to us," said Crane, calmly; "I'm expecting no valentines from England myself, and we'll be back home before mails from the States get around again."

"And, moreover," said Shelby, who had been acquiring information by various means, "old Captain Whiskers, forninst, says that we're bound to get lost, strayed and stolen if we go the route we've planned."

"That's our route, then!" Peter said, satisfiedly; "they always prophesy all sorts of dismal fates, and, like dreams, they go by contraries. 'Fraid, boys!"

He extricated himself from the onslaught this speech brought and then all set about getting the outfit into shape for the start.

Pounds and pounds of flour, bacon, lard, pea meal, tea, coffee, rice, tobacco and other necessaries were packed and stowed

and maneuvered by the capable Joshua, before whose superior judgment Peter Boots had to bow.

Some natives were hired to help carry things that were to be cached against the return trip, and three tired but happy men went to rest for their last night beneath a real roof for many weeks.

Next morning their happiness was even greater and their spirits higher, for the day was clear and perfect, the air full of exhilarating ozone and the golden sunlight and deep blue sky seemed to promise a fair trip and a safe return.

Gayly they started off, and gayly they continued, save when the rain poured unpleasantly, or the swarms of Labrador flies attacked them or steep banks or swift rapids made portage difficult.

However as no threats or persuasions could induce Joshua to travel in the rain, there were enforced rests that helped in the long run.

Another trial was the midday heat. Though the temperature might be at the freezing point at night, by noon it would buoyantly rise to ninety degrees, and the sudden changes made for colds and coughs, that were not easily cured by Mrs. Crane's nostrums.

"Fortunes of war," said Peter, serenely, and Shelby responded, "If that's what they are, I'm a regular profiteer!"

Days went by, the hours filled with alternate joy and woe, but accepted philosophically by willing hearts who had already learned to love the vicissitudes of the wild.

One morning a portage route was of necessity winding and rough. Not as much as usual could be carried by any of them and two or three trips of two miles must be made by each.

Joshua arranged the loads to weigh about seventy pounds each, but these became tiresome after a time. The work took all day, and when toward sunset camp was made and the tired pleasure seekers sought rest, each was far more exhausted than he was willing to admit.

"Had enough?" asked Peter, smiling. "Turn back any time you fellows say. Want to quit?"

"Quit! Never!" declared Shelby. "Go home when you like, or stay as long as you please, but no quitting!"

"It's goin' be nice now," put in Joshua, who was always sensitive to any discontent with his beloved North land. "Nice fishin', nice sleepin',—oh, yes!"

And there was. Rest that night on couches of spruce branches, that rocked like a cradle, and smelled like Araby the Blest, more than knit up the raveled sleeve of the hard day before.

And when they fished in a small, rocky stream, for heaven sent trout, contentment could go no further. Unless it might have been when later they ate the same trout, cooked to a turn by the resourceful Joshua, and then, lounging at ease before a camp-fire that met all traditions, they smoked and talked or were silent as the spirit moved.

The black firs showed gaunt against the sky; the stars came out in twinkling myriads and the dash and roar of the river was an accompaniment to their desultory chat.

"If I were a poet," Blair said, "I'd quote poetry about now."

"Your own, for choice?" asked Shelby, casually.

"You *are* a poet, Gil," said Peter. "I've noticed it all the way along. You don't have to lisp in numbers to be a poet. You just have to—"

"Well, to what?" asked Blair, as Peter paused.

"Why, you just have to want to recite poetry."

"Yes, that's it," put in Shelby, quickly; "understand, Gilbert, dear, you don't have to recite it, you know, only want to recite it. If you obey your impulse,—you're no poet at all."

"I'll restrain the impulse then,—but it's hard—hard!"

"Oh, go ahead," laughed Kit, "if it's as hard as all that! I'll bet it's highbrow stuff you want to get out of your system!"

"Yes, it is. In fact it's Browning."

"Oh, I don't mind him. Fire away."

"Only this bit:

"You're my friend; What a thing friendship is, world without end. How it gives the heart and the senses a stir-up, As if somebody broached you a glorious runlet—"

"That'll do," laughed Peter. "That's far enough. And you didn't say it quite right, any way."

"No matter," said Blair, earnestly; "I mean the thing. Without any palaver, we three fellows are friends,—and I'm glad of it. That's all."

"Thank you very much," said Shelby, "for my share. And old Pete is fairly overflowing with appreciation,—I see it in his baby-blue eyes—"

"I'll baby you!" said Peter, with a ferocious smile. "Yes, old Gilbert, we're friends, or I shouldn't have picked us as the fittest for this trip."

"Good you did, for the fittest have the reputation of surviving."

"Let up on the croaks," Peter spoke abruptly. "Have you noticed any fearful dangers, that you apprehend non-survival of them?"

"No; but—"

"But nothing! Now, Blairsy, if you're in thoughtful mood, let's go on with that plot we started yesterday."

"What plot?' asked Shelby.

"Oh, a great motive for a story or play. Setting up here in the Labrador wilds and—"

Shelby yawned. "Mind if I doze off?" he said; "this fire is soporific—"

"Don't mind a bit," returned Peter gayly; "rather you would, then Gil and I can maudle on as we like."

And they did. Both were of a literary turn, and though they had achieved nothing of importance as yet, both hoped to write sooner or later.

"A story," Peter said, "maybe a book, but more likely a short story, with a real O. Henry punch."

"H'mph!" came in a disdainful grunt from the dozing Shelby.

"You keep still, old lowbrow," advised Peter. "Don't sniff at your betters. There's a great little old plot here, and we're going to make a good thing of it and push it along."

"Push away," and Shelby rolled himself over and dozed again.

"Where's Joshua?" asked Crane, later, as, the talk over, they prepared to bunk on their evergreen boughs.

"Haven't seen him since supper," said Shelby, sitting up and rubbing his eyes. "Queer, isn't it?"

Queer it surely was, and more so, as time went by and they could find no trace of their guide.

"He can't be lost," said Kit; "he's too good a scout for that."

"He can't have deserted us," declared Peter. "He's too good a friend for that! He'll no more desert us than we'd desert one another."

"Well, he's missing anyway," Blair said, undeniably; "then something must have happened. Could he be caught in a trap?"

"Not he! he's used to them about. No, he's had an accident, I think." Peter's eyes were anxious and his voice told of a fear of some real disaster.

The dusk fell early and though only about nine o'clock, it was as dark as midnight. Clouds had obscured the stars, and only the firelight relieved the black darkness.

But after an hour's worriment and distress on the part of the three men the guide returned. He looked a little shame-faced, and was disinclined to reply to their questions.

"Come, now, Joshua, own up," directed Peter; "I see by your eyes you've been up to mischief. Out with it!"

"I—I got lost!" was the astonishing reply, and they all burst into laughter. More at the rueful countenance, however, than at the news, for it was a serious matter.

"You, a guide, lost!" exclaimed Shelby. "How did it happen?"

"Dunno. Jest somehow couldn't find the way."

"Hadn't you a compass?"

"No, sir; I got sort of turned around like,—and I went a long hike the wrong way."

Simply enough, to be sure, but apparently it was only good fortune that had made him find at last the road home to camp.

Light-hearted Peter dismissed the whole affair with a "Look out after this; and always carry a compass or take one of us boys along," and then he sought his fragrant, if not altogether downy couch.

Blair, too, gave the episode little thought, but to Shelby it seemed more important. If a hardened guide could get lost as easily as that, it might happen to any of them. And a compass was not a sure safeguard. A man could wander round and round without finding a fairly nearby camp. Shelby was a few years older than the other two, and of a far more prudent nature. He had no dare-devil instincts, and not an overweening love of adventure. He was enjoying his trip because of the outdoor life and wildwood sports, but as for real adventure, he was content to omit it. Not from fear—Kit Shelby was as brave as any,—but he saw no sense in taking unnecessary risks.

While risks were as the breath of life to Peter Boots. Indeed, he was sighing because the conditions of modern camping ways and the efficiency of the guide left little or no chance for risk of life or limb.

He didn't by any means want to lose life or limb, but he was not at all unwilling to risk them pretty desperately. And he

found no opportunity. The days were pleasantly taken up with fishing, shooting, moving on, setting up and taking down camp, and all the expected routine of a mountain expedition; but, so far, there had been nothing unusual or even uncomfortable to any great degree.

The next day brought a fearful storm, with gales and sleet and driving rain and the temperature dropped many degrees.

The party experienced their first really cold weather, and though it depressed the others Peter seemed to revel in it.

The tent was practically a prison, and an uncomfortable one, for the wind was terrific and the squalls became hourly more menacing.

Shelby was quiet, by reason of a sore throat, and Blair was quiet with a silence that was almost sulky.

Not quite though, for irrepressible Peter kept the crowd good-natured, by the simple process of making jokes and laughing at them himself, so contagiously, that all were forced to join in.

But at last he tired of that, and announced that he was going to write letters.

"Do," said Shelby, "and hurry up with them. The postman will be along any minute now."

Peter grinned, and really set himself to work with paper and pencil.

"I know what you're doing," said Blair; "you're beginning our story."

"I'm not, but that isn't half a bad idea. Let's start in, Gil. We can plan it and make up names and things—"

"Why can't you really write it?" asked Shelby. "I should think it would be the psychological moment. Isn't it to be all about the storms and other indigenous delights of Labrador?"

"You take that tone and I'll pitch you out into the indigenous delights," threatened Peter. "Come on, Gilbert, let's block out the backbone of the yarn right now."

They set to work, and by dint of much discussing, disagreeing, ballyragging and bulldozing each other, they did make a fair start.

"What's the heroine like?" asked Shelby, beginning to be interested.

"Like Carly Harper," said Blair promptly.

"Not the leastest, littlest mite like Carly Harper," said Peter, his blue eyes hardening with determination.

"Why not?" demanded Blair, who cared little what the heroine was like; but who objected to contradiction without reason.

"Because I say not," returned Peter, impatiently. "The heroine is a little rosy-cheeked, flaxen-haired doll. She has blue eyes,—something like mine,—and a saucy, turn-up nose, and a dimple in her left cheek."

"A peach," said Shelby, "but no sort of a heroine for that yarn you two fellows are spinning. I'm no author, but I'm an architect, and I can see the incongruity."

"If you know so much, write it yourself," said Peter, but not pettishly. "If I'm doing it, I create my own heroine or I quit."

"Oh, don't quit," begged Blair. "We're just getting a good start. Have the treacle and taffy heroine if you like, only keep on."

His point won, Peter did keep on, and a fair bit of work was accomplished. For the first time it began to seem as if the two authors would really produce something worth while.

"Not likely," Peter said, as they talked this over. "I'm no sort of a collaborator,—I'm too set in my ways. If I can't have it the way I want it, I can't do it at all."

"But you can have your own way in details," said Blair, musingly. "They don't matter much. Give me the swing of the plot and let me plan the climaxes, and I care not who makes the laws for the heroine's complexion."

"Well, I'm for a run in the rain," said Peter. "I've worked my brain into a tangled snarl, and I must go out and clear it out."

He shook himself into his storm togs, and as no one cared to go with him, he started off alone.

CHAPTER III
The Snowstorm

GIVEN three good-natured young men, a satisfactory guide, a stretch of Labrador wild, and no cares of any sort, it is not surprising that the happy days and weeks followed one another into the maw of Time, until the date of departure for home drew near.

"I'd like to stay here forever," declared Blair, as he filled his pipe and stretched luxuriously before the fire. "Civilization has lost all charm for me."

"Go away with you!" scoffed Peter Boots, "that's a fine, ambitious spirit to show, and you a rising young author,—or about to become one."

"Not unless you duff in and help, old chap. Our book hangs on your efforts, I've pretty well done my part of it."

"And I'll do mine, don't worry. I'm a procrastinator and a put-offer, but I'll get there! Now, cut out the book till we get home. These last few days up here must be given over to Nature as she is snowed under!"

It was the last week in September, but snow-squalls were frequent, winds were high and rains were cold and sleety.

Joshua had been urging the homeward journey for several days, but the men were loath to go, until now, a more severe bit of weather had persuaded them. Even as they sat round the fire, with storm coats drawn high up around their ears, the

sleet-squalls drove against their faces and the gale howled among the snowy trees.

Peter loved the life, the outdoor days and tented nights, but his mind once made up to leave, his volatile spirit turned toward home.

"A couple of days more staving round in the snowdrifts and I'll be ready," he announced, and Joshua began to pack up.

The guide growled a little at the reluctance of his party to start.

"You men wait too long, and you'll be sorry," he warned. "This wind won't only let up for a little spell at a time,—mostly it'll blow like somethin' let loose! And if a big snow comes,—and it's likely to,—we'll be in a fix."

"Now, now, old man," began Shelby, "don't growl. We've been a pretty good sort, haven't we? We're going home, aren't we? Why croak at us?"

"That's all right, sir, but meantime this Northwest wind keeps up its force, and—well, it means business."

"All right, we'll get the better of its business deal," prophesied Peter, and he and Blair went off for a hike.

As they started, the sun shone clear, and though the temperature was below thirty, the two men strode along, happy with sheer physical joy of living.

"This is the life!" said Peter, flapping his arms, and watching his breath congeal in frosty clouds.

"Yes," Blair agreed, "to a certain point—"

"Freezing point?"

"I guess that's right! I like it all as well as you do, but it's nicest when the sun shines. And by Jiminy, she's clouding over again!"

Clouds meant cold,—a raw, penetrating chill that seemed to strike to the marrow, and the pair were glad to turn back toward camp.

"What do you think most about, when you think of home?" asked Blair, idly.

"Carly Harper," replied Peter, speaking from the fullness of his heart.

"Good Lord! So do I!" exclaimed Blair, his tone that of surprise only.

Peter turned and looked at him. "Not a chance for you, old chap," he said. "Little Carly is waiting for me. Yeo, ho, lads, ho,—Yeo, ho!"

"Oh, I say! Really?" Blair's consternation was almost comic.

"Yes, sir! Fair warning,—keep off!"

"Engaged?"

"Same as."

"Meaning she hasn't said a positive yes?"

"Meaning that, if you like."

"Then it's fair field and no favor! We're too good friends to misunderstand, but let's call it a case of may the best man win."

"All right, but I'll win and you can be best man at the wedding, how's that?" Peter's eyes shone with good humor, and his happy face left Blair little room for doubt as to Peter's own view of the case. What Carly herself thought was another matter.

But the two were too good friends to quarrel, and moreover, each knew the other too well to mistrust him for a minute. It would, indeed, be a fair field where they were concerned.

"I didn't know you'd gone so far," said Blair, ruefully, "of course, there's no chance for me."

"I hope not," returned Peter, cheerfully. "But when we get back we'll soon find out."

"Perhaps find out that she's 'gone with a handsomer man,'" suggested Blair.

"Not impossible. I suppose there are such."

But a disinterested observer, looking at Peter's fine, strong face, with its radiant coloring, brought out by the sharp air, might not have agreed.

And then conversation became abstract, for the wind rose to a piercing gale and it was all they could do to keep their balance and fight their way along.

* * * * *

"I said this here wind was bound to ease up some time and it has," said Joshua, with decided satisfaction, the morning of the start for home. "We ought to make good goin' to-day, and maybe get ahead of our own schedule."

"That's the trick," said Shelby, "always get ahead of your own schedule, and you're bound to succeed. Come on, Peter, here we go."

The leave-taking was a bit silent, for all three had become attached to the camp, and they gave long farewell glances

backward.

Then off they went, and throwing sentiment aside, turned their thoughts and their talk to the coming journey.

For home was yet a long way off. Many days' traveling before they reached the mail boat and then many more before they could lift New York Harbor.

"And I'm glad of it," declared Peter. "The longer we are on the home stretch, the better I'll be pleased."

"Granting we don't miss the boat," added Blair. "When I start out I want to arrive."

It was about three days later that a big storm set in. Relentlessly it blew and snowed and the gales were almost unbreastable.

"Don't dare stop," said Joshua, in his usual laconic way; "the winter's set in, and any day may be worse'n the day before. Old Merk is down to twenty-four, and we want to peg ahead,—that's what we want to do."

They did,—by day,—and by night they enjoyed the rest and warmth of camp, but still, Joshua urged them ahead continually.

He parceled out longer days and shorter nights, until even strong Peter began to feel the strain.

Shelby was of a wiry sort, and stood hard going well; Blair was a patient, plodding nature and wouldn't have complained if he had dropped in his tracks; but Peter was impulsive and impatient, and he growled frankly.

"We'll get there, Eli," he said to the guide; "don't hustle us so."

"Got to do it, Mr. Crane. I know more about this here winter that's closing in on us, than you do. It's a bit early, but it's sure!"

So on they went, through snow that was wet and heavy, through icy sleet that stung and cut their faces, through roaring winds that choked their lungs, but full of indomitable courage and perseverance and of unimpaired good nature.

And yet a week of this traveling at last began to tell on their *morale*. Not that they grew testy or irritable, but the silences were longer, the repartee less gay, and even buoyant Peter's spirits drooped a little.

Joshua then took a turn as comforter.

"The worst'll soon be over," he reassured them. "Two days will get us to Big Lake, and once we finish that, we'll be well on our way."

So on they pushed, heavily laden, traveling slowly, but all well and sound in wind and limb.

It was the middle of October, when a bright sunny day beamed on them and their spirits rose in consequence.

But Joshua did not smile. "Weather breeder," he said, laconically, and looked gloomy.

The others knew better than to call him a pessimist, for when Joshua predicted weather, it came.

And come it did. Not a squall; there was little if any wind, but a snowfall. A steady, straight down snow that was so thick, so dense, they could scarce see one another's forms.

"Keep a-going," directed Joshua; "and for the land's sake, don't get far apart. Stay close together, single trail, and close!"

Thus they went on, the guide first, then Shelby, then Blair, then Peter. There was no reason for the order they took, it merely happened that it was so.

They kept close, as directed, but the going was hard. If one stumbled, one must recover quickly and hasten ahead not to lose sight of the others.

And the snow continued. Soft, white, feathery flakes, more and more thickly falling every moment. Joshua plowed ahead, the others followed, and each had all he could do to keep his eyes clear enough to see the man in front.

Which is how it happened that when Peter stumbled and fell, and found himself unable to rise, the others had no knowledge of it.

As the big man went down, he essayed to rise quickly, but his right leg refused to move.

"Broken!" he said to himself, as one noting a trivial occurrence. "Queer, to break a leg, falling in a bed of soft snow!"

But that was exactly what he had done, and realizing it, he set up a yell that would have made a North American Indian envy its force and volume.

But for all the good it did, it might as well have been a whisper. The wind, though not violent, was against him, and carried the sound away from the plodding travelers. His friends could not hear it. Not looking back, as indeed, they had no thought of doing, they did not miss their fallen comrade and on they toiled, ignorant of the fact that they were three instead of four now.

And Peter,—big, strong Peter Crane,—brave, intrepid Peter Boots,—sat there in the furious snowstorm, unable to rise, but with brain and mind vividly alive to what had happened.

Quick of thought, always, he now traced with lightning rapidity, just what the future held for him—and such a short future, at that—unless—

His only hope lay in his lung power.

He yelled, screamed, whistled, hooted, and put all of his strength and nerve force in his desperate efforts to reach the ears of his comrades.

But it was impossible. The cruel wind drove his voice away from those it was meant to reach, the snowflakes filled his open mouth as he shouted; and as hope failed, strength failed and Peter faced his fate.

Strong, able-bodied, save for the broken leg, he tried to crawl along. The result was pitiful, for he merely floundered in the deep mass of soft whiteness. His share of the luggage was heavy packs, nothing of which he could make a flag of distress or even build a fire. He felt for his matches, and lighting a cigarette, waved it aloft, almost smiling at his tiny beacon.

Then came despair. His mind seemed to grow more alert as his body was overcome by the cold. His blood boiled, even as it froze in his veins. He felt abnormally acute of intellect, and plead with himself to think of something,—to invent something that would save his life.

Yet he knew there was no hope. The fast-falling snow obliterated all tracks almost instantly. Even though the others

missed him, they could never find him, and,—this thought struck a new chill through his veins,—in a short time the snowfall would even obliterate him!

What a death! Helpless; unable even to meet it standing, he must lie there, and let the snow bury him alive!

He could maintain a half-sitting posture,—but what use? Why not lie down flat and get it over quickly? Yet he must hold on as long as possible, for the men might come back,—he began to think what they would do—but, he was sure they would not miss him until too late to do anything. If the snow would only let up. It was such a pity to have his whereabouts hidden by a foolish fall of snow! As Peter grew colder he grew calmer. His senses mercifully became numbed at last, and as the actual moment of his freezing to death came nearer and nearer, he cared less and less. A state of coma is a blessing to many dying men, and into this state Peter gently drifted, even as the snow drifted over and covered his stiff, silent form.

* * * * *

And his friends trudged on; not that it could be called trudging, —rather, they plodded, stumbled, pitched, fought and merely achieved progress by blindly plunging ahead.

It was nearly a half hour after Peter's fall that Blair, accidentally turned round by a gust of wind, called out an exasperated "Halloo!" which gained no response.

"Halloo!" he repeated, "Peter! how goes it?"

Still no return call, and Blair called to those ahead.

They turned, and, huddling together in the storm, they looked at one another with scared faces.

"I warned you to keep close together," began Joshua, but forbore to chide, as he saw the dumb agony in the eyes of the other two men.

"Turn back," said Shelby, "and quickly. How long do you suppose he has been gone? Has he missed the track? What happened, Joshua?"

"He must have fallen," the guide replied. "Or maybe just strayed off, blinded by the snow, and he's wandering around yet. He has a compass and he knows where to head for. Small use our trying to turn back and find him. He's 'way off by this time,—or, maybe, he ain't. Maybe he's close behind,—we couldn't see him ten yards off in this snow."

"I never saw such a thickness of white!" exclaimed Blair. "I've heard that when snow is so white and feathery, it doesn't last long."

"This snow does," returned Joshua, "and I tell you, Mr. Shelby, there's no use turning back. We'd just waste our time,—maybe our lives—"

"But, man, we can't go without Crane!" Shelby cried. "I won't go on and leave him to his fate!"

"'Tain't likely he's in any real danger," said Joshua, almost believing his own statement. "If it was one of you two, now, I'd feel more alarmed. But Mr. Crane,—he's got a head on him, and a compass, and he knows the route we're taking,—he went over it with me before we started. Lord knows I'd be the first one to

go to his rescue, if it was rescue he needed, but I don't think it is."

"Rescue or not," said Blair, "I will not go on without Peter. You two do what you like. I'm going to turn back and hunt for him."

"So am I," declared Shelby, and the two turned to face the backward trail.

"All foolishness," muttered Joshua, "but of course, I'll go along."

It was all foolishness, there was no doubt of that. The snow had covered all signs of their own tracks, there was no road to follow, no landmarks to go by. Though Joshua had pursued his route by compass, he could not retrace it surely enough to find a lost man.

However, they persisted; they dashed at snow-covered mounds only to find them hummocks or rocks. They hallooed and shouted; they stared into the snowy distance, hoping to discern smoke; but though their big, strong Peter was less than half a mile away from them, they could get no hint of his presence.

Night came on. They built their camp fire of enormous dimensions, hoping against hope that it might attract the lost man.

None slept, save for a few fitful dozes from sheer exhaustion and grief. Joshua stolidly insisted that Peter was undoubtedly all right, and though they could scarcely believe it, this comforted the other two.

Next morning they held council. Joshua was all for going on and giving up the search for Crane.

Blair, too, felt it a useless waste of time to remain, but Shelby begged for a few hours.

"If the storm abates just a little—" he began.

"It won't," declared Joshua. "It's a little mite less windy but this snowfall's only just begun. It won't quit for days,—lessen it turns to rain,—and then the goin''ll be a heap worse."

It didn't seem as if the going could be much worse. Already the men had difficulty in moving because of their wet, half-frozen clothing. Available wood was buried under the snow, their strength was becoming impaired, and all things pointed to even worse weather conditions.

Reluctantly Shelby and Blair agreed to Joshua's plans, realizing that Peter might be all right and on his homeward journey, and further delay might result in their own loss of life. For the outlook was menacing, and Joshua's knowledge and advice were sincere and authoritative.

And still it snowed. Steadily, persistently, uninterruptedly. There seemed a permanency about that soft, downward moving mass that foreboded danger and defeat to any one who remained to dare it further.

And so they started again, half glad to go, half unwilling to leave. It was the terrible uncertainty that told on them. They shrank from facing the thought of what it would mean if they didn't find Peter, and forced themselves to believe that they would meet him.

Their objective point was a trapper's log house on the shore of the lake.

They reached it, tired, footsore, but full of hope for good news. A quick glance round the tiny interior, consisting of but two rooms, showed no smiling-faced Peter.

A few words from Joshua to the trappers gave no cause for rejoicing, and further conversation and explanation revealed the fact that the experienced trappers had no doubt as to Peter's fate.

Nor did they blame Joshua in any way. Had he stayed for a longer search, they averred, there would have been four dead men instead of one.

And then both Shelby and Blair realized that Joshua's expressed hopefulness of finding Peter safe at the end of their journey was merely by way of urging them to move on, knowing the result if they did not.

They also realized that he was right. The opinions and assertions of the experienced trappers could not be gainsaid. The two came to know that there was but one fate that could have overtaken their comrade and that there was no hope possible.

If Shelby had a slight feeling that Blair ought to have looked back oftener, he gave it no voice, for he knew he himself had never looked back with any idea of watching over Blair. To be sure the last one of the four was in the most dangerous position, but Peter had come last by mere chance, and no one had given that point a thought.

They surmised something must have disabled him. Perhaps a cramp or a fainting spell of exhaustion. But it was necessarily

only surmise, and one theory was as tenable as another.

Long parleys were held by Blair and Shelby as to what was best to be done. It proved to be impossible to persuade any one to start on a search for the body of Crane. The winter had set in and it was a hopeless task to undertake in the snows of the wild. No, they were told, not until March at the earliest, could a search be undertaken, and there was small chance of finding the body until later spring melted the snow. It was to be an especially bad winter, all agreed, and no pleas, bribes or threats of the men could move the natives from their decision.

Then, they debated, should they go home, or wait till spring?

The latter plan seemed foolish, for it was now nearly November and to wait there idly for five or six months was appalling. Moreover, it seemed their duty to go home and report Peter's loss to his father, even if they returned in the spring to search for the body of their chum.

The last boat left for Newfoundland the middle of November, and they concluded that if there was no news of Peter by that time they would sail on it. "I feel cowardly to go," said Shelby, whose brain was weary, working out the problem of duty. "Yet, why stay?"

"It's right to go," Blair said, gravely. "You see, Mr. Crane must be *told*,—not written to."

"One of us might go,—and one stay," Shelby suggested.

"No use in that," Blair said, after a moment's consideration; "the remaining one couldn't do anything."

"You men talk foolishness," said Joshua, gravely. "Mr. Peter Crane is by this time buried under eight feet of snow. You can do nothing. You'd both better go home."

So they went

CHAPTER IV
The Prophecy Recalled

THE steamer from Newfoundland that brought Shelby and Blair to New York arrived during Christmas week.

The two men, however, were far from feeling holiday cheer as they reached the wharf and faced the hard trial of telling Mr. and Mrs. Crane of their son's death.

But it had to be done, and they felt it their duty to lose no time in performing the sad errand.

No one met them at the steamer, for its hour of arrival was uncertain and they had discouraged their friends from the attempt.

Indeed only telegrams from Newfoundland had apprised any one of their arrival, for letters would have come by the same boat they came themselves.

"Let's go straight to the Cranes' and get it over," said Blair; with a sigh. "I dread the ordeal."

"So do I," Shelby confessed. "I wish we could see Mr. Crane alone, first."

"We must do that, of course. It's only eight o'clock, and we're ready to start now. Come ahead."

They sent their luggage to their homes and took a taxi for the Crane town house, on upper Park Avenue.

By good fortune, Mr. Crane was at home and received them in his library. They had asked to see him alone, giving no names.

"My stars, if it isn't the wanderers returned!" exclaimed their host, as he entered and saw the two. "Where's my boy? Hiding behind the window curtain?"

But the expression on his visitors' faces suddenly checked his speech, and turning pale, Benjamin Crane dropped into the nearest chair.

"What is it?" he whispered, in a shaking voice. "I know it's bad news. Is Peter—"

"Yes," said Shelby, gently, but feeling that the shortest statement was most merciful. "The Labrador got him."

By a strange locution, Labrador, as we call it, is spoken of up there as The Labrador, and the phrase gives a sinister sound to the name. It personifies it, and makes it seem like a living menace, a sentient danger.

"Tell me about it," said Benjamin Crane, and his tense, strained voice told more of his grief than any outburst could have done.

* * * * *

"Lost in the snow! My little Peter Boots—" he said, after he had listened in silence to their broken recital. "Tell me more," he urged, and eagerly drank in any details they could give him of the tragedy and also of the doings of the party before that last, fatal day.

Blair looked at him in secret amazement. How could the man take it so calmly? But Shelby, a deeper student of human character, understood how the fearful shock of tragedy had stunned the loving father-heart. Slowly and quietly, Shelby

related many incidents of the trip, drew word pictures of Peter in his gayest moods, told tales of his courage, bravery and unfailing good spirits.

But, though these things interested Crane and held his attention, there was no way to lessen the poignant sorrow of the last story,—the account of the terrible storm and the awful fate of Peter.

Shelby broke down, and Blair finished, with a few broken sentences.

The deep grief of the two, the sincere love of Peter and sorrow at his death proved better than protestations that they had done all mortal effort could do.

"I am not sure, sir," Shelby said, finally, "that we acted wisely, but it seemed the only course to take. We could not persuade any one to go for us or with us in search of Peter's body, until March at the earliest. To go alone, was mere suicide, and though I was tempted to do even that, rather than to return without him, it would not have been allowed."

"Oh, I understand perfectly," Crane said, quickly, "I wouldn't have had you do otherwise than just as you did. There was no use trying the impossible."

"But we will return in March—" began Blair.

"Perhaps," said Crane, a little preoccupied in manner, "or I will send a search party myself. There's no reason you boys should go."

This was a real relief, for though more than willing, the two men were far from anxious to undertake the gruesome errand.

"And now," their host went on, "if you agree, I'll send for Mrs. Crane. At first, I thought I'd rather tell her the news when we were by ourselves,—but, I know there are questions she will want to ask you, things that I might not think of,—and I know you'll be willing to answer her."

All unconscious of the scene awaiting her, Mrs. Crane came into the room.

A bewildered look on her sweet, placid face showed her inability to grasp the situation quickly.

Then, "Why, boys," she cried, "when did you come home? Where's Peter?"

To the others' relief Benjamin Crane told his wife of their mutual loss. Very gently he told her, very lovingly he held her hand and comforted her crushed and breaking heart. Shelby and Blair instinctively turned aside from the pitiful scene and waited to be again addressed.

At length Mrs. Crane turned her tear-stained face to them. Not so calm as her husband, she begged for details, then she wept and sobbed so hysterically she could scarcely hear them. Her thoughts flew back to the years when Peter was a lad, a child, a baby,—and her talk of him became almost incoherent.

"There, there, dear," Benjamin Crane said, smoothing her hair, "try to be quieter,—you will make yourself ill. Perhaps, boys, you'd better go now, and come round again to-morrow evening."

"No, no!" cried Mrs. Crane; "stay longer,—tell me more. Tell me everything he said or did,—all the time you were gone. Did he

know he was going to die?"

"Oh, no, Mrs. Crane," Shelby assured her. "It was an accident, you see. The storm was beyond anything you can imagine. The wind was not only icy and cutting, but of a sharp viciousness that made it impossible to hear or to see. Almost impossible to walk. We merely struggled blindly against it,—*against* it, you understand, so that if Peter, who was behind, had called out, we could not have heard him."

"Why was he last?" demanded Mrs. Crane.

"It happened so," replied Shelby. "I've tried hard to think if we were to blame for that,—but I cannot see that we were. Whenever we walked single file, we fell into line in any order. The subject never was mentioned or thought of. And so, that day, Peter was the last one. If Blair or I had fallen or been overcome by the cold,—which is what we know must have happened,—we would have been seen by Peter, of course. But when he gave out, no one looked backward."

"You had been trudging like that long?" asked Crane.

"Oh, yes, for hours. We were all pretty nearly all in, but Joshua wouldn't let us stop,—dared not, in fact, for he knew the danger of that storm far better than we did. No, Mr. Crane, on the part of Blair and myself, I want to say that we had no thought other than our individual progress. That was all any one could think of, as Peter himself would say if he could speak."

"He has spoken," returned Crane, quietly; "he did say it."

"What!" exclaimed the two men together.

"Yes," the older man went on; "I think I will tell you, though I had half decided not to: What do you say, Mother?"

Mrs. Crane looked up. Her expression of dumb despair gave way to a look of quiet peace as she said, slowly: "Yes, dear, tell them. But let it be held confidential."

"You'll promise that, boys, won't you?" asked Crane, and only half understanding Blair and Shelby promised.

"Well, it was this way," Crane began, "You know we couldn't get letters from you chaps all the time you were away,—except the few early ones. Of course we knew that before you went, but we didn't realize how lonely we would be without Peter Boots. Whenever he has been away before we could hear from him frequently. Julie is a dear girl, but she is a busy little butterfly, and many a time my wife and I are alone of an evening."

"And we're happy enough together," Mrs. Crane put in, gently; "but being alone, we naturally talked a great deal of Peter, and —and we couldn't help remembering the Gypsy's warning."

"Oh, I'd forgotten that!" exclaimed Blair. "What was it, now?"

"A prophecy that Peter would go on a long journey, and would meet with a terrible death. Now, the prophecy is fulfilled." Mrs. Crane's face, as she gazed upward, her eyes filled with tears, was like that of a seeress or prophetess. She appeared exalted, and unconscious of her grief for the moment.

"And there was further prophecy," Benjamin Crane continued, "that after his death, Peter would return. And when I say he has done so, I expect you to respect my story and not to doubt its truth."

"We shall most certainly respect your story, and no one could doubt your veracity, Mr. Crane," said Shelby, sincerely, though with a mental reservation that believing in Benjamin Crane's veracity did not necessarily mean subscribing to his hallucinations.

Blair's face showed his interest and curiosity, and Benjamin Crane went on with the tale to a breathlessly absorbed audience.

"It did come about, I've no doubt, because of our talks of Peter; and also, because we chanced to hear of some neighbors who had wonderful success with a Ouija Board."

A sudden, involuntary exclamation on the part of Blair was immediately suppressed by a warning glance from Shelby. It would never do to show scorn of the Ouija Board and all its works in the presence of this afflicted couple. If any comfort from its use had reached them or could reach them, it must be a blessing indeed.

"Yes," Crane said, catching the meaning of the look on Blair's face, "I know how you feel about such things, but just reserve judgment until you hear our experiences. We bought a Board, and mother and I tried to use it alone. We had no success at all. It would spell nothing coherent,—only meaningless jumbles of letters,—or simply refuse to move. Of course, you understand, we had no thought that our boy was—was in any danger,—but we had been told that sometimes living persons communicated by such means. So we persevered, but we never got a message."

"Then what happened?" asked Blair, eagerly, seeing from the faces of the older people that something had.

"Why then," Mrs. Crane spoke now,—"we found somebody to help us. I'd rather not tell the name,—it was a lady—"

"A medium?" asked Shelby.

"Oh, no! I mean, not a professional medium,—a lady we've known for years. She had had some experience with the Board, and she tried it with us. And then,—you tell it, father."

"Then," said Mr. Crane, speaking very seriously, "then we got a message from Peter. The message said that he had died in the snow."

"What!" cried Shelby, "incredible! When was this?"

"In November."

"Peter died the seventeenth of October."

"Yes, and it was the tenth of November that we had the message."

"Just what did it say?" asked Blair, his eyes wide with amazement.

"It was a little stammering and uncertain, as if hard to get it through. But the Ouija spelled out Peter's name, and when she —Miss—when the lady with us asked if it had a message from Peter, it pointed to 'yes.' Then she tried to get the message. But the words were a little mixed up. There was *snow* and *ice* and *storm* and at last the word *dead*. When we asked if Peter had died in a snowstorm the Board said yes. So, we knew the prophecy was fulfilled at last. The news you brought us was corroboration, not a surprise."

Shelby restrained himself by an effort. His sharp glance at Blair made him keep quiet also. Neither was at all impressed at the story Crane told them, except to be moved to ridicule. Well they knew how a Ouija Board will make glib statements as startling as they are untrue.

But this one happened to be true. Even so, the fact of its relation by such means was unbelievable to both the hearers.

Yet, they could not disturb the faith of the parents of their lost chum.

"I am glad, for your sakes, that you had a premonitory warning," said Shelby, in all sincerity. "Such things are indeed beyond our ken. Did you get any further details?"

"No," said Crane; "but, I learn, you have no further details yourselves. My boy perished in the snowstorm, alone and helpless. What more is there to know?"

"Nothing that we could tell," spoke up Blair, a little excitedly, "but surely, the spirit of Peter,—if it was he speaking to you,—could have told more!"

"It is clear you have had no experience in these matters," Crane said, mildly; "the messages are not easy to get, nor are they concise and clear, like a telegram. Only occasionally does one get through, and then if it is informative we are duly grateful,—and not dissatisfied and clamoring for more."

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Crane; I am inexperienced, but I assure you I am not a scoffer. And of course, I believe your statements."

"Of course!" exclaimed Mrs. Crane, a little crisply. "Surely we would not invent such a story!"

"No, indeed," said Shelby. "It is strange, you must admit. Have you had any further communications from Peter?"

"A few," Mr. Crane spoke a bit reluctantly, for he could see that the men were receptive from a motive of politeness, and not with sympathetic interest. "He has sent other messages, but they would not, I fear, convince you."

"Now, don't blame us, Mr. Crane," Blair broke out, impetuously; "remember, we're just from the place where we left Peter,—remember, we love him, too,—and remember, if we could be convinced that he had spoken we would be as interested as you are."

"Well put, my boy," and Crane seemed greatly mollified. "Now, merely as an admission of facts, do you believe that the Ouija Board gave the messages exactly as I have detailed the proceedings to you?"

"I do," said Blair, "that is, I believe you have told the exact truth of what you observed."

"Then, can you refuse to believe that the message came from the spirit of my dead boy? Who else knew of his death? How could any one know of it?"

"True enough," and Blair shook his head, noncommittally.

Crane sighed. "You don't believe," he said, but without annoyance. "Yet, remember, greater minds and wiser brains than yours believe. Are not you a little presumptuous to set your opinion against theirs?"

"I don't mean to be presumptuous, Mr. Crane," Blair spoke decidedly, "but I do think my opinion on this subject as good as

any man's."

"Then you are condemning the matter, unheard, which you will allow is not strictly just."

"Come, come, Blair," said Shelby, distressed at his attitude, "don't discuss things of which you know nothing. Mr. Crane has gone deeply into the subject and must know more about it than we do." He gave Blair a positive glance of reproof, and tried to make him see that he must stop combating their host's theories, if only for reasons of common politeness.

"But I'm interested," persisted Blair. "If Peter came here and told his father he was dead,— I want to look into these things. You see, it's the first time I've ever been up against a real case of this sort. Own up, Shelby, it's all mighty queer."

Benjamin Crane looked kindly at Blair. "That's the talk, my boy. If you're really interested, come round some night, and with you here, Peter may talk through, all the better."

"Rubbish!" Shelby thought, silently, but aloud, he only said:

"Yes, Blair, do that. And drop the subject for the present. Is Julie at home, Mrs. Crane?"

"No; she's away for a few days. Poor child, she will be heartbroken. She adored Peter Boots," and Mrs. Crane again gave way to tears.

"What does Julie think about the messages?" asked Blair, thoughtfully.

"We didn't tell her," said Crane. "She's so emotional, and—well, of course, we couldn't help hoping that it mightn't be true. And, too, Julie hates all talk of spiritism."

"Sensible girl!" thought Shelby, as Mrs. Crane was saying:

"But Julie went to Sir Rowland's lectures and she was deeply interested."

"Lectures?" asked Blair.

"Yes; there have been a great many this season. I'm sorry you had to miss them. They're over now. But I can't see how any one could listen to that delightful man talk on such subjects in his beautiful way and not be convinced of the truth of it all."

"What did he say?" asked Shelby.

"That's too big a question to be answered in a sentence," and Crane smiled a little, "but he gave us incontrovertible proof that the spirits of the dead return and communicate with their friends who are still on earth."

"Through a Ouija Board?" Blair inquired.

"Yes; and by actual manifestation as well. I've never consulted a real medium, but now that I know Peter is gone, I shall do so."

"Don't!" Shelby said, quite involuntarily. Then, seeing the look in Crane's eyes, he added: "Forgive me, sir, I have no right to advise. But I've been told that all professional mediums are frauds."

"We are told many things,—both for and against," returned Crane, "but if Sir Rowland is willing to consult them, and believes in them, I'm ready to sail under his flag."

"Of course. And you've a perfect right to do so." Shelby felt he couldn't control his real opinions much longer, and wanted to go. "May I come to see you again, soon,—and talk over the

matters of Peter's things,—which, of course, we brought home? And, I'd like to see Julie."

"She'll be home by to-morrow evening. Of course, we'll send for her. And I know she'll want to see you both. Perhaps not just at first, but after a few days. Please come to the house whenever you will,—just as you used to do."

"Yes, do," added Mrs. Crane, her lip quivering at the remembrance of the old days when the boys were jolly together.

"And Miss Harper, how is she?" asked Blair, who had been longing to put the question for some time.

"Well, as usual," replied Mrs. Crane. "She was here last night. She—"

"She's a dear girl," Crane interrupted his wife, and a peculiar look crossed his face. "You come round soon again, boys, but I fear we must let you go now. My wife is keeping up bravely, but —" he glanced at the little woman tenderly, and took her hand in his. "And I, too, don't feel like talking more now. So good-night,—and, thank you for all your good comradeship with my boy,—my Peter Boots."

"We want sympathy, too, Mr. Crane," said Blair; "Peter was very dear to us both. We're not given to spilling over, but we have lost a dear friend and chum whose place can never be filled by another."

"Right!" said Shelby, in a choked voice, and his handclasp with Peter's father said the rest.

But once on the street his exasperation broke forth in words. "I can stand any sort of idiots," he said, "except spook idiots! They

make me want to go back to the Labrador!"

"Sort of queer, though, that message,—from Peter—"

"From Peter—nothing! Don't desecrate that boy's memory by even an implication that he'd fiddle with a Ouija Board! Ugh!"

"How do you explain it, then?"

"There's nothing to explain."

"You think Crane,—er—misstated?"

"Oh, I think he thought he had a message,—but he was duped. They all are. I know all about that Sir Rowland. I've read his books. He's dotty on the subject. Keep off the rocks, Blair. You've a leaning that way, and if you don't look out you'll fall for it, too."

"Wonder why Mr. Crane shut his wife up when she started to say something about Carly Harper."

"Oh, that was nothing particular. Anyway, you can see Carly for yourself. I expect she'll be hard hit by Peter's death. They were practically engaged."

"How'd you know?"

"Peter told me,—not in words, bless his heart! He just let it out when he was in a babbling mood. I mean, he let fall side remarks, and I just gathered the truth. I didn't tell him I knew. Open-hearted as he was, Peter was reserved in some ways."

"Dear old chap, so he was. Our great work will never materialize now. Unless I write it alone. I'd like to do that,—and publish it over both our names, and explain in a preface."

"Do," said Shelby; "it would please the old people a lot."

CHAPTER V
Madame Parlato

BLAIR'S first interview with Carly Harper was painful for both. The Cranes had told her of Peter's death, but the sight of Blair seemed to bring home to the girl a further and more vivid realization of her loss.

"I wish now I'd been kinder to him," she said, her voice quivering.

"Oh, come now, Carly, I know you weren't unkind."

"No; but I wouldn't—wouldn't do what he asked me—"

"Never mind, dear; I think I know what you mean, and, let me tell you, old Peter was happy enough—about you. He seemed pretty sure that things were coming his way."

"Of course," the girl said frankly. "I only wanted him to go away, free, and then if he still wanted me when he came back—and now he'll never come back!" she gave way to silent weeping.

"His parents say he has come back," offered Blair, more by way of diversion than comfort.

Carly looked up quickly. "They told you that?" she said.

"Yes, told me pretty much all about their 'messages.' Foolishness, of course, but it seems to comfort them."

"It doesn't comfort me," and Carly sighed. "I don't believe in it, you see." And she looked at him with a curious glance.

"No; I don't either. But the old people do, and if it helps them bear their grief,—why—"

"Yes; I understand. How—how much did they tell you?"

"All, I suppose. They said some medium,—well, not a professional, but some friend of theirs,—helped them to get messages 'through,' as they call it."

"Didn't they tell you who the friend was?"

"No; but they weren't mysterious about it. They simply didn't say. I believe Julie doesn't like to have them try it,—the Ouija, I mean."

"Oh, she feels as I do,—as anybody must,—if they like it let them have it. She went to the lectures."

"Everybody did, it seems."

"Yes, the whole town went crazy on the subject. Is yet, but not quite to the same extent."

"The war brought it all about, of course. After a short time, the fad will die out."

"Yes, if it is a fad. But,—do you never think there may be a grain of truth in it all?"

"I haven't seen the grain yet, but I'm open to conviction."

"Oh, well, I've no intention of trying to convince you. Tell me all about your trip,—tell me all the queer experiences you had, and everything you can think of. And tell me lots about Peter."

Blair did her bidding. He described their life in the Labrador, told of their exploits and discomforts and also of the glorious outdoor days and nights that were so enjoyed by them all.

"I'd love it!" Carly declared. "Oh, not all the tramping and portaging, but the camp life."

"Better try it nearer home. The Adirondacks would give you enough excitement. There's no use braving that cold up there, and those fierce storms."

"If it hadn't stormed, Peter wouldn't have been lost, would he?"

"Probably not. You see, we've mulled it over and over. He must have fallen and hurt himself in some way, or he would have followed us somehow."

"He would have called out."

"That's the point. The wind was in our faces, it was a villainous blast, and nothing any one said could be heard by one in front of him, unless they were near each other. If Peter had shouted, the wind would have carried his voice back and away from us. That is undoubtedly what happened."

"Don't you think the guide was greatly to blame?"

"No; he had no reason to look back at us, as if we were sheep. We had always followed his trail, there was to all appearances no difference between this trip and any other. We had breasted equally severe storms, and come home, laughing. I feel sure Peter met with an accident,—or, it may be,—probably enough,—his strength suddenly gave out, or even his heart went bad, or something like that. Perhaps he couldn't shout. I blame myself, of course, for not looking back sooner, but I do honestly feel that it was not a culpable omission."

"Of course it wasn't! I see just how it was. Great, big, stalwart Peter was not a baby to be looked after by you others. But—oh,

Gilbert,—it's so dreadful to think of his dying there alone! Perhaps he—he didn't die right away—"

"Don't, Carly! Try not to think about that. Think only that old Peter Boots is gone,—that he lived a fine, clean, splendid life, and met his end bravely, whatever happened. And, too, I'm told that he couldn't have suffered much. He must have lost consciousness very quickly."

"Yes,—I suppose so. But—oh, Gilbert, I didn't know how much I cared, until—until I lost him."

"I know, dear,—it's awful hard for you. Come on, get your hat and let's go over to Julie's. I haven't seen her yet, and I promised to call to-day."

They went to the Cranes', and found Shelby already there.

It was tea hour, and several people were gathered about Julie's pretty tea table.

For the Crane family, though in mourning, received gladly the intimate friends who had loved Peter, and who came, full of sympathy, to talk of him.

Julie received Blair with a warm welcome, but,—or at least so Blair thought,—she was a little cool in her greeting to Carlotta.

The two girls were pleasant enough, but there was an evident constraint between them, and both turned quickly aside to talk to some one else.

Blair pondered. He was by way of noting significant details and his own interest in Carly Harper made him quick to resent any slight put upon her. Not that Julie's attitude could be called

really slighting, nor was it more so than Carly's own, but there was some dissonance there.

His observation, though veiled by a pleasant, general interest in everything, was no less acute, and he continued to note that the girls really avoided each other. It was none of his business, but he was curious and surprised at a state of affairs so different from the intimacy he had known them to enjoy of old.

He bided his time, and at last, finding an opportunity, he spoke to Julie alone. She still sat at the tea table, but all having been served, she was idle and a little distrait.

"I'm glad to see you again, Gilbert," she said, at last, looking at him through tearful eyes, "but it makes me think of Peter, and—oh, talk,—or I shall go all to pieces!"

Knowing Julie's emotional nature, Blair tactfully talked, telling Peter's sister of trifling occurrences that were interesting in themselves rather than of personal import. He succeeded in restoring her calm and at last a chance allusion brought up Carly's name.

"What's the trouble between you two girls?" Blair asked, lightly.

"Trouble? There isn't any," and Julie's blue eyes,—so like Peter's,—looked straight at him.

"Oh, just a school-girl squabble, is it?"

"It isn't anything," Julie persisted, "why do you say that?"

"Now, look here, Julie Crane, you can't fool me. I'm a mind reader, and I see there's a rift in the lute that you and Carly used to play duets on."

Julie smiled at the way he put it, and said, half unwillingly: "Well, you see, Gilbert, Carly's a snake-in-the-grass."

"What! Oh, I say, Julie, don't talk like that! What do you mean?"

"She's underhanded, sly, deceitful, dishonest—"

"Stop, stop! You're losing your mind! Suppose you let up on vituperation and do a bit of explaining. What has Carly done to merit those terms?"

"What has she done? She has come over here,—when I've been away,—and stirred up father and mother with that silly, hateful, vicious old Ouija Board performance,—that's what she's done!"

"Ouija! Carly! Surely you're mistaken."

"Indeed, I'm not. Father and mother couldn't make the silly thing go at all, till Carly helped them. She pushes it, of course,—and they are gulled and duped—"

"But, Julie, wait! Why should Carly do such a thing?"

"Oh, she's got the fad. Lots of people have, you know. And I haven't—I hate it all—and so Carly comes over when I'm not home."

"And was it she who got the messages from Peter?"

"Yes, it was; that is, she pretended to."

Blair was amazed. Carly had given him the impression that she didn't believe in occult manifestations. Why should she do that, if she had assisted at the Crane *séances?* He hated to think of Carlotta Harper as insincere, but—he mused—that sort of thing tends to make people insincere. He came to a quick decision that he would observe for himself and not seek further enlightenment directly from either of the two girls.

So he only said, carelessly, "There's no accounting for the doings of people who are obsessed by that sort of thing. But, look here, Julie, if it is any comfort to your parents to think they have messages from Peter, you wouldn't disturb their belief, would you?"

"No, I don't. That's why I don't have a real quarrel with Carly. I think she knows I've discovered her part in it all, and I think she knows I resent it; but, as you say, if it helps dear old dad and mother to bear their grief, I'm willing they should wear out one Ouija Board after another!"

"Good girl. You attended the lectures, I hear."

"Yes, and they meant nothing to me. What was produced as evidence seemed to me no evidence at all. I'd like your honest opinion, Gilbert."

"I didn't hear the lectures."

"But you can read the books. Sir Rowland has written several, and there are hundreds of others. Do read some, and see if you can find anything in them—anything at all that is conclusive proof."

"Proof of what? Of continuity of existence?"

"Not that, no. But proof that the spirits of the dead have ever communicated with the living."

It was during this conversation that Benjamin Crane came in. He was evidently in a happy mood, his face was radiant and his fine features glowed with enthusiasm.

"I've had such an experience," he exclaimed. "I've had a *séance* with a real medium—"

"Oh, father!" Julie cried out, involuntarily, but he only smiled benignly at her.

"Just listen, Julie, dear. Reserve your comment till you hear it all. Then we'll see."

He drew his armchair nearer the fire and rubbed his hands to the blaze, then settled back in comfort, taking the cup that Julie brought him.

"Yes, yes," he went on, "a wonderful experience. You know," he looked round, including all his hearers, for all present had drawn near to listen, "you know I felt sure we had no real mediums here in America. When Sir Rowland told of the trustworthy ones he has consulted in England, I almost decided to go over there myself. But I heard of one here in New York, and I investigated fully her credentials and references before going to her. Truly, she is a marvel."

"I thought they weren't allowed," observed Shelby, smiling a little.

"'Not allowed' is sometimes a mere figure of speech," and Mr. Crane smiled, too. "However, I was allowed to see her and have a real *séance*—oh, Helen," he turned to his wife, "I can scarcely wait to go there again and have you go with me."

"Father, I can't stand this!" Julie's eyes were blazing. "Please drop the subject—at least, for the present."

"There, there, my daughter, don't lose your temper. If you don't want to hear about this, you may be excused." He smiled at her lovingly but with a decided intention.

"You're all interested, are you not?" he went on, turning to the various attentive faces, and receiving nods and words of assent.

"Then I'll go on," and he glanced at Julie, who sat still, controlling her expression of face but with tumult in her heart.

"Take it easy," Shelby whispered to her, "you'd better hear it, you know, whatever it's all about."

"The lady," Crane said, "is a medium, well recommended by members of the Society for Psychical Research, and by individuals who have been her clients."

"What sort of recommendations does she offer?" asked an interested voice, "letters?"

The speaker was McClellan Thorpe, a friend of Blair's, who shared a studio with him.

Thorpe was frankly skeptical, but by no means controversial. He asked his question in an honest desire to know of the credentials.

"Yes," returned Crane, "letters from many well-known Spiritists, Psychics, Scientists and plain citizens, who are enthusiastic and sincere in their praise of this lady."

"What's her name?" asked Mrs. Crane, who, it was plain to be seen, fairly hung upon her husband's words.

"Madame Parlato," returned Crane. "She is no fraud, no charlatan, but a refined, gracious lady, whose sympathies are as wonderful as her occult gifts."

Carlotta Harper, who sat by Thorpe, was absorbed in the tale, and her large dark eyes glowed, with intense interest as she listened.

"Tell us just what happened," she said, and Julie gave her a look of mingled scorn and apprehension.

"I will," Crane's deep voice went on. "The lady, you understand, knew nothing of me or of Peter. I was careful about this, for I know there are unscrupulous mediums, and I wanted to feel sure of this one's honesty."

"How do you know she'd never heard of you?" asked Thorpe. He had a manner of speaking that was definite without being annoying. Apparently he was curious, and not, necessarily, incredulous.

"How could she?" returned Crane, "we have no mutual friends. I heard of her through a comparative stranger, and I went to her at once. Don't be carping, Thorpe, just wait till you hear my story. Well, she greeted me pleasantly, and with a most courteous and lady-like demeanor. I had an appointment, of course, and she directed me to sit at a table opposite herself. I did so, and for quite a time nothing happened.

"Then—she was not exactly in a trance, I should say, but rather she seemed absorbed in deep thought—she said, 'I see a man, a fair-haired man with a sunny, boyish smile. Do you recognize that description?' I didn't say much, for I'm no fool to give myself away, you understand, but I nodded assent, and she went on: 'He seems very active, full of life and energy, and of a loving, affectionate nature.' You may guess how I felt when she described Peter so exactly! I wanted to exclaim, 'Yes, that's my boy!' but I'm always careful not to help in any way. So I just nodded, and she went on. 'He passed away about two or three

months ago, and he seems willing to communicate with me. What shall I ask him?'

"Now, I'm canny, you know, and I said, 'Make sure of his identity first. Ask him what name we used to call him by?' And, will you believe it? after a short pause, she said, 'Peter Boots!' She seemed surprised herself at such a name. I thought I ought to tell her how true that was, so I did. She looked pleased to think it was all right, and waited for me to ask another question. So I said, 'Ask him how he died.' She did, and he told her he was frozen to death in a fearful snowstorm. Think of that! And I said, 'Ask him how it happened.' And she did, and Peter said he couldn't exactly say—he lost consciousness, and he knew nothing more until he found himself on the other side. He said for me not to grieve, for he should carry on over there all he had attempted to do here. He said he retained all his ambition and energy and hope—you know he was blessed abundantly with those traits—and—"

"Did he say he was happy?" asked Mrs. Crane, eagerly.

"He said he was content, and though it was all a little strange as yet, he was becoming accustomed to that life and did not wish to return."

"Did he send any message to me?" urged the anxious mother.

"I'm coming to that, dear. Yes, he said for you not to grieve for him, but to think of him as busy and happy and entirely contented. Oh, Helen, isn't it wonderful? I arranged for another *séance*, and you shall go with me. She held out a hope of materialization later, but she wasn't sure she could compass

that for some time to come. You needn't look skeptical, Thorpe; that expression on your face only proves your ignorance of these things. I tell you, man, if it were somebody you loved and cherished you'd be mighty glad to hear from him!"

"Never mind my expression, Mr. Crane," Thorpe returned, looking apologetic, "I'm deeply interested, I can tell you, and I'd like to hear more."

"There's little more to tell. It was a quiet session—none of that curtained cabinet, tambourine-playing business, you understand; but a plain revelation from my boy's spirit through the medium of a refined, cultured woman. I'm sorry, now, I didn't take my wife with me to-day, but I feared it might not be so agreeable, and I tried it out myself first. But we will go together soon."

Crane beamed happily, and it was impossible not to rejoice with him in his delight and satisfaction at his experience.

Julie, her lips pressed tightly together, made no comment on her father's story. Christopher Shelby, who sat beside her, eyed her covertly, not quite decided whether to speak to her on the subject or not.

He concluded to do so, and whispered, "How does it all strike you?"

"I don't know," she returned, passing her hand across her white brow with a wearied gesture. "If it had been those foolish cabinet affairs I should have been disgusted, but the really nice woman,—as father describes her,—and he never misrepresents,—gives a slightly different face on it. Still, I can't believe—"

"Shall you go to the next *séance?*"

"I haven't been asked. I doubt if they'll want me. I wonder what Carly thinks of it all."

But Carlotta was talking with Blair and Mr. Thorpe, and their conversation had no connection with the subject in hand. They were discussing a wedding of two of their mutual friends, which had proved a surprise to them all. Blair and Julie joined that discussion, and the matter of the *séance* was not again referred to by the young people.

But on the way home Thorpe spoke his mind to Blair, who accompanied him.

"How can a sensible, otherwise well-balanced man like Benjamin Crane fall for that fake?" he exclaimed. "I've known Mr. Crane for years and he never showed signs of paresis before!"

"I don't attempt to explain it," returned Blair, casually, "but I do know that lots of other equally hard-headed citizens are tarred with the same brush."

"That's true enough, but this is the first time I've run up against it so closely. I say, Blair, how did the lingo tally with the facts of Peter's death? Or would you rather not talk about it?"

"I don't mind talking about it at all. Why should I, among Peter's friends? As to facts, we know none ourselves except that he was lost in the snow. You've no idea of that snow, Thorpe! It was like a thick, white feather-bed, falling, falling continually. It was impenetrable to sight or hearing. The wind blew it about some, but it fell so thickly that it seemed a solid mass that we

struggled through. And it was quite all we could do to get along —"

"Oh, don't think for a minute I feel you were in the least derelict! I know you weren't. It merely chanced that Peter's heart gave out—or whatever it was that did happen—while he was the last one of the procession."

"And not only that. If, say, I'd fallen, a man behind might not have seen me go down. If we swerved ever so little from a straight line, and, of course, we did,—couldn't help it,—we lost sight for a moment of the man in front. And as we all went along, eyes down or closed much of the time, we might have lost a man who wasn't walking last. I wish I could make you see it, Mac! See the traveling, I mean. I've never progressed against such difficulties."

"I know, old chap. Do get out of your head that anybody blames any of you in the least. And if they did, the blame would fall on the guide, not on you fellows."

"Joshua was not a bit to blame either. Surely you see that. It was every man for himself,—and—fate took the hindmost! Oh, I hate to think about it! It's even worse to me now than when it happened. The more I think about it the more I grieve for dear old Peter. We were good pals, you know."

"I know it; we all were. Mighty few chaps like Peter Boots!"

CHAPTER VI
Strange Revelations

"OLD man Crane's gone nutty," Shelby remarked.

"Been going for some time," agreed Blair, and McClellan Thorpe nodded his head decidedly.

The three sat in the studio apartment occupied by Blair and Thorpe, who had just returned from dining at their club.

Shelby had come home with them, but was soon to leave to keep an engagement.

"You'll scarcely believe what I'm up to to-night," Shelby went on, "I'm going to a *séance* with Mr. Crane."

"I say, Kit," remonstrated Thorpe, "I don't think you ought to encourage him. He's daft enough on the subject now, and your approval makes him worse."

"I'm trying to stop him," Shelby said, quietly. "I think if I go to the fool thing I can see how she works it and tell Mr. Crane, and he'll be convinced of her trickery."

"Are you convinced of it?" asked Thorpe.

"I've never seen this one, but it's my opinion all professional mediums are fakes," Shelby replied, seriously; "it may not be so, but I believe I can tell after one investigation. I shall pretend to be greatly impressed and all that, but I'll keep my eyes open. And I'm not going to upset Mr. Crane unnecessarily. But if I think she's just fooling him along for the money that's in it, I'm going to tell him so."

"Even at that," Blair put in, "maybe it's worth the money to him to be fooled. He's rich enough."

"Maybe. But I hate to see a man swindled. However, I've agreed to go with him once, and I'm glad to go. Good-by, I'll report results later."

"You see," Blair said to Thorpe after Shelby had gone, "Kit and I can't help feeling a sort of responsibility for this fad of Mr. Crane's. It may be foolish and sentimental, but we feel an interest in Peter's father, and we watch over him as if Peter had asked us to do so, which, of course, he never did."

"But the medium business is such awful rubbish," objected Thorpe.

"It is and it isn't," Blair said, musingly. "It's six weeks now since we came home, and all that time Mr. Crane has been receiving messages from Peter, and every one of them that I've heard are sane and believable. Moreover, Carlotta Harper has almost convinced me there's something in it. That girl is a sort of medium herself. She denies it, says she only uses her common sense, but I think she's clairvoyant."

"There's a heap of difference between being clairvoyant, in a common sense way, and being a fake medium! I don't care what Miss Harper does with a foolish Ouija Board, but I'm like Kit Shelby, I hate to see Benjamin Crane stung by a wily faker!"

* * * * *

Meantime Mr. Benjamin Crane was altogether enjoying the process that Thorpe called stinging.

Shelby, deeply interested, and looking innocently credulous, sat by while the medium conducted the *séance*.

Madame Parlato was, as Crane had asserted, a quiet-mannered, refined looking woman, of a gracious and pleasant personality. She was tall and fair, rather English in type, and spoke with a noticeable English accent. She frequently ended sentences of simple statement with a rising inflection and was addicted to the use of the word *very*, which she pronounced *virry*.

"You are a bit skeptical?" she said, with a careless glance at Shelby.

"Only by reason of lack of occasions for belief," he returned. "I am, however, open-minded and fair-minded enough to be willingly convinced. You may or may not know, this son of Mr. Crane's was one of my closest friends, and—"

"Don't advance information, please," she remonstrated, "lest I be thought to make use of it. I will ask you both to be quiet, whilst I compose myself."

"Hush up, Shelby," growled Crane, and Shelby did.

The medium closed her eyes and leaned back in her armchair.

She did not seem to be asleep, but she breathed heavily and a trifle irregularly, and now and then gave a slight convulsive shudder.

At last she spoke, very slowly, and in a voice decidedly different from her own. Shelby couldn't quite make up his mind whether it seemed to him like Peter's voice or not.

The voice said, "I am here, father," and, after a moment's pause, repeated the words.

"Yes, yes," breathed Benjamin Crane, enthralled, as always, by the sound; "talk to me, Peter, tell me things."

"I can't talk much this time, father, it is hard to get through. There is some obstacle."

These words did not follow each other in natural succession, but came haltingly, with waits between. Madame Parlato seemed unconscious of the delays, and merely acted as a mouthpiece for the revelations.

"What sort of an obstacle?" asked Crane.

"An unbeliever is near," the voice hesitatingly asserted.

"Oh, I say!" exclaimed Shelby, "tell him who I am!"

"It's only Shelby," Mr. Crane said, "Kit Shelby. He's not really an unbeliever, only inexperienced."

"May I speak to him?" asked Shelby, as if permission were necessary.

"Go ahead," consented Mr. Crane.

"It's old Kit, Peter—Kit Shelby, who went on the trip with you."

"Oh, Kit—all right—all right, old fellow—can't say much to-night—something wrong—"

"Well, but Peter," Shelby begged, "give me some sort of a sign—a test, you know. I can't help wanting that."

"All right," very slowly, "what test."

"Let me see—well, tell me whose picture you carried in your watch case."

"Why, it was—Caroline—Caroline Harper."

Shelby looked dazed. True, they had never called Carly Caroline, but the Harper was undeniable, and the test quite near enough to the truth.

The medium sat still, save for frequent slight shivers. Suddenly she opened her eyes:

"Who is talking?" she said.

"I am," Shelby told her. "Please let me say a few more things."

Madame Parlato's eyes closed, and she was motionless.

"Are you still there, Peter?" asked his father, who was not at all pleased with the presence of Shelby. It seemed to interfere with the continuous talk he had hitherto enjoyed at the *séances*.

"Yes, father. Is Kit there?"

"Can't you see me, Peter?"

"Not—not clearly. There's a haze in the room."

There was no haze visible to the mortals present, but Shelby went eagerly on.

"Never mind seeing me, Peter, but do tell me this: What happened to you?"

"When?" asked the voice, with a far-away, fading sound.

"When—when you died, you know. Oh, Peter, don't go away until you tell us!"

"Tell you—tell you—what?"

"What killed you? How was it? Did you fall down?"

"I—I fell down, yes."

"In the snowdrifts?"

"Yes, the snow was so cold—"

"But why couldn't you get up? What happened to you? Did any attack—"

"Yes, I was attacked. Attacked by a—"

"What!"

"By a wild animal of some sort."

"Oh, Peter! What was it? Are you sure?"

"No, not sure—but attack by—"

The voice grew fainter and more incoherent, and in a moment the medium sat up straight and shook her head.

"He was troubled," she said, "I could see him though you couldn't, and he was sad and worried."

"What about?" asked Shelby, abruptly.

"I'm not sure, but I think because he didn't want to tell the awful details of his death."

"What were they? Could you see them?"

"Yes," she pushed her loose hair back from her brow, as if exhausted. "Yes, I saw it like a picture, but like a clouded, indistinct picture. The poor chap was fighting a wild beast! Oh, it was fearful!" she shut her eyes and shook her head violently. "That's the worst of it, I see too clearly."

"Tell us more, then," begged Shelby. "How did Peter look?"

"Glorious, transfigured! His face was shining and his eyes sparkling."

"H'm—queer to look like that when he was so worried."

"Oh, that was before the anxious look came. It is, I fear, difficult for you to understand the conditions. The discarnate spirit has a sort of secondary personality, not unlike a hypnotic

state, and sometimes this is jarred by any untoward influence and develops into a delirium, and the statements cannot then be relied on. A novice always expects a clear, definite style of speech from a spirit communicating through a medium. This is not always the case. And the medium must merely take what comes and repeat it without change or addition. If, therefore, you are disappointed, I cannot help it. Surely you would not wish me to embroider the messages I receive."

"Surely not," returned Shelby, "indeed, I think it wonderful that you succeeded in getting as much coherence and information as you did. It is something to know that Peter was attacked by a wild beast, for, horrible as is the news, it does explain why he couldn't proceed on the journey."

"Yes," agreed Mr. Crane. "And I am so avid for word from my boy, that even if the messages are disturbing and harrowing, I want them all. I have always told Madame Parlato not to spare me. I prefer to know the worst. For my boy is happy now. We have had several sittings; my wife has attended some, and they are always comforting because of Peter's assertions that he is now happy and contented."

At Shelby's urgent request, the medium endeavored to induce Peter's spirit to return for a further word.

Her success was only partial, but they did hear a message to Shelby direct.

"Persevere, Kit," Peter said, "you're doing right in that matter. Go ahead, Kit."

"Your voice sounds queer, Peter," Shelby said, frowning a little. "It used to be pitched in a higher key."

"It's the medium," came a reply, and the pitch was higher. "I don't mean the human medium, but the medium through which I must talk—the ether, I suppose it is. Good-by, Kit."

Madame Parlato then came out of her trance, or whatever term she used to designate her half-conscious state.

"The session is over," she said, pleasantly. "I fear, Mr. Crane, you did not get your usual degree of satisfaction from it, but that was because of a third party here. I don't think Mr. Shelby's antagonistic exactly, but he's—well, uncertain whether to believe what he hears or not."

"That's quite true, Madame," said Shelby, with due respect, "but you are doubtless accustomed to people in my frame of mind."

"Oh, yes," and the lady smiled a little, "but I trust, Mr. Shelby, you will come some time by yourself and let me see what I can do to help you make up your mind."

"I shall be glad to do that. You have a strange power, at any rate."

"Strange, yes; but by no means unique. There are minds tuned by nature to receive spirit messages, as wireless stations are tuned. I cannot explain my strange power, I marvel at it myself, but I recognize it, and I use it humbly and gratefully as a God-given treasure."

"And that's what it is!" declared Benjamin Crane. "I'm glad you came to-night, Shelby, but, after this, I admit I prefer to come

alone, or with only my wife. The messages from Peter to his father are naturally more of a loving and domestic nature, and I revel in them."

"I don't wonder at that, Mr. Crane. And I congratulate you on having found such a capable and skillful medium."

Madame Parlato gave Shelby a quick glance, almost as if doubting his sincerity. But his frank, honest face reassured her, and she said:

"And, I'm proud to say, I'm not only a medium, but I am possessed of the power that is called impersonation or transfiguration. This is comparatively rare, and it enables me to perform what really seem like miracles. I am taken possession of by the departed subject, and I speak and act so perfectly with that other personality that sometimes I even resemble the person who is talking through me."

"It is indeed wonderful," Shelby said, and Benjamin Crane looked happily contemplative of the *séances* in the future when Madame would utilize this miraculous gift of hers in his behalf.

* * * * *

Shelby did go alone to see the medium, and it happened also that, about a week later, going again, he chanced to meet Mr. Crane there. The younger man offered to leave, but Crane said, "No, come along. Madame is going to try to-night to materialize Peter's face, and I want you here to see it."

And so the strange *séance* began.

Materialization, of course, called for a darkened room, and Shelby's naturally suspicious mind was alert for possible fraud.

But he could discover no chance for such. There was no cabinet, no tambourine, bell or trumpet, and no curtain was drawn or screen set up.

After they had sat in darkness and silence for a time, a face seemed to form in mid-air. It was a misty, vague countenance, and was wrapped about with a soft, floating drapery or veil, which exposed only the features.

"Peter!" exclaimed Benjamin Crane in a half-gasping voice. "My boy himself!"

"Peter Boots!" cried Shelby, and slowly the face vanished.

Not another word was spoken, and in a moment the lights were turned on. This was done by Madame Parlato, at whose elbow the light switch was.

"Did you see anything?" she asked, in an exhausted, harassed way, yet with an air of eagerness.

"Yes," cried out Crane. "I saw Peter, my own son!"

"I couldn't be sure," she went on, speaking wearily. "It always exhausts me utterly to induce a materialization, and I doubt if I can achieve anything more to-night."

"Nor do you need to," declared Mr. Crane. "That's enough for one *séance*. Some time you may do that again, and also get speech from him."

"May be," she rejoined, with a gentle politeness, "and now I should be glad to say good-night."

The two men walked off, Crane in a tumult of delight, Shelby wondering at it all.

"You accept marvels very easily, Mr. Crane," the latter said.

"Because they are marvels," said the older man simply. "If they were fraud it would be no marvel. But being genuine, it is a marvel, it is a miracle, and I am glad, rejoiced to accept it!"

* * * * *

It was soon after this that Shelby, calling on Carlotta Harper, asked her what she thought of it all.

"Rubbish," she replied flatly.

Shelby looked at her. "But," he said, "I've been told that you can work the Ouija Board wonderfully!"

"Work the Ouija Board! What sort of talk is that? Do you mean push it, to spell what I want it to?"

"No; I spoke carelessly. I mean use the Board with results that are surprising."

"Who can't do that?"

"Lots of people—myself, for one. Let's try it now, Carly. Will you?"

"Certainly, if you like. And, if you'll give me your word of honor that you won't voluntarily or purposely urge the thing in any direction or toward any letter."

"Of course I promise that! Where'd be the fun if we cheated? You promise, too?"

"Yes, indeed. Like you, I've no interest if either pushes the least mite."

They placed themselves with the board between them on their knees.

It was but a short time before the little heart-shaped block began to move.

Carly, who was no novice, said in a sing-song way: "Is there a spirit present?"

The board slid quickly to the corner marked "yes."

"Will you spell out your name?" Carly went on in a very matter-of-fact voice.

The pointer went from letter to letter, now hurriedly and now making wide circling sweeps, but it spelled correctly "Peter Boots."

Shelby kept most careful watch on Carly's finger-tips. He could see that there was no apparent muscle movement, no surreptitious pushing and no motion of any sort save to follow the moving board. Her hands were quite evidently resting as lightly as his own on the wood, and the board without doubt moved without the voluntary help of either.

"Shall we go on?" asked Carly, in a half whisper.

"Go on? Of course!" returned the other.

"Peter, have you a message for us?" Carly asked, again using that calm, uninflected tone.

"Yes," pointed the board, and then, as they settled down to receive it, the wooden heart spelled rapidly: "Do not grieve for me— I am happy."

Carlotta looked disappointed. "Oh, dear," she said, "I'm so tired of that message! I thought Peter would do better than that! Let's

try again."

Again the board moved, and the message came, "Tell mother not to grieve—"

"Oh, Peter," Carlotta said, in real impatience, "do say something beside those stereotyped phrases! Tell us something we don't know, something about yourself."

"Tell us how you died," said Shelby, suddenly.

"Yes, tell us that," Carly repeated.

The board moved more slowly.

"I was," it spelled, and "Go on!" the girl urged "I was—in the snow—"

"Yes, yes—go on."

"And I fell down, and I—I—couldn't get up."

"Why not?" this sharply from Carly.

"H—" the board stopped; then went on, "Heart failure."

"I thought so!" exclaimed Shelby; "there aren't any wild animals up there in—"

"Hush—it's moving again," said Carly.

"Heart gave out," the board spelled, moving rapidly now. "Couldn't make the boys hear. Could only gurgle in my throat. Couldn't shout. So I died."

"Do you believe it?" asked Carly, her big, brown eyes solemn and serious.

"Yes, I do," said Shelby. "It's highly probable, anyway. Go on, Peter, tell us something else."

Whether Shelby "believed" or not, he was deeply interested, and his breath came faster as he saw the revealing letters spell

various messages.

Both performers watched the four hands as the board moved under them. And, the most intense scrutiny could discover no voluntary movement or assistance to the uncanny instrument.

Many messages were of slight importance, and then came a sudden, "I say, Shelby, why don't you marry Carly?"

The girl gasped, then smiled, but Shelby looked up, dumbfounded.

"Oh, Carly," he said, "if you only would!"

"Hush!" she reproved him. "I'll put the board away if you do such things! You know you pushed it that time!"

"I didn't, Carly, truly—word of honor, I didn't! I'd no idea what was coming! Oh, Carly, darling, I love you, and—dear, whether Peter sent that message or not—won't you—can't you—"

They had risen, casting aside the board, and Shelby took her hands in his. "Dearest," he said, "I wanted to tell you, but I was waiting—for—for Peter's sake. Now—he wants it! So, dear heart—my little girl—won't you—"

"No," said Carlotta.

CHAPTER VII
The Tobacco Pouch

It was doubtless owing to Benjamin Crane's attitude regarding his son's death that the home did not present more the aspect of a house of mourning. Both Crane and his wife were not only resigned to Peter's fate, but they seemed positively happy in what they believed to be continued communion with his spirit.

As Mrs. Crane said, "When Peter was a child the gypsies said he would go away and be lost, but he would return to us. He has done so, he is doing so—why should we grieve? He tells us he is happy and contented in his new sphere of existence, therefore, we are, too."

"That's all very well," Carlotta Harper would respond, "but I don't look at it that way at all. I want my Peter Boots back again in the flesh. I'm not contented at all with a lot of spirit talk communicated through a paid medium!"

"Don't say paid medium, as if the paying detracted from her worth," Benjamin Crane chid the girl. "Of course, we pay Madame Parlato for her time—why should we not? It's the best money I ever spent! And you're a medium yourself, Carlotta. You hate to acknowledge it, but you are. Your work with the Ouija Board is perfectly marvelous, and I have proved to my own satisfaction that you never use the least fraud."

"Indeed, I don't," said Carlotta, earnestly, "but what's the use? What do I care to have Peter talk on that wooden board—if it *is*

Peter—I want him, himself!"

Carlotta was passing through strange moods. Living alone with her mother, their home seemed far more a house of mourning than the Cranes'.

The girl grieved deeply for Peter. Though not definitely engaged, she knew their betrothal would have been sealed on his return. And not having the comfort that the Cranes so gladly accepted, she sorrowed for her lost love.

Her success with the Ouija Board was a matter of mystery to her mother and to all who knew of it. It seemed that she must be a medium, or possess some occult power, for whenever she placed her finger-tips on the little board it immediately began to move, and told such remarkable things that there was occasion for surprise. Nor did Carlotta move the board of her own volition. It was easily seen that she did not "push" or urge it in any direction. The most careful scrutiny could not only discern no effort of hers, but could not fail to be convinced that she made none. Her friends came often to beg her to give them a session. Her fame spread until it began to annoy her.

Gilbert Blair talked to her about it.

"You know, Carly," he said, "it's not really a message from a spirit you get, it's—"

"It's what, Gilbert?" she asked, smiling. "Don't you tell me it's fraud on my part, because it isn't."

"No, I don't think it's conscious fraud, but—"

"But you don't know what it is, do you?" the girl smiled at him, and Blair, looking deep in her eyes, said: "No, I don't know what

it is, and I don't care. But I care about you. Carly, dear, can't you learn to love me? I'm not as good a chap as Peter—dear old Peter. But I love you—oh, girl, how I love you!"

"The Ouija Board said that Peter wanted me to turn my affections toward Kit Shelby."

"It didn't! did it? Then that proves that it was no real message from Peter! He would rather you'd turn toward me."

"How do you know?"

"Oh, we used to talk about you up in the snows of Labrador. And Peter loved you lots, but he knew I did, too, and we agreed that the best man should win. I don't mean the best man, but the one who stood best in your heart. And now—oh, Carly, if you only would—"

"Not yet, Gilbert—don't let's talk about it yet."

"But Peter's been dead nearly six months, and you weren't actually engaged, you know—"

"How do you know that?"

"Peter told me, oh, we were confidential up there. And, now, Peter's gone, and try, won't you, Carly, try to love me. Shelby isn't in my way, is he?"

"I don't know—he wants to be."

"Of course he does! But I won't give up to him! Peter was different. He was a wonder, that chap!"

"Indeed, he was. And I care too much for his memory to think about any one else—yet."

"But some day, Carly—dear, some day?"

"Some day we'll see about it. Gilbert, what do you think of that medium the Cranes go to all the time?"

"Absolute rubbish."

"I think that, too. But she's doing queer stunts. She's begun materializing things."

"What sort of things?"

"I don't know exactly. Flowers, I believe, and hands and faces."

"You know all the legerdemain people do that."

"That's no argument, Gilbert, and you know it. The charlatans can do all the things that the real mediums do. The question is not whether the fakers can do them, but whether the real mediums can."

"Meaning whether the real mediums are real or not?"

"Yes, that's what I mean. If ever there was a real one. I think Madame Parlato is one. But I'm not sure. She does the Cranes a lot of good. They believe—"

"Not Julie."

"Oh, no, Julie hates the whole business. I think she'd be convinced, though, except for Mr. Thorpe. He's such a skeptic that he influences Julie."

"I *thought* Thorpe was rather interested in that direction."

"Well, rather! Why, they've been exclusively interested in each other all winter."

"Thorpe's a close-mouthed chap. We live together, but we seldom exchange confidences. I like him pretty well, but—"

"But what?"

"I oughtn't to say it, but I don't altogether trust him. We're working for a prize, you know, the Callender medal, and sometimes I've imagined that he—"

"I know, he steals your ideas."

"Well, I wouldn't put it so bluntly, but he is an unconscious kleptomaniac, I think. He watches my drawing—I go astray sometimes to mislead him—and next thing I know he incorporates the same motive in his own sketches. I wouldn't say this to any one else, but I'm a little worried about it. Not so much about his taking my stuff as the fear that some one will think I've taken his."

"How's your work progressing?"

"Well—if Thorpe lets me alone."

"Can't you lock yourself in?"

"Oh, no; we use the same studio, and if I seemed fearful he would be angry at once. He's a strange nature, Thorpe. Morbid and secretive, yet a good friend and a first-rate living companion. You see, we've separate bedrooms, of course, but we've only the one big room that's studio and sitting-room combined. We have to use it together, but as our friends are pretty much the same bunch, we get along all right. We have lockers and all that, but I hate to lock up my sketches when I go out. It looks as if I didn't trust him."

"Well, you don't."

"No; but I can't tell him so. Nor do I want to hint it—at least not until I find some definite proof. Get out your Ouija Board, Carly, and see if it will tell us anything."

"Oho, you believe in it fast enough when you want to use it?"

But a trial of the occult only brought Blair the advice to beware of a friend who might be at heart an enemy. To be careful of his plans and sketches, for there was some one near who might be guilty of deceit.

All of which Blair knew before.

* * * * *

The sessions which the Cranes held with Madame Parlato increased in importance and interest.

She had succeeded in materializing the face and form of their son to their satisfaction of his identity. They told remarkable tales of seeing and hearing Peter Boots, until Julie ran out of the room lest she voice her disapproval too strongly. For Julie Crane, though an absolute unbeliever in Madame Parlato and all her works, was a devoted daughter, and would do nothing to disturb the happiness her parents felt in the *séances* with the medium.

But one performance fairly staggered the group of listeners to whom the Cranes recounted it.

They returned from the medium's to find the young people sitting round the hospitable Crane fireside. It was mid March and the weather still allowed of the cheerful open fire.

Carlotta was there and Shelby, and Blair and Thorpe, with Julie, of course, made up the little party.

"The most marvelous yet!" Benjamin Crane exclaimed, as he drew near the fire. "Julie, dear, if you don't want to hear, run

away, for I must tell about it."

But Julie stayed, and her parents told the story.

It seemed the medium had promised them something very definite by way of proof, and she had certainly kept her promise.

The materialization of Peter had taken place, and, as the spirit form slowly dissolved and faded from their view, there was left behind, lying on the table, an object that had not been there before.

It was a tobacco pouch, old and worn, and bearing Peter's initials.

Julie looked at it with horror-stricken eyes, as her father produced it from his pocket.

"Why," she gasped, "it's the one I gave him on his birthday."

"Not really!" cried Shelby, and both he and Blair leaned eagerly forward to look.

"It's the one he always carried with him in Labrador," Blair said, with an expression of blank wonderment. "How did it get down here?"

"I offer no explanation, save the true one," Benjamin Crane said, seriously. "That is, as you see, a real object. It is Peter's property. You, Blair, recognize it. Do you, Shelby?"

"I do," Shelby replied, his eyes staring at the thing.

"Julie recognized it at once," went on Crane. "So there's no doubt of its identity. Now, I submit that it would be impossible for Madame Parlato to have come by this in any natural way, therefore it is supernatural."

"Supernatural!" McClellan Thorpe exclaimed, with utter scorn in his voice. "How could that be, sir?"

"It was materialized by my son, Peter," Crane returned, looking at Thorpe, calmly. "That may seem incredible to you, but it is not so incredible as any other explanation you may offer. You cannot think my wife or I would misstate what happened, can you? You cannot assume that Madame Parlato obtained this in any underhanded way, for you cannot conceive of any way in which she *could* do so. Then, what do you suggest?"

"Anything, but that Peter brought it!" Thorpe cried.

"Ah, yes; anything but the truth. You glibly say 'anything,' but I ask you to suggest what you mean in that 'anything,' and you fail to reply."

"There is nothing to suggest," Blair said; "I confess myself utterly at a loss to suggest anything. To my certain knowledge Peter had that on his person when he died! Why, that morning he had given me a pipeful out of it, and had then returned it to his pocket! My explanation is that Peter is alive!"

"I wish that were the true one," said Benjamin Crane, fervently, "but if you'll think a minute, Gilbert, you'll realize that if Peter were alive he would come to us in the flesh, and not send his tobacco pouch by a medium."

"Indeed, he would!" agreed Carlotta, "much as I'd love to believe Peter alive, this episode contradicts such a belief, not proves it!"

"That's right," said Shelby, thoughtfully; "I, too, can believe anything rather than that the medium caused the

materialization of this thing, but—"

"The medium didn't cause it, exactly," broke in Mrs. Crane's gentle voice; "you see, we had begged Peter so hard for a material proof that he promised to try to give it to us. And at last he succeeded. It is miraculous, of course, but no more miraculous than the strange things recorded in the Bible. You see, I hold that the day of miracles is not past."

Shelby said gravely, "You must be right, for there's surely no other explanation. I, too, saw this in Peter's hand that last day we were together. I can't believe he's alive—"

"Of course not!" interrupted Blair, "if he were, he'd have no use for mediums! Whatever is the truth, it's not that Peter's alive! I only wish it might be, but as Carlotta says, this thing contradicts such a theory. I'm beaten. I see no light at all."

Benjamin Crane smiled. "You boys admit you see no explanation yet you refuse to accept the obvious and only one possible. But I'm not going to try to persuade you, I've no reason to do so. It all means little to you, but it is as the breath of life to me and to Peter's mother. I trust that some day Julie will be convinced of these truths, but that is for her to decide. I shall add this revelation to my book, by way of an appendix. It's too late to incorporate it in the body of the work."

Benjamin Crane's book had been a work of absorbing interest to him if not to his friends. He was entirely obsessed by the whole matter of Spiritism, and his book, following the style of a celebrated work of a similar nature in England, was even now in the publisher's hands.

The book was a memorial to Peter and an account of the experiences of his parents during the sessions with the medium. Crane possessed a pleasant, convincing style, and the book was well written and of a real interest quite apart from the question of the reader's belief in its matter.

* * * * *

When the volume was published, and that was early in April, it became an immediate success. Not the least of the reasons for this was the astounding account of the materialization of the tobacco pouch, detailed exactly as Benjamin Crane had told the story the night of the occurrence.

The book went like wildfire. Edition after edition was sold, and Benjamin Crane found himself famous. The benign old gentleman took his notoriety calmly, and refused to see the people who thronged to his door unless they were personal acquaintances. He had to engage secretaries and other assistants, but his methodical and efficient mind easily coped with all such matters. Mrs. Crane, too, was serenely indifferent to the publicity of it all, and pursued her simple ways of life undisturbed.

But Julie was angry at it all. Her life, she said, was spoiled by being known as the daughter of a demented monomaniac.

Her father smiled at her and told her she would change her views some day, and her mother scolded her now and then, but mostly ignored the subject when talking with her.

Julie found sympathy in the views of McClellan Thorpe.

Neither of these two would believe in the materialization of the tobacco pouch, yet neither of them could arrive at any satisfactory explanation of the incident.

"Of course, it's Peter's pouch," Julie would say; "but it came to that woman by some natural means. Maybe, somebody found it up there in Labrador and brought it home—"

"No," Thorpe would object, "in that case it would be weather-worn and defaced, and, too, nobody would have any reason to find it, bring it home, and give it to Madame Parlato! No, Carly, that won't do."

"Maybe he had two—duplicates," Carly suggested once. But inquiries of the Crane family proved that was not so. It was the very one Julie had given her brother, she was sure of that.

And so that mystery remained unexplained, save by the acceptance of a miracle.

A very material result of the success of Crane's book was a large amount of money that came to him from its royalties. Some of this he decided to use in fitting out an expedition to recover his son's body.

This, he decreed, was to be under the direction of Shelby and Blair, who knew just how it should be conducted. With his usual efficiency, Crane made all the arrangements and then told the young men about what he had done.

They agreed to go, but Shelby advised first that he write to Joshua, their old guide, as to their reception.

This was done, but the reply received caused a halt in the preparations.

For the letter, which Shelby brought over for Crane to read, ran thus:

"Dear Mister Shelby:

"I think youd better not try to take back the boddy of Mister Peter. We berried it verry deep and it better remain here. Anny way, you cant mannage it till late summer. Say about August or so."

"However, Mr. Crane," Shelby said, "if you say so, we can go ahead in spite of Joshua's letter. He's a good guide, but he always was a bit dictatorial."

"No," Benjamin Crane said, "I believe in taking advice from one who is undoubtedly good authority. We'll postpone the plan until August."

When Blair was told of it he was rather relieved, for he was busy with his prize drawings and he didn't want to leave town.

"Let's see the letter," he said to Shelby.

"I haven't it, Blair. I left it with Mr. Crane. But I've told you the gist of it."

"All right, Kit," and Blair went on with his work.

It was the next night at the Crane house that Mr. Crane again spoke of his disappointment at not putting through his hoped-for expedition.

"You see, Kit," he said to Shelby, "I want to write another book, and I want it to be about the recovery of Peter's body."

"Oh, don't do that, Mr. Crane," Shelby said, impulsively; "it would be anti-climax. You've done a big thing, and scored a success. Another book would spoil it all."

"I don't think so," said Crane, not at all annoyed at Shelby's attitude. "Anyway, I hate to give up my plan. See here, Shelby, are you sure that man Joshua wrote the letter you got?"

"Why, yes. What makes you ask that?"

"Only because it's in a big sprawly hand, and once Blair showed me a letter from Joshua, which he's kept as a memento, and it was in a small cramped hand."

"That's queer. But I expect Joshua might have got somebody to write for him. Those half-breeds are not very scholarly, you know. However, if there's any doubt about it, the matter must be looked into. Do you mean that maybe we can go now, after all? But I can't help thinking that Joshua wrote that. I know he's not very strong on spelling!"

"Well, Blair will know. You ask him for that letter he has of Joshua's."

"All right, Mr. Crane, I will. I'll see him to-night. There's a dinner on at the Club, and he'll be there. You know he's in a fair way, I think, to get that Callender prize."

"I hope so, I'm sure. A rising young architect, Blair is, and I hope he wins it. I suppose he wouldn't want to go to Labrador until that matter is settled?"

"No, probably not. But the award will be made this month."

"And he's in a fair way to get it?"

"Looks that way to me. His sketches are fine, though I haven't seen his finished work. Thorpe's a close second, I imagine."

"I suppose I'd rather see Thorpe get it, but don't tell Blair that. A man is naturally interested in his future son-in-law."

"Oh, it's gone as far as that, has it?"

"Yes, but it's not announced yet. So say nothing till Julie tells you to. She's a dear girl, but as hard as adamant where belief in the occult is concerned."

"She and Thorpe are at one there."

"Yes, that helped the affair along, I fancy. But it's all right. Julie can think what she likes. Peter used to hate the subject, too."

"I know it. We touched on it now and then, but he usually veered off to something else at once."

"What do you think about the pouch, Shelby? I'm not sure I ever asked you."

"I don't think, Mr. Crane. I mean I can't explain the thing by natural means, and I'm unable to believe in the supernatural. What more can I say?"

"Nothing. I suppose most people are like that. Thank heaven. I'm made so that I can believe!"

CHAPTER VIII
Blair Knows

GILBERT BLAIR was a lovable sort of chap, one of those fine, gentle natures that will put up with annoyance rather than annoy another. Although he would have preferred to live alone, yet it was greatly to his pecuniary advantage to have Thorpe share his place, and, on the whole, they got on fairly well. But, being of different habits and temperaments, the details of their home life were not always harmonious.

Blair was methodical, liked his drawing implements and sketches kept in order, and the rooms tidy. Thorpe was not particular in these respects, and his belongings were always scattered about not only on his own tables or desk, but on Blair's. Moreover, he did not hesitate to use his chum's materials if his own were not immediately available.

So it happened that when Shelby stopped in on his way home from the Cranes' he found a mild war of words in progress.

"You know, old dear," Thorpe was saying, "you'd be quite welcome to use my drawing paper, and I call it rough of you to kick because I took a couple of sheets of yours."

"Couple of sheets!" exclaimed Blair, "you took six or eight, and I had only about enough to complete this series of sketches. You know how I hate to use paper that doesn't match—"

"At it again?" said Shelby, coming in. "You two never have an out and out row, but you're always bickering. Thorpe, you ought

to mend your ways—it is a confounded nuisance to have other people using your things."

"Oh, Blair's an old granny. It does him good to get stirred up once in a while. That paper of his—"

"I know," said Shelby, quietly, "it's a special paper that he bought for his prize drawings—it's not only expensive, but he wants the sheets uniform. You knew this, Thorpe, and yet you grab it and use it for your trial sketches."

"Now, now, Kit," and Blair smiled good-naturedly, "you needn't take up my quarrel. I'm jumping on Thorpe myself."

"You jumping! You'd lie down and let him walk over you!"

"Not much, he wouldn't!" Thorpe growled; "he's been ballyragging me for half an hour! Not only about the paper, but he—"

"Let up, Thorpe," Blair spoke angrily, "at least let's keep our skeletons in our closet!"

"Oh, is there a real row on?" Shelby inquired.

"No, no," Blair declared, but Thorpe jumped up, and, going into his bedroom, closed the door behind him.

"Drop it," commanded Blair, quietly, and Shelby changed the subject.

"Mr. Crane says you had an old letter from Joshua," he began, "let's see it, will you?"

"Sure, if I can find it," and Blair began rummaging in his desk. "Confound it, Kit, if Thorpe hasn't been poking in here among my letters!"

"I wouldn't stand for it, Gilbert. What would he do that for?"

"Hush," with a glance toward Thorpe's closed door, "never mind now. But, anyway, I can't find that letter. What do you want it for?"

"Mr. Crane thinks the one I received from Joshua looks so different that I wanted to compare them."

"Let me see yours. I can tell at once. Joshua wrote a small cramped hand—"

"This one was rather large and of loosely formed letters, but, of course, some one may have written it for him."

"Yes, Joshua hated to write—"

"Well, never mind, don't hunt for it any more. Pretty queer thing about that tobacco pouch of Peter's, don't you think?"

Blair looked up quickly. "No, I don't. I know, or at least I think I know, the explanation of that."

"You do! Well, out with it!"

"No, not now," and Blair gave a significant glance toward Thorpe's door. "But I've had my suspicions roused, and I'm going to verify them, and then I'm going to expose somebody. I can't stand any more of this sort of thing. I tell you, Kit, I know!"

Shelby looked at him in amazement.

"Well, if you won't talk now, we'll whoop it up some other time. See you to-night at the dinner?"

"Yes; get along now, and we'll meet there later."

Blair looked anxious and preoccupied. As he went toward the door with Shelby he said suddenly, "I say, Kit, will you drop Carlotta Harper?"

"Drop her!"

"Yes; stop calling on her or paying her any attention."
"I will not! Just why—"
"All right." Blair's voice was cold and sharp. "Good night."
"Good night, Gil. You're queer to-night. See you later."

* * * * *

While dressing for the dinner Kit Shelby thought long and earnestly of Blair's strange words and his peculiar mental attitude. He thought Blair was like a man who had reached the end of his rope. A sort of exasperation had showed in his face and manner, and Shelby wondered what it meant.

He went over every word of the conversation they had had, including Blair's demand that Shelby desist from future acquaintance with Carly Harper! That was some demand, Shelby decided. And one to which he had no intention of acceding.

His ruminations resulted in his calling again at Blair's on the way to the dinner.

He found Blair nearly ready, and Thorpe, too, waiting to start.

Shelby scrutinized the faces of both men, and concluded they were still at odds. He went into Blair's bedroom, where that correct young man was carefully tying his immaculate evening tie.

"There, you made me spoil it," Blair exclaimed, as Shelby's sudden entrance caused a nervous gesture and a resultant wrinkle of the strip of lawn.

"Fiddle-de-dee! Don't be a fuss! Only men, you know. That's good enough."

But Blair selected another tie, and, while he manipulated it, Shelby fussed around the room. He could say no word in confidence to Blair, for Thorpe was impatiently tailing them to hurry, and shortly the three started off, gay of manner on the surface, whatever they might be thinking about.

They carefully avoided all mention of the Cranes, and also avoided the coming prize competition as a subject of discussion.

This, itself, proved the rift in the lute was still recognized in the souls of Blair and Thorpe at least. The two had enough artistic temperament to feel the inevitable jealousy of each other's designs, and if Blair suspected Thorpe of appropriating his ideas, whether consciously or unintentionally, it would have the effect of making him unusually quiet, even morose, rather than to result in so much as a spoken hint of his thoughts.

Moreover, habit is strong, and the three walked off to keep their engagement with much the same gay laughter and chatter as usual.

Shelby, especially, was purposely talkative and jocular, for he wanted to get the other two in complete good humor before the feast began.

In a general way he succeeded, and though Blair was a bit quiet, Thorpe regained his ordinary temper, and the men met and mingled with their fellows, their attitude properly in the key of the occasion.

It was a merry little dinner, and at last the talk drifted to Mr. Crane's book about Peter. Everybody present had known and loved Peter Boots, and various were the opinions regarding Benjamin Crane's extraordinary work.

"All rubbish," declared one man. "Strange, how sensible men can fall for that stuff! Makes me sick!"

"Oh, come now," another urged, "there must be something in it. Benjamin Crane never made up all that."

"No, he didn't make it up, but he was fooled, gulled, taken in."

"By the medium?" asked some one.

"Partly," answered somebody else. "But I think there's been underhand work going on."

"Such as what?"

"Oh, some of Peter's people or friends helping the medium along. I've read that book with the greatest care, studied it, and I get a lot between the lines. And I think—"

"Don't say it," put in Blair, quietly. "Unless you know something, Knight, better keep still."

"But why, Blair? We're all friends of Peter here, why not discuss the thing freely and frankly?"

"Better let it alone," insisted Blair, and then the talk drifted to the coming competition, which was even more dangerous.

"Of course nobody has a look-in but Blair and Thorpe," declared the talkative Knight. "They're sure to get the prize, separately or together."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Heard you were working on a big scheme on which you had joined forces."

"Nothing of the sort," declared Blair, shortly, and Thorpe added, "And if we were, we wouldn't say so."

Then the more peaceable minded of the group introduced other subjects, and art and spiritism were left out of it.

* * * * *

On the way home, as several were walking together, Shelby turned off at his home street and refused all invitations to go on with the others.

"Can't do it," he said. "I've got a piece of work to finish, and I've got to go home. See you all to-morrow night. By-by."

"I'm going along with you," Knight said to Blair. "I want to see your sketches, you said I might."

"All right," Gilbert returned, and, Thorpe with them, they went on to the studio.

Knight acted as a peacemaker, though not knowing it. He was a jolly, good-natured man, and he guyed the work of both his friends until they joined forces to contradict him.

Late they sat, smoking and talking over general matters. Also they discussed the Crane book, and agreed that, whether true or not, it was a great document and wonderfully popular.

"People are crazy over it, who always hooted at that sort of thing," Knight asserted. "It's partly the charm of Mr. Crane's manner, for the book is delightfully written, and somehow it does carry conviction."

"Thought you didn't believe in it!"

"Me? Oh, I don't," and Knight winked; "I mean it carries conviction to those who like that sort of thing. No, I don't believe a word of it is truth."

"Yet you have confidence in Mr. Crane's sincerity?"

"Oh, yes; he's merely fooled by a medium and—"

"Go on."

"And somebody who's telling her things."

"Who'd do that?"

"I don't know, but it's too palpable. Look at that tobacco pouch affair. You know somebody must have given her that. Who did?"

"Hush up," said Blair, determinedly. "If you want to discuss that, do it somewhere else."

"You're all on edge to-night, Blairsy. What's the matter?"

"Nothing, and I'm not."

"Oh, yes, you are," Knight went on. "But, of course, it's nervousness about the competition. What'll either of you boys do if the other gets the prize?"

"Congratulate him," said Thorpe, but there was not much ring of earnestness in his tone.

Blair looked at him moodily, and Knight rose to go.

"You chaps are out of sorts, and I'll not see you again till the prize business is settled. Then I hope you'll be your own sweet sunny selves once more. Good night."

He went off, and the other two began a desultory conversation. It lagged, however, and soon they separated for the night.

* * * * *

Nobody in the Leonardo Studio apartments was an early riser. For that reason it was nearly eleven o'clock when Thorpe, his face very white, telephoned downstairs and asked the doorman to come up at once.

When Hastings appeared he found Thorpe sitting on the edge of a chair in the studio in a state of agitation.

"Blair—" Thorpe said, speaking with difficulty. "Mr. Blair,—you know,—he's—he's very ill—"

"Ill, sir? Where is he?"

"In bed—in his room—go in, Hastings."

The man went in, and it needed only a glance to tell him that Blair's illness, whatever it had been, was fatal.

"He's dead," Hastings said, in an awe-stricken voice. "He's surely dead."

"Well, do something," Thorpe said; "what's the thing to do? Get a doctor?"

"A doctor couldn't help him, but yes, we ought to send for one. Who, sir?"

"I don't know. I've never had a doctor. This unnerves me, Hastings. I wish you'd do what's necessary."

"Ain't you a friend of his, sir? Can't you show a little heart?"

Hastings had never liked Thorpe, but had always been an admirer of Gilbert Blair. There was no special reason for this, unless that Blair was of a kindlier nature, and rarely found fault with Hastings, while Thorpe was sometimes irascible and even unreasonable.

Moreover, if Thorpe was nervously upset, Hastings was, too, and neither man knew exactly what to do.

"Well, you must get a doctor," Thorpe went on, a little peevishly. "You're responsible in cases of emergency—"

"Me responsible, sir? What do you mean, Mr. Thorpe?"

"Nothing to make you look like that. But you're in a position of responsibility, and it's up to you to do something. Now, do it."

"Yes, sir." The tone of authority brought Hastings to his senses. He was responsible in a case like this, and he went to the telephone. He called the superintendent, who did not live in the building, and asked him to come at once, and to bring a doctor. Then, his work done, he left the room, and Thorpe was alone with his dead comrade.

But McClellan Thorpe made no move. He sat still on the edge of the chair, his face turned away from Blair's bedroom and toward the outer door.

At last Somers, the superintendent, arrived, and with him was Doctor Frost.

They went straight to Blair's bedroom, scarcely speaking to Thorpe.

"Hastings tells me he's dead," Somers merely said, as he passed Thorpe's chair.

With practiced experience, the doctor examined the body.

"The man has been dead about eight or nine hours," he said, "it's impossible to fix the time of his death exactly,—but I place it at about three o'clock this morning. Though it may have taken place an hour sooner or later."

"What caused it?" Somers, asked, "a stroke?"

"Can't tell without an autopsy. There is positively no indication of any reason for it."

"A natural death, of course?" Thorpe asked, jerkily.

The doctor gave him a quick glance. "Looks so," he returned. "Maybe a stroke,—though he's young for that. Maybe acute indigestion, is he troubled that way?"

"With indigestion? Yes," Thorpe said; "he has it most of the time. But not acute,—merely a little discomfort when he overeats,—which he often does."

"Does he take anything for it?"

"I don't know,—yes, I've seen him take remedies now and then. I've not paid it much attention."

"Queer case," the doctor mused. "If it had been that, he would have cried out, I think. Did you hear no disturbance?"

"Not a bit," said Thorpe. "Are you sure it's not a stroke?"

"He's too young for a stroke. Where are his people?"

"'Way out West. And he hasn't many. An invalid mother, and a young sister,— I think that's all."

"Well,—who should be notified? Those relatives? Where are they? Will you take charge?"

"Oh, I can't!" Thorpe spoke shrinkingly. "I'm— I'm no relation, —you know,—merely a fellow lodger in his apartment. I'd— rather get out, any way."

"You and he chums?"

"Yes; both architects. Of course, I know all about Mr. Blair's work and that,—but I know nothing of his private affairs. Can't

you get somebody to—to settle up his estate?"

"If he has an estate to settle. But somebody ought to look after things. Who are his friends?"

"Mr. Crane is one,—Benjamin Crane. And Christopher Shelby,—he's an intimate chum."

"Crane, the man who wrote the book about his son's spirit?"

"Yes, that one. Shall I telephone him?"

"Yes; you'd better do so. And I think it necessary to have an autopsy. This death is mysterious, to say the least. It's unusual, too, in some of its aspects."

"Do what you like," said Thorpe, "but—but I'd rather not be present. I think I'll go down to the Cranes' and tell them,—while you—you go on with your work."

"All right," said Doctor Frost, "I'd just as lief have you out of the way. Leave me the telephone call that will reach you."

* * * * *

As Thorpe went off, he realized that he'd had no breakfast. He felt little like eating, but dropped into a restaurant for a cup of coffee.

He found himself totally unable to drink it, and leaving it untasted he went on to the Crane house.

He told the story to Benjamin Crane, who was shocked indeed.

"But I'm not greatly surprised," Mr. Crane said; "I've been thinking for some time that Blair didn't look well. A sort of pallor, you know, and he was thin. I don't think the Labrador

trip agreed with him at all. And Peter's death affected him deeply. No; Blair hasn't been well for months."

"What are you doing here at this time in the morning, McClellan?" asked a laughing voice, as Julie Crane came into the room.

But her laughter was hushed as she was told the news.

"Oh, Mac, what an awful ordeal for you," she exclaimed, her sorrow at Blair's death apparently lost sight of in sympathy for Thorpe.

"It was, Julie," he returned, earnestly; "I'm—I'm positively foolish about such things,—death, I mean. I,—I almost went all to pieces."

"Of course you did! Had you had your breakfast?"

"No; I tried to take some coffee, but I couldn't."

"You will now," said the girl, decidedly. "You come with me, to the dining room, and I'll make you some coffee myself, on the electric percolator, and some toast, too, and if you don't enjoy them, I'll be mad at you."

He followed her in a sort of daze, turning back to say:

"Are you going up to the studio, Mr. Crane?"

"Yes, at once. You go along with Julie, and let her look after you. And, Julie, you must tell your mother. It will be a shock,—she loves all Peter's friends."

The two went to the dining-room, where Julie, housewifely girl that she was, brewed golden coffee and made toast with no aid from the servants.

Mrs. Crane joined them, and Julie told her mother the sad news.

"Poor Gilbert," she said, wiping her tears away. "Peter loved him. Have you told Kit Shelby?"

"Not yet," Thorpe said; "I'm so broken up myself—"

"Of course you are," Julie said; "I suppose father will send him word. Don't think about that, Mac, father will attend to everything."

"I know it," said Thorpe, "and I'm so relieved. Don't think me a weakling, but death always unnerves me,—I can't help it,—and when I found Gilbert,—like that—"

"There, there," Julie soothed him, "you did all you could. Now let me make you one little piece more of brown toast—"

But Thorpe declined. To please the girl he had managed to eat one tiny crisp bit, but another he could not accept. Nor could he take more than a small part of the cup of coffee she gave him.

"I'm a fool," he said, "but—I'm all in!"

CHAPTER IX
Investigation

NOR did Thorpe's nerves grow calmer. Both Mrs. Crane and Julie tried to soothe him, but he was jumpy and his mouth twitched spasmodically.

The women endeavored to change the subject and talked of other things, whereupon Thorpe sat, brooding,—his dark, handsome face strained and despairful.

"Now, McClellan," Julie said, at last, decidedly, "it's awful enough, goodness knows, but I'll go crazy if you sit there like that any longer! Let's think what's to be done. In the first place, there's Carly to be considered. She's worse hit than you are. Oh, I know you and Gilbert were great friends and all that,—but I think he and Carly were more than friends."

"Julie," said her mother, "don't assume more than you know. Carly hasn't forgotten Peter,—of that I'm sure."

"No; and I don't say there was anything definite between her and Gil Blair, but I think it would have come in time. Gilbert was crazy over her, even before they all went on that trip, and when Peter didn't come back, I think Gilbert felt he had a right to win Carly if he could."

"Oh, he had right enough," Mrs. Crane conceded, "but—I suppose I'm a bit jealous of my son's memory. However, I'm sorry for poor little Carly, if she did care for Gilbert in that way."

And then Carlotta came in. Shelby was with her; he had heard the news and had gone straight to Carlotta's home, and they had come over to the Cranes' together.

Carlotta's eyes were red with weeping, but she was even more indignant than sad.

"Who could have killed Gilbert?" she cried, "and why should any one do so?"

"Killed him!" cried Julie, "what *do* you mean?"

"Why, yes,—haven't you heard? Gilbert was poisoned."

"Oh, Carlotta! Who said so?"

"Kit told me;—tell them about it,—I can't."

So Shelby told them.

"Mr. Crane telephoned me," he said, "only about half an hour ago. He said the doctor found that Gilbert was poisoned, either by himself—"

"Oh, he never did it himself!" Carlotta cried out. "Why should he? He was just on the eve of the great competition,—and he was so excited about it, and so hopeful,—it's absurd to say he killed himself!"

"Of course it is," agreed Julie. "But are they sure it was poison? Mac thought it was acute indigestion,—or a stroke, or something like that."

"No," Shelby said. "Mr. Crane said there was no doubt about it, I mean about the poisoning. But don't be too sure that Gilbert didn't take it himself. It might have been by mistake, you know. And anyway it's a mistake to theorize much until we know

more of the details. I'm going up to Blair's place. Coming along, Thorpe?"

"No,—no,—I don't believe I will,—I'll stay here a while, if Mrs. Crane will let me."

"Of course," said Mrs. Crane, in her kind, motherly way, "Mac is all broken up. And no wonder! The shock of finding Gilbert dead—"

"Oh, Mr. Thorpe, did you make the discovery?" exclaimed Carlotta. "How awful! I don't wonder you're upset. Yes, Kit, you go up to Gilbert's. There may be something you can do."

Shelby went away, and when he reached the studio the first one to greet him was Mr. Crane.

"Hello, Shelby, I'm glad you came. This is a bad business."

"Tell me all about it,—I know only the main fact,—of Gilbert's death."

"Yes, that's the main fact, and the next one in importance is that the boy was poisoned. It's not known whether he took the poison himself or whether—"

"But how? I mean, what are the circumstances?"

"Come on in,—the police are here and the doctor. Listen to them."

The two went into the familiar studio, the big room where Blair and his friends had so often forgathered with jests and laughter.

There were two doctors there and two or three men from the Police Department.

The Medical Examiner was talking.

"It's one of those cases," he said, "where there seem to be no clews at all. The autopsy revealed the mere fact that Mr. Blair was poisoned by prussic acid, taken into the stomach. But there is no evidence in the way of a glass or container of any sort, there is no odor of prussic acid about his lips, no real reason to suspect foul play, and yet no apparent reason to think he killed himself. It may have been an accident, yet I can see no real evidence of that. It's mysterious from the very lack of anything suspicious."

"Was he—was he in bed?" asked Shelby, who had heard no detail of Thorpe's finding the body.

"Yes," said Doctor Middleton, the Examiner. "It seems his room-mate found him, in bed, in his night-wear, and immediately called the doorman of the house."

"And then Thorpe lit out," remarked Detective Weston. "I want to see him."

"Oh, Thorpe's all right," said Mr. Crane. "He's down at my house. I'll vouch for him. You needn't look that way for the criminal,—if there is a criminal."

"I should say not!" declared Shelby. "McClellan Thorpe and Mr. Blair were the greatest friends."

"But I can't think Gilbert was killed," Mr. Crane went on. "Seems to me if that were the case, there'd be some evidence of an intruder. And as Gilbert has no friends,—I mean no relatives or family in the city, I'll take up the matter myself. I'd like a thorough investigation, not so much to prove there was a criminal as to prove there wasn't one. I don't think there was,

but I'd like a search made for any light that can be thrown on the matter."

"Oh, we'll investigate all right," said Weston; "I think somebody bumped the man off. I don't see any possibility for an accident, but it's more like suicide to me."

"Let's look around a bit," said Shelby. "I'm with you, Mr. Crane, in assuming responsibility. Why, who is there to take charge of Gilbert's things,—his estate?"

"It's hardly a big enough matter to call an estate," Crane said; "of course, I know more or less of Blair's affairs, and he wasn't by any means affluent. Indeed, his hopes of the prize in the coming competition represented his chief asset."

"Thought he'd get a prize, did he?" said Weston, "for what?"

"For his architectural design," Crane answered. "He was working hard, and was hopeful. That's why I feel sure he never killed himself."

"Here are his designs," said Shelby, as he opened a big portfolio. "Why don't you take these, Mr. Crane, and take them home with you. They're really valuable."

"Of course they are,—I'll do that," agreed the older man. "Blair has a sister, somewhere out West. If anything comes of the drawings, it will be hers."

"Can you get in touch with his family?" asked Middleton.

"Don't know anything about them," Crane returned. "I suppose there must be letters or an address book or some such matters in Blair's desk. Thorpe may know more about it than I do."

"Thorpe may know a lot of things," suggested Weston. "Better get him up here, I say."

"All right," Benjamin Crane said, after a moment's pause. "He's down at my house,—I'll telephone him to come up here now."

But when connection was made it transpired that Thorpe had left the Crane house and nobody knew where he was.

"Looks bad," said Weston, shortly. "Why'd he run away?"

"See here, Mr. Weston," Crane said, "if you've any suspicion against McClellan Thorpe just put it out of your mind. He had no hand in Mr. Blair's death—"

"I didn't say he had."

"I know you didn't, but you implied it, and I want to quash any such suggestion at once."

"It's absurd," Shelby agreed. "You don't know the friendship that existed between the two men. Why, they were fellow architects and have lived here together for over two years. They were like brothers."

"That's all right, but why did Thorpe run away?"

"He hasn't run away!" Crane said, "what a ridiculous charge! Merely because he left my house, you say he's run away! He's probably on his way up here. This is his home."

"Well, until he gets here, I'll look around his room a bit," Weston remarked, and as he went into Thorpe's bedroom, Crane followed.

There was nothing sinister there. Merely the usual appointments, and rather plain ones, for the young architects were not of luxurious tastes or means.

With a practiced eye and deft hand, Weston went through dresser drawers, and cupboard shelves. Looked into the books on the night table, and in a short time had satisfied himself that there was no evidence apparent, so far.

Into the bathroom next, they all went. This the two men shared, and the detective scrutinized the glasses and brushes that were on shelves, either side of the wash stand. They were of tidy appearance and presented merely the array that might be expected.

Weston sniffed hard at the glasses, but could detect no untoward odors, nor any sign of poison or drugs of any sort.

The small white cupboard on the wall showed only a few bottles containing toilet appurtenances and simple medicines.

"Witch Hazel, Peroxide, Talcum powder, Cholera mixture and soda mints," he said, from the various labels,—"hello, here's laudanum! How about that?"

"No," Doctor Middleton declared, "it wasn't laudanum poisoning. It was prussic acid. The effects are quite different, and there's no mistaking them. I don't know what the young men were doing with laudanum, but it wasn't that that killed Mr. Blair."

"Curious, to have poison around at all," said Shelby, musingly.

"Gives a hint of intended suicide," suggested Weston. "Though not necessarily—"

"I should say not!" broke in Benjamin Crane. "Gilbert Blair wasn't coward enough to take his own life for any reason. Why, he was my son's friend. It was an accident,—and the fact of

finding that other poison about, points toward accident, to my mind."

"Just how do you make that out, Mr. Crane?" asked Weston, with a slight smile.

"Why"—began Crane, a little lamely—"I'm not sure that I can explain, but it appeared to me that if Blair had one poison in his possession, he might have had the other, and—"

"How do you know this laudanum was Mr. Blair's possession?" asked Weston. "Might it not have been Mr. Thorpe's?"

"How you hark back to Thorpe!" exclaimed Crane, with real petulance. "I wish you'd stop it, Weston. If you've a definite suspicion that he killed Gilbert Blair, say so, but don't throw out these silly hints."

"Nothing especially silly about them, Mr. Crane," the detective was quite unruffled, "only I hold that the poison we've just found is quite as likely to be Mr. Thorpe's as Mr. Blair's. That's all."

"Of course it is," Shelby said, placatingly, "but that's neither here nor there. If you have reason to think Mr. Blair was murdered, you've reason to look for the criminal. But I don't think you've proved it was not an accident, and until you do, it's well to be careful how you throw suspicion about."

"It's not so easy to prove an accident,—or a murder, either,—when there's practically no clew to be found. Therefore, it's our duty to question any one who can give any material evidence, especially one who was presumably the last one to see Mr. Blair alive."

"Except the murderer,—if there was one," said Shelby.

"Yes, and if he was not the murderer himself," grunted Weston.

"Send for that doorman," said Middleton, a bit curtly. "Let's get somewhere."

Hastings, being summoned, appeared, and told all he knew, which was little, and all he surmised, which was more.

"Yes," he said, "Mr. Thorpe called me, this morning, and when I came, he was all of a shiver. He sat on the edge of that chair there, and his teeth chattered and his voice shook—"

"Small wonder!" said Crane. "Mac is a very nervous man, and a shock such as he must have had—"

"Go on, Hastings," ordered Doctor Middleton.

"Well, Mr. Thorpe said Mr. Blair was ill, and told me to go in and see him. Now, of course, Mr. Thorpe knew Mr. Blair was dead, but he said he was ill. Why did he do that?"

"Tell your story," said Crane, scowling at him. "Don't ask fool questions as you go along!"

"Yes, sir. Well, I went in and I saw Mr. Blair was dead. And I told Mr. Thorpe so, and he didn't seem surprised, but he was all of a blue funk, and he said, 'Well,—get a doctor—or whatever is the thing to do.' Just like that. He didn't show any grief or any sorrow,—only just seemed scared to death."

"And he didn't show any surprise?" This from Middleton.

"Of course he didn't!" Crane cried; "of course he knew Blair was dead when he called Hastings. I know Thorpe, and he's a most nervous temperament. And when he called for help, as of course he had to do, it was the most natural thing in the world

for him to say that Mr. Blair was ill. Nor would he be apt to show his grief then and there. He was stunned, and moreover, he's not the man to talk over his sorrow with the janitor! I say Thorpe acted as any of us would do in the same circumstances. Now, I for one, object to having him misjudged."

"You're a good champion, Mr. Crane," said Doctor Middleton, "and I don't blame you for standing up for your friend. But he'll have to speak for himself,—Mr. Thorpe will,—and the sooner we get hold of him the better."

"I agree to all that," Crane replied, "all I ask is that he shall not be condemned unheard."

"That's reasonable enough," granted Middleton, "but we must get hold of him soon."

"He'll come back here," Mr. Crane assured them. "He hasn't run away, as you seem to think, but he has a natural aversion to this place, and I shouldn't be surprised if he stayed away for a few days."

"A few days! Where would he stay?" asked the Examiner.

"Probably at his Club."

"Which Club? I'll call it up and see if he's there now," Weston said, briskly.

"The Artists' Club. Call it, and they'll tell you something about him, I'm sure."

Weston called the Club and received word that Thorpe was there.

"Ask him to speak to me," he ordered, and in a moment he was talking to Thorpe himself.

"Yes, I'll come home right away," Thorpe agreed, when urgently invited to do so.

"I told you so," said Crane, triumphantly; "that man had no thought of running away, but he dreads this place just now. He's of a sensitive, nervous nature, and I hope, Mr. Weston, you'll be decent to him. No third degree manners,—that won't help with McClellan Thorpe."

They all remained awaiting Thorpe's return. Shelby busied himself looking over some of Blair's books and papers, while Benjamin Crane talked to Dr. Middleton.

He rather liked the Medical Examiner, but he did not at all admire detective Weston or his ways. So he endeavored to give Doctor Middleton a mental picture of Thorpe, and prepare him for an interview that should temper justice with mercy, or at least, consideration.

Weston spent the time prowling round Blair's bedroom in search of clews. But his keen glances could find no single thing that gave any hint of means or reason for suicide, nor any that suggested an accident.

"Wherefore," he concluded to himself, "it's a murder. No clew, means a careful removal of any clew,—and a mighty clever criminal at that. Maybe it wasn't friend Thorpe, but a few words with him will convince me one way or the other."

Thorpe came, and though his expression was inscrutable and his face set and stern, it seemed to those who knew him best that he was trying to hold himself together and not give way to his nervousness.

"Take a seat, Mr. Thorpe," Doctor Middleton said, courteously, after Crane had introduced them; "we expect from you a straightforward account of all you can tell us of your experiences this morning."

"Why should my account be other than straightforward?" Thorpe said, breathing hard, and making an evident effort at self-control. "I have nothing to conceal, and if I seem distraught, it is, I dare say, not astonishing."

"Now, Mac," Mr. Crane said, kindly, "don't bristle. We're all your friends, and we only want you—"

"Good heavens, Mr. Crane, why do you take that conciliatory attitude? I've no confession to make,— I— I didn't kill Blair—"

"Why do you say that?" cried Weston. "Who even hinted that you killed Mr. Blair? Why do you think anybody killed him?"

"Why do you?" countered Thorpe, turning an angry glance at the detective.

"I haven't said I did."

"Not in so many words,—but you imply it. I tell you I didn't kill him! I *didn't!"*

Thorpe was not excited of manner, he was very calm, but his blazing eyes and quivering mouth, and his intensity, rather than force of speech gave him the effect of intense excitement.

"Don't deny or assert, Mr. Thorpe," said Middleton, coldly. "Just tell your story. At what time did you rise?"

"About ten o'clock," was the short reply.

"And then?"

"Then I bathed, shaved and dressed just as usual. I generally dress before Mr. Blair, and I thought nothing of his silence."

"His bedroom door was closed?"

"Yes; then, after I was dressed and about to go out to my breakfast, I called to him through the door."

"What did you say?"

"I can't repeat the exact words, but it was only to the effect of 'good-by, old chap,' or maybe, 'I'm off, Blair,' or something of the sort."

"And you went on?"

"I didn't hear him reply,—he usually says, 'All right, Mac,' so I repeated my call. Then, when he didn't respond that time, I knocked at his door."

"Fearing something was wrong?"

"N-no,—not wrong,— I think I just wanted him to say something—"

"Why were you so anxious he should say something?" This last from Weston, with a direct glance.

"Why, good Lord, man," Thorpe's eyes blazed, "because I am accustomed to a reply, and when it didn't come, I naturally wondered why."

"Didn't you think he might merely be asleep?"

"I didn't think anything about that. I acted on impulse. I didn't hear him, and I wanted to see him."

"And you did? You opened the door?"

"Yes, after I knocked twice,—then I— I opened his door."

"It was not locked?"

"No; we never lock our bedroom doors."

"Go on,—and then?"

"Then"—Thorpe spoke slowly, as if choosing his words—"then, I saw him lying in the bed,—still,—as if asleep. I went closer, and I saw by the look on his face that he was dead."

"You knew that at once?" asked Middleton. "You didn't think he was only asleep—"

"No,—the pallor was unmistakable—"

"Have you often looked upon death?"

"Never before,—except at a funeral."

"And yet you knew at once it was death you saw,—not sleep. That is remarkable, Mr. Thorpe."

Thorpe met Middleton's eyes, and then his own fell.

"I can't help that, Doctor," he said; "I was sure,—that is,—almost sure Mr. Blair was dead."

"Yet you called Hastings and told him Mr. Blair was ill."

"Yes,—I couldn't seem to say the—the other—"

"Why did you kill him, Mr. Thorpe?"

"I— I kill him! Oh, I didn't!— I told you I didn't!"

"Yes; but we can't believe you."

CHAPTER X
Evidence

THE few days following Gilbert Blair's death were like a nightmare to his friends. A search of his papers had revealed a probable address of his mother, but a telegram sent there had as yet brought no reply and though a letter was despatched, no answer could be expected to that for a week or more.

Meantime, by general consent, Benjamin Crane took charge of Blair's affairs. The funeral took place in an undertaker's establishment and the body was placed in a receiving vault, until Blair's people could be heard from. His immediate possessions remained in the studio rooms, for the lease had still six months to run, and the police objected to any removal of the dead man's effects. It was practically impossible to seal them up as Thorpe occupied the same rooms, but a strict surveillance was kept, and Weston doggedly asserted he would yet track down the murderer.

For no one could doubt Blair had been murdered. On the eve of the prize competition, in which he was so deeply interested, —on the eve, as he hoped, of being engaged to Carlotta Harper, whom he loved, full of life and energy, why should he kill himself? It was impossible to accept the theory of suicide, and the detectives were hard at work on the case.

McClellan Thorpe was suspected, but as there was no evidence against him, save his indubitable and exclusive opportunity, he

had not as yet been arrested.

"His opportunity was not exclusive," Mr. Crane contended. "Those studio apartments are not burglar proof! Anybody might have got in during the night and administered the poison."

"No," Weston objected. "It would be practically impossible for any one to go into those rooms, force or persuade Blair to swallow poison and get away without being heard by Mr. Thorpe or without leaving any trace of his presence."

"Well, look here, Weston," Mr. Crane spoke very seriously, "you know me well enough to know I've no notion of evading justice for anybody. But knowing McClellan Thorpe as I do, and knowing his peculiar temperament, I wish you'd let him alone, —at least, until you have a bit of indisputable evidence."

"I've got it, Mr. Crane."

"What?"

The two were sitting in Benjamin Crane's library, where they often met to talk over the case. Julie was present, for she wanted to know every detail of any discovery that might be made.

"I don't believe it!" she flared out at the detective's statement.

"Yes, Miss Crane," Weston said, "I found a pretty suspicious circumstance to-day. Nothing less than a very small bottle, without cork or label, but smelling unmistakably of prussic acid."

"Where was it?" demanded Crane.

"Hidden in an old and unused paint-box of McClellan Thorpe's."

"Where was the paint-box?"

"'Way back, on a cupboard shelf. Pushed back, behind a pile of old books."

"Planted evidence," suggested Crane. "The real criminal put it there to incriminate Mr. Thorpe."

"Not a chance!" said Weston, smiling. "I've had that place watched too closely for that, sir! Nobody could get in to plant evidence, or to do anything else without being seen by my men. No, sir, that bottle in Mr. Thorpe's paint-box was put there by his own hand, and it will prove his undoing."

"But it's absurd!" flashed Julie. "Mr. Thorpe never killed his friend,—but if he had done so, he wouldn't be fool enough to leave such evidence around!"

"He couldn't help himself, Miss Crane. When he used the bottle that night, he had to secrete it somewhere, and since then he has been too closely watched to dare to take it from its hiding-place and dispose of it."

"But I don't see how he could have done it," Crane objected. "How could he persuade Blair to take a dose of poison?"

"Oh, in lots of ways. Say, they had a highball or that,—all he had to do was to drop the tiniest speck from the little vial into the drink. He could easily do that unobserved. Anyway, he did do it. Then, of course, afterward, he had ample chance to clean the glasses and remove every trace of crime, except that he had to conceal the bottle. This he did in the most obvious way. Exactly the way any one would try to secrete such a thing. The bottle had been emptied and washed, but that poison has such

an enduring odor that it is practically impossible to eliminate it entirely. But there's the fact, Mr. Crane, now, unless another suspect can be found, it's all up with Mr. Thorpe."

"Then we'll find another suspect!" exclaimed Julie.

"Go ahead, Miss. I'll investigate your new man, as soon as you name him. That's the important part of this affair, there's no chance of another suspect. No one has been so much as thought of—"

"That doorman?" said Julie.

"Nixy! He had no motive, no opportunity,—and there's not the slightest reason to suspect him."

"Some outsider, then," went on Julie, desperately, "some fellow artist, who feared Gilbert would win that prize—"

"Miss Crane, you must know that's the motive attributed to Mr. Thorpe. You must know that he and Mr. Blair were rivals in that competition and—"

Julie's eyes flashed fire. "And you mean to say that he killed his friend,—his chum,—in order to be sure of winning the prize!"

"That's the motive we're assuming. But there was doubtless a scrap,—a row about the pictures or drawings,—in fact,— I hate to tell you these things, but we have learned that there was bad blood between the two men, for each thought the other had imitated his own ideas. This brought about more or less dissension, and—well, probably both men lost their temper, and real hatred ensued."

Weston tried to adapt his language so as to spare Julie's feelings as much as possible, for the girl was highly wrought up,

and he was genuinely sorry for her. He knew of the state of things between her and Thorpe, knew, too, that it explained Benjamin Crane's determination to free Thorpe from suspicion, if it could be done.

But Crane was staggered by the disclosure of the hidden vial.

"It's a clew," he said, but he spoke slowly and thoughtfully.

"Yes, it's a clew," agreed Weston, "and it will convict the criminal. The label,—if it ever had one,—has been washed off. The cork is missing,—and, by the way, if that cork could be found it would help a lot! But all the same, I've a notion I can trace that bottle to its source."

"How?" asked Crane. "Is it of a peculiar shape or style?"

"No; just a common, ordinary two-ounce bottle, such as most druggists use all the time. But there's no name blown in it,—that's important, for many dealers have their names on their glassware, and a blank bottle is conspicuous of itself."

"Conspicuous by its rarity,—but not therefore traceable," said Mr. Crane.

"Perhaps so,—by elimination—"

"Nonsense!" Julie cried; "you can't trace it, and you know it! You're just making believe,—you're what do you call it? framing a case! you're railroading McClellan Thorpe to prison! I won't have it! Father, surely you can do something! You *must!"*

Stifling her sobs, Julie ran out of the room.

There was an uncomfortable silence and then Benjamin Crane said:

"You see what a hard position I'm in, Weston."

"Yes, sir."

"But of course," Crane sighed deeply, "justice must be done,—only I beg of you, Weston, use every effort to find another suspect,—a logical one,—now, don't misunderstand me! I mean, if there can possibly be a doubt of Thorpe's guilt, and a chance of another man's guilt,—for Heaven's sake find that other man!"

"Not a chance."

"But, at least, keep an open mind. And spare no expense. Get a special detective,—a big one,—there now, don't bristle! I don't suppose you think yourself the cleverest in the world, do you? Don't you admit any superior? If so, get him; if not, then prove your own worth. I repeat, I want no undue favor shown to McClellan Thorpe, but if he is not the guilty man, then I want you to move heaven and earth to find the real criminal. Can't you conceive, Weston, of a murderer so clever as to have committed the crime, planted the vial as evidence against Thorpe and made his escape leaving no clew?"

"I can conceive of such a thing, sir, as I can conceive of a ghost,—but there is no evidence for either conception."

"Evidence enough for ghosts, Weston! Haven't you read my book?"

"Oh, I clean forgot that book you wrote, Mr. Crane. No, I haven't read it, but my folks have, and I dare say you do believe in spooks. But, come, now, you don't believe a spook killed Mr. Blair, do you, sir?"

"No,—and yet, it is within the bounds of possibility—"

"Not as the police count possibility! There's small chance of any human agency other than Mr. Thorpe, but far less chance of a supernatural agent! I'll be getting along, Mr. Crane, if you're going off on that track."

"Hold on, Weston, I'm in earnest about this special detective. Suppose I engage a private one. Can you and he work in harmony?"

"Oh, yes, I'm not pig-headed. So long as he don't interfere too much, or get me into any scrapes with his highfalutin tricks,—which they all have, go ahead and get him. I'll do my own duty, as I see it and as it's dictated to me by Headquarters; but if you want to engage a dozen private detectives, there's no law against it. And, sir, I'm free to confess I feel mighty sorry for that pretty daughter of yours, and if anybody else can save her man for her, when I can't—why, let him at it!"

"Good for you, Weston, I hoped you'd be above petty jealousy. Go on, now, and see if you can't connect up that empty vial with somebody whose name isn't Thorpe,—and, I say, you're not going to arrest him yet, are you?"

"Not just yet,—but,—well, I'll let you know—soon, where we stand."

His visitor gone, Benjamin Crane put on his hat and went at once to see Madame Parlato. He had acquired the habit of an interview with her when anything bothered him, and his faith in her powers was unshaken.

His request for a *séance* was granted, for since the book of Benjamin Crane's had made such a success, the medium was

besieged with patrons, yet she always gave Crane the preference over other sitters.

Admitted to the private sanctum, Crane told the Madame he wished to learn anything possible concerning the death of Gilbert Blair.

The medium went into a trance as usual, and after a short interval, announced in her low monotone that the spirit of Peter Crane was present.

"My boy," said Crane, eagerly, "do you know who killed Blair?"

"Yes, father," came the reply, through the voice of Madame Parlato; "do not seek further than you already know."

"You mean it was—"

Benjamin Crane hesitated. He was a cautious man, and often as he had had this sort of interviews with Peter's spirit, he was always particular to give no information unnecessarily.

"Yes,—dad,—it was."

"Well, who? who, Peter?"

"Must I say the name?"

"Yes, boy. But only if you're sure you know. It would be a grave error otherwise."

The medium stirred uneasily, and was silent for a time. Then, with a long drawn sigh, she resumed, "Well, father, if I must tell you, it was Thorpe."

"Oh, Peter, not really!"

"Yes, dad. Don't look any further,—it was Thorpe."

The medium was silent after that. She came out of her trance state, looking a little bewildered.

"Did you get anything?" she asked, for, as she had frequently told her sitter, she herself knew nothing of what transpired while she was unconscious.

"Yes," Crane returned, and knowing there would be no further communication that day, he went home.

He found Thorpe there, discussing the matter with Mrs. Crane and Julie.

"I don't know what to do," Thorpe said, as Mr. Crane joined the group. "I didn't kill Blair,—at least, I don't think I did."

"What does that mean?" Crane asked.

"Only that if I did do it, it was unconsciously."

"In your sleep?"

"No; but under hypnotism. I've not much belief in that sort of thing,—but,—well, you know about occult matters, might it not be possible?"

Benjamin Crane was disappointed. He had hoped for a vigorous denial on Thorpe's part, but this halfway confession seemed to him a mere quibble. He found himself believing the man guilty and that he was using this hypnotism suggestion as a last resort to prove innocence.

"Stop it, father!" Julie cried. "You are thinking Mac did do it, having been hypnotized by somebody! Well, he didn't! and I *know* he didn't and I'll *prove* it!"

"Good talk, Julie, but does it mean anything!" asked her father, giving her a look of gentle sadness.

"I'll make it mean something! That thick-witted detective doesn't know a thing! Now, I don't believe in the hypnotism

theory—"

"Why, Julie," said her mother, "I've heard you say you believed in hypnotism!"

"Oh, yes, I do, but I mean not in this case. Nobody hypnotized McClellan to kill Gilbert. I'm sure of that, and I wish you wouldn't repeat it, Mac. People will only laugh at you."

"Well, what are you going to do, my child?" asked her father.

"Oh, I don't know! I'm desperate,— I will find out something!"

"Of course you will, Julie, for I'll help you."

It was Thorpe who spoke, and he seemed to have suddenly acquired a new energy.

"I'm going to turn detective myself," he went on. "We'll work together, Julie, and,— Mr. Crane, if we succeed,— I mean succeed in freeing myself from suspicion—"

"And finding the real criminal," put in Crane with a very serious face.

"Yes, and find the real criminal," but Thorpe's face was less bright, "then, sir, will you give us your blessing?"

"Yes, McClellan," but Crane's voice had no hearty ring, "yes, when you are a free man in every sense of the word, you may take my little girl for your own."

Thorpe gave him a searching look. "I can't help seeing, Mr. Crane," he said, "that you think,—or perhaps I may say, you fear I am guilty. I hope I can prove to you that I am not."

Crane noticed the wording of his speech. Thorpe hoped to prove to him,—but he didn't say he was innocent.

And Benjamin Crane believed the man guilty. Greatly influenced by what he had heard at the *séance* with the medium, Crane was still willing to be convinced to the contrary, but Thorpe's own attitude and words did not carry conviction.

"Well, my children," Crane said at last, "here's my proposition. I can't think your determination to do detective work will produce much fruit. Now, if you like, I'll engage the best detective I can find and put him on the job. What say, Thorpe?"

It was a test question, and Crane eagerly awaited the answer. If Thorpe were really innocent, he would welcome the clever sleuthing that would be likely to unearth the truth.

But he was disappointed to hear Thorpe say, "Not yet, Mr. Crane. Give us a chance. Let me try,—let us try,"—with a glance at Julie—"give us a few days, at least,—then, if we gain nothing, —then bring on your detective."

"But,— I hate to say it, Mac, though I dare say you know it,— you may be arrested any day now."

Thorpe gave a start, and the sudden pallor that came to his face showed how the idea affected him.

"Oh, not that,—hardly that—"

"Yes, it's imminent." Crane thought best to tell him this. "They —they say they've got the goods on you, Mac."

"What—what do you mean by that?"

"Well," Crane couldn't bring himself to tell of the poison bottle, "well, my boy, they say that you and Blair quarreled."

"We did."

"Over the sketches for the prizes?"

"Yes, over those, and over other matters."

"When was this?"

"We'd been scrapping off and on for some time. Nothing very serious. But,—well, when Gilbert implied that I had used his ideas, I—I got mad."

"And saw red?"

"Yes, I suppose that's what they call it."

"The night he—he died?"

"Yes."

"Mac," Benjamin Crane looked grave, "suppose you tell me just what happened that night."

"Well,—we'd all been to the Club to dinner, you know."

"Yes."

"And when we went home, Bob Knight went with us. He was irritating, somehow,—said he heard Blair and I had combined on our work—"

"Why was that annoying?"

"Oh, it implied that Gilbert and I took each other's ideas, or something,— I don't know,—anyway, he stirred us up, and when he went off, Gil and I were touchy. We had some words, and Blair tore up his sketches, a-and—tore up some of mine, too."

"He did! No wonder you were annoyed."

"Yes; they were the ones I had ready,—or, almost ready, to send in."

"Go on," said Crane, briefly.

"Well, there's little more to tell. I went into my bedroom and slammed the door. Yes, I slammed it, for I had lost my temper,

and I was mad at Blair."

"And then?"

"I don't know anything more to tell. I heard Blair around the studio for a time, and once I heard his footsteps near my door, as if he wanted to speak to me,—maybe make up,—but he didn't say anything or knock, or call out,—and then, after a time I heard him go into his own bedroom and close the door."

"And you heard nothing through the night?"

"Nothing unusual. The ordinary sounds in the building, of course."

"And you stayed in your room,—in your bed,—till morning?"

"Yes, I did. I sleep very soundly, and I sleep late. The details of the morning, and my finding of Blair,—you know. Don't ask me to recount all that again."

"No; I shan't. Are you going on with your work for the competition?"

"Of course!" Thorpe's face showed surprise at the question. "Why should I not? I rescued the torn sketches from the waste-basket, and I can copy them. I've a good chance at it, I think."

"Now that Blair's out of the running?"

Thorpe looked up angrily, but as suddenly he became calm. "No, Mr. Crane," he said, "not because of that. But because Gilbert can't steal my plans."

"Unpleasant talk, Mac. I don't like that."

"But it's true. Blair did take my ideas—"

"Consciously?"

"I think so. Why, he incorporated in his design, a particular bit of drawing that I had invented and shown to him only a day or two before."

"You must see, McClellan, that your saying that puts a bad face on the whole affair?"

"I suppose it does," and the man again relapsed into moody silence. "Oh, well,—it's all in a lifetime."

"A lifetime that has just ended,—or one still being lived?" Benjamin Crane spoke like an avenging justice, and there was no mistaking his meaning.

But beyond a startled glance, Thorpe made no reply.

CHAPTER XI
Carlotta and the Board

MUCH as Benjamin Crane desired to believe in Thorpe's innocence it was difficult for him to do so, after the disclosure of the medium, Madame Parlato. In her powers he had absolute faith, of her honesty and sincerity he was entirely confident, and it was largely the accounts of her *séances* that made the bulk of his book about his son's communications with him. The *séances* were frequent, still, and at each one he gained more material for use in a second book.

The book, the one already published, was in its fourth edition and was still having large sales. It was called "A Prophecy Fulfilled," and dealt with the old prophecy of the gypsy,—that Peter should be lost while on a distant journey, should die a terrible death there, but should mysteriously return to his family.

This, Benjamin Crane held, had been accomplished in full. The long journey, the terrible death, were matters of fact, and Mr. and Mrs. Crane believed that the return of their son was equally a matter of fact.

Wherefore, the book was written in a simple, straightforward style, without excitement or exaggeration, and it gave detailed recitals of the happenings at the *séances*.

Needless to say that the medium was besieged with would-be clients, but she accepted very few, for the Cranes claimed most

of her time. Not that they were continually in her presence, but the exhaustive nature of her trances made it impossible for her to devote many hours a day to their practice. And Benjamin Crane made it quite worth her while, financially, to reserve for him her peculiar talents.

The sessions brought forth little that was new or different, but the parents never tired of what they implicitly believed was absolute direct communication with their son's spirit through the personality of Madame Parlato.

Criticism, disapproval, even ridicule from their friends and acquaintances moved them not a jot from their faith and trust.

Wiser and better people than we, believe in it,—they would argue,—and it is now so much a part of our lives, that I think we could scarcely live without it.

And so, they went along, cheered and made happy by the communications and fully reconciled thereby to the death of their cherished son.

Julie, though never quite satisfied of the truth of the whole matter, had become more or less imbued with the atmosphere that she lived in, and aside from her own feelings, was glad that her parents could be happy in their grief, even though it were a delusion.

And the popularity of this book brought him absorbing work and many outside interests to Benjamin Crane. Continually, people came to see him, to discuss the question of Continuity, or Life after Death, and to argue for or against the reappearance of departed spirits.

Many of these he saw and learned to like and his circle of acquaintances was continually enlarging.

Naturally, when he discussed matters with them, the subject of Gilbert Blair's death was talked of. Crane was a careful man, and rarely told what happened at his *séances*, save in a general way. For he had learned of the dangers of having his statements misquoted and exaggerated, and as a rule, he was canny enough to let his visitors talk, while he said little.

And from the consensus of opinion thus gathered, he discovered that public sentiment was largely against McClellan Thorpe. This troubled him, for if Thorpe were guilty it was surely Crane's duty to guard his daughter from a criminal. On the other hand, Julie was so deeply in love with Thorpe, and so positive that he was in no way a wrong-doer, that the father's heart was torn.

But his most vital reason for believing in Thorpe's guilt was the message from his son to that effect.

"It rests between our two children," he said to his wife. "Peter tells us Mac is the guilty man,—and Julie tells us he isn't. Now, we must learn the truth. I'm going to get a detective, myself,—I've had a fine one recommended,—and I don't think we need say anything to Julie or Mac about it. They asked for a few days to do some 'detecting' on their own account,—but it won't amount to anything, I feel sure. So I'm going to engage Pennington Wise,—if I can get him. I'm told he's a most successful man, though not one of the 'wizards' or know-it-all variety."

"Very well," Mrs. Crane, as always, agreed; "but don't tell anybody. Need you?"

"Yes, I'll tell Weston. It wouldn't be fair not to. You see, I'm in a peculiar position. I've taken the responsibility of investigating Blair's death, without any real authority, save that of a friend."

"Of course your reason is that Julie cares for him."

"Of course. And I do hope he can be cleared, but if not, it would better be proved against him, and let Julie know it, and get over it."

"Yes," Mrs. Crane sighed. "Poor child, it would go hard with her."

"But she must bear it, if it's the truth. I've hopes of Wise's discovering another criminal."

"Then what about Peter's message?"

"I don't know,—but it's possible Peter may himself be misinformed. You know we've discovered that the disembodied spirits are not omniscient."

In the meantime Carlotta Harper was endeavoring to use her occult powers to solve the mystery of Blair's death.

Carlotta herself was a mystery. Disavowing any especial clairvoyant ability, she yet achieved marvelous results from the Ouija Board.

She scoffed at it herself, yet whenever her finger-tips were on the board it spelled words rapidly and gave messages that were acclaimed as truth by the audience.

One afternoon Shelby was with her, and he, a little timidly, suggested a trial of the Board.

"Why, Kit, I thought you detested it," said Carly, surprised.

"I do; but you're a witch at it, and—suppose it should tell us something about Blair,—something we don't know—"

"You think Mac did it, don't you?" Carly spoke hesitantly, for the two had discussed the subject very little.

"I don't say so, Carly, yet where else is there to look? If you had seen, as I did, how much at odds the two chaps were that evening I dropped in—"

"The night of the dinner?"

"Yes, in the late afternoon. They were rowing no end! Then I went off, but I called for them on the way to the feast,—we always go together,—and Blair was in a regular stew. Nervous,—couldn't get his tie right,—and all that. And—Carly,—what do you think? He asked me if I'd drop you! Think of that! As if I were a sort of man to interfere with a friend's interests! Why, if he'd told me there was anything between you two, of course I should have stepped down and out at once. Was there, Carly?"

"Nothing definite,—no." The girl spoke wearily, pushing back her thick mass of dark, wavy hair. "No, Kit, nothing promised. If he had lived—oh, I don't know. You see, I loved Peter. And I sometimes think I never can care at all for any one else."

"But, dear, Peter's dead and Blair's dead,—and you can't live all your life alone: Just give me a ray of hope, Carly. I won't bother you about it,—only tell me that some time,—maybe—"

"Let it stay at that, Kit. Some time it may be—and now come on,—if you like we'll try the Ouija."

The session was interesting. Carly never, in any circumstances, pushed or guided the board in the very least,—nor did she ever sit with any one whom she suspected of doing so. But with her friends in whom she had perfect confidence, or with acquaintances who, she knew were eagerly wanting to learn, not anxious to tell, she often tried the uncanny thing.

Lightly they rested their finger-tips on the little wooden heart, and after a short wait it began to move.

At Carly's questions, replies came that there was a spirit present and that it was Peter Boots.

Neither of the inquirers was surprised at this, for they had fully expected it. Moreover, both had watched most closely the other's muscles and fingers and wrists, and each was positive the messages, whatever their source, were not the result of human deceit.

After some preliminary talk, Carly said, "You put the questions, Kit."

So Shelby said, "Peter, you know Blair's gone?"

"Yes," returned the board.

"Have you seen him—or I mean, is he with you—in spirit?"

"Yes" came the answer.

"Will he talk to us?"

"No."

"Well—then can you give us a message from him?"

"Yes."

Yes and No are designated on the Ouija Board as words. The movement of the Board toward these was quick, almost jerky.

But when the message was asked for,—when Shelby said, "Will he tell us how he died?" there was a pause and the Board moved aimlessly about.

At last, Carly said, "Peter, was Gilbert killed?"

"Yes," came the quick reply.

"Do you know who killed him?"

"Yes."

"Who was it?"

Carly shot out the question quickly, and immediately the board moved to T. From that, as the two breathlessly waited, the pointer very slowly spelled Thorpe.

The word did not go smoothly,—the board swung round in large loops, but paused positively at each letter, and then started slowly to the next.

"You didn't push, Kit?" Carly asked, but more from force of habit than any doubt of him.

"Of course not. Nobody could push with you watching, nor was there any reason why I should. Did you?"

"Of course not. Don't let's ask each other that. We're both honest. But you know, Kit, Mr. Crane had a communication from Peter and he said Thorpe did it. But Mr. Crane thinks maybe Peter doesn't know."

"Let's try to get Blair's spirit."

They tried,—if receptive waiting can be called trying,—and at last they succeeded in receiving the information that Gilbert Blair's spirit was present.

"Will you tell us who killed you?" Carly asked at once, fearing lest he go away.

Slowly the pointer moved away from the letter T. But after a series of swirls it stopped definitely at M.

"Go on," said Carly, in a whisper.

A long swing of aimless motions and then a stop at A.

The next stop was at C, and then the board would move no more.

Carly sighed, and took her hands off.

"Well, there's the message, Kit. You know Gilbert always called him Mac,—now what do you think of Ouija?"

"I don't know what to think, Carly. Mayn't it be only that Thorpe was in both our minds, and that we subconsciously—"

"Oh, well, if you're going to take that tack, there's no more to be said. It's easy enough to say that,—but how can the dead send messages if the human beings always say,—oh, subconscious pushing!"

"But, are you so anxious to believe in Thorpe's guilt?"

"Not that,—but I want to know. Julie's devoted to him, and if he's a—a murderer, Julie must be saved from him. If he isn't,—we must find it out, and give him to Julie free and clear of suspicion."

"We! Are you responsible for Julie's affairs?"

"Yes, in so far as I can help. You say, everybody says, that I have occult powers. If so, I must use them to help,—if they really do help. But how can I be sure?"

"I don't know. But I think, perhaps, you'd better leave the whole occult business alone. It's uncanny if it's real, and it's foolishness if it's faked."

"I think Mr. Crane is going to get a special detective," Carly said, "but, oh, my gracious, I forgot I promised not to tell that. So don't tell anybody else. I don't suppose they'd mind you knowing."

"Who's the man?"

"I think his name is Wise,—good name for a detective!"

"Never heard of him. But, let's hope he clears Mac."

"Yes, and finds the real murderer. Do you know I can't realize Gilbert's gone,—even yet."

"Don't think about him, Carly. It can't do any good, and it only makes you sad and morbid. Let me tell you of my hopes and fears, mayn't I?"

"Of course, go ahead."

"Well, I'm getting up a big,—a really big enterprise."

"What?"

"I hope you won't disapprove, but it's in the Moving Picture business."

"Why should I disapprove?"

"Oh, some people sniff at M. P's. But this is a really big, fine production."

"Are you the producer?"

"Yes; don't tell it outside, yet. You see, I've written a big story,—a picturesque thriller,—and critics who've read it, think it's a wonder. Now, it's too big to give to anybody,— I mean, it would

be foolish for me merely to get a royalty,—so I'm going to put it on, myself."

"Good, Kit, I'm glad to hear it. I always thought you had it in you to be some sort of an organizer or producer, in some important way."

"Yes, I've always had that ambition. Well, this is a great yarn! I want to read it to you some time. Marvelous pictures,—they're being made now. And that's not all of it,— I mean to make it into a book—"

"You can't write a book!"

"If I can't I'll get it written,—but the plot is such a wonder,—and the scenes!"

"Up in Labrador, I'll bet!"

"Yes, they are, Carly. And corkers! Well, I figure to have the book and the pictures sprung on an unsuspecting public simultaneously,—and afterward,—maybe, it will be made into a real play!"

"And after that, into a Light Opera,—and after that, into Grand Opera?"

Carly's tone was mocking, but her smile was sweet and approving, and Kit beamed at her.

"I knew you'd be interested! I want you to hear the plot soon,—and would you like to go to the studios?"

"Where they're making the Labrador pictures?"

"Yes; they're faked, of course. No sense in going up there to take them. I know the stuff so well, I can get it up right here."

"Oh, Kit, you ought to have the real scenes."

"No; it isn't necessary. Snow's easy enough to manage. But the plot's the thing! Carly, it's a peach! And then, it's all done up with real artistry. No crude, raw scenes. All softened with lights and shades and colors; and everything,—even realism, sacrificed to beauty. It will be the success of the season, the talk of the town, and it will make my reputation forever."

"When will it be put on?"

"Soon, now, I hope. Well, I mean in a month or so. I'd like to say the middle of May, and think perhaps I can. It will run all summer and doubtless longer."

"And you don't want me to tell of this?"

"Not quite yet, Carly. I'll let you know when you may."

* * * * *

And so, when, after Shelby had gone, and Julie and Thorpe came, Carly said nothing of the plans for the great Moving Picture.

Nor did she tell of the Ouija Board experiences she and Shelby had had. In fact, Carly said little, preferring to let her guests talk.

And they did.

"We're detecting," Julie began, and Thorpe, his eyes harassed and gloomy, had to smile at Julie's enthusiasm.

"Can I help?" Carly asked, with a loving glance at her friend.

"I hope so,—but not with your old Ouija Board. I hate it!"

"Wait till I suggest it," Carly smiled, for she saw Julie was in no mood for argument. "What can I do?"

"Only advise. I don't think you're a medium, Carly, but I do think you have sort of queer powers. Now a queer thing has happened to me. This morning, on my bureau, there lay a note,—here it is." She handed a folded paper to Carlotta.

It read: "Dear little sister. You *must* give up old Mac. He did for Gilbert. Peter Boots."

Carly stared at the note.

"It's in Peter's own writing!" she said; "what can it mean?"

"It means fraud!" Julie exclaimed. "I know that's no note from Peter! It is in his writing—"

"But so exactly his writing!" Carly said, "nobody could have written that but Peter himself. Oh, Julie!"

"Now, stop, Carly! Don't you say it's really a materialization of a note from Peter! It can't be! I'm afraid to show it to mother or Dad, for I know they'll say it's really from him,—and I won't believe it."

"You won't believe it's from Peter, because you don't want to believe what it says,—isn't that it?"

Carly looked at Thorpe, though she spoke to Julie.

"Partly," Julie admitted; "but anyway, I can't believe that Peter,—my dead brother,—put that real, paper note on my dresser!"

"If it had said Mac didn't kill Gilbert, would you believe it then?" Carly asked.

Julie stared at her, as she took in the question.

"Yes," she said at last, "in that case, I'd want to believe,—but I don't see how I could—"

"Oh, you could, all right," Carly said, "if it meant Mac's innocence was thereby established."

"I'm out for justice," Thorpe said; "I hate to hurt Julie's feelings, but that note doesn't interest me at all,—one way or the other. You see, if it's a fake,—and I can't help thinking it is, it's somewhat in my favor, for if faked must it not have been done by the real murderer, trying to put the blame on me? And if it's real—but, I never discuss that sort of thing at all. I'm not a believer,—as the Cranes believe, and yet, feeling toward the Crane family as I do, I refuse to combat their beliefs or principles. So, as I say, I leave the note out of my consideration. And, yet, Carlotta, I do want your opinion as to the genuineness of the handwriting, because you know Peter's fist so well,—and you're even less likely to be deceived than his family."

Carly scrutinized the note again.

"It seems to me it must be Peter's writing," she said at last. "Those long tails to the filial letters of the words, those are characteristic. And it's—yes, it's unmistakably his."

"All right," Thorpe sighed. "I just wanted to know, for Mr. Crane will know of it sooner or later, and I'm sure he'll identify it as Peter's writing.

"And it surely is," Julie added, again staring at the paper.

"But, Julie, it's *too* absurd!" Second thoughts convinced Carly of this. "How could such a thing happen?"

"I don't know how it could, but it did," Julie said, doggedly. "And so, Carly, I feel, as Mac says, there's no attention to be paid to this note. If—mind I say *if*—Peter sent it, why then Peter

thinks Mac did something that he didn't do, that's all. I know Mac is innocent, and so I shall say nothing of this note to any one, and you mustn't either."

"I won't," Carly smiled to herself as she realized how many secrets she was accumulating, "but you will, Julie. You can't keep that from your father, even though you mean to."

"Yes, I can, if to tell of it would cast a straw of evidence against Mac! You see, Carly, we've got to find the real criminal, and I'd rather do it myself than get a new detective on the job."

Carly knew this was because Julie feared the astuteness of the new detective. Which, in turn, meant that Julie, herself, feared Mac's guilt. Oh, it was a tightly closing net round Mac, as she saw it!

"I wish I could help," she found herself saying, most unconsciously, so deeply was she thinking. "But, Julie, you two can do nothing. What are you expecting to accomplish?"

"Success," Thorpe made reply. "Complete success. It may sound absurd, but I think that note is a help to my cause rather than hindrance!"

"I think so, too," said Carlotta.

CHAPTER XII
Wise and Zizi

"WELL, Julie, my little girl, the jig is up."

Thorpe spoke despairingly, and Julie knew only too well what he meant.

"They're—they're going—"

"Yes, they're going to arrest me. This is the last call I can pay you."

Julie didn't break down and cry, nor indeed did she show great emotion of any sort. She set her curved red lips firmly and said, with an air of determination:

"I'm not sure, Mac, that it isn't better so. I mean now we've something definite to work against. Father's going to get that Mr. Wise, and he'll soon get you out of—out of—oh, Mac, will they put you in prison? In a cell?"

"Yes, dear, until the trial. You see, that little bottle did it for me."

"And somebody put that in your old paint-box! Who did it, Mac?"

"Hastings is the only one I can think of. That man never liked me— I don't know why, but he never did. And he adored Gilbert —"

"You don't think he killed Gilbert, then?"

"Oh, Lord, no! He was always fond of him. But he wants to get me in bad, and so I think he planted that bottle. It must have

been planted, Julie, I never put it there. I never had it in my possession."

"Who did kill Gilbert?"

"I've no idea, but I don't think it was anybody we know. I'm inclined to the belief that it was some enemy, of long standing. You know Gilbert Blair's past life was by no means an open book to his friends. He had turned-down pages that we never knew about or inquired into. It would not have been impossible for some one to get into his room in the night—"

"And give him poison? Not likely!"

"But it must have been something of the sort, Julie. Blair never killed himself."

"No, I suppose not. Oh, Mac, how unfortunate that you and he quarreled so much. Otherwise they wouldn't have suspected you at all."

"Yes, they would. It's opportunity they consider, exclusive opportunity."

"And that empty bottle! I should think they'd see that's a plant!"

"They don't see anything an inch away from their noses! I'm the nearest suspect to hang a charge on, so they choose me."

Thorpe wasn't pettish, but he was discouraged and unstrung. He knew that his arrest, which was imminent, was, in part, due to the assertions of the medium and the Ouija Board. These secrets had leaked out somehow, and though the detective, Weston, would have scorned to acknowledge it, he had been

more or less biased in his estimates of other evidence by what he had heard of supernatural communications.

But of this Thorpe hesitated to speak to Julie. For it was her father who had brought those things about, and while Thorpe had no use for the whole mediumistic business, he rarely said so to the Crane family.

And the note that purported to be from Peter, he believed a bare-faced fraud. He couldn't understand it, nor imagine how it had been managed, but he would not believe that it was the work of the dead Peter Crane.

And so, he submitted helplessly to arrest, for there was no way to prove his innocence. He had tried "detective work" on his own account, but it amounted to nothing. The police held that it was an "open and shut" case, and that Thorpe must have been the murderer.

Benjamin Crane, though all unwilling to condemn Thorpe, was, of course, greatly swayed by the supernatural messages, and couldn't help his belief in them. But, for Julie's sake, and to give Thorpe every possible chance, he had engaged Pennington Wise, and had invited him to stay at the Crane house while conducting his investigation.

So Wise came, and with him came his queer little assistant, the girl called Zizi.

There was ample room in the big city house, and the two were treated as honored guests.

Wise was alert, quick-witted and tactful, but Zizi was even more so. She made friends with the Cranes at once, and they all

admired the odd, fascinating girl. Small of stature, dark of coloring, Zizi was not unlike a gypsy, and the mention of this brought about the tale of the gypsy's prophecy regarding Peter Boots.

"What an interesting story," the girl said, after hearing Benjamin Crane tell it. "It is wonderful how you dear people bear your loss so bravely."

"But it isn't really a loss," said Mrs. Crane, "you see, we have our boy with us continually."

It was only by desperate effort that Zizi kept from laughing, for of all fads or whims, spiritism seemed to her the worst and most foolish. But she was there on business, and part of her business was to gather all the information she could regarding this same spiritism, so she showed only deep interest and apparent sympathy with their beliefs.

"You do believe in these things, don't you?" Mrs. Crane asked, and, being thus confronted, Zizi had to answer directly.

"It's hard to say," she replied, "for, you see, I've had so little real experience. Practically none. But I'm eager to learn, and most interested in what you tell me."

"I'm a frank unbeliever," declared Pennington Wise. He had considered the matter and concluded it was better to state this fact and thereby rouse the others to defense.

"You wouldn't be, Mr. Wise," Benjamin Crane said, "if you'd had the experiences we're continually enjoying. You've read my book?"

"Yes, Mr. Crane, and an able, well written work it is. But you must number some among your friends who find difficulty in accepting it in just the way you do."

"Certainly, and though I do what I can to convince them, I think none the less of them for their honest unbelief. But with you right here in the house, Mr. Wise, it will, I'm sure, be an easy matter to make a convert of you."

"We'll see; at any rate, I'm ready to be converted if you can do it. Now, let's begin with that note your daughter received from —ah, shall I say from your son?"

"Of course, it was from my son. You may compare the writing with Peter's own—we've lots of his letters, and I think you'll be convinced it's no forgery."

"And it doesn't seem illogical to you," Wise went on, as he took the papers Crane handed to him, "that your son should materialize this paper, this note, and leave it for you, when, if he can do such things, he doesn't write a letter to his mother or to you?"

"From the average mortal's point of view there is much that seems illogical in spiritism," Crane said, easily, as if quite accustomed to answering such arguments; "we who believe, never question why or why not. We merely accept."

"Yes," said Mrs. Crane, "and when we are granted such wonderful boons as we are, it seems ungrateful and ungracious to ask for anything we do not get. When I hear my son's voice —"

"Do you recognize his voice?" asked Zizi.

"I can hardly say that, my dear, but we have heard Peter talk so often, through the medium, that it almost *seems* like his voice."

"And he told you that Mr. Thorpe was responsible for Mr. Blair's death?" Zizi went on, wanting a plain statement.

"Yes, he told us that."

"Then how can you have any doubt of it?"

"Spirits do not know everything. It is quite as likely for them to be misinformed as for earthly people to be. It may be that my boy doesn't know who killed Gilbert Blair, but has some reason to think it was Mr. Thorpe."

"Do you think it was?"

"I can't say that," Mrs. Crane looked very serious, "nor can I deny it. We are all so fond of Mr. Thorpe that we can scarcely bring ourselves to believe ill of him—"

"But if he is a criminal, we want to know it," her husband interrupted her. "Mr. Thorpe is engaged to my daughter, and if he is an innocent man, I want it made clear to the world. If not, then, of course, the engagement must be broken."

"He *is* an innocent man," Zizi said, quietly.

"Oh, you darling!" cried Julie, running across the room to embrace her. "How do you know?"

"By that letter," and Zizi pointed to the note from Peter, which she had been scrutinizing and comparing with some old letters of Peter's.

"You think it isn't from my brother?"

"I know it isn't. I've made a study of handwriting, and whoever wrote that wrote it in imitation of your brother's writing. I

mean the writer was disguising his own hand and imitating your brother's."

"How can you tell? They are very much alike."

"That's just it. The salient points are imitated, the long terminal strokes, the peculiarities of the capitals, but the less conspicuous details, such as slant and spacing, are not so carefully copied. It is a forgery, and though well done enough to deceive the average observer, it would not deceive an expert."

"What a lot you know!" and Julie looked at the other girl in surprised admiration.

"'Course I do. It's my business to know things. Am I right about this, Penny Wise?"

"Yes," he said, smiling at her. "I thought you'd see it. Moreover, Mr. Crane, this note was written by a man, or by a person capable of deep, even venomous hatred. If, as may well be the case, it was written by the murderer of Mr. Blair, and with an intent to throw suspicion on Mr. Thorpe, then we must look for a criminal of great cleverness and of patience and perseverance in the workings of his nefarious plans. I mean a nature of inborn evil, capable of premeditated wrong. This murder of Gilbert Blair was no impulsive or suddenly brought about job. It was carefully planned and carefully carried out. If you will show me some of Mr. Thorpe's writing I will tell you if he forged this note."

"No, he did not," Wise asserted, after a study of a letter of Thorpe's, which they gave him; "we cannot say this note signed with your son's name was written by the criminal we're looking

for, but we can be sure it was not written by McClellan Thorpe. You see, Mr. Crane, penmanship is a very exact science. Some one forged your son's writing, but he or she was utterly unable to omit the personal characteristics that are in every one's hand."

"And you can deduce character even from a forged hand?"

"Absolutely. It is those inevitable and unmistakable signs that make the individual writing a true mirror of character."

"But it is often impossible to determine the sex of a writer," Zizi informed them. "Frequently, to be sure, penmanship is undoubtedly that of a man or a woman, but sometimes it is not definitely evident. In this case, I think we have the work of a man, but I can't be sure."

"Who would do it, anyway?" queried Mrs. Crane.

"Any one interested in concealing the identity of the murderer and desiring to have Mr. Thorpe suspected. A clever person, because, knowing of Miss Crane's love of her brother and also knowing of your interest in the occult, it would doubtless seem to you a strong bit of evidence."

"It did," Benjamin Crane admitted, "at least, until you proved to us that it is not a note from my son at all. But you must remember, Mr. Wise, that we are in no way doubting my son's communications with us in other ways. If this is not from him, that does not cast doubt on other communications we have had from him. And, as he has repeatedly told us that Mr. Thorpe is responsible for Blair's death, I can only say that my boy may be mistaken, and I sincerely hope he is."

"Of course, he is," Julie cried. "Peter has sent us other messages that turned out to be untrue, but he was mistaken."

"You believe in the mediums, then?" asked Zizi, flashing her big dark eyes at the girl.

"Oh, I don't know. I didn't at first, and I was unwilling to, but I've heard so much and seen so much, and, of course, I can't help being influenced by Dad and Mother."

"Of course not," agreed Zizi. "It's all so interesting to me. I'm only afraid I'll become so absorbed in the spirits that I'll neglect the detective work."

"It may be they're interdependent," Wise observed.

"They are, I'm sure," said Julie. "You see, Mr. Wise, it's not only father and the medium that have told us things against Mr. Thorpe, but we have a friend who is an expert on the Ouija Board—"

Zizi rolled her eyes skyward.

"Oh," she groaned, "I thought you people were real honest-to-goodness Spiritists!"

"We are," defended Crane.

"Not if you fool with an Ouija Board!"

"But Carly, Miss Harper, can make it tell wonderful things," Julie went on, "things of which she really knows nothing."

"But the other person at the Board knows them?"

"Well, maybe; but they can't get Ouija to tell them without Miss Harper has her fingers on, too."

"And Ouija is against Mr. Thorpe?"

"Yes; at least it has said he was guilty, but, as you say, an Ouija Board means nothing."

"It means something, indeed, but not the thing it says."

"A brilliant remark, Zizi!" Wise smiled at her.

"But I mean just that, Penny. I'm getting a line on this thing, and I think that the criminal or the criminal's friends or accomplices are utilizing occult forces in their own behalf. I think, Miss Crane, the more messages you get telling you of Mr. Thorpe's guilt the more you may believe in his innocence!"

"Look out, Ziz, don't go too fast," Wise counseled her. "You've only begun this thing—there's a lot yet to be learned."

"I'll learn it, and I'm sure I'm headed in the right direction. And I'd like very much to see this Miss Harper. The Ouija witch! Has she told you to suspect Mr. Thorpe?"

"Don't put it that way," Julie begged. "Miss Harper is my dearest friend, and whatever she does with the Ouija Board is absolutely honest on her part, absolutely free from deceit."

"Then she's a unique case," declared Zizi. "Never has such a thing been known to science." Her smile robbed the words of invidious intent, and though Julie stood up for Carlotta's innocence, she had always wondered whether there was not some involuntary, even unconscious helping along done to the little board.

"Let's go to see her now," she suggested, and Wise agreeing, the two girls started off.

* * * * *

"This is Miss—?" Julie looked inquiringly at the girl she was about to introduce to Carlotta, remembering she didn't know her last name.

"Just Zizi," was the smiling reply, and the slim little dark hand was held out in greeting. "I'm so glad to know you, Miss Harper. For, though I admit I don't believe in Ouija, I am interested, and Miss Crane tells me you never 'push'."

"No, I never do that," Carlotta smiled, "but don't think I believe in the thing, for I don't at all. It amuses me, and it puzzled me, at first, but now I understand it, and it's beginning to lose interest for me."

"Understand it?" Zizi looked bewildered. "You mean—"

"I mean I know what makes it work, why it tells the truth, when it does tell the truth, and why it fibs when it does fib."

Carly Harper's face was frank and honest; she had no effect of mystery or clairvoyant power, and Zizi was bewildered.

"I am indeed glad to know you!" she exclaimed, "will you impart this knowledge to me, or is it a secret?"

"It's not a secret, perhaps it isn't knowledge, it's, after all, only my own theory, or rather, discovery, based on long and wide experience."

Zizi was enchanted.

"Oh, goody!" she cried, her black eyes dancing. "I'm crazy to know just what you mean! Will you give me a session with the board?"

"Will you promise not to push?"

"Of course, and, anyway, you'd know it if I did."

So Carly got the board, and the two sat at it, while Julie looked on.

The usual routine followed, and at last the professed spirit of Peter Crane was "present."

On being asked if Thorpe killed Gilbert Blair, the Ouija Board promptly replied "No."

"Oh, Peter, the other day you said he did!" Carlotta exclaimed, but again the Board flew to the corner where "No" was printed.

Julie, watching closely, was sure neither of the girls in any way cheated or helped things along. She was an acute observer, and she was certain both the manipulators were strictly sincere.

"Well, then," Zizi said, her thin, dark fingers merely touching the little wooden heart, "who did?"

There was no reply. Motionless the board remained, and no persuasion would induce it to move.

Other subjects were brought up, questions were asked to which only Carlotta knew the answer, or to which only Zizi did, and they were answered, if not always definitely, at least in a general way. But when they returned to the question about Blair there was no response.

"Don't you know?" Carlotta demanded of Peter's "spirit," which obligingly announced its presence when requested.

But the board remained stationary, and they finally gave it up.

"All of which goes to prove my theory the true one," Carlotta declared, and then Zizi begged her to disclose her discoveries.

"Why, you see, it's this way," Carlotta began, "you get out of the Ouija Board exactly what you bring to it, no more, no less."

"Just what do you mean by that?"

"That nobody gets any information from the board unless it is already in his mind. When we ask questions, to which one of us knows the answer, that answer comes. Mind you, I don't mean that one of us pushes the board in the right direction, at least not consciously, but it is inevitable that the mind leaps ahead, and when a word is started we know, usually, what letter is coming next, and we receptively await it. You see, unless you hold your hands still purposely, the board is bound to move. Naturally it goes to the words you have in mind, and unless you purposely check it, the message is bound to come. If it is something I know and you don't, the board starts off, and as the words form, you don't stop them nor do I, yet we don't really force them, it's more as if we thought on the board. This is proved, to my mind, by the fact that if either party knows the answer, it always comes; if neither knows it, you can't get it. Usually the message is something that can't be verified anyway, and often the message is untrue. But people notice and remember the few times the truth is told, and quickly forget the other times. In no case are they messages from the dead. It is not Peter's spirit talking to us at all. It is merely our minds, subconsciously or not, that impel involuntary muscular action in the slightest degree, and our eagerness to get a certain word or phrase, brings it about. Tradition and habit ascribe the messages to the dead, and the universal desire to get such communications is responsible for the belief that they are such. Now, here's proof. Whenever I have asked the Board who killed

Gilbert it has responded with the name of the person whom my companion thought guilty. I have no idea who is the criminal, neither, I take it, has Zizi; consequently, as we are both open-minded and waiting for the answer, we get nothing."

"Right," and Zizi nodded her head. "People fool themselves into believing they get information from Ouija. But, if they were honest, they would have to admit that never has it told a truth that was not known to at least one person present. Of course, I except coincidences, which must happen occasionally."

"But," objected Julie, "then why will it work so much better when Carly has her hands on?"

"Just because I'm impassive," Carlotta said, "and sit quietly while the other one gets the message she wants. Without effort the message desired comes, merely because nobody stops it."

"Then," said Julie, "none of the help we get from Ouija means anything at all?"

"No, and it isn't help," said Zizi.

CHAPTER XIII
"Labrador Luck"

KIT SHELBY'S play was a wonderful success. Though a motion picture, it was one of the finest ever produced, and no expense had been spared to make it the sensation of the season. It was called "Labrador Luck."

The Crane family attended the opening night, as, indeed, all Shelby's friends did, and the verdict was unanimous that never had such a beautiful and finished play been screened. The scenes of ice-bound Labrador were picturesque and fascinating, while the plot was ingenious and thrills plentiful. The audience applauded continuously, for so real was the acting that it seemed as if the performers were actually there.

Benjamin Crane had helped Shelby finance the production, and he realized at once that he would get his money back with interest.

"It's a gold mine, boy!" he said to Shelby, as they were all at the Crane home afterward, "and it must be made into a spoken drama. There's scope for a great play in that plot."

"Marvelous plot," commented Pennington Wise. "All your own, Mr. Shelby?"

"Yes," Kit replied, with frank pride; "it did turn out well, didn't it?"

"And you're going to make a book of it, too, aren't you?" asked Julie.

"Yes, a book, and a serial story and, oh, I'm going to do lots of things with it!"

"Grand opera, maybe!" chaffed Julie.

"Why not?" said Shelby, seriously. "Slighter plots than that have been put into grand opera. It may yet come about."

Without undue conceit Shelby was quite conscious of his great success, and as he walked home with Carlotta from the Crane house, he begged her to consent to his repeated proposals of marriage.

"This thing will make me rich, dear," he said, "and while that sounds mercenary, it does make me glad to have a fortune to offer you."

"But I don't love you, Kit," and Carlotta smiled carelessly at him.

"You will, Carly. You'll have to, 'cause I love you so. Oh, sweetheart, I love you just desperately— I must have you, my little girl, I must!"

"Now, Kit, you wouldn't want a wife who didn't care for you as a woman ought to care for the man she marries. Truly, my heart is still Peter's. I sometimes think I'll never marry, his memory is so vivid and so dear to me."

"Weren't you beginning to care for Blair?"

"N-no; not that way. Of course I was fond of Gilbert, and I'm fond of you, but there's always the thought of Peter between us."

"But, Carly, there's no one you care more for than for me, is there?"

"No, I'm sure of that."

"Then say yes, darling. Even though you won't marry me quite yet, let's be engaged, and truly you'll soon learn to love me. I'll make you!"

But Carlotta wouldn't consent, and Shelby had to be content with her promise to think about it.

"Kit," she said, suddenly, "are those queer detectives going to find out who killed Gilbert?"

"Oh, I suppose they'll fasten it on Mac. Poor chap, to think of his being in jail while we're having all this excitement over my play. But I don't see any other direction for Wise to look. What a funny little thing that Zizi is."

"Yes, but I like her a lot. And she's nobody's fool! Her black eyes take in everything, whether she remarks on it or not. You should have seen her watch you to-night."

"When?"

"At the Cranes', when you were talking about the play."

"She's dramatic herself. She ought to be in the Moving Pictures!"

"Yes, she'd be a film queen at once."

* * * * *

Zizi must have had something of the same idea in her own mind, for the next day she went to see Shelby at his office and asked him if he could give her a chance at film work.

"But you're a detective," Shelby said, amusedly, "what would Mr. Wise do without you?"

"He'd get along all right," Zizi said earnestly. "He's willing I should have a try at a screen career, if you'll take me on."

"I'm not sure I could use you," Shelby returned, "at least not at present. If I do another picture I'll try you out in it."

"Oh, you are going to do another, aren't you?"

"Probably, but not until I've exhausted all the different possibilities of this one."

Zizi showed her disappointment at the failure of her plan, but, after some further talk on general subjects, she went back to the Cranes'.

"Well, Ziz," Wise said to her, as they discussed the case alone, "we're not making our usual rapid headway this time. Rather baffling, isn't it?"

"Everything seems to point to Thorpe, except that I can't think he had motive enough. That foolish jealousy of the plans and suspicion of Blair's stealing his ideas isn't enough to make him commit murder."

"I don't think he did do it, but I can't agree with you that it wasn't a big enough motive. You don't know how the artistic temperament resents anything like that. Nor how it imagines and exaggerates the least hint of it. I think his motive is the strongest point against Thorpe. Who else had any motive at all?"

"That's what we have to find out. And we're going to do it. And, I say, Penny, I want to go to see that medium person the Cranes are so fond of."

"Think she'll help you?"

"Yes, though not by her spiritism. But I suspect she's one big fraud, and I want to be sure."

"Come along, then. No time like the present. Mr. Crane can arrange a session for us."

To Madame Parlato's they went, and soon had the pleasure of seeing that lady in one of her trances.

The room was dimly lighted but not in total darkness. After a silence a faint, low-pitched voice said, "I am here."

"Are you Peter Crane?" asked Zizi, who chose to be spokesman.

"Yes."

"Will you talk to us?"

"Yes, for a short time only."

"Very well, then tell us who killed Gilbert Blair."

"His friend, McClellan Thorpe. Good-by."

"Wait a minute. I own up to being skeptical, is it too much to ask for some proof of your identity, Peter Crane? Will you, can you give some material proof?"

"It is not easy."

"I'm sorry for that, but, oh, I do so want to be convinced. And I can't, unless I have something tangible to take away with me. Do give me something."

There was a silence, and then, apparently from nowhere, a handkerchief fluttered through the air and fell at Zizi's feet.

Amazed, the girl picked it up, and though she could not see it distinctly, she discovered it was a large one, evidently a man's.

Suddenly the medium sat up straight, came out of her trance, and putting on the lights, said, eagerly, "Did you get any

message?"

"I should say I did!" Zizi returned, "and a material proof, too. Look!"

"Wonderful!" exclaimed Madame Parlato, as she looked at the white square of linen. "Initialed, too."

"Yes, P. C.," and Zizi scrutinized the embroidery.

Pennington Wise expressed a polite admiration for the medium who could bring about such marvelous results, and the *séance* over, the two departed, Zizi carrying the handkerchief in her bag.

"One of a set of Peter's," Wise said, confidently.

"Of course. Julie or Mrs. Crane will recognize it. Funny, how she thought a crude performance like that would convince us!"

"Mighty well done though."

"Pooh, in a darkened room one can do anything."

"Well, where did she get the handkerchief?"

"Dunno, yet. Maybe the Cranes left it there by chance."

"Oh, no, that won't do. Guess again."

"I think I could if I tried. But we'll see what the family say about it."

Both Mrs. Crane and Julie declared the handkerchief to be one of Peter's own, and, moreover, that it was one of a set Carlotta had embroidered for him just before he went to Labrador. And he had taken the whole dozen with him, of that they were both sure. It had been Carly's parting gift, and Peter had been delighted with it.

"It's too wonderful!" Julie said, amazed. "Now, how do you explain it, Zizi? We know this to be Peter's own handkerchief. We know he took it to Labrador with him. How did it get back here? How get into Madame Parlato's possession? And how appear to you, out of nothingness?"

"Yes," said Benjamin Crane, smiling happily, "answer those questions satisfactorily, or else admit that it is real materialization!"

Wise looked a little nonplused. Positive though he was of the medium's trickery, he could not tell Mr. Crane exactly how it had come about. Materialization was easy enough for a charlatan, but, as had been said, where could she get the handkerchief to do the trick with?

Convinced of the Cranes' honesty, of course, Wise couldn't doubt that Peter had taken all the handkerchiefs with him. His luggage had never been sent home, therefore how did the handkerchief get to New York, and more especially how did it get to Madame Parlato?

"I can't explain it yet," Wise said, frankly, "but I'll find out all about it. To you, Mr. Crane, it seems additional proof of your son's communication through that medium. To me it is additional and very strong proof of her fraud. Now, we'll leave it at that for the present, but I promise to explain it to you soon."

"All right, Mr. Wise, you'll not be offended, I trust, if I say I don't believe you can make good your word. But I'm not surprised at your attitude. Some minds are almost incapable of

belief in the occult, and will accept the most absurd and far-fetched explanations rather than the simple and plausible one of spirit communication. I can't understand such a mental attitude, but I've met so many like you that I'm obliged to recognize its existence."

"Oh, Mr. Wise," Mrs. Crane said, "it does seem so strange that a clear-headed, deep-thinking man like yourself prefers to believe that Madame Parlato could get Peter's handkerchief and could produce it so mysteriously for you rather than the rational belief that Peter sent it himself."

Zizi looked at the speaker with kindly eyes.

"Dear Mrs. Crane," she said, "what will hurt me most when we expose that medium's fraud is the fact of your disappointment."

"Don't worry about that," smiled Benjamin Crane, "you haven't exposed her yet! Meantime, I shall incorporate this experience of the handkerchief in my next book."

"Oh, don't!" cried Zizi, involuntarily. "You'll make yourself a laughing-stock—"

She paused, unwilling to hurt his feelings.

But so assured of his beliefs was Benjamin Crane that he shook his head and said:

"No fear of that, child. I'll take all risks. Have you any idea how my book has been received? It's just gone into another big edition, and my publishers are clamoring for my second book, which is nearly finished. But to return to the case of McClellan Thorpe. Did Peter tell you—"

"Yes," Wise said, "according to Madame Parlato, the spirit of your son said that Thorpe is the criminal, and it was as proof of identity that Zizi received the handkerchief."

"Fine," said Crane, nodding his satisfaction, "I think I'll use that *séance* for the finale of my book, and get it in press at once."

"Do, dear," said his wife, "as far as the handkerchief is concerned. But don't put in the book that Mac killed Gilbert."

"Oh, no, certainly not. In the first place, we're all agreed that though Peter believes that, it is a mistake on his part; that is, it may be a mistake. Don't let it influence you too much, Mr. Wise."

Penny Wise laughed outright. He couldn't help it.

"No, sir," he promised, "I won't!"

"But have you any other suspect?"

"I'd rather not answer that question quite yet, Mr. Crane."

"All right, take your own time. I've confidence you'll do all you can, but my hopes of your success are dwindling."

"Don't feel that way, on the contrary, I'm beginning to see at least a way to look for another suspect."

"Look hard, then. For I want to get Mac cleared as soon as it can be brought about."

"We'll hope to do that. I'm going over to the Studios now, and I've a notion I'll discover something."

Accompanied by Zizi, Wise went to the home that Blair and Thorpe had occupied, and which was now in charge of the police.

The detective set himself to the task of looking over old letters and papers in hope of finding out some secret of the dead man's

past.

Zizi flitted about the rooms, looking for nothing in particular, and everything in general.

"I've sized up his medicines," she said, coming from Blair's bedroom into the studio where Wise sat at the desk.

"His cough syrup hasn't been touched lately. The dried up stickiness of the cork shows that. And one or two other bottles are in the same condition. But in the waste basket in his bedroom I found this."

She held up an empty bottle that was labeled soda mints.

"There's a new full bottle in the medicine chest," she went on, "and as this was in the basket, mayn't it be that he took the last ones, and—"

"And they were poisoned!"

"One of them was. See, somebody had put a poisoned one in among the others."

"That leads back to Thorpe, who else could do that?"

"And we don't know that anybody did, only it might have been."

"Can you smell any prussic acid in the vial?"

"No," and Zizi sniffed at it, "I seem to think I do, but I daresay it's my vivid imagination. Do you suppose a chemist could discern any?"

"Probably not, but we might make a try at it. Pretty slim clue, anyway, Ziz."

"I know it, but I have a hunch it's the real thing. You see, Blair was in the habit of taking these things—"

"How do you know?"

"Carlotta Harper told me. I've quizzed her a lot about Mr. Blair's personal habits, and he always carried soda mints in his pocket, and took one now and then. So, as there was no soda mint bottle found in his pockets, and this was in the basket, it's a logical deduction that he finished this bottle that night that he died. And they all think the poison was given to him through some simple trick, so why not this?"

"It may be. It very likely is. But where does it get us?"

"Dunno yet. But, say it was done that way, it needn't have been done here. Maybe the murderer put a poisoned mint in the bottle when they were somewhere together."

"How could he?"

"Oh, lots of ways. Say Blair had his coat off, playing golf or billiards, or—"

"He'd carry such a bottle in his waistcoat pocket, I think."

"Well, it's all surmise. The thing to do is to begin from the other end. Who had a motive?"

"That's what I'm trying to trace. Nothing doing as yet. Hello, here's that old letter from Joshua, the guide. Look at it! It is in a small, cramped hand, and you know the one purporting to be from him later was in a big, sprawly hand. Somebody faked that letter!"

"Well, there's something to work on, then."

"But maybe Thorpe did it."

"Not he. Why should he? He had nothing to do with that Labrador trip."

"What was the letter about, the other Joshua letter?"

"Advising him not to try to bring Peter Crane's body down to New York, or to postpone the matter, or something like that."

"Queer business, that. Why should anybody want to fake a letter like that?"

"I don't believe anybody did. More likely some one else wrote for the guide. They're an ignorant lot, and writing is an unwelcome task to them."

They were still looking at the guide's letter when Shelby came in.

"I heard you were here," he said, "and thought it would be a good time to come around. I want to see if there's anything in Blair's papers that would help to turn suspicion away from Mac Thorpe. I don't believe that man did it, and I wish we could free him."

"That's what we're after," and Wise made room for Shelby to sit beside him at Blair's desk.

But though they made systematic search of all letters they found none other than friendly. There were some from his mother and sister, pathetic ones, telling of their ill health, for both were invalids.

They had not come East on learning of Blair's death, for they could not well stand the trip, and, too, there was no real reason for their coming. After the police investigation was over Blair's effects were to be sent to them, but for the present everything remained as it was found at his death.

"Let me help you, if I can," Shelby went on to Wise. "You know Blair and I were chums. Poor Gilbert, and Peter Boots, too, both gone, and both by such tragic means. I don't know which death was the worse."

Zizi showed him the small bottle she had found, and asked his opinion of her theory about it.

"What an ingenious notion," Shelby exclaimed; "yes, it might be the truth, of course, but a dozen other ways might have been used either."

"Such as what?" asked Wise, "it's always a help to talk these things over."

"Well, granting that some one administered poison to Blair, secretly, mightn't he have put it in anything that Blair was about to eat or drink?"

"Not this poison," objected Wise. "It acts too quickly. Whatever plan was adopted, it was some scheme by which Blair would take the poison unknowingly, but naturally. As Zizi says, if it had been put in some one of his bottles of medicine, he must take it, sooner or later."

"Yes; well, then say it was put in a cigarette, no that's foolish; why, hang it all, Wise, don't you see there's no plausible theory except that some one put it in a drink Blair took just before going to bed, or even after he was in bed."

"Where's the glass, then?"

"That's just the point. What's the answer, except that Thorpe washed it and put it away? Of course, Blair would take a drink Thorpe offered him."

"Also, he might have taken a soda mint just as he went to bed or after," said Zizi.

"Yes," agreed Shelby, thoughtfully. "He might have done so, but could one introduce poison into one of those things? They're quite hard, you know."

"Yes, it could be done," Wise declared. "I've heard of such a thing before. The little pellet could be soaked in the poison—"

"That would make it taste, and he wouldn't swallow it," Shelby said.

"True. Well, I think, with a hypodermic needle, the poison could be got into the mint."

"Maybe, but I doubt it. However, I don't know much about such things. You're doubtless experienced."

"Yes, I've had a lot of poison cases. And, if we give up all thought of the soda mint, it does come back to a drink of some sort mixed by Thorpe."

"Or Blair might have mixed his own drink, and Thorpe added the poison, unnoticed."

"But I want to get away from Thorpe," Zizi said, her eyes anxious and worried.

"So do we all," returned Shelby gravely. "But where can we look?"

"Where, indeed?" echoed Penny Wise.

CHAPTER XIV
A Prophecy Fulfilled

AMONG the passengers disembarking from a steamer at a Brooklyn pier was a tall, gaunt man, who walked with a slight limp.

He was alone, and though he nodded pleasantly to one or two of his fellow passengers, he walked by himself, and all details of landing being over, he took a taxicab to a hotel restaurant, glad to eat a luncheon more to his taste than the ship's fare had been.

He bought several New York papers, and soon became so absorbed in their contents that his carefully selected food might have been dust and ashes for all he knew.

Staring at an advertisement, he called a waiter.

"Send out and get me that book," he said, "as quick as you can."

"Yes, sir," returned the man, "it's right here, sir, on the news-stand. Get it in a minute, sir."

And in about a minute Peter Boots sat, almost unable to believe his own eyes, as he scanned the chapter headings of his father's book, detailing the death and the subsequent experiences of him who sat and stared at the pages.

He looked at the frontispiece, a portrait of himself, but bearing little resemblance to his present appearance. For, where the pictured face showed a firm, well-molded chin, the living man wore a brown beard, trimmed Vandyke fashion, and where the

expression on the portrait showed a merry, carefree smile, the real face was graven with deep lines that told of severe experiences of some sort.

But the real face grinned a little at the picture, and broke into a wider smile at some sentences read at random as the pages were hastily turned, and then as further developments appeared, the blue eyes showed a look of puzzled wonder, quickly followed by horror and despair.

Peter closed the book and laid it aside, and finished his luncheon in a daze.

One thing stood forth in his mind. He must take time to think—think deeply, carefully, before he did anything. He must get away by himself and meet this strange, new emergency that had come to him.

What to do, how to conduct himself, these were questions of gravest import, and not to be lightly settled.

He thought quickly, and concluded that for a secure hiding-place a man could do no better than choose a big city hotel.

Finishing his meal he went to the desk and asked for a room, registering as John Harrison, which was the name by which he had been known on the ship that had brought him to port.

Once behind the locked door of his room he threw himself into an armchair and devoured the book he had bought.

Rapidly he flew through it; then went over it again, more slowly, until Peter Boots was familiar with every chapter of the book that his father had written in his memory.

Memory! And he wasn't dead!

The book, he saw, had gone through a large number of editions, wherefore, many people had read the tale of his tragic fate in the Labrador wild, and of his recrudescence and communications with his parents, and now, here he was reading it himself.

It is not easy to realize how strange it must seem to read not only one's own death notices but the accounts of one's return to earth in spirit form, and to be informed of the astonishing things one said and did through the kind offices of a professional medium!

A medium! Madame Parlato! And she "got in touch" with him! She succeeded in getting messages from him—and materializations!

Peter's chicory blue eyes nearly popped out of his head when he read of the "materialization" of his tobacco pouch.

"Jolly glad I know where it is," he thought; "I've missed the thing, but how did it waft itself to a professional medium! Bah! the stuff makes me sick!

"But Dad wrote it! Dad—my father! And mother's in the game! Got to read the book all over again."

And again he delved into the volume, seeming unable to take in the appalling fact of what had been done.

"They believe it!" he said at last, reaching the final page for the third time; "they believe it from the bottom of their blessed souls!

"Who is that medium person? Where'd she get the dope to fool the old folks? Let me at her! I'll give her what for! Messages to

mother from her departed son! 'Do not grieve for me,' 'I am happy over here,' Oh, for the love o' Mike! what *am* I going to do first?"

Followed a long time of thought. At first, chaotic, wondering, uncertain, then focussing and crystallizing into two definite ideas.

One, the astonishing but undeniable fact of his father's belief and sincerity, the other, what would happen if that belief and sincerity were suddenly stultified.

"Good Lord!" he summed up, "when I appear on the scene that medium will get the jolt of her sweet young life— I assume she's young still, and Dad—

"H'm, where will he get off?"

That gave him pause. For Benjamin Crane to have written such a book as this, for it to have achieved such a phenomenal success and popularity, for it to have been the means, as it doubtless was, of converting thousands to a belief in Spiritism, then, for the whole thing to be overturned by the reappearance in the flesh of the man supposed dead, would mean a cataclysm unparalleled in literary history.

And his father? The dear old man, happy in his communications from his dead son, how would he be pleased to learn that they were not from his dead son at all, but the faked drivel of a fraudulent medium?

It was a moil, indeed.

Peter Crane had come home incognito, because he doubted the wisdom of a sudden shock to his parents. Unable to send or get

news, and making his voyage home at the first possible opportunity, he had intended to learn how matters stood before making his appearance.

He had intended telephoning Blair and Shelby, and if they said all was well at home he would go there at once. But if there had been illness or death he would use care and tact in making his presence known.

For Peter Boots had had no word of, or from his people for half a year—all the long Labrador winter he had lived in ignorance of their welfare and had suffered to the limit, both mentally and physically.

And he had thought they would probably assume his death—as, by reason of this astonishing book he now knew they had done—and, what was he to do about it?

Impulse would have sent him flying home—home to his mother, Dad and Julie, and—and dear little Carly.

But—when he thought of the possibility of his reappearance being the means of making his father's name a by-word of ridicule, of heaping on the old man's fame obloquy and derision, of shocking his mother, perhaps fatally, or at least into a nervous prostration, he was unable to shape a course.

Could he tell Carly first? He glanced at a telephone book at his elbow.

No, that would never do. To hear his voice on the telephone would throw her into a convulsion. He didn't believe she stood for that spirit foolishness, but if, by any chance, she had been won over, his voice would surely give her some sort of a shock.

The boys, then. Yes, that was the only thing. He must see them, but he must telephone first and learn their whereabouts.

He could, he concluded, call in a disguised voice, and get a line on things anyhow.

So, still in a haze of doubt and uncertainty, he looked up the number and called Shelby.

As he rather expected, Shelby was not at his home, but the person who answered could give no directions save to say that Mr. Shelby would probably be home by six o'clock, and would he leave a message?

"No," returned Peter shortly, and hung up.

Getting next the number of the Leonardo Studios, he asked for Gilbert Blair.

"W-what—who?" came a stammering response.

"Mr. Blair—Mr. Gilbert Blair," repeated Peter.

"Why—why, he's dead—Mr. Blair's dead."

"No! When did he die?"

"Coupla months ago. Murdered."

"What!"

"Yep, murdered."

Peter hung up the receiver from sheer inability to do anything else.

Of course it couldn't be true. Blair couldn't have been murdered, and he must have misunderstood that last word. But his arm seemed paralyzed when he tried again to take hold of the telephone.

He sank back in his chair and tried to think.

His subconscious mind told him that he had not misunderstood—that Gilbert was murdered. He knew he had heard the word correctly, and people do not make such statements unless they are true.

His thoughts gradually untangled themselves and he began to grapple with the most important problems.

It was clear that he must learn what had happened in his absence. He wanted to get hold of Shelby and ask about Blair. He wanted to go right over to Blair's place—but if—if *it* had occurred two months ago there was small use going there now.

Also, he must preserve his incognito for the present, at least. His return would be blazoned in the papers as soon as it was known, and the effect on his father's reputation would be most disastrous.

He must learn more facts—the facts he had already discovered were so amazing, what else might not be in store for him?

Concentrating on the subject of Blair's death he concluded his best course would be to get a file of newspapers covering the past two months and read about it.

In a big newspaper office he accomplished this, and spent the rest of the afternoon reading up the case.

Of late the subject was not a principal one in the papers.

McClellan Thorpe was in prison, awaiting his trial, and the police, while still on the job, were not over aggressive.

Pennington Wise was not mentioned, so Peter had no means of knowing that that astute person was connected with the matter.

But the news of Thorpe's arrest struck Peter a new blow. While not as chummy with Thorpe as with Shelby and Blair, Peter had always liked him and found it difficult to believe him guilty of Blair's death.

Back to his hotel went the man registered as John Harrison, and, going to the restaurant for dinner, he ate and enjoyed a hearty meal.

After all, strange and weird as was the news he had heard, his parents were alive and well—and, strangest of all, they were not grieving at his death.

He was relieved at this, and yet, he was, in an inexplicable way, disappointed. It *is* a blow in the face to learn that your loved ones are quite reconciled to your death because, forsooth, they get fool messages from you through the services of a fool medium!

Peter's ire rose, and he was all for going to his father's house at once, and then, back came the thought, how could he put that dear old man to the blush for having written that preposterous book?

From the papers, too, Peter had learned of the furor the book had made, of the great notoriety and popularity that had come to Benjamin Crane from its publication, of the enormous sales it had had, and was still having, and of the satisfaction and happiness the whole thing had brought to both Mr. and Mrs. Crane.

So, stifling his longing to go home and to see his people, Peter decided to sleep over it before taking any definite steps.

He had small fear of recognition. Nobody in New York believed him alive, or had any thought of looking for him. His present appearance was so different from the portrait in the book that, after he had changed his looks still further by a different brushing of his hair, he felt there was no trace of likeness left save perhaps his blue eyes. And only one who knew him well would notice his eyes, and he had no expectation of running up against one who knew him well.

So, after dinner, he sat for a time in the hotel lobby, not wishing to mingle with his fellow men, yet not wishing to seem peculiar by reason of his evading notice.

Worn with the succession of shocks that had come to him, and weary of meeting the big problems and situations, he thought of diversion.

"Any good plays on?" he asked the news-stand girl, and his winning smile brought a chatty response.

"Plays—yes. Nothing corking, though. But say, have you seen the big movie?"

"No; what is it?"

"'Labrador Luck,' oh, say, it's a peach! Go to it!"

"Where?" and Peter stopped himself just in time from exclaiming, "Labrador anything would interest me!"

"Over in N'York. Hop into the sub and you're there."

Peter hopped into the sub and shortly he was there.

"Labrador Luck," he read from the big posters. "Monster production of the Tophole Producing Company. Thrilling scenes, thrilling plot, thrilling drama."

There was more detail as to the names of the Film Queen who was starred, and the Film King who supported her, but without stopping to read them Peter bought a ticket and went in.

The picture was under way, and as he sank into his seat he saw on the screen the familiar scenes of the Labrador wild.

Not quite true to nature were they, this Peter recognized at once, but he knew they were taken in a studio, not in Labrador itself, and he had only admiration for the cleverness with which they were done.

With a little sigh of pleasure he gave himself up to a positive enjoyment of the landscape, and, as the story went on, he was conscious of a vaguely familiar strain running through it.

Suddenly a scene was flashed on, and an episode occurred which was one of his own invention.

"Why," he smiled, "that's my very idea! Now how'd they get that? Oh, I know, of course, such things often occur to various minds without collusion, but it's sort of queer. If he follows up that lead, it will be awful queer!"

The lead was followed up, and, a bit bewildered, Peter sat gazing while the whole story was unrolled.

Greatly changed it was, greatly elaborated; the main plot side-tracked by a counter-plot; the number of characters multiplied by a score; yet, the mystery interest, the suspense element, the very backbone of the piece was the plot he and Blair had worked out while up in the Labrador wild.

"Labrador Luck!" he mused. "Fine name for it, too. The 'Luck' being that old heirloom—just as I planned it. Wonder how it all

came about?"

Then he realized how long he'd been away from Blair. How Blair, doubtless, supposed him dead, and, most naturally, the boy had gone on with the story, and here was the splendid result.

He sat through the thing enthralled, and when the finale came, so exactly as he had planned that smashing great scene, he could have yelled his applause. But he didn't, he simply sat still in glad anticipation of seeing it all over again.

But he was disappointed. It was not a continuous performance—the long play was a whole evening's entertainment, and opening and closing hours were like those of a regular theater.

So Peter determined to come the next night to see it again, and to see the first part that he had missed.

"Great old play," he thought, delightedly. "Wonder if Blair put it on before he died, or if it's posthumous."

He picked up a stray program as he left the place—he had had none before—and put it in his pocket to look over at home.

"At least, I'm not suffering from lack of interests or diversion," he said, "but, by Jingo, I've just thought of it! What about money!

"I've enough to hang out at that hotel about a week and that's all. I'll have to tell Dad I'm here, or get a job or rob a bank. And what can I do to turn an honest penny? And I can't go to work under an assumed name! Oh, hang it all, I've got to come to life! Much as I love Dad and much as I want to save him from all

ridicule and disaster about that abominable book, I've simply got to live my own life!

"But I won't decide till my cash gets lower than it is now. I'll go a bit further in my investigations and then we'll see about it."

Comfortably seated in his room he drew out the program to look over.

To his unbounded amazement he learned from the title page that the author of the play and also the producer, or, at least, the president of the producing company was—Christopher Shelby!

"Kit! Good old top!" he cried aloud.

"Oh, I must see him," he thought, "I just must see him! So Kit wrote the thing—well, I suppose he and Blair did it together— I recognize Kit's hand more especially in the producing element —and then, old Gilbert, bless him, was killed, and Kit went ahead alone— I can't think Mac Thorpe did for Gil—oh, I must see *somebody* or I'll go crazy!"

And because he was afraid to trust himself to keep away from the telephone any longer, Peter Boots went to bed.

The night brought counsel.

Clarifying his thoughts, Peter tried first to see where his duty lay.

To his parents, first of all, he decided, for he was a devoted son, and all his life he had loved and revered both father and mother more than most boys do. Julie, too, but, so far he had no reason to think she had any special claim on him.

Well, then, what did his duty to his parents dictate?

Common sense said that they would far rather have their son with them alive than to rest secure in the success of the book his father had written.

But the book itself was, to his mind, quite outside the pale of common sense, and could not be judged by any such standards.

Certain pages, special paragraphs in that book, stood out in his mind, and he knew that never had there been such a fiasco as would ensue if the long lost and deeply mourned hero of it should return! His return in the spirit was so gloatingly related, so triumphantly averred, that his return in the flesh would be a terrific anti-climax.

He remembered the gypsy's prophecy—how it had come true!

But the return, foretold by the second gypsy, was now verified in the flesh and put to naught all the fake returns narrated in the book.

Much stress was laid, in his father's story, on the spiritual return being what the gypsy meant. Now, Peter had proved that that prophecy meant, if it meant anything at all, his return in the flesh.

Anyway, here he was, very much alive, and very uncertain what to do with his live self.

Should he go away, out West, or to some distant place and start life anew, under an assumed name, and leave his father to his delusion? Was that his duty?

He was not necessary to his parents, either as a help to their support or as a comfort to their hearts.

He did not do them the injustice to think that they had never mourned for him, or that they had not missed him in the home. All this was fully and beautifully set forth in the book.

But they had been compensated by the comfort and enjoyment afforded them by their *séances*, and by the messages they continually received from him!

And he could see no way, try as he would, that he could inform them of his return without causing them dismay and distress.

For if they knew him to be alive he must take again his old place in the home—and then what would his father be?

A laughing-stock, a crushed and crestfallen victim of the most despicable sort of fraud!

It would never do. He couldn't bring positive trouble into his father's life on the off chance of removing a sorrow, which, though real, was softened and solaced by the very fraud that he would expose.

No; the more he thought the more he saw his duty was to eliminate himself for all time from his home and friends.

And Carly?

He tried not to think about her, for his duty must be his paramount consideration. He would wait a day or so, and then disappear again, and forever.

CHAPTER XV
An Interview

"WELL, Mr. Douglas, what can I do for you?"

Benjamin Crane spoke cordially, and smiled genially at the young man who had called on him in his home.

"You can turn me down, sir, if you like, or, if you'll be so kind, you can give me a few details of these strange experiences of yours in occult matters."

"Are you a reporter?"

"I am, but also I want to be something more than that. And in this case I want to write up these things for a special article, and a personal interview would help a lot."

"Well, my boy, you impress me pleasantly, and, as I like nothing better than to talk on my favorite subject, I'll give you a fifteen-minute chat. More than that I cannot spare time for."

"Then let's confine our talk to the phase that interests me most. I can get your beliefs and experiences from your book, you know. And your personality," Douglas gave him a humorously appraising glance, "I am gathering as we go along. First, will you tell me your attitude, mental and spiritual, regarding the loss of your son? I mean, though I fear I put it crudely, are you entirely reconciled to his death because of the comfort you receive from his—er—communications and all that?"

"A difficult question to answer," Crane paused a moment, "but I think I may say yes. I bow to the will of a Higher Power in the

death of my son, and I am grateful to that same Higher Power for the comfort that is mine in the communion I have with my boy."

"Then you do not really grieve over his loss?"

"Not now—no. At first, of course, both his mother and I were crushed, but when he came to us, in the spirit, we took heart, and now we are perfectly satisfied—more than satisfied to accept our life conditions just as they are."

"You have frequent communication with the spirit of your departed son?"

"Almost daily."

"With the same medium always?"

"Nowadays, yes. I tried various ones, but I rely on Madame Parlato. She has had the greatest success, and now can readily get into communication with my son at almost any time."

"Excuse me, Mr. Crane, if I am indiscreet, but have you never felt that she might be—not entirely—honest?"

Benjamin Crane smiled benignly. "Don't hesitate to put your doubt into words. I am quite ready to answer that question. I have no doubts of any sort concerning the medium's honesty, sincerity and genuineness. I have no doubt that the communications she obtains are really from my son Peter. That his spirit speaks to me through her. This has been proved to me in many ways, but a far greater proof is the conviction in my soul of the reality of it all. My wife believes as implicitly as I do, and no amount of scoffing from outsiders can in any way shake our faith."

"You have had material proofs?"

"Yes; here is a letter from my son himself. Here is a tobacco pouch that I know was his. Here is his handkerchief."

With a calm pride Benjamin Crane took these articles from a table drawer and showed them.

Douglas was deeply impressed, examined the articles and watched Crane as he returned them to the drawer.

"You see," said Crane, "it is not only difficult but impossible to account for those things except by supernatural explanation, so why refuse the logical truth?"

"That's so. And, I understand now, why you are so happy in your beliefs, for it all gives your life a continual and absorbing interest. You are writing another book, are you not?"

"Yes; it contains the detailed account of my *séances*, and will, I trust, prove an additional source of information and education on the great subject of survival."

"And your daughter? Does she, too, subscribe to all your theories?"

"Almost entirely. She is not so absorbed in the subject as Mrs. Crane and myself, but she has become persuaded of many truths."

"And now, my time is nearly up, may I ask you a word regarding the Blair case. Do you think McClellan Thorpe is the guilty man?"

"No! a thousand times no! I am trying by every means in my power to prove that he isn't. I hope to succeed, too. But we mustn't go into that subject, as I have an important

appointment to keep. Come to see me again, Mr. Douglas, if you like. I'm not unaccustomed to such calls, and I'll be glad to see you again. By appointment, though, for I'm a busy man."

Tom Douglas went back, over to Brooklyn, and, going to a hotel, asked for one John Harrison.

In a short time Peter Boots was eagerly listening to the report of the messenger he had sent to his father.

"I learned a lot, Mr. Harrison," the visitor began. "I think I can give you quite a bit of the local color you need for your novel."

"Not so much local color as mental attitude," Peter returned. "You see, in writing a psychological novel the author has to be careful of shades of feeling in his delineation of the characters. And as this Mr. Crane seemed to be just the type I want to study, I'm glad to have you tell me all the things he said, as nearly as you can recollect his own language."

"Yes, I know. And I was mighty interested on my own account, too."

"He was willing you should write an article about him?"

"Oh, yes, and asked me to come again."

"Go on, tell me all he said—how he looked and acted and everything that happened."

And so the young reporter and free-lance writer told Peter Boots all about his father, under the impression that he was talking to one who had never seen Benjamin Crane.

"He's a wonderful man, Mr. Harrison," the other said, enthusiastically. "He must be fifty-five at least, maybe more, but

he's so alert and quick-witted, and so full of his subject, that he seems a much younger man."

"And he seems happy?"

"Happy! I should say so! Perfectly reconciled to his son's death, because of these communications he gets from him! I say, Mr. Harrison, I can't stand for it! It gets me to see how that man is gulled, and he such a clear-headed, sane sort! Had proofs, too—all sorts of things. Do you believe it, Mr. Harrison? Do you believe that the spirit of Mr. Crane's dead son talks to him through a medium?"

"I do not," said Peter Crane, endeavoring not to speak too emphatically. "I didn't want you to get that interview in the interests of Spiritism at all, but to tell me of the condition, mentally and physically, of Mr. Crane."

"Yes, I know. Well, the old guy is O.K. physically, fit as a fiddle. And sound mentally, you bet, except that he's nutty on the supernatural. Why, he showed me the tobacco pouch—you know he tells about that in his book—"

Peter nodded.

"Showed me, too, a handkerchief of his dead son's—"

"That's not so remarkable."

"Yes, it is; 'cause it's one of a set that the chap took away with him, embroidered by his best girl, I believe."

Peter started. One of those handkerchiefs Carly gave him! Where in the world could that fool medium have got hold of that?

"Also a note from son, in his own handwriting," Douglas went on.

"Did you see it?"

"Yep. Commonplace looking note, advising his sister to drop acquaintance with Thorpe—he's the man they arrested in the Blair case."

"Where did the note come from?"

"Materialized—out of thin air."

"At a *séance?"*

"No; the brother kindly left it on sister's bureau, I believe."

Peter Crane was bewildered indeed. What sort of performances were going on, anyhow. And who was at the bottom of all this?

Clearly, he must look into things a little more before he did his final disappearance!

"Well, Mr. Douglas, you've helped me a whole lot. Now, as I say, I want mental impressions. Tell me everything you can think of about the atmosphere of the whole house, the—did you see Mrs. Crane?"

"No, only the old man. There seemed to be quite a lot of people about, coming and going. We had our interview in Mr. Crane's study, or library—"

"I know, the small room at the back of the house—"

"Been there?" Douglas looked up quickly.

"Read of it in the book," said Peter, quietly, annoyed at himself for the slip.

"Yes. Well, there's a table in the middle of the room, and in the drawer of that table Mr. Crane keeps all the things' materialized by the medium. I think he expects to get a big collection."

"Oh, Lord!" groaned Peter, "*what* a mess!"

"Yes, isn't it?" Douglas assumed that the whole subject of Spiritism was thus referred to.

"Suppose anything happened to shake Mr. Crane's faith?"

"I don't think anything *could* do that. He's absolutely gullible. He'd swallow anything. I say, how *do* you explain it? Why is it that big-brained, well-balanced men fall for this rot?"

"They can't be really well-balanced,—and then, too, it's largely the eagerness to believe, the desire for the comfort it brings them that makes them think they do believe. And a clever medium can do much."

"Sure. But those materializations! Where'd she get the goods?"

"Give it up. Tell me more about Mr. Crane."

So Douglas patiently recounted and repeated all the words of Peter's father and told of his appearance and manner, under the impression that he was helping an author with data for a psychological story.

Peter had found Douglas by merely making inquiry for a bright young reporter, and had made an agreement, satisfactory to both, for him to try to get the interview with Benjamin Crane, and they would both profit by it.

He was delighted that Crane had asked the young man to call again, and when they parted it was with the understanding that there should be another interview arranged.

Peter Boots had much food for thought.

He sat thinking for hours after the food had been given to him.

What was the explanation? What *could* be the explanation?

How could communications from a dead man be received when the man was not dead?

How he longed to go home, disclose himself, and run to earth that fearful fraud! How gladly he would do so, except that it would ruin his father's reputation. What would the public think of a man who had been so taken in by fraud, and had blazoned it to the world.

To be sure it was no reflection on Benjamin Crane's sincerity, yet he would be the butt of derision for the whole country, and his discredited head would be bowed for the rest of his life.

Peter couldn't bring himself to do that, especially now that he had discovered that his loss was not a source of hopeless grief to his parents.

"I'm not wanted in this world," he told himself, sadly, "I'm a superfluous man. I've got to dispose of myself somehow," and he gave a very realizing sigh.

And the thought of Carly,—that tried to obtrude itself, he put resolutely from him.

"She's probably forgotten me," he assured himself, "and anyway I must do the right thing by Mother and Dad first. If I decide that I can't demolish their air castle, so carefully built up, I must light out,—that's all."

Trying hard to be cheerful, but feeling very blue and desolate he ate a solitary dinner and went again to the theater to see

"Labrador Luck."

Douglas' graphic description of his home and his father had given him a great longing to go there, to see the dear old place, the dear old man,—and his mother, and Julie.

He felt he *must* go. Then, he knew he couldn't go, without breaking his father's heart and life.

"I broke his heart when I *didn't* go home," he thought whimsically, "now, I mustn't break it again by going home!"

He sat through the moving picture performance again, and marveled anew at the beauty of the production. It was far above the rank and file of moving pictures, it was adjudged by all critics the very greatest production ever put upon the screen.

Shelby's name had become famous, his work was applauded everywhere, and Peter yearned to see him and renew their friendship.

But he knew he mustn't think of those things. First of all he had to decide whether or not he was to come back to life, and if not,—and he had a conviction that that would be his decision,—he must not dally with tempting thoughts and hopes of any sort.

But it was hard! Blair dead, Shelby famous, and he, Peter, unable to talk things over with any relative, chum or friend.

He must talk to somebody, and on his way out of the theater he spoke to the box office man.

"Wonderful show," he said, smiling at him. "Who's this Shelby?"

"He's the big push of to-day," was the enthusiastic reply. "He's a marvel of efficiency and generalship. And a big author, too."

"He wrote the play as well as produced it, I see."

"Yes. Oh, he can do anything."

"Married man?"

"No; but I've heard he's engaged to a girl,—a Miss Harper, I believe."

Peter choked. The last straw! But he might have known,—he, himself, supposed dead, Blair dead, what more natural than that Carly should turn to old Kit?

With a mere nod to the man who had unwittingly dealt him this final blow, Peter walked out into the night.

And he walked and walked. Up Broadway to the Circle, on up and into Riverside Drive, and along the Hudson as far as he could go.

Thinking deeply, planning desperately, only to be confronted with the awful picture of his father's consternation at the shattering of his beliefs and the collapse of his celebrity.

At times he would tell himself he was absurdly apprehensive, that any parents would rather have their lost son restored than to have the applause and notoriety of public fame. And, then, he would realize that while that might be generally true, yet this was a peculiar case. His father was a proud, sensitive nature. Perhaps—Peter shuddered,—perhaps he wouldn't love a son who by his return made him the most laughed at man in the whole world!

Peter longed to go to some one for advice. Shelby, now,—his big efficient mind would know at once what was best to do.

But he couldn't disclose himself to Kit and not to any one else. Kit couldn't keep that a secret, even if he wanted to do so.

And— Kit was engaged to Carly! He never wanted to see either of them again!

Poor, lonely, troubled Peter. Only one plain, sure truth abided. He *must* do his duty, and he felt pretty sure he knew what that duty was. It was to stay out of the life he had lost.

There was no other possible course.

He turned and retraced his steps southward, and finally went across town, drawn as by a magnet to his own home.

Home! What a mockery the word was!

It was two o'clock in the morning now; he had been walking or sitting on a Drive bench for hours.

He was not conscious of fatigue, he only wanted to see his old home and then go away forever. He didn't plan his future. He was sure he could make a living easily enough, he felt he could build up a new life for himself over a new name. But oh, how he longed for the old life!

He stood in front of the house and stared at it.

He walked round and round the block it was on, pausing each time he passed the front door, and walking on, if there chanced to be a passer-by.

At last, he concluded to give up the painful pleasure of gazing at the closed windows and go back to Brooklyn.

His gaze traveled over the windows at the various rooms,—how well he knew what they all were,—and at last he found himself looking at the front door. How often he had let himself in with his latchkey.

Involuntarily his hand went to his pocket, where that latchkey even now was,—and hardly knowing what he was doing, he had the key in his hand and was mounting the steps of his old home.

Still as one in a daze, and with no intention of making his presence known, but with an uncontrollable desire to see for the last time those dear rooms, he silently fitted the key into place.

Noiselessly he turned it and pushed the door open.

The house was still, there were no lights on, save a low glimmer in the front hall.

He remembered that had always been left on.

But the street lights faintly illumined the living-room, and he went in. With a wave of desperate homesickness he threw himself on the big davenport and buried his face into a pile of cushions.

He couldn't go away,—he *couldn't*.

But—he must!

And so, he forced himself to put aside his emotion, he bravely fought down his nostalgia, and promising himself one look into his father's study he vowed to go directly after.

He stepped into the little room where Douglas had been received. He couldn't resist the temptation to look about it, and,

cautiously he snapped on the desk light.

There was the table with the drawer in it.

Carefully, Peter opened the drawer and saw for himself the tobacco pouch, the handkerchief, and the letter, signed "Peter."

He stared at it, amazed at the similarity to his own penmanship.

"I'd like to stay, if only to ferret out the mystery of this rascally fake!" he thought "But—oh, hang it! this rascally fake is the very breath of life to Dad and Mother. No, Peter Boots, it can't be done! You're out of it all and out of it all you must stay. Clear out of here now, before you get in any deeper."

He fingered the old tobacco pouch.

"Heavens and earth!" he exclaimed to himself, as a sudden thought struck him. "That's so!"

Again he took up the letter, looking closely at the formation of the words, studying the tenor of the message, and then, with a sigh, laid all back in the drawer and gently closed it.

"That way madness lies," he told himself, and turned to leave the room and the house.

As he reached for the light switch, a small hand laid on his own detained him.

Startled, he looked up and saw a witch-like, eerie face smiling at him.

"Must you go?" whispered a mocking voice, and Peter Boots, for once in his life was absolutely stricken dumb.

Who or what was this sprite, this Brownie? What was she doing in his father's house? Were materialized spirits really

inhabiting the place?

"Hush!" Zizi warned him, "don't speak above a whisper. Are you a burglar?"

Peter shook his head, unable to repress a smile, and his smile made the same impression on Zizi that it had always made on everybody,—that of absolute pleasure.

"Who are you?" she asked, scarce breathing the words.

"John Harrison," he returned, still smiling. "I'll go now, please."

"Without further explanation?"

"Yes, please."

"All right, I'll let you out. I know all about you. You sent a chap here to interview Mr. Crane,—and you're getting follow-up literature."

"Right! Good night."

And with a swiftness and silence born of the dire necessity of the moment, Peter went to the front door, out of it and down the street in record time.

He turned the first corner, and walked rapidly many blocks, before turning to see if he were followed.

He was not, and he went on his way to Brooklyn, his life tragedy still ahead of him, but relieved by the touch of comedy added by that mysterious and wonderfully attractive girl.

CHAPTER XVI
Zizi's Opportunity

THE Blair case had come to a standstill. Although the police were still making investigations, they were fairly well satisfied that Thorpe was the guilty man and since he was jailed and awaiting trial, they rested on their laurels.

Pennington Wise was by no means sure of Thorpe's guilt, and Zizi was certain of his innocence, but though these two were working hard, as yet they had found no other definite suspect.

"But you must, Zizi," wailed Julie. "You know as well as I do that Mac never killed Gilbert. Now, find out who did!"

Wise confessed himself baffled, but asked for a little more time before admitting himself vanquished.

"You see, Ziz," he said to his astute young helper, "there are so many interesting side issues, that we get off the main track. I own up I'm quite as much absorbed in this Spiritism racket as I am in the murder case."

"That's the trouble, Penny," Zizi returned, gravely. "You're scattering your energies. And it won't do. You've got to concentrate on the Blair murder. And you've got to get at it from a different angle. Suppose you take a run out West and see that mother and sister. They may give you a line on things."

"I've been thinking I'd do that. There must be something in Blair's past that can be unearthed and may prove enlightening. I could do it in a week, and it might be time well spent."

"Of course it would. And, truly, there's no way to look, here. I've thought and thought but we've no hint or clew pointing to any one but Thorpe,—and, it wasn't Thorpe."

Then Zizi told him of the strange man she had seen in the Crane library the night before.

"And you let him get away! Why, Zizi?"

"He was no burglar. I saw that. There was no use in alarming the house. He was—"

"Well?"

"Oh, I knew at once who he was. He was the John Harrison who sent that Douglas person here to interview Mr. Crane."

"Well, is he to be allowed to walk in and out as he chooses! How did he get in?"

"I don't know, but I hope he'll come again. I like him. Why, Penny, he's a gentleman."

"But who is he? What's he up to?"

"He didn't confide in me, but I know. He's the medium's agent. He comes here and gets data and information and tells her and she works it off on the Cranes. I saw through that at once. He must have a key and he just walks in and helps himself, you see."

"Absurd!"

"Maybe; but that's what he does, all the same."

"And he told you his name!"

"Yes; but that's nothing. He'll have another name and another home before night. These mediums resort to the strangest tricks to get their stuff! Why, Penny, he was prowling in that drawer

where the tobacco pouch is, and I think he meant to take it away so they could 'materialize' it over again. I'm going to watch for him nights. He'll come again."

But Zizi was mistaken. John Harrison did not come again, though the girl was alert to welcome him.

Pennington Wise went West, to see the relatives of Blair, for it had frequently been his experience that such inquiries into a man's early life brought about useful knowledge.

This left Zizi in a position of responsibility, to keep watch of developments and to learn what she could from them.

She was not so sure as Julie of Thorpe's innocence, but she meant to find another suspect if one could be found, and she redoubled her efforts.

Zizi had become a welcome guest in the Thorpe household, and they all admired and loved her. A most adaptable little piece, she fitted into the family as if she belonged there, and she and Julie were warm friends.

She said nothing of the midnight intruder, being determined in her own mind, that he was an emissary from the medium, Madame Parlato, whom Zizi regarded as an absolute fake. To prove this was a desire of Zizi's mind as well as to solve the mystery of the Blair murder.

But her fondness for the Cranes was such, that she was not sure she should expose the medium's trickery, even if she discovered it herself. So she went on with her secret investigations, and at present they included an inquiry into the

matter of that reporter's visit and John Harrison's appearance on the scene.

Zizi had, of course, read Benjamin Crane's book, and in it had seen the picture of Peter, but the portrait was so different in effect from the bearded man whom she saw but indistinctly by the dim light in the library that she never connected the two in her thoughts.

But she thoroughly believed that the man in the library had come there for the purpose of acquiring either information or materials for further manifestations of the medium. She was sure that the tobacco pouch and the handkerchief which had been "materialized" had been obtained in this way and, she argued, the best way to find out, was to remain silent as to John Harrison's call.

When told by Mr. Crane of the visit of Douglas, the reporter, Zizi had suspected something beneath the surface,—it did not seem plausible to her, that the case was just as it was stated.

And somehow, in the back of her astute little brain, she had a notion that the Blair murder and the supernatural manifestations were in some way connected, at least, indirectly.

So she was merely receptive, and put herself in the way of learning all she could of the medium's affairs without showing her own hand. She obtained a detailed account of the *séances* from the elder Cranes, and each time she became not only more convinced of the medium's fraud, but sure that the faker, more and more secure in her clients' credulity, was growing both daring and careless.

This, Zizi concluded, was her opportunity, and she hoped to profit by her knowledge of the visit of John Harrison.

* * * * *

And meantime, the so-called John Harrison, whom Zizi had sized up so mistakenly, was puzzling his head over the identity of the girl who had seen him.

He was not alarmed by fear of discovery, for he could change his name and address at will, but he was piqued by the saucy announcement that she knew all about him, and amazed at her knowledge that he had sent Douglas to see Benjamin Crane.

Moreover, the sight of that familiar old tobacco pouch of his own had stirred him, and some logical deductions that followed in its train caused him to reconsider his decision to disappear at once.

"But I got to have some money," he reasoned, "and I think I know how to get it!"

As a matter of fact, he did. He had in his mind a plot for a moving picture, which he had long cherished and thought over, but which he had never put on paper. The success of Shelby's great picture put it in his mind to try to sell his own. He was tempted to take it to the Shelby corporation but knowing it wiser, he went to a rival company.

As his plot was new, original and decidedly meritorious, he had no trouble in finding a market. He learned that he could sell merely his plot, that the "continuity" work would be done by their own people; and delighted to receive a most

satisfactory lump sum, John Harrison gave his name as Louis Bartram, and removed to another hotel, where he registered under his new name.

For Peter Crane had resolved to do a little investigating on his own hook, and he realized that since the girl at his home knew his present cognomen it must be changed.

Louis Bartram, therefore, sent for Douglas, and took that mystified young man into his confidence to a degree.

"It's this way, Douglas," he said, "I give you my word I'm straight and all right, but I'm unraveling a mystery, and I'm incog for the present."

Now nobody could look into Peter Crane's blue eyes and doubt his veracity, and Douglas believed exactly what was told him.

"Can I help?" he said, simply, and Louis Bartram told him he could.

Wherefore, Bartram expeditiously acquired such information as he needed, and the first item was the name and address of the medium who was responsible for the *séances* detailed in Benjamin Crane's famous book.

And then to the house of Madame Parlato, Louis Bartram went, having made an appointment through the useful Douglas.

The madame's quick glance of inquiry was satisfied and her ever-ready suspicions lulled by her first glance into Peter's eyes. It was impossible to distrust that frank gaze, and though Peter was an unbeliever in her and all her works, yet his cause was honest and sincere and he met her on her own ground.

"You want a *séance?"* the occult lady inquired.

"No, Madame Parlato," Peter returned, quietly, "I want to bribe you to undertake a commission for me."

"Wh—what!" she cried, turning white and quite losing her poise at his astonishing remark.

"Now, let's cut out all that," Peter went on, practically, "let's assume that we've thrashed it all out, and agreed that you're one of the cleverest of your sort and can fool the gullible ones very neatly. But, let's also assume that when one who knows comes along that you will meet him halfway, and at least, listen to his proposition."

"But, this,—this is outrageous—"

"Not at all. You see, I know of the faking you have done,—and are doing,—in the Crane matter."

"Oh,—ah—" Madame cautiously awaited further speech from her attractive but unusual caller.

"Yes,—and," here Peter made a bold stroke, "I know who is giving you things to 'materialize,' and why, and I want to know how much you are being paid, in order that I may offer you more to follow my directions."

"I do not acknowledge that you are right—" she began, but Peter interrupted:

"You needn't; your expression, your countenance tells me all I want of acknowledgment. Now, listen to reason. I only want one *séance*, conducted according to my orders, and I'll pay you what you demand. Your other patron needn't know anything about my hand in the matter."

"I refuse your requests, sir. I resent your accusations, and unless you leave here at once, I shall call—"

"Oh, no, you won't call the police, or any one else. You would greatly object to an investigation of your place here, and you and I know why. You'll do much better, madame, to listen to my proposition, and accept it. You see,— I *know!"*

The mysterious tone Peter used seemed to carry conviction, and with a little shudder, Madame Parlato gave in.

"What do you want?" she asked, tremulously; "what do you intend to do?"

"I intend to do a great many things," Peter replied, gravely, "but I want very little. Only that you shall conduct a *séance*, at the time I set and entirely in accordance with my orders."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then I shall feel it my duty to expose you as a fraud and a charlatan."

The woman winced at these words, but meeting Peter's steely gaze and realizing his power over her, she said:

"First, tell me who you are."

"I am Louis Bartram," he said, "you know that already. For the rest, I am an investigator of psychic conditions and a student of the occult, along certain definite lines. You will find it to your best advantage, Madame, to be perfectly frank and truthful with me. Any other course you will find most disastrous."

"Are you—are you of the—"

"Of the police? No, this is not an official investigation. And, moreover, it all depends on yourself whether the results of our

work together are ever made public or not. Now, answer my questions. How did you come to give these *séances* to the Cranes?"

"Mr. Crane came and asked me to."

"Where had he heard of you?"

"I was recommended to him by some friends of his."

"Did you ever know his son, Peter?"

"No; I never heard of him until Mr. Crane came here."

"And then you immediately got into spiritual communication with the dead man?"

"Yes; that is my business."

She spoke a little defiantly, and Peter smiled. "I know. I accept that. Now, I'm a friend of the Cranes, because of having read that book. A man who is so absolutely positive of his beliefs is too good and dear a man to be disturbed in his enjoyment of them."

"Oh, Mr. Bartram, I'm glad you see it that way, too! Truly, I've come to love the Cranes, and if—if I help along a little, it is largely for the comfort and happiness it gives them."

"I know,— I see; and I realize what an awful thing it would be if the world were to learn that all the matter in his book is really false—"

"Oh, it would kill him! If you knew Mr. Crane, if you knew how his very life is bound up in this matter, you would be even more assured what a disaster it would be to have him in any way discredited!"

Peter's heart fell at this, for he had a half hope that he could yet bring himself to demolish his father's air castle.

"Well, then," he said, slowly, "I'll not discredit him, nor you, for, of course, one involves the other. But this, on condition that you obey my commands implicitly in this matter of a *séance*. If you fail me in one particular, if you disobey one tiny detail, or, if you so much as hint a word to your—your other employer,—I mean the one who has bribed you to certain frauds,—then, I shall show you up, even if it does distress Mr. and Mrs. Crane."

Madame Parlato thought in silence for a moment. Then she said, astutely, "I don't know who you are, Mr. Bartram, but I am quite certain you are something more than you wish to tell. I mean a bigger factor in the Crane affair than you admit. I ask no questions, I agree to your terms, and I will do exactly as you direct, relying on your promise that if I do so, you will not tell of any—any insincerity you may notice."

"Wait a moment,—that promise may lead to complications. If the result of my proposed procedure is to reveal your—er,—insincerity—I cannot be responsible for the consequences. Those you will have to bear. But I will admit that my interests are those of Benjamin Crane, and I shall do all in my power to preserve his secrets and, thereby, yours."

"I think, then, you may go ahead and tell me your plans that you wish me to carry out."

"I've revised them,'" Peter said, thoughtfully, "they may, as I now see it, call for more than one *séance*. But here's for a starter. When do you expect Mr. Crane again?"

"To-morrow."

"All right. Merely give him a further materialization. And let the object be this,"—he laid a small paper parcel before her, which he had taken from his pocket,—"yes,—and this," and he produced a second parcel.

She opened the papers, and found the first to be a handkerchief, the duplicate of the one already "materialized" and bearing the monogram Carly had so painstakingly embroidered.

The other parcel contained a silver quarter of a dollar, one side of which had been smoothed off and engraved with the entwined letters P. C.

"These belonged to the son?" Madame exclaimed, excitedly. "Where did you get them?"

"From the son," replied Louis Bartram; "but remember you are under oath of secrecy. You are merely to produce these things as materializations at your next session with Mr. Crane, and also,—I want to be present,—unseen. Can it be managed?"

"Of course, that's easy enough."

Further arrangements were made, terms were agreed on, and Louis Bartram went away from the house of the medium in New York and returned to his hotel in Brooklyn.

And as he came down the steps of the Parlato residence, a small, dark girl, who was walking by, quickly scuttled around a corner, and out of his line of vision.

"I knew it!" Zizi said to herself, exultantly, "he's in cahoots with the spook woman! He's been there to give her things to

materialize and soon I'll hear of them! He came to the house and stole something which she will use to fool poor old Mr. Crane. You'll see!"

Zizi talked enthusiastically to herself, resolving to learn more of this attractive young man's identity.

"Clever, wasn't he?" she asked of herself, "to send that reporter around first,—probably he stole a key to the house,—oh, it's a whole big organization, I suppose, and they cover their tracks so completely they're not even suspected."

Acting on an impulse, she turned and went back to the house of the medium. By strategy, she succeeded in getting an interview, although she had no appointment.

"I have come to warn you," she said, without preamble, looking into the woman's eyes, "I am a detective, and I am onto your game. I know that man who just left here, he is your tool, your accomplice. Also, I know that he stole some things from the Crane house that you intend to use in your so-called materializations. Now, I warn you that if you do that, I shall see to it that your deceit is shown up, your fraud exposed!"

"My Lord," cried the puzzled Madame, "who are you? Why do you think that man is my accomplice? It is not so! I never laid eyes on him until this morning!"

"That is not true," Zizi said, sure of her ground, and wondering why the medium looked so unfeignedly puzzled. "He works for you—"

"He does not! He is a client. Now you leave, or I'll have you put out."

"I am going to leave," and Zizi rose, "but you remember what I said. If you show up any more materialized belongings of Mr. Crane's dead son, I'll have you exposed and arrested!"

It is doubtful which of the two was more perplexed by this conversation.

Zizi, with her quick reading of human nature, saw that Madame Parlato was truly surprised at the girl's accusation of an accomplice, therefore, she decided, he could not be an accomplice, after all. And if not, what was he, and what was he doing at the medium's house?

That he was a client, she did not believe, for had she not seen him, rummaging in the Crane library and in that table drawer? It was all most mysterious and Zizi determined to stick to this new mystery in hopes it would shed some light on the old ones.

Meanwhile Madame Parlato was absolutely bewildered. Who was this strange girl who had come flying in with an incredible tale about the new client being an accomplice of her own?

Nor did that question trouble her so much as the consideration of what she should do next? She had arranged to have Mr. Crane at a *séance* the next evening, and to have Mr. Louis Bartram concealed in an adjoining room, where he could see and hear without being discovered.

Now, if she failed to use the objects he had directed her to use she feared his ire and vengeance, while if she did use them, this awful child, who called herself a detective, threatened exposure!

To be sure, she told herself, that little scrap of humanity couldn't be a detective, the thought was impossible. Yet the child's words and tones had carried conviction. Indeed, she was no child, though small enough to be one. She was either a detective, the Madame finally decided, or, she was a fake medium herself, and had some unknown ax to grind.

In any case, the way of the transgressor was hard, and the occult lady thought a long time before she came to a decision.

But the conclusion she reached was to obey the orders of Louis Bartram. He was a far more formidable antagonist, there must be more real danger in disobeying him than that chit of a girl.

So Madame laid her plans, prepared her properties, and, with fear in her heart, arranged for the forthcoming *séance*.

And Zizi, worried and uncertain, in Wise's absence, as to just what she should do, laid her plans to be present also at Benjamin Crane's next session with the medium.

And Peter Boots, communing with himself, and rapidly getting more and more excited at his discoveries and the developments of his theories, impatiently awaited the hour when he should see his father and perhaps his mother.

CHAPTER XVII
The Heart Helper

NEVER during her association with Wise, had Zizi wanted him so much as she did at present. The situation, she felt, was too big for her to handle, and the contradictory conclusions forced upon her bewildered her.

Public interest in the Blair murder had waned, or at least it was waiting for the trial of McClellan Thorpe, and while the police were ready to listen to any new evidence or theories, none seemed to be forthcoming.

Julie was in despair, feeling that the great Pennington Wise was making no headway in his endeavors to free Thorpe, and Benjamin Crane too was beginning to doubt Wise's ability.

Zizi, therefore, felt the brunt of upholding her colleague's reputation for cleverness and success, and now that things were getting so complicated, and Penny Wise so far away, the girl felt her responsibility almost greater than she could bear.

But, she concluded, after deep thought, the first and most important thing to be done was to locate that John Harrison.

From Benjamin Crane she obtained the address of young Douglas, the reporter, and went to see him.

Douglas was greatly pleased with the appearance and manner of his visitor, for Zizi was at her sparkling best, and that was very good indeed.

"You see, Mr. Douglas," she confided with a captivating smile, "I'm a Heart Helper."

"A what?"

"Yes. I help people's hearts,—people who are sad or in trouble. Now, I'm working in the interests of a dear friend, a lovely girl, whose sweetheart is being most unjustly treated, and only I can set things straight. Think of that!"

The great dark eyes flashed an appealing glance at him, and Zizi's red mouth took a sorrowful droop at the corners.

Instinctively he yearned to bring back the smile and he said, promptly, "Can I help you? Is that why you come to me?"

"Exactly," and Zizi beamed at him, quite completing his undoing.

"And what I want," she went on quickly, lest she lose her suddenly-acquired power over him, "is only the address of Mr. John Harrison."

Douglas's face fell, and he plainly showed his embarrassment and chagrin.

"That I can't tell you," he began,—but paused at the look of despair that came to Zizi's expressive face.

"Oh, please," she begged. "It's so necessary,—so important. I won't make any wrong use of the information. Please tell me."

"But I can't, Miss Zizi. You see, Mr.—Harrison isn't where he was. He—he isn't anywhere."

Clearly, Douglas thought, he was making a mess of things. But what could he say?

"Are you making game of me?" Zizi's tone was wistful, and with her head cocked to one side like an alert bird, she waited breathlessly for his answer.

"No, not a bit of it!"

"But—you say—he isn't anywhere! What do you mean?"

Still under the spell of her smile, her fascinating manner, and her sweet, piquant little face, Douglas hesitated,—and was lost.

"Well, you see, he,—he was somebody else. I mean he isn't,—that is, he isn't himself."

"Are you sure you are?" Zizi laughed outright, so infectiously, that Douglas joined in.

"No, I'm not!" he admitted. "Now, if you're not, either, we're all in the same boat."

But Zizi was not to be put off with foolery.

"Mr. Douglas," she said, seriously, "truly, I'm on an important errand, and one involving grave consequences. You can help greatly by giving me that man's address, and help not only the girl of whom I spoke, but help the cause of right and justice, even, perhaps, in a matter of life and death. Don't refuse—"

"But if I don't refuse, I must at least inquire. And, suppose I tell you that Mr. Harrison does not want his address known?"

"I assumed that. But, suppose I tell you that it may help to clear up one of the greatest mysteries of the day if you will just give me a hint where I can find that man. And, even though he has forbidden you to tell, I think I can assure you that he won't mind my knowing the secret, and if he does mind I'll persuade him to exonerate you."

Zizi had meant to take quite a different tack,—use hints of legal authority or suggest his duty to humanity, but intuition told her that this man was best persuaded by coaxing,—and Zizi could coax!

She succeeded only partly. After she convinced Douglas of the wisdom of such a course he told her that John Harrison had been at the Hotel Consul in Brooklyn, but had left there, and had left no further address.

Moreover, he declared he had no knowledge whatever of the whereabouts of John Harrison at the present time.

"No!" and Zizi flashed a quizzical smile, "because he has changed his name! I know that from your emphatic declaration! But I'll find him. Good-by."

Zizi betook herself forthwith to the Hotel Consul.

A polite clerk informed her that Mr. Harrison had checked out, leaving no address.

Determinedly she interviewed the cab drivers ranked in front of the hotel, and by a lucky chance found the one who had driven Mr. Harrison away. A proper bribe brought the knowledge that he had been driven to the Wilfer, a much smaller hotel nearby.

To the Hotel Wilfer Zizi went, and learned there was no John Harrison there, but a very few inquiries proved to her astute intellect that the Louis Bartram, who was the only guest registered at that time on that afternoon, was in all probability the man she sought. At any rate there was no harm in trying.

She asked for an interview, and was connected with Mr. Bartram's rooms by telephone.

"I want to see you again," she said, in response to his Hello, —"Let me come up, Mr. Midnight Visitor, please."

Partly the pleading voice, partly the fact that Peter was eager for new developments in his devious course, and partly a sudden recollection of the girl he had seen in his father's library, brought about a cordial invitation to "come along."

And Zizi exultantly went, hoping against hope that she was on her way to learn something of real importance.

For so many hopeful openings had proved blind alleys, so many bright prospects of success had dimmed on nearer view, that Zizi had begun to lose heart, and this seemed to her perhaps a last chance.

Peter received her in his sitting room, and as the big dark eyes looked deep into the chicory blue ones, and both smiled, it was impossible to be formal.

"Why are you a burglar, Mr. Bartram," Zizi said, as she seated herself sociably in the depths of a big armchair. "You don't look the part a bit."

"What is *your* calling?" he countered; "for unless it is that of a witch or Brownie, I'm sure *you* don't look it."

"I am all of those things," she announced, calmly, crossing her dainty feet and gazing guilelessly at him. "I'm a witch, a Brownie, a sprite, an elf, a kobold, a pixie—"

"That's enough. They're all tarred with the same brush. And why am I favored with this angel visit?"

"So you may answer my question, which you so rudely ignored. Why are you a burglar?"

"But I'm not. Can your ingenuity suggest no explanation of a man's presence in another man's house at midnight save a burglarious motive? I took no jewels nor plate away with me."

"So you didn't. But, I admit motives seem scarce. You were not intending a social call, were you? You didn't come to read the meter or repair the plumbing? You were not seeking a lodging for the night?"

"None of those, Miss Brownie. But, why am I obliged to tell?"

"Because I ask it," and Zizi's pretty powers of coaxing were put to the utmost test.

"I admit that constitutes an obligation, but, I am not going to meet it," and the big man settled back comfortably in his chair and smiled benignly but a trifle exasperatingly.

"Then,—" and the little brown face became serious, the merry light went out of the dark eyes, and Zizi said, coldly, "Then I will tell you. You are a burglar,—you did take valuables from Mr. Crane's house,—at least they were valuable to you, though perhaps of small intrinsic worth."

"Whatever *do* you mean?"

"I mean that you are the accomplice of that woman who calls herself a medium,—that woman who is a fraud, a fake, a miserable charlatan! You came to the house to get some more belongings of Mr. Crane's dead son's,—in order to take them to the Parlato woman and let her trade further on an old man's credulity! That's what you were there for!"

Zizi's nerves were at high tension. She thoroughly believed every word she said, and she felt that perhaps the best way to make this man own up was to put the case thus straightforwardly.

Peter Boots looked at her, his expression changing from amazement to amusement and then to sympathy.

"No," he said gently, "I didn't do that. I swear I didn't."

"Then why were you there?"

Uncertain what to say, Peter just sat and looked at her.

And somehow,—by some subtle intelligence or telepathic flash —all of a sudden,—Zizi knew!

"Oh," she breathed, her eyes like stars, "oh,—you're Peter Boots!"

Slowly, Peter nodded his head.

"Yes," he said, "I am. Now, what are we going to do about it?"

"Do about it? Why, everything! Oh,—wait a minute,—let me take it in,—let me think what it will mean—"

"To father? Yes, I know."

These two, so lately strangers, were immediately at one. Zizi, with her instantaneous understanding and quick appreciation saw the whole situation at once, and realized fully its tragedy.

"It can't be, you know," she cried out; "it mustn't be! Think of the—"

"I know," returned Peter, "I've thought."

Instead of being appalled at the knowledge that his secret was out, Peter felt a positive relief, a sudden let-down of his strained

nerves, and a queer sensation of confidence in this strange girl's powers to set things right.

Peter's intuitions were quick and true; Zizi was not only charming, but gave an effect of capability and efficiency that were as balm and comfort to poor, harassed Peter.

He was willing to nail his colors to her mast; to give his affairs and perplexities into her hands; to abide by her decisions.

And Zizi accepted the tremendous responsibility gravely.

"But it is all too wonderful," she said. "What happened? Where have you been?"

"Two broken legs,—compound fractures,—frozen feet,—gangrene—ugh!—fierce—cut it out!"

"The gangrene!" cried Zizi, horrified.

"Yes, but I didn't mean that. I meant can the description of my sufferings! They'd put the early Christian martyrs to the blush. They would indeed! But let's take up the tale from the present moment."

"Oh, wait a minute,—do! Who rescued you? Why haven't you __"

"Lumbermen,—camp, miles from any sort of a lemon. Couldn't get into communication. Fiercest winter ever known,—everything cut off from everything else. Came home the minute I could,—and,—oh, thunder! how I want to know things! Tell me heaps, do! And who are you, anyway?"

"Heavens, what a tale! Yes, I'll tell you everything, but what shall I fly at first? And—oh, I can't stand the responsibility of

your secret! I can't! Why are you keeping it secret? On account of your father?"

"Yes, that's the sole reason. How can I come forward,—the son who is supposed dead,—who is supposed to come back as a spook,—the son who has had a book written about him—"

"Oh, what a situation! And your father so wrapped up in the whole business,—so positive in his beliefs—"

"And that rascally medium!"

"And those wicked materializations!"

"And the fool Ouija Board!"

"And that letter from you to Julie—oh, I say!"

"And *I* say! But, tell me, what can I do? Do you see it as I do? That I must go away again, disappear forever,—or—"

"Or break your father's heart,— I mean,—oh, I don't know what I mean! Mr. Peter, I think I'll lose my mind!"

"I've almost lost mine, puzzling over the thing. But I've put the kibosh on that Parlato!"

"Oh, that's why you were there! I got things all wrong, didn't I? And you came to your own home—"

"Only because of a terrible attack of homesickness. You see, I still have my latch key, and if you hadn't seen me, I should have merely had a good look around, and then silently steal away, without, however, stealing anything else!"

Zizi smiled at her accusation of his burglarious intent, and then sat musing.

"I can't grapple with it," she said, at last. "It's too big. I shall telegraph for Mr. Wise. He must come back at once and help

us."

"Now, look here, Miss Zizi, I'm not lying down on this job myself. I'm not asking you to carry my burdens or fight my battles. I am very much able to hoe my own row,—only I fear it's going to be a hard one. I'm going to depend on you for help, if I may, but I'll take the helm; Peter Boots leads, he doesn't follow."

Zizi gazed at him, her eyes moist with emotional admiration. This man, this splendid, fine man,—to efface himself to save his father's reputation,—it was too bad! She couldn't stand it.

"Now, wait," she began; "wouldn't your father,—your mother,—rather have you back with them in the flesh,—than to have their pride spared?"

"Answer that yourself," he returned. "I admit that if that question were put to them, they would doubtless say yes. But that's not the thing. The point is, they're reconciled to my loss, happy in the experiences they're having,—delusions though they are,—and contented, even exultant, in things as they are. Why disturb that happiness, for my selfish reasons? Why not leave them to their Fools' Paradise,—for that's what it is,—and not take the chance of what might easily be a distressing disillusion?"

"It would indeed be that," Zizi spoke gravely; "I know it would. But what will you do?"

"Go 'way off somewhere,—start fresh,—make a new name and fame for myself and forget—"

"Sacrifice your own identity to your father's reputation?"

"Exactly that,—and, simply, it is my duty."

"And Carlotta Harper?"

Peter jumped.

"Tell me about Carly," he said, speaking thickly. "Is she engaged to Shelby?"

"No, she isn't!"

"I heard she was."

"Probably he hinted it, and the report started. He's eternally after her, but, to my certain knowledge she hasn't yet said yes."

"Oh, my God! Dear little Carly! What can I do?"

"She would go with you,—into a new life—"

"No; don't be absurd! This secret must be kept inviolably. Nor could I marry her under an assumed name, even if she were willing. Also, she may have forgotten me."

"No, she has not. Oh, Mr. Peter, you must come home."

"I can't. But tell me more,—tell me of mother, of Julie,—why, I sent a reporter to the house just to get a line on home life,—on present conditions,—oh, little girl, you don't know what I suffered; it's all so foolish,—so absurd,—the spook stuff, I mean,—yet, as I've learned, it's the very breath of life to my Dad."

"It is; but, look at the thing from another angle. Couldn't you help unravel the Blair mystery. Here's Mr. Thorpe held for a crime I don't think he committed; here's Julie crying her eyes out because of it—"

"Julie! She and Thorpe!"

"Yes, didn't you know that?"

"No; are they engaged?"

"In a way. If Thorpe should be freed Mr. Crane will give his consent. If Thorpe is convicted—"

"He shan't be convicted! He never killed Blair! I'll find out who killed Blair, and then I'll go away after that. I'll help Julie,—why, Thorpe wouldn't kill Gilbert, why should he?"

"You've read the case?"

"Yes, and thought how little evidence there was against Thorpe. But, I'm ashamed to say, my own affairs rather blotted the matter out. But if Julie's concerned, that's another matter. I'll free Thorpe,—and I can do it, too!"

"Then it's most certainly your duty, for many reasons. Look here, Mr. Peter, don't let your ideas of duty get over-sentimental regarding your father."

"Oh, I don't!" Peter waxed impatient. "But I've mulled over the thing to the very end, and I know, I *know* father would be happier left to his delusions. Yes, and mother, too. You see, I've read the book, and knowing Dad as I do, I read between the lines, and I see how it would be like stabbing his heart and draining his life blood to stultify that book. No, Zizi, don't tempt me,—indeed, you can't."

"Well, then, come back to the murder case. Have you any suspect other than Thorpe?"

"Why, sometimes, I think I have. But it's a serious thing to accuse, without evidence. Now, I think I can get evidence, but mainly from Madame Parlato. You see, she has been bribed by a powerful influence,—she is absolutely under orders from some one, and it is because of that she is so frightened for fear of

exposure. I think in the ordinary *séance* with my father, where my spirit—ugh!—appears and talks guff and rubbish, the medium is more fool than knave. But when the spirit gives information concerning the murderer,—and wrong information,—it's criminal work itself, and ought to be shown up."

"Showing up the medium would expose the falsity of your father's book, even without your reappearance."

"I've thought of that, but there's duty there, too. If I can free Mac Thorpe from unjust accusations, and incidentally, I'm thinking of Julie,—it's in all ways my duty to do so,—even if—"

"Even if it makes your father a butt for ridicule."

"Yes, even that. All things are matters of comparison. Thorpe's life, or even Thorpe's name mustn't be sacrificed to father's feelings. I may sacrifice my own future, even my own life if I choose, but not that of another."

"Are you sure Mr. Thorpe is innocent?"

"As sure as shooting! But you must tell me all the details of your investigations. I've studied the newspaper reports, but I want your accounts, too. When can you get Wise back here? Send for him at once, will you? He can't get anything on Blair out there. Blair's life was blameless. I know it as I know my own. Why, Zizi, you don't realize,— I've lived with my family and my friends for a whole long lot of years. I'm no newcomer, except regarding the last six months. You can't tell me of Blair's character, or Thorpe's either. Now, what I want to puzzle out is whether I can do my part in producing the real murderer,

without revealing my presence here and without even showing my hand in the matter."

"You might appear as your own spook."

"I've thought of that, and it offers wide possibilities. But it isn't fair to mother and Dad. Let the medium fool them, if she will, it's not for their own son to fool them, too! No, I can't do that."

"You might appear to the—the criminal."

"And give him the scare of his life! Yes, I might do that. But I'm not yet sure he is the criminal,—I'm basing my suspicion on generalities, not any specific evidence."

"Tell me his name."

"Not yet. Let's plan a little first. You see, I've arranged a fake *séance* with Madame Parlato. If I rearrange it a bit, it may serve our purpose. I'll postpone it until Mr. Wise can get back, and then we'll see what we shall see!"

CHAPTER XVIII
The Confession

PETER BOOTS arranged and rearranged his plans for the *séances* many times.

Though still living under the name of Louis Bartram, he had cast aside fear of having his real identity discovered, pretty sure, now, that it must come sooner or later.

His present concern was with the discovery of Blair's murderer, and thereby the freeing of his sister's fiancé. These accomplished he would consider the case of his own restored identity, if it were not by that time a foregone conclusion.

Pennington Wise came back from the West, and was let into the secret.

His amazement was beyond all bounds when Zizi took him over to the Brooklyn hotel and he met Peter Crane.

"This thing has never been equaled in my experience," he declared. "And no one but Zizi could have found you out, unless you chose to make yourself known. Now, we must move warily, —your quarry may get away."

"You know whom I suspect?" asked Peter in astonishment.

"Of course I do, and I've had the same suspect from the beginning. But I couldn't get a shred of evidence,—haven't any yet,— I say, Mr. Crane, suppose you confide in me fully. You'll have no cause to regret it."

So Peter Boots and Pennington Wise and Zizi had a long confab, in which all cards were laid on the table, and all details of the plan settled.

Wise agreed that it would be a fearful blow to Benjamin Crane's pride, but he held that the author of the book about Peter would receive no blame and the fame of the affair would be world-wide, which would make up for the blow to the author's vanity.

Peter was not convinced of this, but agreed to go ahead as Wise suggested. Indeed, he had no choice, for it now rested on his statements whether an innocent man was tried for crime or not.

The medium was completely suborned. She was instructed that if she obeyed orders implicitly and succeeded in fulfilling the desires of her new employers, she would be paid a large sum of money, and enabled to leave the country secretly and safety.

For, after all, she was doing no more than the great army of "mediums" all over the world, and if she achieved good at last, they wished no harm to come to her.

"Moreover," as Peter said, "she was a great comfort to my parents in my absence, and when they know of my presence, they'll have no further use for Madame!"

The *séance* was staged in the Crane home.

It was a simple matter for Madame Parlato to persuade Benjamin Crane to allow her to hold a session there, promising

him a probable materialization of his son, if allowed to attempt it in the scenes familiar to Peter Boots.

It was pathetic to see the hope and joy on the faces of Peter's father and mother as they were offered this experience. Gladly they accepted the proposition, and when the medium further advised them to invite a few friends, they willingly did so.

It was not announced that materialization was expected,—Madame Parlato preferred it should not be, she said; so the friends were merely asked to a *séance*.

After all, Zizi, who had charge of the invitations informed them, interest must be falling off, for no one was coming except Miss Harper, who would also bring Mr. Shelby.

However, with the Crane household, that made quite a group, and as Detective Weston had heard about it, and asked to be present he also had a seat, in the rear of the room.

There was no air of secrecy, the waiting audience were receptive, hopeful or skeptical as their natures prompted.

Shelby and Carlotta whispered to each other that they were glad to see a specimen of the genius that had hoaxed so able a mind as Benjamin Crane's. Julie was out of sorts and sad, for she disliked the whole subject, and pitied her father and mother for their absorption in it.

At last Madame Parlato appeared.

She was an impressive looking woman, tall, slender, and with the traditional long green eyes and red hair. Her face was very white, but she was calm and well-poised, and seemed to feel a great sense of responsibility.

She had not been informed of Peter's identity, but she knew him to be acquainted with the man whom she still considered dead, and she knew that Mr. Bartram was to impersonate Peter Crane.

She asked the eight people present to sit in a circle and join hands, allowing herself to make one of them.

Weston flatly refused to do this, saying he preferred to sit alone at the back of the room. He did so, and took his place near the door of the small library of Mr. Crane's, the session being held in the large living room.

The medium requested that the lights be shut entirely off, saying that sufficient illumination would come in from the street to prevent total darkness.

This proved to be true, and the dim light was just enough for them to distinguish one another's forms but not faces.

"Poppycock," whispered Shelby to Carlotta, as he held her hand.

Zizi, who sat on Shelby's other side, heard it and answered, "Absolutely."

Then the usual things happened. The medium went into a trance state, and the regular proceedings took place.

She gave messages to Mr. Crane, purporting to be from his dead son. She gave messages to Julie and to Peter's mother, all vapid and meaningless and mentally scoffed at by all present, except the two elderly listeners.

At last the medium said, "I am weary,—weary,—I would sleep. The spirit of Peter Crane himself would speak to you."

"Will you?" eagerly asked Benjamin Crane, "will you speak yourself, Peter?"

"Yes, father," came a reply, and everybody started.

Surely that was Peter's own voice! Not loud, almost a whisper, but with the unmistakable cadence and tone of Peter, himself.

"That's Peter!" cried Julie, excitedly, "oh, father, is it?"

"Hush, dear," her father said, himself greatly agitated. "One must be very calm and quiet on these occasions. Peter Boots, will you talk with us?"

"Gladly, Dad," came the voice again,—seeming to emanate from behind Detective Western's chair,—as indeed it did.

"Then tell us of yourself, my boy."

Mrs. Crane said no word, but sat, her hand in that of her husband, full of faith in the genuineness of it all, and ready to listen and believe.

"I am very happy here, father," Peter's voice declared,—and Zizi bit her lip to keep from smiling at the hackneyed phrase uttered by mortal tongue!

"You sound so real, Peter," Julie said, bluntly. "Is it always like this?"

For Julie had never attended a *séance* before.

"No, sister," the voice said, speaking more clearly with every word; "this is an unusual occasion. Perhaps,—perhaps the medium can bring about materialization to-night."

"Oh, don't," Julie cried out, "I'm scared!"

"Don't be frightened, Julie," Peter said, his voice faint again, "I won't hurt you."

The well-remembered gentleness reassured Julie, and she held tight to her parents' hands and listened.

"I have a message for each of you," the voice went on; "or you may each ask me a question, as you prefer."

"I'll ask," Julie exclaimed; "Peter, dear Peter Boots, tell me that Mac never killed Gilbert. I know it, yet I want you to say so. They told me you didn't know, and that you were misinformed and all that. You do know, don't you, Peter?"

"Yes, Julie, I know. And Mac didn't kill Gilbert at all. But I know who did. Shall I tell?"

"Yes," cried out several in chorus.

And then, from out the dark shadows behind Weston's chair, there slowly appeared a dark, cloaked form. A black-draped, hooded figure, that moved slowly toward them. A tall, big figure that seemed to loom out of the darkness, and then the hood fell back a little, a white ghostly face appeared dimly and a slowly raised hand pointed to Kit Shelby.

"Thou art the man!" came in low, accusing tones, and they were unmistakably Peter's.

Julie shrieked, and the accused man gave a strange, guttural sound, expressive of abject fear, and as the tall figure drew nearer, he rose to flee from its avenging shape.

Shelby didn't go far, for his progress was stopped by the burly form of Detective Weston, who advised him to sit down.

"Confess!" went on the figure that seemed to be Peter, and with wild eyes, fairly starting from their sockets at the sight, Shelby

cried out, "I did, oh, Peter, I did!" and then he fell in a convulsion of fright and terror.

And then, Peter Boots himself switched on the lights, threw off his long cloak, and turned to take his mother in his arms.

"My boy, my boy!" she said, knowing intuitively and instantaneously that it was her son, alive and found.

Benjamin Crane was a picture of utter perplexity. Unable to accept the obvious, he tried for a moment to believe in a marvelous "materialization," but Peter came to him, smiling and holding out an eager hand.

"Welcome me home, Dad," he said, a quiver in his strong voice. "I know what a shock it is, but brace up and meet it,— I'm here, and very much alive. In fact, I never have been dead at all."

"Peter,—Peter," his father muttered, and fearing ill effects, Zizi came quickly to his side.

"Yes, Mr. Crane," she said in her brisk little way. "Peter Boots, home again. Never mind the spook stuff now. Cut it out,—forget it,—let him tell us of his adventures."

And now Carly came toward Peter.

One glance passed between them, and she was in his arms, a smiling, sweet Carly, who kissed him right before everybody, and said triumphantly, "I knew you'd come back!"

"Of course," said Peter, happily holding her to him. "I had to, the gypsies prophesied it, you know. They didn't mean come back as a silly old spirit, they meant come back in the flesh, and here I am. Kit, old man, I'm sorry."

And there was infinite sorrow and pity in the face that Peter turned on Shelby, who was still trembling and mouthing in a vain effort to speak.

"Get his confession," said Wise, lest when the shock wore off Shelby might dare deny it all.

But he couldn't speak, and out of very pity, Peter said, "I'll tell the details, and Shelby can nod assent."

"Go ahead," said Weston, his eye on his prisoner.

"I'll not tell of my experiences now, only to say there is no blame to be attached to Shelby or to Blair or to the guide for my accident. I fell in the snow, and somehow so managed to double my half-frozen legs under me that the silly things both broke. I floundered in the drifts but couldn't get up, nor could I make the boys hear my shouts, for the wind was against me. Well, I was picked up—after many hours—by some lumbermen and my tale of woe thereafter would fill a set of books. But never mind that now, I got home just as soon as I possibly could, having been absolutely unable to get a letter here any sooner than I could come myself. I came back to find that Dad, supposing me dead, had written a book,—oh, my eye! Dad, how you did butter me! Well, then I was up a stump to know whether to make my joyous presence known and spill the beans entirely or whether to sneak off, disappear forever and leave Dad to his laurel and bay."

"Peter! how could you dream of such a thing!" Benjamin Crane was himself now. "I'd a million times rather have you back than to have written all the books in the world!"

"But, father, think what people will say! I understand your book is read and discussed from pole to pole—"

"And it may be hooted at from pole to pole for all I care! Oh, Peter! Peter Boots! Good old chap!"

Peter's blue eyes beamed. The thing that had worried him most had turned out all right. Moreover, Carly seemed still kindly disposed toward him.

Remained only the dreadful business of Shelby and that must be put through.

"Then," Peter resumed, "I came home, and found old Gilbert Blair was dead. Murdered. And Mac Thorpe arrested for the crime.

"I know Thorpe, and I know he never did it. And I wondered. Then I read in father's book about that old tobacco pouch of mine being 'materialized.' So I knew there was trickery afoot. For I had handed that pouch to Kit only a short time before I fell down. And he hadn't handed it back. So, that accounted for its presence in the possession of the medium, though it didn't necessarily incriminate Shelby. He might have lost it or had it stolen from him.

"But, next I went to the Picture Show of 'Labrador Luck.' That, or at least the plot, the backbone of it, was Blair's and mine. Together we doped it out, sitting by our camp fire up there in the wilds, old Kit dozing near by. He talked with us about it now and then, but his plans were different from ours. All for a monster, spectacular production which he has achieved, while Blair and I planned a little light comedy affair. But the plot, the

great theme of the thing, was Blair's,—and I denounce Kit Shelby as the murderer of Gilbert Blair for the purpose of using that plot alone and in his own way! Another motive lay in the fact of his admiration for Carlotta Harper, whom, he thought, Blair was about to marry.

"And, if these do not seem to you, Mr. Weston and Mr. Wise, sufficient motive for murder, I will inform you that Blair had discovered Shelby's visits to the medium, Parlato, and had learned that it was he who was responsible for the tobacco pouch, the handkerchief and that forged letter. Blair discovered or suspected all this, and went to the medium and forced her to admit he was correct.

"Wherefore, Shelby had to be exposed and ruined, or—had to close Blair's lips forever. He chose the latter course. The method was by a poisoned soda mint, as has been suspected, and this I know, because Shelby and I talked over methods of murder, when we were discussing detective stories, and he detailed to me the very plan that I am sure he used himself, that of putting one poisoned pellet in a bottle of plain ones, and letting the result happen when it might. His argument was, that the murderer would be far from the scene at the time death took place. These statements I submit, and if Christopher Shelby can deny or refute them, none will be more glad than I."

Shelly maintained a sullen silence, refusing to look at Peter at all.

But Weston adjured him to reply to the accusations with either confession or denial, and he muttered: "Of course it's all true. I

got in deeper and deeper and there was no way out but to do for Blair. I began giving the medium things just for fun,—the whole matter seemed to me such rubbish, and I never dreamed Mr. Crane would take it so seriously. Then when he did, and when Blair found out I had primed the medium, and when I wanted his play and he wouldn't let me have it, and when I wanted his girl,—and when he declared he would expose the medium business,—I fell for the temptation. That's all."

He lapsed again into utter dejection and Weston led him away before he should collapse utterly.

"Now, Julie, you can have your Mac," Peter went on, smiling at his sister. "It's too late to-night—"

"Not a bit of it," declared Penny Wise, "come along, Miss Crane, I'll take you to him, and let you tell him yourself, and I shouldn't be surprised if he came back with you."

The two went off joyfully, leaving Peter to be lionized and petted by his adoring people.

Madame Parlato had long since disappeared, being allowed to get away unmolested because of the help she had been.

Then Peter and his parents had a talk, while Carlotta just sat and looked at the group, knowing her turn would come. Zizi, too, like a little *dea ex machina*, sat, gloating over the outcome of it all.

Benjamin Crane utterly refused to listen to a word of regret at his discredited book,—he only laughed happily and declared it was a joke on himself, and he didn't care what the result might be or what loss he might suffer in reputation or in pocketbook.

Mrs. Crane said little but she held tight to the hand of her boy, and lost herself in an oblivion of happiness.

And then, turning to Carlotta, Peter said, "And you thought I'd never come back?"

"Peter," Carly said, "I'm an expert Ouija Boarder. I have the reputation of making the Board say whatever I want it to. But my own theory is, that the little pointer always goes straight to the message that the performer wants. And whenever I tried it alone, and asked it if you'd come back to me,—it said you would."

Peter smiled at her, a little quizzically.

"I don't know, Carly, whether you're making that up or whether you mean it, but it doesn't matter, I did come back,—and I came back to you,—and for you. Which, being interpreted, means, that when you're ready to go home, I'll walk along with you. I'll have time to see the family here to-morrow."

Whereupon Carly smiled happily, and they two "walked along".

THE END