THE ALMOST PERFECT MURDER

by HULBERT FOOTNER

A Madame Storey Case Book

A WOMAN DETECTIVE'S INTUITION SOLVES DIFFICULT CASES

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ALMOST PERFECT MURDER

Mr. Hulbert Footner's well-known character, Madame Storey, is perhaps the most celebrated woman detective in fiction. Her detective ability is aided to some extent by feminine intuition, but she achieves results—amazingly successful results, for the problems here elucidated certainly proved baffling enough to the police. This volume provides thrilling fare for all readers of detective stories, and Mr. Hulbert Footner writes with his customary verve and ingenuity.

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A Case Book of Madame Storey

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HULBERT FOOTNER

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The Almost Perfect Murder

I

Fay Brunton was one of those stars who suddenly shine out on Broadway in full effulgence, and are almost as quickly darkened. Most people will remember her name, but I doubt if many could name the parts in which she appeared. But to those of us who knew her, she remains a vivid and lovely memory; she was so beautiful! And that was not all of it; beauty is not uncommon on Broadway: it was her great sweetness of nature that endeared her to us; her girlishness; her simplicity. She was not a great actress; her smile was her passport to popular favour.

My employer, Madame Storey, who knows everybody in the great world, had become acquainted with Fay, and through her I had met the girl. By degrees, I can hardly say how, Fay and I had become intimate friends. She brought colour and incident into my life. To a plain Jane like me, she was marvellous. I was the recipient of all her charming confidences—or nearly all; and as well as I could, I steered her with my advice amongst the pitfalls that beset a popular favourite. For one in the limelight she was incredibly ignorant of evil. And you could not bear to show her the ugly side of life.

How bitterly I regretted that I had not warned her against Darius Whittall in the beginning. But I had thought that her natural goodness would protect her. Goodness, however, is apt to be blind. Whittall's name had been connected with Fay's for several months, but he was only one of many. I had hoped that one of the young men would win out; particularly one who was called Frank Esher, a fine fellow. I banked on the fact that Fay had been shy about mentioning his name in her confidences. As for Whittall, he was a notorious evil-liver. His wife had committed suicide some weeks before. To me he was no better than a murderer.

How well I remember the morning that Fay came to our offices to tell us. It must have been November, for the trees in Gramercy Park had shed their leaves, though the grass was still green. This was during Fay's second season when she was appearing with huge success in *Wild Hyacinth*. She came in beaming, and I marked the gleam of a new pearl necklace under her partly-opened sables. What a vision of youthful loveliness she made, sparkling with a childlike excitement!

She had Mrs. Brunton with her. This lady was not her real mother, but an ageing actress whom Fay had rescued from a cheap boarding-house, and set up as her official chaperone. Such an arrangement is not unusual on the stage. Mrs. Brunton was a typical stage mamma; over-dressed, over-talkative; a foolish woman, but devoted to Fay, and people put up with her on that account.

When Fay came to call, business was dropped for the time being. I took her in to my mistress. What a complement they made to each other! the one so dark and tall and wise; the

other simple, fair and girlish. Alongside my mistress, the girl looked the least bit colourless, but that was inevitable. There is only one Madame Storey. Fay was not aware that she suffered by comparison with the other, and if she had known, I doubt if she would have minded.

Mrs. Brunton was in a great flutter. "Oh, I hope we're not interrupting anything important! Fay couldn't wait a minute! What I have been through since last night you wouldn't believe! I didn't sleep a wink! And then to be hauled out of my bed at eight o'clock! *Eight o'clock*! And dragged here half-dressed. Is there a mirror anywhere? I know I'm a sight...!"

And so on; and so on. The exasperating thing about that woman was that her talk never meant anything. She surrounded herself with a cloud of words. Nobody ever paid any attention to what she said. Talk with her was a sort of nervous habit, like biting the fingernails.

Meanwhile Mme. Storey was gazing into Fay's face with searching kindness. Nervously pulling off one of her gloves, the girl mutely exhibited the third finger of her left hand. I caught a glimpse of an emerald that took my breath away.

"Who is it?" asked Mme. Storey.

"Darius Whittall," she murmured.

It was a horrible shock to me. Fortunately none of them was looking at me at the moment. The thought of seeing my friend in all her youth and loveliness handed over to that

murderer—for such he was in all essentials—was more than I could bear. The bottom seemed to drop out of everything.

Mme. Storey's face showed no change upon hearing the announcement, though she must have known Darius Whittall better than I did. She enfolded the girl in her arms, and murmured her good wishes.

Meanwhile Mrs. Brunton in the background was talking away like steam puffing out of a boiling kettle. I perceived a certain glint of anxiety in the old lady's eye; she knew that Darius Whittall was no paragon for a husband. But he was so rich! so rich! who could blame a mother? She was relieved when Mme. Storey appeared to make no difficulties about the match.

"Well, I never thought he'd be the one!" said Mme. Storey with an appearance of great cheerfulness.

"Neither did I," said Fay, laughing.

"Are you dreadfully in love with him?"

"I suppose so ... I don't know... Don't ask me to examine my feelings!"

"Look at her!" cried Mrs. Brunton. "Isn't that enough? Radiantly happy!"

"But if you're going to marry the man," said Mme. Storey, laughing, "surely you must know the state of your feelings!"

"I want to marry him," said Fay quickly. "Very much. I suppose it's because he needs me so."

Mme. Storey's expression said: Hum! But she did not utter it. She asked when it was going to be.

"Soon," said Fay. "There's no reason for delay. It will be very quiet, of course."

"Of course," said Mme. Storey.

Fay seemed to feel that some further explanation was required. "It's true his wife has only been dead two months," she said. "But as Darius pointed out, she had not been a real wife to him for years before that."

"Poor woman!" said Madame Storey.

We all echoed that. "Poor woman!"

By this time I was aware that my mistress was not any better pleased with Fay's announcement than I had been; but she was too wise to burst out with objections as I might have done.

"Why do you suppose she killed herself?" she said thoughtfully.

"Oh, don't you know?" said Fay. "She was in love with somebody else. Darius talks about her so nicely. He offered to let her divorce him, but she wouldn't because of her religion. A Catholic, you know. I suppose she could see no way but to end it all. Darius honours her for it."

"Oh, don't talk about it!" cried Mrs. Brunton. "Don't let that cloud darken this happy day! How that poor man has suffered! And such a gentleman with it all. Such delicacy! I could tell you things about him! But never mind!"

What has he given *her*? I thought.

Fay and Mme. Storey ignored her interruption. "But *I* think," the former went on with gentle censure, "that she ought to have considered what a dreadful blow it would be to her husband."

"Still," said Mme. Storey dryly, "if she had not done it, you would not be marrying him now."

"No-o," said Fay innocently. "I suppose not.... Of course Darius is going to sell the house at Riverdale," she continued with an involuntary shiver. "I shouldn't care to live there where it happened."

Mme. Storey struck out on a new line. "Well! Well!" she said, "what a poor guesser I am! Frank Esher was the one I backed."

I saw a spark of animosity leap out of the old woman's eye. I suppose it occurred to her, too, that my seemingly candid mistress was trying to gum her game.

"Oh, Frank Esher!" said Fay pettishly. "Don't speak of him!"

"He was so good-looking!" said Mme. Storey dreamily.

"Good-looking, yes," said Fay with some heat. "But impossible. You don't know! Oh, impossible!"

"I liked him," said Mme. Storey, "because there seemed to be a genuine fire in him. Most young fellows are so tame! I should have thought he would make a wonderful lover."

Fay, silenced, looked at her with rather a stricken expression in the candid blue eyes.

Mrs. Brunton rushed in to fill the breach. "Fire!" she snorted. "Preserve us from that kind of fire. That's all *I* have to say. I don't speak of his rudeness to me. I am nobody. He treated Fay as if she was just an ordinary girl. No sense of the difference in their positions. A dreadful young man! He spoiled everything. So different from Mr. Whittall. He is such a gentleman. You never catch him making a vulgar display of his feelings!"

Fay had recovered her speech. "That incident is closed," she said. "Frank was simply a thorn in my side."

But Mme. Storey would not let Frank drop. "By the way, what has become of him?" she asked. "I haven't seen him for ages."

"We quarrelled," said Fay with an impatient shrug. "He Was always quarrelling with me. He said that would be the last time, and he went away somewhere. Peru or China or somewhere. Nobody knows where he's gone. Now I have a little peace."

But the look in her eyes belied her words.

There was a lot more talk. Like every young girl when she first gets herself engaged, Fay could hardly speak a sentence without bringing in the name of her lover. One would have thought Darius was the Oracle. Considering the manner of man he was, it was absurd and it was piteous.

Darius had no objection to her finishing out the run of *Wild Hyacinth*. But after this season, of course, she would retire. Darius had bought a town house. No, not a big place on the Avenue; Darius hated show. A dear little house in the East Seventies; Darius had said that was the smartest thing now. Very plain outside, and a perfect bower within. Like a French maisonette. Darius had such original ideas. And so on.

When they got up to go, Fay said to me wistfully: "You haven't congratulated me, Bella."

What was I to say? The tears sprang to my eyes. Fortunately she considered that the emotion was suitable to the circumstances. "Oh, I want you to be happy! I want you to be happy!" I stammered.

The words did not please her. She withdrew herself from my arms somewhat coldly.

II

When the door closed behind them I broke down. Mme. Storey looked at me sympathetically. "Ah, Bella, you are very fond of her, aren't you?" she murmured. "This is damnable!"

In my eagerness I involuntarily clasped my hands. "Ah, but you won't ... you won't let it go on!" I implored her.

"I?" she said in great surprise. "How on earth could I stop it, my dear?"

"Oh, but you could! you could!" I wailed. "You can do anything!"

She shook her head. "As an outsider I have no business to interfere. And, anyhow, my better sense tells me it would be worse than useless. If I said a word to her against her Darius, she'd rush off and marry him the same day. You saw how she looked at you just now.... No! it's a tragedy, but it's beyond our mending. If I have learned anything it is that we cannot play Providence in the lives of others. We can only look on and pity her..."

"That's what your head says," I murmured. "What about your heart?"

She rose, and began to pace the long room. "Ah, don't drag in heart," she said, almost crossly one would have thought; "I can't set out to save every foolish girl who is determined to make a mess of her life!"

"I can't bear it!" I said.

She continued to walk up and down the long room. That room had been expressly chosen for its length, so that she could pace it while she was thinking. How well it suited her! the bare and beautiful apartment, with its rare old Italian furnishings and pictures. She herself was wearing a Fortuny gown adapted from the same period; and when you turned your back to the windows which looked out on matter-of-fact New York, you were transported right back to sixteenth century Florence.

I felt that anything more I might say would only damage my suit, so I remained silent. But I couldn't stop the tears from running down. Mme. Storey looked at me uneasily every time she turned.

"We must get to work," she said crossly. I obediently took up my note-book. "Oh, well," she said in a different tone. "For your sake, Bella..." She returned to her desk, and took the telephone receiver off its hook. "We'll see if we cannot dig up something in the circumstances surrounding Mrs. Whittall's death that will give this foolish girl cause to stop and think what she is doing."

She called up Police Headquarters. "Rumsey," she said, "do you remember the case of Mrs. Darius Whittall who killed herself about two months ago? ... Well, I suppose there was an inquest or investigation of some sort, and that the findings are on file somewhere. Come and see me this afternoon, will you? and bring the papers with you. I want to go over them with you.... I'll tell you when I see you... Thanks, at four then. Good-bye."

Our worthy friend arrived promptly to his hour. Inspector Rumsey was not a distinguished-looking man, but he was true-blue. He owed part of his reputation, perhaps, to his friendship for my mistress, who often helps him with the more subtle points of his cases. He in return, I need hardly say, is able to render us invaluable assistance.

The papers he laid before my mistress told a simple and straightforward tale. On the night of Sunday, September 11th, Mrs. Whittall had dined alone at their place in Riverdale. Her husband was dining with friends in the city. After dinner, that is to say about nine-thirty, she had complained of the heat, and had asked her maid, Mary Thole, for a light wrap, saying that she would walk in the grounds for a few minutes. Almost immediately after she left the house, the sound of a shot was heard. Everybody in the house heard it, since the windows were all open.

The butler and the second man rushed out to the spot whence it came, a little pavilion or summer-house placed on a slight knoll overlooking the river, about two hundred yards from the house. They found the body of their mistress lying at full length on the gravel outside the entrance to the pavilion. She had evidently fallen with considerable force, for her hair was partly down, the hairpins lying about. An ornamental comb which she wore was found about four feet from her body. One of her slippers was off. So it was judged that she had shot herself within the pavilion, and had fallen backwards down the steps. There were three steps. There was a bullet hole in her right temple, and so far as the servants

could judge she was already dead. The revolver was still lying in her partly opened hand. Upon a microscopic examination of the gun later, the prints upon it were found to be those of Mrs. Whittall's fingers.

The body was immediately carried into the house and laid upon the bed. The family physician was telephoned for. The powder marks around the wound could be seen by all. In his confusion and excitement, the butler felt that he ought to notify his master of what had happened before sending for the police. Nobody in the house knew where Mr. Whittall was dining that night, and the butler started telephoning around to his clubs, and to the houses of his most intimate friends in the endeavour to find him. He could not get any word of him. He was still at the telephone when Mr. Whittall returned home. This would be about eleven. Mr. Whittall's first act was to telephone to the local police station. He upbraided the butler for not having done so at once. A few minutes later the police were in the house.

Mrs. Whittall's own maid had identified the revolver as one belonging to her mistress. She had testified that she had seen nothing strange in the behaviour of her mistress before she left the house. So far as she could tell, there was nothing special on her mind. She was a very quiet lady, and saw little company. She had left no letter in explanation of her act. Not more than a minute or so could have elapsed between the time she left the house and the sound of the shot, so she must have proceeded direct to the pavilion and done the deed. Indeed, it happened so quickly it seemed as if she must have run there.

The doctor testified that Mrs. Whittall was dead when he saw her. Death must have been instantaneous. The bullet had passed through her brain and was lodged against the skull on the other side from the point of entrance. Questioned as to her possible reasons for the deed, he said he knew of none. The dead woman was in normal health, and though he had known her for many years, and was a friend, she did not often have occasion to send for him in a professional capacity. She seemed normal in mind. He admitted though, that she might have been seriously disturbed without his knowing anything of it, since she was a very reticent woman, who spoke little about her own affairs.

Mr. Whittall testified that the revolver found in the dead woman's hand was one which he had given her some three months previously. It was a Matson, 32 calibre, an automatic of the latest pattern. She had not asked for a gun. He had given it to her of his own motion, believing that every woman ought to have the means of defending herself at hand. He did not know for sure if she had ever practised shooting it, but he believed not. Only one shot had been fired from it. He understood that she had kept it in the top drawer of the chiffonier in her room, but he had never seen it there. He had not noticed anything unwonted in her behaviour on that day, or he would never have left her alone. It was true, though, that she had suffered from periods of deep depression. She brooded on the fact that she had no children, and looked forward with dread to a childless old age.

Such, in effect, were the contents of the papers which Inspector Rumsey spread before us. Tea and cigarettes followed. Mme. Storey looked disappointed at the outcome.

"Merely a perfunctory investigation, of course," said Inspector Rumsey. "Nobody suspected there might be something peculiar in the case. Nobody wished to turn up anything peculiar."

"I had hoped that there would be enough in these papers to accomplish my purpose," said Mme. Storey gravely. "By showing them to a certain person, I mean. But there is not. So we must dig further into this business. It is not a job that I look forward to!"

"What can you expect to do now, after two months?" said the Inspector.

"Oh, there are plenty of leads. Firstly: if Mr. Whittall was dining in New York that night, it is strange that he should have arrived home in Riverdale as early as eleven."

"Right!"

"Secondly: if it was such a hot night, why should Mrs. Whittall have called for a wrap? When one steps outside to cool off, one doesn't wrap up. It is indicated that she meant to stay out awhile."

"Right!"

"Thirdly: Whittall's explanation of his wife's alleged depression is mere nonsense. It is a simple matter for a rich woman to adopt a child if she is lonely."

The Inspector nodded.

"Fourthly: when a person shoots himself dead one of two things happens. Occasionally the grip on the gun is spasmodic, and remains fixed in death. More often in the act of death all the muscles relax. In that case when she fell from the steps the gun would have been knocked from her hand, just as the comb was knocked from her head. As a matter of fact, they say the gun was found lying in her *open hand*. I am forced to the conclusion that it was placed there afterwards."

I looked at her, struck with horror.

"In that case she must have been decoyed to the pavilion," said the Inspector.

"That is for us to find out."

"The double identification of the gun as hers is an awkward point to get over," he suggested.

"Matson 32's are sold by the hundreds," said Mme. Storey. "There is no evidence that this one bore any distinguishing marks. Why not another of the same design?"

"In that case Mrs. Whittall's gun would have been found."

"Maybe it was."

The Inspector slowly nodded. "A case begins to shape itself," he said. "What do you want me to do?"

"It is not yet a matter of public interest," said Mme. Storey. "As soon as we have sufficient evidence that it is, we will put it in your hands. In the meantime I wish you'd trace where

and when Whittall bought the gun that he gave his wife, and the number of it. You have better facilities for doing that than I have."

He nodded.

III

A pleasant-faced young woman, very neatly and plainly dressed, came into my office somewhat shyly, and mutely offered me a printed slip which had been filled in. I read at a glance that the bearer was Mary Thole, who had been sent by Mrs. ——'s Employment Agency as an applicant for the position of maid. One of our operatives had brought about this visit without the girl's suspecting what we wanted of her. I looked at her with a strong interest. Through my association with Mme. Storey I have learned to read character to some degree, and I said to myself that the lady who secured this girl would be lucky. Good servants are rare.

I took her in to Madame Storey.

"Do you know who I am?" asked my mistress.

"Yes, Madame, I read in the papers..."

"Good! then you know something of my business. I may as well tell you at once that I do not need a maid. That was

merely a pretext."

The girl looked at her, greatly startled.

"Oh, you have nothing to fear," Mme. Storey went on. "I merely wished to satisfy myself that you were an honest and a faithful girl. I am satisfied of it. I mean to be frank with you. Mr. Whittall has engaged himself to marry a friend of mine, a beautiful young girl. I think that is a great shame."

"Oh, yes, Madame!" she said earnestly. "He ... he is not a good man!"

"So I think myself," said Mme. Storey dryly. "I want you to tell me all the circumstances surrounding Mrs. Whittall's death."

The girl's eyes widened in horror, and she pressed one hand to her cheek. "Oh, Madame, do you think ... do you think ... that *he* ...!"

"Hush!" said Mme. Storey. "Answer my questions carefully, and we'll see."

The girl went on in a daze, more to herself than to us: "Of course, I always knew it was due to him ... in a way ... he made it impossible for her to live ... but I never thought that he might actually ..."

"Don't jump to conclusions," warned Mme. Storey. She reseated herself at her desk.

"May I ask you something?" said Mary humbly.

"Certainly."

"Is it ... is it the beautiful young actress, Miss Brunton?"

"Yes. What put that into your head?"

"Well, it came to my mistress's ears that her name was being connected with Mr. Whittall's, and she heard she was a nice girl, so it seemed a great shame to her on the girl's account. So she asked Miss Brunton and her mother to come to Oakhurst—that was the name of the house—to lunch and spend the afternoon. She wanted to stop any scandal that was going about, that might hurt the girl. That was the sort of woman she was; thinking of everybody before herself."

"Hm!" said my mistress, "and did they come?"

"Yes, Madame, and my mistress told me the girl was a dear—that was her own word, and she hoped she could really make friends with her."

"Was Mr. Whittall present at this luncheon?"

"No, Madame. My mistress had fixed a day when she knew he would be out of town."

"When was this?"

"I cannot say to a day. Late in August some time. Two weeks, maybe three, before my mistress died."

"What can you tell me about that visit?"

"Not much, Madame. I was busy about my work, of course. When the car drove up to carry them away, I peeped out of the window, and I had a glimpse of the young lady, as she turned around to say good-bye. Such a beautiful young lady! She was happy and smiling, so I supposed everything had gone well."

"You cannot tell me anything they did?"

"Nothing, except I heard they had tea sent out to the pavilion."

"Who served it?"

"The butler would be at the tea-wagon, Madame, and the second man serving."

"What were the relations, generally, between Mr. and Mrs. Whittall?" asked Mme. Storey.

Mary looked uncomfortable. She said in a low voice: "They were living apart, Madame—though under the same roof, since before I came. They never quarrelled before the servants, of course. They were cold to each other. It was the gossip among the servants that Mr. Whittall was always trying to persuade her to get a divorce, and she wouldn't because it was against the laws of her church."

"So is self-destruction," remarked Mme. Storey gravely.

Mary looked up quickly. Evidently this was a new thought to her.

"You considered that Mrs. Whittall was an unhappy woman?" asked Mme. Storey.

The girl nodded. "But I never heard her complain," she added quickly.

"Had she ever spoken of adopting a child?"

"Not seriously, Madame. Once I heard her say that a child was entitled to a father as well as a mother."

"Now let us come to the day of the tragedy," said Mme. Storey. "I want you to tell me everything that happened that day, beginning with the morning."

"I can't tell you much," said Mary. "What happened at night seems to have driven it all out of my head.... It was Sunday. I suppose Madame went to early mass as usual. She would not let me get up on Sunday mornings to dress her, nor would she have the car. She walked to church. Then came breakfast. I tidied up her room then. I don't remember anything about the morning; I suppose she was writing letters. After lunch she slept; I dressed her when she got up. I scarcely saw her during the day. She wanted us to rest on Sundays. Dinner was always earlier; half-past six. I had heard downstairs that the master was dining out. Mrs. Whittall didn't dress for dinner on Sundays. She came up from the table in less than half an hour. I was in her room then...."

"How did she look?"

"Quite as usual, Madame. Calm and pale."

"What happened then?"

"A few minutes later a special delivery letter was brought to the door."

"Ha!" said Mme. Storey. "Why was this never mentioned before?"

"Nobody asked me about it, Madame." For the first time an evasive note sounded in the girl's honest voice.

"Was not such a thing very unusual?"

"No, Madame. Mrs. Whittall's mail was very large, she was interested in so many charities and committees. So many people wrote to her asking for one thing or another. There were often special delivery letters; telegrams too."

"Did you have this letter in your hands?"

"Yes, Madame. I carried it from the door to my mistress."

"Describe it."

"Just an ordinary white envelope with the address written on it. No printing."

"Did you recognise the handwriting?"

"No, Madame."

"Was it a man's handwriting?"

"I don't know. I just gave it a careless glance."

Again the evasive note. However, Mme. Storey chose to ignore it.

"Then what happened?"

"Mrs. Whittall said she wouldn't want me any more, and I went away."

"Then?"

"After a while, an hour maybe, she sent for me back again."

"You found her changed then?"

Mary looked at Mme. Storey in a startled way. "Y-yes, Madame," she faltered. "Her cheeks were red. She was nervous. She tried to hide it."

"Where was the letter then?"

"It wasn't anywhere about. It was never seen again."

"Was there a fireplace in the room?"

Mary looked frightened again. "Y-yes, Madame."

"Did you not look there afterwards—next day perhaps?"

The girl hung her head. "Y-yes, Madame."

"And found some scraps of burned paper?"

"Yes, Madame." This very low. "I swept them up."

Once more, to my surprise, Mme. Storey dropped this line of questioning for the moment. "What did Mrs. Whittall say to you?" she asked.

"She said her afternoon dress was too hot, Madame, and she wanted to change. So I started to get a négligée from the wardrobes, but she said no, she had a fancy to put on her blue net evening dress that she had never worn. She wanted her hair done in a different way, too. I was a long time dressing her. It was the first time I had ever found her hard to suit. At the end she asked for her blue velvet evening cloak, as she wanted to walk in the grounds for the cool."

"Had she ever done that before?"

"Not as far as I know, Madame."

"Describe the blue dress."

"A simple little frock, Madame. Just a plain, tight bodice of charmeuse, and a full skirt of net in points over underskirts of malines. A scarf of blue malines went with it. She had never worn it because she said it was too young for her."

"How old was Mrs. Whittall?"

"Thirty-seven, Madame.... She wasn't old at all!" the girl went on warmly. "She was beautiful! She was beautiful all

over!"

"Where did she keep her revolver?" asked Mme. Storey.

"In the top drawer of the chiffonier in the bedroom. I could feel it lying at the bottom of the drawer when I put things away."

"Were you in the bedroom when you were dressing her that Sunday night?"

"No, Madame; in the dressing-room, which adjoined."

"Did she leave the room at any time while you were dressing her?"

"No, Madame."

"Did you leave the room?"

"No, Madame. The wardrobes were right there along the wall."

"When she was dressed, who left the room first?"

"She did, Madame. I remained to tidy things up. I was still in the dressing-room when I heard ... when I heard..."

"I know," said Mme. Storey gently. "Please attend well to what I am going to ask you. When Mrs. Whittall left the room where did she go?"

"Out through the door into the hall, Madame, and down the stairs. I heard her heels on the stairs. She was in a hurry."

"She did not go into the bedroom first?"

"No, Madame."

"Did she have anything in her hands when she went out of the dressing-room?"

"No, Madame."

"Did the blue cloak have a pocket in it?"

"Only a tiny pocket inside for a handkerchief." Mary held up thumb and finger, indicating a space of an inch and a half.

"Would it have been possible for her to conceal the revolver inside that tight bodice?"

"No, Madame."

"Then I ask you, was it possible that she could have carried her revolver out of the house with her?"

The girl stared at her with wide eyes of horror. "No, Madame! No! No! ... I never thought it out before.... Oh, my poor mistress!"

She broke down completely. Mme. Storey lit a cigarette, to give her time to recover herself.

"Well, after that we know pretty well what happened," my mistress said soothingly. "Just a few more questions.... Did it occur to you at any time before your master came home, to look in the chiffonier drawer to see if Mrs. Whittall's gun was there?"

"No, Madame. I never thought. I scarcely knew what I was doing."

"When did you first see Mr. Whittall?"

"He came running up the stairs to the bedroom where the ... where the body was lying. He ordered us all out of the room. 'I must be alone with my dead!' he said. Those were his words. Very dramatic."

"Hm!" said Mme. Storey with a hard smile. "And then?"

"In just a minute he called me back into the room by myself, and started to question me, very excited."

"What sort of questions?"

"I can't remember exactly.... Like the questions you were asking me. What she was doing all day? What made her go out, and so on."

"Did you tell him about the letter which came?"

"Yes, Madame, because he asked if any message had come."

"What did he say when you told him about the letter?"

"He didn't say anything, then. Later, when we were waiting to be questioned by the police, he sort of said to me and Mr. Frost, the butler, and Mr. Wilkins, the second man—we were the only ones who knew about the letter; he said maybe it would be better if nothing was said about it, and we agreed, of course, not wishing to raise any scandal about the mistress."

"What can you tell me about his subsequent actions?"

"Well, Madame, whenever he got a chance, I saw him looking, looking about the sitting-room and the bedroom..."

"For the letter?"

"So I supposed."

"Did you know then that it had been burned?"

"Yes, Madame; I had looked before he came home."

"Why didn't you tell him it had been burned?"

"I didn't want to give him that satisfaction."

"What else?"

"Well, as long as the police were in the house, Mr. Whittall was right there with them. After they had gone he went out. He took a flashlight with him, because I could see it flashing down the path to the pavilion. Then I lost him. He was out of the house about ten minutes. When he came back he wanted

me to go to bed. But I asked to stay up ... by her. He went to bed."

"Can you tell me what became of the pistol that was found in Mrs. Whittall's hand?"

"The police captain took it away with him that night. Later I heard that Mr. Whittall had given it to him."

"Now to go back," said Mme. Storey. "When your mistress sent for you to dress her, you said you found her excited. Do you mean pleasurably so?"

"Yes ... no ... I can hardly say, Madame. When I thought over it afterwards, I supposed she had made up her mind then to end it all, and was just sort of wrought up."

"That was reasonable. But you know now that you were wrong."

Mary nodded. "I don't know what to think now," she said unhappily.

"That letter," said Mme. Storey—and Mary instantly began to look nervous, "what do you think was in it, Mary?"

"How should I know?" she said. "A girl like me, just a lady's maid."

"But you thought it had something to do with the tragedy."

"Not direct."

"Well, indirectly, then."

"Whatever I may have thought is proved wrong now."

"Tell me what you thought."

"I don't think I ought," was the stubborn reply. "I told you the truth when I said I didn't know the handwriting. It was only a guess."

Mme. Storey tried another tack. "Mary," she said, "Mr. Whittall has told his fiancée that his wife killed herself because she was in love with another man."

"That's a lie!" she said excitedly. "At least, the way he means it. My mistress was a good woman!"

"I am sure of it!" said Mme. Storey gravely. "But I can also understand how a woman, married to a man like Whittall, might conceive an honourable love for another man, and still remain true to her marriage vows."

The girl broke into a helpless weeping. Still she stubbornly held her tongue.

At length Mme. Storey said: "Mary, your mistress was foully murdered. Don't you want to see justice done?"

"Yes! ... Yes!" she sobbed. "But I don't see how he could have done it. I don't know what to think! I don't see any use in raking up a scandal!"

"The whole story must be opened to the light now," said Mme. Storey gravely. "If that is done, no possible blame can attach to your mistress's name. Wouldn't you rather tell me here than be forced to tell in open court?"

Mary nodded.

"Then, Mary, from whom did you think that letter had come?"

"Mr. Barry Govett," she whispered.

I exclaimed inwardly. Barry Govett!

"You mustn't lay too much on that!" Mary went on, as well as she could for sobbing. "I am ready to swear there was nothing wrong between them. I don't believe they ever saw each other alone but once. That was at our house in the summer. Mr. Govett called unexpected. He didn't stay but an hour. I happened to go into my mistress's sitting-room where they were, and I saw them. I saw by the way they looked at each other how ... how it was with them both. How it would always be. I had never seen anything like that...." She was unable to go on.

IV

Barry Govett was the most prominent bachelor in New York society. I had been reading about him in the papers for years. His name regularly headed the list of men present at every fashionable entertainment, and one was continually being informed of his visiting this great person or that in Newport, Saratoga, Lenox, Tuxedo and Palm Beach. Prominent as he was at this time, he must have been still more prominent a few years ago when the cotillon was still a feature of every ball. I have always wondered what a cotillon was. Barry Govett was the cotillon leader *par excellence*. They said then that one had to engage him months ahead.

All this I had gathered from the gossip weeklies, which, like every other stenographer whose social life was limited to a boarding-house, I used to read with avidity. Barry Govett was their *pièce de resistance*. Before all this happened, he was once pointed out to me in court costume at a great fancy dress ball; and I thought then that he had the most beautifully turned leg I had ever seen on a man. He must have been over forty then, but still conveyed the effect of a young man; very handsome in his style. But too much the cotillon leader for me. When I thought over this I wondered what a woman like Mrs. Whittall could have seen in him. One never knows!

The moment he entered the outer office I was aware of a personality. Of course, no man could occupy so lofty a position for years, even if it was only at the head of a frivolous society, without acquiring great aplomb. Close at hand in the daylight, I saw that there was little of the youth remaining about him, though his figure was still slim, but I liked him better than I had expected. He had a long, oval face, almost ascetic looking, with nice blue eyes, though they

were always pleasantly watchful, and betrayed little. He was wonderfully turned out, of course, but nothing spectacular. It was the perfection of art that conceals art. I was immediately sensible of his charm too, though I had discounted it in advance. The smile and the bow conveyed no intimation that he saw in me merely the humble secretary.

I took him in to Mme. Storey. She was playing the great lady that afternoon, and the black ape Giannino in green cap and jacket with golden bells was seated in the crook of her left arm. Mr. Govett hastened forward, and gracefully kissed her hand. I wondered if Giannino would snatch at his none-too-well-covered poll. We were always amused to see how the ape would receive a new person. He is an individual of very strong likes and dislikes. However, he only made a face at Mr. Govett, and hissed amicably. Indeed, Mr. Govett held out his elbow, and Giannino hopped upon it, and stroked his face. This was a great victory.

"Dear lady!" said Mr. Govett, "this is an undeserved privilege. To be invited to tea with you, and" (looking around the room) "alone!"

"Just me and Giannino and my friend Miss Brickley," said Mme. Storey.

He whirled around and bowed to me again, murmuring: "Charmed!" My hand was horribly self-conscious in the expectation that he might offer to kiss it. I wondered if it was quite clean. Which way would I look! I could see too that Mme. Storey was wickedly hoping that he might. Fortunately he did not.

"Miss Brickley has been dying to meet you," she said slyly.

"Ah! you do me too much honour!" he said.

I was rather fussed, and therefore I was bound not to show It. "Well, you're such a famous man," I said.

"Now you're spoofing me," he said. "It's not much to be a hero of the society notes, is it?"

Tea was waiting, and we attacked it forthwith. Mr. Govett, stroking Giannino's pompadour, and feeding him sugar, supplied most of the conversation. His gossip was extremely amusing, without being malicious—well not *very* malicious. No doubt he suited his talk to his company.

Had we heard that Bessie Van Brocklin was going to give a zoological dinner? It was in honour of her new cheetah. He didn't know quite what a cheetah was; the name sounded ominous. The Princess Yevrienev had promised to bring her lion cubs, and the Goldsby-Snows would be on hand with their falcons. Somebody else had a wolf, and he had heard a rumour that there was an anaconda being kept in the dark. Oh, and of course, there were plenty of monkeys in society, zoological and otherwise. It ought to be a brilliant affair.

Had we heard the latest about Freddy Vesey? Freddy had been dining with the Stickneys, who were the last householders on Madison Square. Carried away by his boyhood recollections of old New York, Freddy had leaped into the fountain, causing great excitement among the park-

benchers. An Irish policeman was convinced that it was an attempted suicide. Freddy had argued with him at length from the middle of the fountain. Freddy had refused to come out until the policeman promised to let him off. No, Freddy had not undressed before jumping in, he was happy to say, and thereby the world was saved a shocking disclosure of the means by which he preserved his ever youthful figure.

All the while this was going on, I could see that Mr. Govett was wondering why he had been asked to tea with us. He knew, of course, that we had something more to do than gossip in that place. But he betrayed no particular anxiety.

Finally they lighted their cigarettes. Giannino, who adores cigarettes, though they invariably make him sick, coolly stole Mr. Govett's from between his lips, and fled up to the top of a picture frame, where he sat and mocked at us. I dislodged him with a stick which I keep for the purpose, and depriving him of his booty, carried him to his little house in the middle room. When I came back Mme. Storey was saying: "Have you heard that Darius Whittall is going to marry Fay Brunton?"

"That was a foregone conclusion, wasn't it?" said Mr. Govett with a shrug.

"Not to me!"

"Ah, yes, of course, the adorable Brunton is a friend of yours." I could see by his eyes that he was thinking: Is *this* what I was brought here for?

"Is Whittall a friend of yours?" asked Mme. Storey.

"No!" he said shortly.

"Barry, you and I have known each other for a good many years," said Mme. Storey, "and I have confidence in your discretion, though you always make-believe not to have any..."

"Thanks, dear lady."

"What do you think of me?"

"I think you're an angel!"

"Oh, not that tosh!"

"I think you're the greatest woman in New York!"

"That's not what I want either. In all these affairs that I have been engaged in, are you satisfied that I have always taken the side of decency?"

"Oh, yes!" he said quite simply. "What a question!"

"Good! Then I ask for your confidence in this affair. I am investigating the circumstances surrounding the death of Mrs. Whittall."

He gave a start, which he instantly controlled. One could not have said that he showed more than anybody might have shown upon hearing such an announcement. "Good

Heavens!" he murmured, "do you think there was anything more than..."

"She was murdered, Barry."

"Oh, my God!" he whispered. His face turned greyish; his hands shook. I thought the man was going to faint; but even while I looked at him, he steadied himself. I never saw such an exhibition of self-control. He drew a long breath.

"How can I help?" he asked quietly.

"By being quite frank with me."

He looked at me in a meaning way.

"Miss Brickley is familiar with all the circumstances," said Mme. Storey, "and she possesses my entire confidence. Nothing that transpires in this room is ever heard outside of it, unless I choose that it shall be."

"Of course," he murmured. "Still, I don't see how *I*..."

"Mrs. Whittall was lured out to the pavilion by a letter which we have reason to suppose she thought you had written."

He jumped up involuntarily, staring at her like one insane; then dropped limply into his chair again. It was some moments before he could speak. "But I never wrote to her in my life!"

"Then how could she have known your handwriting?" asked Mme. Storey.

"Well, I mean nothing but social notes; answers to invitations and so on." He saw that he had made a slip, and added hastily: "How do you know that she *did* recognise my handwriting?"

"We mustn't waste the afternoon fencing with each other," said Mme. Storey mildly. "You are aware of something that would help me very much in this matter."

"What makes you think so?" he asked with an innocent air.

"You betrayed it just now. It leaped out of your eyes."

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

"Barry, nothing can be altogether hidden. Your secret is known to a few people."

"I have so many secrets!" he said with a silly-sounding laugh.

"You were in love with her."

"If you imply by that..." he began excitedly.

"I imply nothing. From all accounts Mrs. Whittall must have been a saint."

"She was," he said. "And of course I loved her. Everybody who knew her loved her. In our world she moved like a

creature apart. She was really good."

"Of course," said Mme. Storey. "But that is not what I mean."

He remained obstinately silent.

"Why did you call on her unexpectedly one afternoon last summer?" Mme. Storey asked bluntly.

He stared at her in confusion. "Why ... why for no special reason," he stammered.

"On that afternoon," pursued my mistress relentlessly, "you told her that you loved her, and she confessed that it was returned."

He suddenly gave up. "Rosika, you are superhuman!" he said simply. "I am in your hands ... we all are!" He relaxed in his chair, and his chin sank on his breast. The guard had fallen from his eyes, and he looked old and heart-broken. Mme. Storey gave him his own time to speak.

"You understand," he said at last, "my only object in trying to put you off was to protect her memory—not that it needed protection, but only from misrepresentation."

"I understood that from the beginning," said my mistress.

"It is true that I was in love with her," he went on. "Since many years ago. Almost from the time that Whittall first brought her home. We called her St. Cecilia. I watched her once cutting roses in her garden, when she didn't know

anybody was near. At first it didn't hurt much. I had no aspirations. She was like a beautiful dream in my life, which redeemed it from triviality. I fed my dream with what glimpses of her came my way.

"Later, all that was changed. It hurt then! Because I knew that she must be unhappy, and I longed to make her happy. I wanted her so! Up to the afternoon that you spoke of we had scarcely ever been alone together, and we had never exchanged any intimate speech. But before that, even in a crowd, I had been aware that she had a sympathy for me. In short, she loved me. You may well wonder at that—a man like me! But you see ... she saw beneath the grinning mask I wear. She brought out the best in me, that I have hidden for so many years. Even then I had no thought of ... I knew her too well!

"And then on the day you speak of, a note was brought to me by special delivery from her. I had stored away scraps of her handwriting; invitations and so on, and I never doubted but that it was from her. Just four words: 'Come to me quickly!' I flew. When I entered her sitting-room, she seemed surprised, but I thought that was just a woman's defence. I took her in my arms. She surrendered for a moment, just a little moment; then she thrust me away.

"She denied having written to me. For a moment I did not believe her—I had already burned the note, so I could not show it to her; however, she made it abundantly clear she had not written it. Then we realised somebody must be trying to entrap us, and we were alarmed. But she said nobody could hurt us if we kept our heads up and walked straight. She sent

me away. Yes, it was for good! for good! There was never any doubt about that. We were never to attempt to see each other alone; we were not to write—except in case of desperate need. It was I who exacted that. If the need was desperate, either of us might write to the other.

"When I heard of her death—by her own hand as I thought ... I felt betrayed; I felt if things had come to *that* pass she might have sent for me first.... Oh, well, you are not interested in my state of mind! How gladly I would have put a pistol to my own head! I did not do so because I could not bear to sully her name by having it connected with mine. And so I kept on with the same old round, showing the same old grin! I dared not stop for fear of people saying: 'Oh, old Barry Govett is broken-hearted because of, well, you know!' ... A pretty world, isn't it?" He finished with a harsh laugh.

Nobody said anything for a while.

Finally he raised his head. "But you have given me a renewed interest in life," he said grimly. "The same hand that forged that letter to me afterwards forged the letter that lured her out to the pavilion."

"There can be no doubt of that," said Mme. Storey.

"By God!" said Govett quietly. "If the law doesn't get him, *I will*!"

"Slowly!" said Mme. Storey. "There is no proof yet."

V

I see upon referring to my notes that this took place upon a Friday afternoon. Mr. Govett had not much more than left our place when Fay Brunton dropped in. She looked sweet enough to eat. To our relief she had left the inevitable mother behind on this occasion. Fay did not take tea, but dined at six in order to have a short rest before going to the theatre. She had just fifteen minutes before dinner, she said, and had rushed around to tell us—her news, after what we had just heard, was like a bombshell. I could scarcely repress a cry of dismay.

"Darius and I have decided to get married on Sunday morning."

My mistress never changed a muscle of her smile.

"What!" she said with mock reproach, "must you abandon us so soon?"

"I am not abandoning you!" said Fay, giving her a kiss. "It's the most wonderful plan!" she went on happily. "You know little Larrimore, my understudy, who is dying to have a chance at the part? Well, she is to have it. For a whole week! It's all been fixed up. It will be given out that I am indisposed. The fact of our marriage will be allowed to leak out later. And if Larrimore makes good she can keep the part. It's only that I don't want anybody to lose any money through me.

"We are to be married on Sunday morning in the hotel. Strictly private, of course. And immediately afterwards we'll hop on a train for Pinehurst. Think of Pinehurst after weather like this! And what do you think? Darius has secured the loan of a private car from the president of the railway! I've never been in a private car; have you? And then a whole wonderful week in the woods!"

"Wonderful!" cried Mme. Storey, and there was not a tinge of anything but sympathy in her voice. "But am I not to see you again? Tomorrow is Saturday, and you have two performances."

"How about tonight after the show?" suggested Fay.

Mme. Storey shook her head. "I have an engagement." (This was not true.) "How about tomorrow night after the show?" she went on. "I must have a chance to give you a little party before you step off into the gulf. Come here. My flat is too far up-town."

Fay looked dubious. "I should love it," she said, "but Darius, you know. He hates parties."

The expression in my mistress's eyes said: Damn Darius! But she laughed good-humouredly. "Oh, I don't mean a *party*, my dear. Just you and Darius and Mrs. Brunton; Bella and I."

"I should love it," said Fay. "If Darius doesn't mind."

"Why should Darius mind?" demanded my mistress. "Doesn't he like me?"

"Oh, yes!" said Fay quickly. "He admires you ever so much!"

"Then why should he mind?"

The girl could not withstand the point-blank question. "Well, you see," she faltered, "he thinks ... that you do not like him very much ... that you disapprove of him."

"Fay," challenged my mistress, "have I ever by word or look given you any reason to suppose such a thing?"

"Oh, no, Rosika! And so I have told him. Over and over.... But he still thinks so."

"Now, look here," said Mme. Storey. "I am never the one to interfere between a married pair—or a soon-to-be-married pair, but you must make a stand somewhere, my child, or you'll soon find yourself a loving little slave. I mean when you are in the right. Now this particular notion of Darius's is a silly notion, isn't it?"

"Y-yes," said Fay.

"Then you should not give in to it.... But look here, I'll make it easier for you. Let's pretend that it's your party. You tell Darius that you have asked Bella and me to your hotel for supper after the show on your last night, and he could not possibly object, could he?"

Fay's face lighted up. "Oh, no!" she cried. "That will be splendid!"

"All right!" said Mme. Storey. "Expect us about quarter to twelve. You'll have it in your own rooms, of course, where we may be quite free."

"Now I must run!" said Fay.

"Oh, wait a minute!" pleaded Mme. Storey, slipping her arm through the girl's. "This is the last moment I shall see you alone! There are so many things I want to talk to you about! ... And now you have driven them all out of my head.... Is the little nest ready in the East Seventies?"

"It will be when we get back from Pinehurst." Fay launched into an enthusiastic description.

"And what happens to Oakhurst?" asked Mme. Storey.

"Oh, didn't I tell you? Darius has put it into the hands of Merryman. It's to be sold, lock, stock and barrel."

"And quite right, too.... By the way, do you know what Darius's movements will be tomorrow? I must see him if I can, in order to remove this ridiculous wrong impression he has got of me."

"You're so kind, Rosika! All I know is, he's going to sleep at his rooms in the Vandermeer tonight, in order to be on hand early for all the things he has to see to tomorrow."

"Well, I'll call him up at the Vandermeer."

Arm in arm, they had been moving slowly out through my office with me at their heels. They had now reached the door.

Mme. Storey kissed the girl fondly. My mistress was playing an elaborate game, but at least there was nothing insincere about *that* gesture.

"One last thing," she said. "I want to make you a little gift of some sort..."

Fay made a gesture of dissent.

"When the news comes out you will be showered with all sorts of useless things. I should like to give you something that you *want*. What shall it be?"

"Oh, I'd much rather leave it to you, dear."

"Well, I must think of something original." She feigned to be considering deeply. "I have it!" she said. "I will give you a beautifully mounted gun with your name chased on the handle. Every woman ought to have a gun."

"Oh, thank you!" said Fay. "But I have one! Darius says too that every woman ought to have a gun. He gave me one months ago."

"Oh, yes, I remember," said Mme. Storey. "What sort of gun?"

"A Matson 32, automatic."

I shivered inwardly. Did the man buy them wholesale?

"Do you carry it about with you?" asked Mme. Storey, laughing.

"Oh, no," said Fay simply. "I keep it in my bottom drawer."

"Ah, well, I'll have to think of something else then," said Mme. Storey.

They embraced, and Fay went.

The instant the door closed after her, Mme. Storey said to me: "Quick, Bella! Your hat!" She went to the window to wave her hand to Fay when she issued below. While standing there, she continued to speak rapidly to me. "Pick up a taxi, and go to Merryman's. That's the big real estate office on Madison Avenue near Forty-Fourth Street. If it's closed, you'll have to look up the address of one of the partners in the telephone book, and go to his house. Apologise for disturbing him and say that your employer (who wishes to remain unknown for the moment) has just learned that the Whittall property in Riverdale has come into the market. Ask for an order to view the place tomorrow. Explain that, owing to your employer's leaving for the West, tomorrow is the only day he will have for the purpose.... Wait a minute! Fay is just getting into her car.... Now she's off. Run along!"

VI

Next morning we drove up to Riverdale in Mme. Storey's own limousine, but instead of her regular chauffeur, we had

Crider at the wheel, an admirable fellow, quiet and keen; the chief of all our operatives. I pointed out to Mme. Storey that if anybody at the house was curious about us, it would be an easy matter to find out who we were by tracing the number of our licence.

"It doesn't matter," she said. "By tonight it will all be decided one way or the other."

Riverdale, as everybody knows, is not a "dale" at all, but a bold hill on the mainland, just to the North of Manhattan Island. On the one side it overlooks the Hudson River; on the other the flat expanse of the Bronx with Van Cortlandt Park. The original village may have started down by the river, but now the whole rocky height is thickly covered with handsome new villas standing in their limited plots. It is an exceedingly well-to-do community, but not fashionable. Fashion has fled farther from town. "Oakhurst," however, is a survival. It was built and laid out by the first Darius Whittall in the days when "a mansion on the Hudson" was synonymous with everything that was opulent and eminent.

The grounds were of considerable extent. We drove in through beautiful wrought iron gates and past a lodge in the English style. The house was invisible from the road. We wound through a wood of evergreens and oaks before coming to it in the midst of its lawns. It was a long, irregular structure built of native stone. It had no particular architectural pretensions, but the years had mellowed it. It looked dignified and comfortable. This was the back of the house really; the principal rooms faced the glorious prospect over the Hudson with the Palisades beyond.

We drove up under a *porte cochère*, and upon alighting, were received by an irreproachable butler. This must have been Frost. I showed him our order to view the place, and Mme. Storey expressed a wish to be shown the grounds first. Whereupon he handed us over to the second man, a sort of embryo butler; younger, fresh-faced; not yet able to subdue his curiosity and interest at the sight of a woman so beautiful as Madame Storey. He conducted us around the side of the house to the head gardener, who was directing the operations of several men engaged in setting out shrubs.

So we began our perambulations. There was only one thing about the grounds that really interested us; i.e., the pavilion; but of course we said nothing about it, waiting until we should arrive there in proper order. In front of the house the ground fell away gradually in beautiful flower-beds and terraces, to the edge of a steep declivity which dropped to the river. The steep part was wooded in order to mask the railway tracks below. At this season it was all rather sere and leafless, except the grass, which was clipped and rolled to the semblance of green velvet. Stables, garage and other offices were all concealed behind shrubbery to the north of the house.

We could see the pavilion off to the left as we faced the river; that is to say the southerly side. On this side the hill ran out in a little point ending in a knoll, and on the knoll was the pavilion, in the form of a little Greek temple with a flattened dome and a circle of Doric columns. The winding path which led to it was bordered with rhododendrons, backed with arbour vitæ. As we approached, I pictured the beautiful woman running down that path thinking she was going to the

man she loved, and I seemed to hear the shot that ended everything for her. At the foot of the three steps one instinctively looked for bloodstains in the grey gravel; but, of course, all such marks had been erased long since.

Mme. Storey said to the gardener: "I should like to sit down here for five minutes to look at the view. Will you come back?"

The man bowed and hurried away to look after his subordinates.

As we mounted the three steps Mme. Storey laid her hand against the first pillar to the right. "Here," she murmured, "the murderer waited concealed, gun in hand."

I shivered.

Inside, there was a circle of flat-topped marble benches. The view from that spot is world famous. One could see both up and down the glorious river for miles. Only within the last few years the foreground had been defaced by the cutting of new streets and the building of showy houses.

"Our first job is to decide how the murderer got here," said Mme. Storey. "He must have familiarised himself with the spot beforehand."

"But, of course, he knew the spot!" I said, in surprise.

"Mustn't jump to conclusions, my Bella!" she said with a smile. "To go upon the assumption that we already know everything would only be to warp the judgment. All that we

can say so far is, some person unknown to us stood behind that pillar and shot Mrs. Whittall."

I thought she was over-scrupulous.

As soon as we looked down to the left, the means of access was clear. The present boundary of the Whittall property was only about a hundred feet away on this side. It was marked by a rough stone wall, not very high; any determined person could have scrambled over it. On the other side of the wall a new street had been laid off down to the river. There were several new houses looking over the wall, and a boating club house down at the end. Once over the wall it was an easy climb through the dead leaves and thin undergrowth up to the pavilion.

"If one followed that street back over the hill and down into the valley on the other side," said Mme. Storey, "it would bring one out somewhere in the vicinity of the subway terminal at Van Cortlandt Park. That is the way he came. You cannot trace anybody on the subway."

She went on: "Now, what did Whittall do with his wife's revolver?"

"A search?" I asked anxiously, thinking what a little time we had.

"Oh, sit down," she said, suiting the action to the word. "And appear to be enjoying the view like me." She produced a cigarette, and lighted it. "Let us search in our heads first. Let us put it through a process of elimination. We have

something to go on in this instance because we know our man."

She presently went on: "During that minute when he was left alone with the body, he took the revolver out of the drawer and dropped it in his pocket. All during the time when the police were in the house it lay there in his pocket, burning him! As soon as he could, he left the house with his little flashlight as Mary has told us, and came this way. He was looking for the letter then. He was afraid that his wife might have carried it out in her hand, and dropped it when she fell. Not finding any letter he had to dispose of the gun. Well, there he was. He dared not stay out more than a few minutes. Put yourself in his place, Bella. What would he do with it?"

I shook my head helplessly.

"I think his first impulse would be to toss it from him as far as he could," Mme. Storey resumed. "But it was night, you see, and the risk would be too great that the morning light would reveal it. There are too many men working on this place! For the same reason he wouldn't dare hide it in the shrubbery. He would next think of burying it, but I don't suppose Whittall had ever dug a hole in his life. Besides, he would have to get a tool, which would take time, and anyway, where in this carefully manicured place *could* he have buried it without leaving tell-tale marks? Then there's the river, that's the ideal hiding-place. But it's too far away. It would take him twenty minutes to go and come, not counting the time he spent looking for the letter, and we have Mary's word for it that he was not out of the house more than ten.... I

think he would have risked the trip to the river, Bella, had he not known of water nearer to. For a guilty person with a heavy object to hide instinctively thinks of water!"

We saw the gardener returning along the path.

Mme. Storey smiled on him. "I have a horror of mosquitoes," she said to him as he came up, "and I want to ask you if there is any standing water on the place, or nearby. Any pond or pool or basin."

"No, Madame," was the reply. "Nothing of that sort anywhere in the neighbourhood."

"But are you *sure*?" she persisted sweetly. "They say that even a pan of water is enough if it's allowed to stand."

"Well, there's an old well down at the foot of the front lawn," he said good-humouredly. "But I hardly think the insects could breed there, because it's twenty feet down to the water."

"Still I'd like to look at it," said Mme. Storey. "If you wouldn't mind."

"Certainly, Madame."

He pointed out a path which led down to the right. As he led the way, he gave us the history of the old well. "The original house on this property stood on the edge of the steep bank, and this was the well belonging to it. When Mr. Whittall's grandfather pulled the old house down, he did not fill up the well, but built an ornamental well-house over it.

But the late Mrs. Whittall thought it was incongruous, as it was, and she had it removed. Her idea was to bring over an antique well-curb from Italy, but for some reason this was never done, and so at present it just has a temporary cover over it."

In a hundred yards or so we came to the spot. It was on the lowest level of the gardens and terraces in front of the house, One could picture the old-fashioned farmhouse which had once stood there. The magnificent elm which had shaded it had been allowed to remain. The brickwork of the well projected a few inches above the ground, and over it had been laid a heavy wooden cover with a trap in the middle, having a ring.

"Will that open?" asked Mme. Storey, pointing.

He got down on his knees to pull it up, looking bored at these vagaries of my mistress, but still respectful.

"I want to look in it," she said.

He made place for her, and she in turn got down on her knees to peer into the black hole.

Suddenly she clasped her breast. "Oh, my pin!" she cried, "It fell in!" And got up with a face of tragedy.

The old gardener scratched his head. I think he was a Scotsman. He looked utterly disgusted. Oh, the folly of these gentlefolk! his expression said.

"It must be recovered!" my mistress said agitatedly. What an admirable actress she was! "It must be recovered! I value it above price!"

"Well, ma'am, I suppose it can be got," the man said slowly. "There's not above three feet of water in the bottom. I have a block and tackle in the toolhouse. I will send one of the men down."

"My chauffeur shall go down," said Mme. Storey.

"No need of that, ma'am."

"No, I insist! My chauffeur shall go down. If the others will help him I shall see that all are well rewarded for their trouble. And you, too!"

"As you wish, Madame." He went off to summon help.

With a slight smile, Mme. Storey pressed an emerald barpin that she had unfastened from somewhere or other into my hand, and sent me for Crider. I found him still sitting like a wooden image at the wheel of the car. I gave him the emerald, which he pinned inside his clothes, and whispered his instructions. His eyes gleamed. We returned to the old well.

The under-gardeners had gathered to help, and the old man was dragging block and tackle towards the spot.

"This will take some time, I suppose," said Mme. Storey when he came up. "We had better be looking over the house while we wait."

So we went back up the slope.

We had no particular interest in the interior of the house, but we went over everything dutifully under the guidance of the butler. It was one of the most attractive houses I ever was in. If I had never heard anything else about the mistress of it I would have known by the inside of her house that she was a superior woman. It had nothing of the awful perfection usual to the houses of the very rich; nothing of the museum look. It was full of character. There were no "period" rooms.

In order to give Crider plenty of time we made our tour last as long as possible, but we had returned to the main floor before any word came from him. There was a central hall which was furnished with comfortable chairs. Mme. Storey said to the butler:

"If we may, we will wait here a little while. It is so cold outside."

"Certainly, Madame," he said, and withdrew. We had a feeling, though, that he was lingering somewhere close by. Well, after all, we were strangers in the house.

In a few minutes we heard a car approach swiftly through the crunching gravel, and come to a stop with a grinding of brakes. Mme. Storey and I looked at each other significantly. She shrugged. We heard the car door slam outside, feet came running up the steps, and the front door was flung open. There stood the master of the house. The light was behind him, and I could not read his expression.

The thought instantly flew into my head that the butler, recognising Mme. Storey, or perhaps suspecting us on general principles, had telephoned to him. He had had just about time enough to drive up from town.

VII

"What! Mme. Storey!" Whittall cried very affably. "What a surprise! I had no idea that you were interested in my property. Why didn't you let me know?"

She ignored the question. "It is beautiful!" she said blandly, "but I am afraid it is too expensive for me."

They shook hands. I could see his face now. He had it under pretty good control, but his eyes were narrow and sharp with curiosity. He was a handsome man in his way, with dark, bright eyes in which there was something both defiant and shifty. It was the look of a schoolboy who knows he has a bad name, and is determined to brazen it out. Why had not Fay Brunton's instincts taken alarm? I wondered. But perhaps Whittall only had that look when he faced my mistress.

"Oh, it's too expensive for anybody to own as a residence now," he said with a laugh. "I supposed it would be bought by a real estate operator, and subdivided.... Have you seen everything?"

"Yes, thank you," said Mme. Storey. "We were just waiting for a few minutes. I had the misfortune to lose a piece of jewellery in the grounds, and they are looking for it."

"Ah, I am so sorry!" While he smiled in polite sympathy, his sharp eyes sought to bore into her, but my mistress's face presented a surface as smooth as tinted china.

"We might as well go and see what they are about," she said, moving towards the door.

"Don't hurry away!" he begged. "I don't often have the chance of entertaining you."

However, at this moment the butler appeared, to announce that Madame's pin had been found, and we all moved out to the front steps. Crider was there, and the head gardener. Crider passed over the emerald, and with a meaning look gave his mistress to understand that he had been successful in his other quest. A great relief filled me. Whittall had not come home in time to frustrate us. Mme. Storey was loud in her protestations of thankfulness. She opened her purse to reward the gardener and his men.

"Where was it found?" asked Whittall.

The gardener spoke up. "At the bottom of the old well, sir."

It must have given Whittall a hideous shock. I scarcely had the heart to look at him. He uttered no sound; his eyes were divested of all sense. His florid face went greyish, leaving a network of tiny, purplish veins outlined against the greyness.

Several times he essayed to speak before any sound came out.

"Come inside a minute," he gabbled. "Come inside ... come inside!"

Mme. Storey looked at Crider, and he followed us inside. My mistress had no notion of trusting herself alone with that madman. Whittall led the way across the hall, walking with such quick short steps as to give almost a comic effect. He opened the door of the library for us to pass in. He was for shutting it in Crider's face, but Mme. Storey stopped him with a steady look. So Crider entered and waited with his back against the door. It was a beautiful, quiet room upholstered in maroon, with three tall windows reaching to the floor.

Whittall was in a pitiably unnerved state. Consider the height that he had fallen from. On the eve of his marriage, too. He drew a bottle from a cabinet, and poured himself a drink with shaking hands. Gulped it down at a draught. He went to the windows and jerked at the curtain cords senselessly, though they were already opened to their widest. Again, one was reminded of something comic in his attempt to make out that there was nothing the matter. Finally he asked in a thick voice:

"Am I to have any explanation of this extraordinary visit?"

"I would not insist on it, Whittall," said my mistress, almost regretfully, one would have said.

"I do insist on it," he said quickly.

"Very well. It was not an emerald pin, of course, that I was looking for at the bottom of the well."

"What was it then?"

She turned to the door. "What did you find there, Crider?"

"A Matson 32 automatic, Madame. The magazine is full."

"Hand it over!" said Whittall.

Crider, naturally, made no move to obey.

"This is mere folly," said my mistress calmly; "it is to be handed over to an authority higher than yours."

"Of what do you accuse me?" he cried wildly.

"Of nothing yet, except throwing this gun down the well."

"It's a lie! It's a lie! I never saw it before!"

"Then why all this excitement?"

He turned away biting his fingers.

"This is worse than useless," said Mme. Storey. "Open the door, Crider."

Whittall instantly became abject and cringing. "Wait a minute!" he implored. "Give me a chance to explain. Oh, my

God! this frightful unexpected accusation has driven me out of my senses. Give me a chance to recover myself. Don't you see what you are doing? You are ruining me beyond hope. And all for nothing! All for nothing! I am as innocent as a child!"

I am afraid we all smiled grimly at this last cry of his. However, Mme. Storey waited.

"Give me a little time!" he muttered. He took another drink. He then said in a stronger voice: "Send those people out of the room, and I'll tell you all."

"These two are my trusted employees," said Mme. Storey. "We three are as one. You may explain or not, just as it suits you."

After a moment's hesitation he said: "I will explain on one condition, that, if my explanation is a reasonable one, you promise you will not proceed against me immediately. But if you are determined to proceed against me anyhow, what's the use of my telling you anything. You can go ahead and be damned to you."

This was too much for Crider. "I'll trouble you to be civil to Madame Storey," he said, flushing.

My mistress silenced him with a gesture. To Whittall she said coolly: "I am not prepared to proceed against you yet. As to the future I make no promises. Are you willing on your part to give me your word of honour that you will not marry until this matter is cleared up?"

"Certainly!" he said quickly. "Word of honour.... But, don't tell Fay yet. It would break her heart."

"I have no intention of doing so, yet," said Mme. Storey dryly.

There was a considerable silence.

"We are waiting for the explanation," said Mme. Storey at length.

Whittall turned around. He had evidently decided on his course. "It is true that that is my wife's gun," he said without hesitation, "and that I threw it down the well. But I swear as God is in His Heaven that I did not shoot her. The reason I acted as I did was to prevent a scandal. I immediately suspected that she had been murdered. Well, a dirty scandal would not have given her back to me; it would only have besmirched her reputation still further."

"I know all about the 'other man,'" said Mme. Storey coolly. "I have talked with him. If you are suggesting that he shot her, I answer that it is impossible that he could have done so."

Whittall's face was a study while she was saying this. Finally he shrugged. "In that case," he said sullenly, "I know no more than the next man who did it."

"What gave you reason to suspect that it was murder?" asked Mme. Storey.

"Oh, the general circumstances."

"Nobody else suspected such a thing."

He shrugged indifferently.

Nothing more seemed to be forthcoming, and presently Mme. Storey said: "Your explanation so far is no explanation."

He turned away, visibly in a state of indecision. Then he flung around again. "Oh, hell! I suppose it's all got to come out now!" he cried. "I was warned of her murder!"

"Beforehand?" Mme. Storey asked sternly.

"No. What do you think I am? ... Shortly after it was committed. That is why I came home so early ... I was dining with a friend. I was called to the telephone. A voice, unknown to me, said without any preliminary explanation: 'Your wife has just been shot. If you want to avoid a nasty scandal, you had better hurry home and dispose of her revolver, so that it will look like a suicide.'"

I could not help smiling at this tale. It sounded so preposterous. Mme. Storey, however, was grave enough.

"A man's voice or a woman's voice?" she asked.

"A man's."

"Can you offer corroboration of this?"

"Certainly."

"Where were you dining, and with whom?"

"What right have *you* to cross-examine me?" he said, scowling.

"Oh, if you'd rather tell the district attorney..." said Mme. Storey calmly.

"I was with Max Kreuger, the manager of Miss Brunton's company," he said sullenly. "We were at the Norfolk. It is not a hotel that I frequent, but we had some private business to discuss, and I didn't want to be recognised."

"Yet the person who called you up knew where to find you?"

He flung out his hands violently. "You'll have to figure that out as best you can! It beats me!"

Mme. Storey took a thoughtful turn up and down.

Whittall went on: "It has been established by a dozen witnesses that the fatal shot was fired at nine-thirty. Kreuger will testify that at that hour I was dining with him in the Norfolk—ten miles away from here. So your case against me collapses. Kreuger will tell you further that about ten minutes past ten I was called to the 'phone. Naturally I did not tell him the nature of the message I received. But he'll tell you that I left immediately. Before eleven I was back here. I suppose the taxicab driver who brought me here can be found too, if he is looked for... Kreuger is in his office now. Come with me and question him, and let this ridiculous charge be laid once and for all."

Mme. Storey agreed to the proposal. Again she pointed out to Whittall that she had not yet made any charge.

There was a brief discussion as to how we should dispose ourselves for the drive to town. Naturally we did not intend to let Whittall out of our sight. I thought we all ought to go in Mme. Storey's car, but she ruled otherwise. She and I and Whittall would ride in his car, she said, and Crider could bring her car along after.

While Whittall waited for us in his car, biting his fingers with impatience, Mme. Storey gave Crider his private instructions: "Do not follow us, but drive to your own place as quickly as possible, and change. Telephone Younger to come and get the car. You had also better get in touch with Stephens. Get back to the Adelphi theatre as soon as you can. Whittall will be there in Max Kreuger's office. You and Stephens between you are to keep Whittall under observation until further notice, reporting to me at my office by 'phone as often as you are able."

That was hardly a cheerful drive. Mme. Storey and Whittall sat side by side on the back seat without exchanging a single word the whole way. Whittall crouched in his corner, scowling and biting his fingers. If Fay could have watched him then, that in itself ought to have given her pause. Whittall had a skilful chauffeur, of course. He had a special instinct to warn him of a traffic policeman. When the road was clear he opened his throttle to its widest, and we sped like a bullet. Then at certain moments he abruptly slowed down, and sure enough, presently the brass buttons would appear. We made Times Square in twenty-five minutes.

The Adelphi was one of the newer theatres in that neighbourhood. Its name has been changed now. At this time Whittall was reputed to be the owner, but I do not know if this was so. It was perfectly clear though that Max Kreuger was Whittall's creature. *Wild Hyacinth*, I should say, was not showing at the Adelphi, but at the Yorktown, farther down Broadway, which had a greater seating capacity.

A deceitful air of activity pervaded the offices. Apart from rehearsals, theatrical business seems to consist of lengthy conversations which end exactly where they begin. There were a number of depressed-looking actors of both sexes sitting around the outer office waiting for an interview with the manager. Yet Kreuger as we presently discovered was alone in his office, with his heels cocked up on his desk. Whittall marched straight into the private office with us at his heels. Snatching the cigar from his lips, Kreuger leaped to his feet. He was a rosy, plump little man of the type that I have heard described as a fore-and-aft Jew; a blond. He looked astonished, as well he might, at the combination which faced him.

Without the slightest preamble, Whittall cried out with a wave of his hand: "There he is. Ask him what you want." And went to the window where he turned his back to us.

Kreuger, greatly flustered, began to pull chairs out, and to mumble courtesies.

"Never mind, thanks," said Mme. Storey. "We won't sit down. Just answer a few questions, please. It is by Mr. Whittall's wish that we have come."

"Anything, Madame Storey, anything within my power!" the little man murmured fulsomely.

"What were you doing on the evening of Sunday, September 11th?"

Kreuger was horridly taken aback. He stared at us in a witless fashion and pulled at his slack lower lip. His distracted eyes sought his master for guidance, but received none, Whittall's back being turned.

"Well, speak up, can't you?" barked Whittall, without turning around.

"Yes ... yes ... of course," stammered Kreuger, sparring for time. "Let me see ... September 11th ... I can't seem to remember offhand. I shall have to look it up."

"That was the night of Mrs. Whittall's death," Mme. Storey reminded him.

"Oh, to be sure! that dreadful night!" said Kreuger in suitable tones of horror. "That was the night of the private showing of the super-film 'Ashes of Roses.' I looked in at that."

This was certainly not the answer that Whittall looked for. He whirled around with a face of terror. I rejoiced that we had caught the villains napping, as it seemed. Something had gone wrong with their concerted story.

"Tell the truth!" gasped Whittall.

"Eh? ... What?" stammered Kreuger, blinking.

"Tell the truth, I said!" cried Whittall in a fury, banging the desk.

"Oh, to be sure! To be sure!" stuttered the demoralised Kreuger. "Mr. Whittall and I had dinner together that night. At the Hotel Norfolk."

I smiled to myself. This came a little late, I thought. It sounded as if it had been got by heart.

"Why did you not say so at once?" asked Mme. Storey.

"Well, it was a private meeting, Madame. We had business to discuss. I didn't think that Mr. Whittall wanted it known."

"At what time did you meet?"

"Half-past seven."

"Describe what happened."

"Well, we had our dinner. Afterwards we went out to the smoking lounge. Shortly after ten, a boy came through paging Mr. Darius Whittall. Mr. Whittall was surprised, because he had not thought that anybody knew where he was. Everybody in the room looked up, hearing *that* name. At first Mr. Whittall wasn't going to identify himself. Just some trifler, he said, or a newspaper reporter. But he was curious to find out who had got hold of his name. So after the boy had gone on, he went out to the office. In a minute or two he came back. He looked very agitated. All he said was:

'Something wrong at home.' He got his hat and coat, and jumped in a taxicab."

"Now are you satisfied that I didn't do it?" cried Whittall.

"Quite!" said Mme. Storey.

I was surprised at this answer. Still I supposed she had her own reasons for making it.

She asked them both a number of further questions, which they answered readily. Whittall rapidly quieted down. It had the effect of a genuine cross-examination, but knowing my mistress so well, I could see that she was only stalling for time. She did not want Whittall to get away from there until Crider was waiting outside to pick him up. Nothing of moment to the case was brought out by their answers.

Finally we went. The street outside was crowded, and I could not pick out Crider anywhere, but I had no doubt he was safely at his post. Just the same I felt that we were doing wrong to go away and leave Whittall like that, free to work his own nefarious schemes. And as we drove away in a taxicab I voiced something to that effect.

"But we have no reason to order him detained," said Mme. Storey calmly. "He didn't shoot his wife."

"What!" I cried, astonished. "You still doubt that!"

"No," said Mme. Storey, smiling at the heat I betrayed. "I'm sure he didn't."

"But obviously that man Kreuger was ready to swear to anything that would please him!"

"Obviously!" she agreed.

"And the story about the telephone call—fancy anybody calling him up and saying: 'Your wife has been shot.' Just like that. Why, it's preposterous!"

"Quite!" said Mme. Storey. "Whittall is far too clever a man to have offered me so preposterous a story if it were not true. There is nothing so preposterous as the truth sometimes."

"Well, if he didn't do it himself he certainly had it done," I said excitedly. "And that telephone message was from his hireling telling him that the job was accomplished."

But Mme. Storey still shook her head.

"What makes you so sure Whittall wasn't responsible?" I asked helplessly.

"It's so simple," she said. "If Whittall had plotted to shoot his wife, he would have shot her with her own gun, wouldn't he? And then we never would have known."

I looked at her in silence. Why, of course! My theory went down like a house of cards.

"No," she went on gravely, "here's the best part of the day gone, and we're almost where we were yesterday evening....

Well, not quite. Because Whittall told one little lie, which will appear later."

"Then are we up against a blank wall?" I asked, discouraged.

"Oh, no," was her surprising answer. "I know who did it."

I looked my breathless question.

But she only shook her head. "No evidence," she said, frowning. "Not a shred! It's almost the perfect crime, my Bella!"

VIII

Mme. Storey and I returned to the office. We found her car waiting out in front for orders. The chauffeur, Younger, handed over the gun fished from the well at Oakhurst, which Crider had given him for safe keeping. Mme. Storey, in my presence, marked the gun for subsequent identification. We found a number of matters awaiting our attention, which we got out of the way as quickly as possible. Meanwhile, we ordered in a light lunch of sandwiches and milk.

While she munched her sandwiches, Mme. Storey paced slowly up and down the long room, considering deeply. With the last bite she evidently finished mapping out her course of

action. Her first move was to call up Fay Brunton in her dressing-room at the theatre. They had an aimless friendly talk, which was, however, not so aimless on my mistress's part as might have been supposed, for she found out: (a) that Fay had not seen nor heard from Darius Whittall since we had left him: (b) that she was still looking forward to the supper party in her rooms that night. I also marked this bit:

"I saw the new film 'Ashes of Roses' last night," said Mme. Storey. (I knew this was not true.) "Have you seen it?" Fay's answer ran to some length. It was evidently in the negative, for Mme. Storey said: "Well, you ought to. It's really quite tremendous." The talk then passed to other matters.

Mme. Storey then called up Inspector Rumsey at Headquarters. She asked him if he had succeeded in tracing Whittall's purchase of the guns. He replied that he had full information. She then got him to tell her what his movements would be that afternoon and night, so that we could get in touch with him any time we might need him.

Crider called us up to report that Darius Whittall had called upon the President of the —— Railroad. Crider was not able to say, of course, what was the occasion of the visit. Upon hearing this Mme. Storey instructed Crider to send Stephens to the —— Terminal to find out as best he could what order had been received respecting the President's private car.

I must try to set down in order all that we did that afternoon. The significance of much of it did not become

clear to me until night. First; an operative was despatched to the garage run in connection with the Hotel Madagascar (where Fay lived) with instructions to learn what he could about the movements of Miss Brunton's cars on the night of September 11th. Fay kept two cars; a brougham which was driven by a chauffeur and a smart little convertible that she drove herself. It appeared that in this very up-to-date garage a complete record was kept of the movements of all the cars stored there. Every time they went out their mileage was taken, and again when they came in. This was to prevent their use for unauthorised purposes.

Second; an operative (this one a woman) was sent to interview Miss Beatrice Dufaye, the well-known cinema star, in the guise of a representative of some mythical magazine. Miss Dufaye was the star of "Ashes of Roses," a picture which was the sensation of the moment, and at present she was resting at her country place at Glen Cove before starting work on her next picture. Among other things, this operative was instructed to ask certain questions relative to the private showing of "Ashes of Roses" on September 11th. This had been made a great social occasion in theatrical circles.

A third operative was instructed to learn the present whereabouts of Mr. Frank Esher. Esher, you will remember, was the young man who was deeply in love with Fay Brunton, and for whom we suspected she had a tenderness in return. After a quarrel or a series of quarrels, he had flown off to parts unknown. This operative was furnished with the address of his last employers, his club, and his last home address.

Finally I received my assignment. "Bella," said my mistress, "I want you to go to Tiffany's with me, to help choose Fay's wedding present."

It struck me as very strange that we should spend our time this way when matters were at such a critical juncture; and especially as we were determined to prevent this wedding if we could. However, I said nothing. We used up a good hour choosing the most beautiful amongst all the tiny platinum and jewelled watches they showed us.

"Take it to the hotel," said Mme. Storey, "and give it to her maid to keep until Fay returns from the theatre. You may let the maid have a peep at it as a great favour. This ought to put you on an intimate footing at once. You will no doubt find her packing her mistress's things for the journey tomorrow. It will seem quite natural for you to show curiosity in Fay's pretty things. Take plenty of time. Fay cannot get home until nearly six if she comes at all. Ordinarily, on matinée days, she has dinner in her dressing-room. I want you to find out what Fay was doing on the night of September 11th."

"What Fay was doing?" I echoed, greatly disquieted.

Mme. Storey looked at me in a way which did not allay my uneasiness. "Have patience, Bella. I cannot yet foresee how all this is going to turn out."

She drove off up to Riverdale again with the object of recovering the gun which Whittall had presented to the Captain of the precinct. It was from this gun that the fatal shot had been fired.

I proceeded to the Madagascar, that towering palace of luxury. Fay, like most women in her position, had two maids, one of whom waited upon her in the hotel, and one at the theatre. I was already slightly acquainted with Katy Meadows, her hotel maid, and of course the nature of my errand immediately broke the ice between us. Katy was a pretty, vivacious Irish girl with naturally rosy cheeks. Fay spoiled her. Katy looked on me as a sort of superior servant like herself, and was quite free with me. She went into raptures over the watch.

Just as Mme. Storey had said, I found her packing. Fay's things were spread over the whole suite. I did not have to express any curiosity, for Katy insisted on showing me everything; hats, wraps, dresses, lingerie, shoes in endless profusion. It was immoral that one woman should possess so much, but oh! what a fascinating display! Unfortunately, I had something else on my mind, and was unable to give myself up to the contemplation of it. The suite consisted of three rooms; a corner sitting-room with Fay's bedroom on one side and Mrs. Brunton's on the other.

After we had finished rhapsodising over the watch I lingered on. Katy was bustling from room to room bearing armfuls of Fay's things that had to be packed. She was in a great state of fluster.

"Four o'clock!" she cried. "Mercy! I must get a move on me! They're going to have a supper party here after the show, and everything must be out of here before that, and the place tidied up.... But don't you go, Miss Brickley. Sit down and talk to me. It keeps me going...."

In the end it was not at all difficult to get what I wanted. I led up to the matter as I had heard Mme. Storey do over the 'phone.

"I went to see 'Ashes of Roses' last night. It's a dandy picture. Have you seen it?"

"No," said Katy. "I must wait until it shows in the cheaper houses."

"That was a great party they had the night of the private showing last September," I went on. "I suppose your folks went. They say all the famous people on Broadway were there."

"Mrs. Brunton went," said Katy unsuspiciously, "but at the last moment Miss Fay wouldn't go. Said she didn't feel good."

"I thought she was never sick," I ventured.

"Oh, not sick," said Katy. "Just wanted to stay quiet and read. I left her in bed reading. I remember that's the night I saw A. J. Burchell, in 'Well-Dressed Wives.' Don't you love him?"

So much for that.

While I was in the suite, things were still arriving from the shops. I remember I was looking at a marvellous négligée when the telephone rang. From Katy's responses I understood that it was Fay calling from the theatre. Fay was

evidently issuing somewhat complicated instructions, to which Katy returned breathless affirmatives.

Katy finally hung up, and turned around with wide eyes. "What do you think!" she cried. "They've changed all their plans. They're going away this evening instead of tomorrow morning!"

I thought that was the end of everything. Mme. Storey had gone up to Riverdale, and I didn't know when she'd get back. Luckily Katy was too much excited herself to notice the effect that her announcement had on me.

"For the Lord's sake," she cried. "You never know what they're going to do next! ... I'm to pack the dressing-case and the small wardrobe trunk, and leave everything else to Maud. I'm to take the things to the —— Terminal—my own things too, and meet them in the Grand Concourse at six-thirty!"

There was only one thing for me to do, and that was to get out as quick as I could. Which I did. What was I to do? I felt desperate. If I tried to go after Mme. Storey, likely I would only pass her somewhere coming back. I didn't dare call up the police station at Riverdale, because I didn't know if she would give her right name there, and if I mentioned it, I might upset all her plans. There was nothing for it but to return to the office and wait for her. At the worst, I was prepared to go myself to the Terminal, and denounce Whittall in public, though I died for it.

To my great relief that was not required of me. At the end of an hour, Mme. Storey came into the office bringing a very

pretty young lady whom I had not seen before. She introduced her as Miss Larrimore. I was too excited at the moment to remember that this was the name of Fay's understudy.

"Miss Larrimore wanted to see our offices," Mme. Storey explained amiably.

Perceiving from my face that something had happened, Mme. Storey allowed the girl to pass on into the long room, while she lingered in my office. I hurriedly made my communication. Mme. Storey was not in the least disturbed. Indeed, she laughed merrily.

"I fancied that some such move might be made," she said. "So I kidnapped Fay's understudy. I expect they're looking for her now."

"But ... but where did you find her?" I asked, amazed.

"Oh, I knew that after reporting at the theatre for every performance, she was free to go home if Fay had turned up in good health. So I went to her boarding-house, and asked her to go for a drive. We'll take her back directly. It will be fun!"

From her handbag Mme. Storey took an automatic pistol, and put a mark on it in my presence, before dropping it in the drawer of my desk. This weapon was identical with the one which had been recovered from the well at Oakhurst that morning.

My mistress did not hurry herself at all. After showing Miss Larrimore her artistic treasures she announced that she

would drive her up-town. "I'm going to drop in on Fay at the theatre," said Mme. Storey. "You come along too."

It was not the first time that Mme. Storey and I had applied at the stage door of the Yorktown theatre, and we were admitted without question. The star of the company was allotted two rooms on the level of the stage; the outer was used to receive her friends in, while the inner was devoted to the mysteries of make-up and dress. When the outer door was opened we heard the voices of several people within. Mme. Storey slyly bade Miss Larrimore to enter first, while she hung back with a smile. Cries of relief greeted the understudy.

"Oh, here you are!"

Then Mme. Storey entered with me at her heels. They were all there; Whittall, Kreuger, Mrs. Brunton and Fay. My mistress's appearance created a startling effect. Whittall was arrested in full flight, so to speak. The man froze where he stood. His face turned livid. Kreuger was frankly terrified; while Mrs. Brunton was herself, for once. She snarled. She could not have known what had taken place that day, but she saw clearly enough that her darling scheme was endangered. Fay swam towards us, perfectly candid in her gladness. Whittall made an involuntary move to stop her—then he saw it was useless.

"Rosika and Bella!" cried Fay. "What a lucky chance! I was just about to write you. Darius said it would sound too casual to telephone. I am afraid our little party for tonight must be off, my dears. But Darius says we shall have a big

one as soon as we get back. Our plans are all changed. It turns out that the private car is required in New York on Tuesday, and we have to use it tonight or not at all. I suppose I am silly, but my heart was set on that private car. So we're off at seven o'clock. Miss Larrimore will play my part tonight. We'll be married in Pinehurst tomorrow."

Mme. Storey looked at Whittall with a cold smile. He visibly writhed under it. He had given her his word of honour, you remember. The tension of that moment was almost unbearable. Everybody in the room was aware of it except the two girls who were laughingly whispering about the night's performance. There was something inexpressibly touching in the sight of their happy ignorance.

Finally Mme. Storey spoke. "I'm afraid I've got the thankless job of throwing a monkey-wrench into the works," she said.

"What do you mean?" asked Fay, laughing.

"I can't let Mr. Whittall go away tonight."

One can imagine what a hell of rage and frustration Whittall was undergoing during those moments. I don't suppose that the arrogant millionaire's will had ever been crossed before.

"What!" said Fay, opening her eyes wide.

"Some time ago," said Mme. Storey coolly, "Mr. Whittall promised to back me in a scheme I was getting up to open a

studio building for poor artists. My plans are ripe now, and I have called a meeting for tomorrow. I am counting on him."

"Oh, but surely," said Fay, more and more surprised, "under the circumstances, can't somebody appear for him? can't it be put off for a few days?"

"No," said Mme. Storey with cold firmness.

From astonishment Fay graduated to indignation. Suspecting enmity in my mistress, she turned from her. "Darius!" she said.

What a bitter moment for him! He hesitated. His eyes glittered in the direction of my mistress with an expression of reckless rage. But upon meeting her cold glance they fell again. He knew that the word "murder" had only to be whispered to destroy his chances for ever. "I gave her my word," he mumbled, grinding his teeth. "I've got to stick to it."

Fay's gentle eyes flashed. She could see now that there was much more in this than appeared on the surface. But pride would not allow her to ask any more questions. She was much angrier at her renegade lover than she was at Mme. Storey.

"Oh, well, of course it doesn't make any difference," she said, tossing her head. She slipped her hand under Miss Larrimore's arm. "I'm only sorry on your account, my dear." She drew the other girl into the inner room.

IX

The events which succeeded this scene were simply baffling to me. Katy was ordered back from the station to the hotel, and told to unpack all her mistress's things and put them away. The private car was cancelled. At this, Mrs. Brunton could no longer contain her feelings. She burst out at Mme. Storey wildly.

"How dare you come here interfering in our private affairs! What does your silly meeting mean to us when Darius and Fay are going to be married! I never heard of such a thing...."

The outburst was quite natural. Mrs. Brunton had had a hard life, and Whittall's twenty millions blinded her to all other considerations. There is no doubt but she loved Fay as if she had been her own child.

Now Whittall, when he heard this, executed a rapid *volte-face*. A moment before he had seemed absolutely suffocated with rage against Mme. Storey; now he turned against Mrs. Brunton, and roughly silenced her. "Mme. Storey is our friend," he said. "You have no reason to speak to her in that manner. This is important. She knows what she is doing."

Mrs. Brunton didn't know what to make of it, and no more did I. To my further astonishment, Mme. Storey allowed a

reconciliation to be patched up, and when I left she and Whittall were chatting together as amicably as you please. Since Fay was to go on as usual, her supper had been ordered in. I can't tell you what happened after that, because I had been sent to the office with private instructions to receive the reports of the various operatives who had been detailed on the case, and forward them to Mme. Storey at the theatre. I supposed that she and Whittall remained at the theatre throughout the performance, exchanging compliments—and watching each other.

During the evening Mme. Storey called me up to say that the little party would take place in Fay's rooms after the performance as at first arranged, and that I was to be there. She instructed me to get in touch with Inspector Rumsey, and to ask him to be waiting in the lobby of the Madagascar at quarter to twelve. I possessed no key to Mme. Storey's plans, and this latter message caused a feeling of dread to weigh on my breast.

In due course I went home to change my dress, and then proceeded to the hotel. I saw the Inspector waiting in the lobby, and nodded to him as I passed. When I was shown up to Fay's suite I found that I was the first to arrive. Katy pounced on me to learn the inner reasons for her mistress's second extraordinary change of plans, but I had no heart to gossip with the maid.

There was a table ready set for six persons. It looked lovely with its snowy cloth set off with glass and silver and flowers. All around the white panelled walls relieved with an old messotint or two there were pink-shaded lights bracketed

in threes, and casting down a pleasant glow on the comfortable furniture covered with crisp cretonnes. Only the most expensive places dare to be as simple as that. There were flowers everywhere in the room. To me there was a horrible irony in the sight of all this dainty preparation for such a scene.

Fay, Mrs. Brunton, Darius Whittall and Kreuger came in together. Their faces gave nothing away.

"Where is Mme. Storey?" I asked involuntarily.

"She'll be up directly," said Fay. "She met a friend in the lobby."

I supposed this was Rumsey.

Fay and Mrs. Brunton disappeared within their respective bedrooms to remove their wraps. When Fay left the room something of the inferno of passion that was consuming Whittall broke through the mask he wore. He looked at me as much as to say: What the hell are you doing here? I paid no attention. Mme. Storey entered, and he smiled at her obsequiously. Mme. Storey lit a cigarette, and lingered in the sitting-room exchanging some trivial remarks with Whittall until Fay returned. She then said something about tidying herself, and entered Fay's room alone.

When she came back we sat down at the table, and the waiters entered. Mme. Storey, alone of the women, was not in evening dress, nevertheless by her mere presence she dominated the scene. Everybody else was trying to be funny.

There was a ghastly hollowness about it. Whittall was the loudest of all. Fay seemed pleasant towards him, but I suspected that her pleasant manner concealed a certain reserve. Mrs. Brunton seemed to be satisfied that everything was going well, as long as there was plenty of noise.

Fay occupied the place of honour at the head of the table, with Mme. Storey on one hand, and me on the other. Kreuger sat next to Mme. Storey, and Mrs. Brunton next to me. Whittall faced Fay across the table. Fay, I remember, was wearing a pale pink gown embroidered with self-coloured beads in a quaint design. It lent her beauty an exquisite fragility. When he thought nobody was looking at him, I would catch Whittall gazing at her like a lost soul.

The meal, I suppose, left nothing to be desired. I cannot remember what we ate or drank. Some day I hope I may be invited to such a perfect little supper when my mind is at peace. This one was wasted on all of us. It was soon over, and the cigarettes lighted. Mrs. Brunton chattered on.

"There was twenty-one hundred dollars in the house to-night. That's a hundred and fifty more than capacity."

"How do you do that sum?" asked Whittall facetiously.

"Standees," said Mrs. Brunton. "... And what a house! So warm and responsive. I could have hugged them to my breast!"

"Rather an armful," put in Whittall.

"And when she finished her waltz song, didn't they rise to her! Oh, it was wonderful! Never have I heard such applause! And didn't she look sweet when she came out to acknowledge it? I declare her pretty eyes were full of real tears!"

"Well, I thought maybe it was the last time," said Fay.

"I thought they would *never* let her go!" Mrs. Brunton rhapsodised. "She took fourteen calls!"

"Oh, mamma!" protested Fay, laughing. "Draw it mild!"

"Fourteen!" said Mrs. Brunton firmly. "I said it, and I stick to it! Fourteen!"

She appealed to Whittall and to Kreuger, and they made haste to agree in order to shut her up.

"One doesn't have to exaggerate the successes of a girl like Fay," she went on complacently. "I saw Mildred Mortimer and her mother hidden away at the back of the house. I can. imagine what *their* feelings were!"

Such was Mrs. Brunton's style. She turned it on like a tap. She had been something of a beauty in her day, and she looked quite handsome tonight in her black evening gown, with her hair freshened up with henna, and prettily dressed.

Whittall, I remember, made an effort to break up the party. "Fay, you look tired," he said. "I think we'd better beat it."

Fay protested. Kreuger, always eager to take a hint from his master, pushed his chair back. No one else moved. I saw Mme. Storey, for whom this suggestion was really intended, glance at her wrist watch. Then she helped herself to a cigarette, and gave the conversation a fresh start.

The crisis was precipitated by an innocent question of Fay's. "Why are you so quiet, Rosika?"

"I am thinking of that poor lady who is dead," said Mme. Storey gravely.

It was like an icy hand laid on each heart there. A deathly silence fell on us. It seemed to last for ever. I felt paralysed. Mrs. Brunton was the first to recover herself. She was afraid of Mme. Storey, and dared not be openly rude, but her anger was evident enough in her voice.

"Oh, I say! What a thing to bring up at such a time and place! I'm surprised at you, Mme. Storey!"

"We are all thinking of her," said Mme. Storey. "It would be better to clear our minds of the subject."

"*I* wasn't thinking of her, I assure you!"

Even the gentle Fay was resentful. "It's not fair to Darius," she murmured.

"Darius is a man and must face things!"

I glanced at Whittall. He had the look of one braced to receive a fatal stroke.

"I am so sorry for her!" murmured Fay distressfully. "I often think about her and wonder... But, Rosika, is it *my* fault that I am happy? that I have everything, while she is dead?"

Mme. Storey made no reply to this.

"She solved her problems in her own way!" cried Mrs. Brunton excitedly. "Who shall blame her? Can't you leave her in peace?"

"She did not kill herself," said Mme. Storey slowly. "She was murdered."

Again that awful silence. Horror crushed us.

Whittall lost his grip on himself. "You promised me ... you promised me...!" he cried shakily, "that you would not tell her..."

"We had better not talk about promises," said Mme. Storey with a steady look at him.

"Darius! ... you already knew this!" gasped Fay.

He could make no answer.

Fay turned to Mme. Storey. "Rosika ... how do you know? ... how do you know?" she faltered.

"She received a letter that evening which drew her out to the pavilion. She was unarmed when she left the house."

"Then it's quite clear," said Fay, laughing hysterically. "The letter must have been from her lover. He pleaded with her for the last time, and when she was obdurate he shot her in a fit of desperation."

"She was shot within three minutes of leaving the house," said Mme. Storey relentlessly. "Not much time for pleading. No! Somebody was waiting for her in the pavilion with the gun ready."

"But it *must* have been her lover!" wailed Fay.

Mme. Storey sat looking straight ahead of her, pale and immovable as Nemesis. "It was somebody who is amongst us here," she said.

You could hear the tight breasts around the table labouring for breath. Each of us glanced with furtive dread at our companions. Whittall broke again.

"Well, who? ... who? ... who?" he cried wildly, "Out with it!"

"Somebody amongst us here?" quavered Mrs. Brunton in a high falsetto. "I never heard of such a thing!"

The ageing woman with her touched-up cheeks and dyed hair looked like a caricature of herself. Everybody around the table looked stricken, clownish, scattered in the wits. I'm sure I was no exception. Only my beautiful mistress was as composed as Death.

"Fay," she asked, "what were you doing on the evening of September eleventh?"

I turned absolutely sick at heart. Mrs. Brunton and Whittall loudly and angrily protested. The exquisite girl shrank away from Mme. Storey, and went as pale as paper. Apart from the noisy voices of the others I heard her dismayed whisper.

"Rosika! ... I? ... *I?* ... Oh, Rosika, surely you can't think that I..."

"This is too much!" cried Mrs. Brunton, jumping up. "Must we submit to be insulted here in our own rooms? Mr. Whittall, are you going to permit this to go any further?"

"No!" cried Whittall, banging the table. "This woman is taking too much on herself! She has no right to catechise us!"

Mme. Storey looked at me. "Bella," she said, "admit the gentleman who is waiting outside."

As well as my legs would serve me I got to the door. Inspector Rumsey was in the corridor. He came in.

With a wave of the hand, Mme. Storey introduced him to the gaping company. "Inspector Rumsey and I are acting in concert in this matter," she said. "I suppose you will allow that he has a right to ask questions."

Rumsey quietly sat down in a chair away from the table.

"Now, Fay," said Mme. Storey.

The girl raised her gentle eyes in an imploring and reproachful glance upon her friend. "Oh, Rosika, how can you?" she murmured.

Mme. Storey's face was like a mask. "I must do my duty as I see it. Answer my question, please."

Fay put a hand over her eyes. "That was the night of the first showing of 'Ashes of Roses'," she murmured. "I did not go. I was not well. I went to bed when Mamma went out."

"But you got up again," said Mme. Storey remorselessly. "I have a report from the garage where you keep your cars, stating that you telephoned for the convertible at 8.10 that night, and that it was handed over to you at the door of your hotel five minutes later. It was returned to the garage at half-past ten."

"Oh, yes," murmured Fay feebly. "I forgot."

Mrs. Brunton and Whittall looked dumfounded. As for me, I simply could not believe my ears.

"Where did you go?" asked Mme. Storey.

"I ... I was just driving around for the air. I don't remember exactly."

"According to the custom of the garage," Mme. Storey continued, "a reading of the speedometer was taken when the car went out, and again when it was returned. The elapsed mileage was twenty miles. That is just the distance to Riverdale and back."

Fay sat up suddenly. "I never went to Riverdale!" she cried sharply.

"Then where did you go?" persisted Mme. Storey.

A deep blush overspread Fay's face and neck. "Well, if you must know," she said a little defiantly, "I picked up Frank Esher in front of his house and took him for a drive."

Again Mrs. Brunton and Whittall looked at her open-mouthed.

The Inspector spoke up cheerfully. Like everybody else, he wished to be on Fay's side. "That will be easy to verify," he said, taking out his note-book.

"Unfortunately," said Mme. Storey coldly, "Mr. Esher has disappeared."

"Well, anyhow," cried Whittall, "you can't convict her of a crime simply because she chanced to take a drive that night. It's ridiculous!"

"Ridiculous!" echoed Mrs. Brunton.

"I have not yet done," said Mme. Storey. "Inspector, will you please state what you learned respecting the purchase of the guns."

Rumsey consulted the note-book. "On May 24th Mr. Darius Whittall purchased two Matson 32 calibre automatics from Lorber and Staley's. He has an account there. Those

were the only pistols of that design he ever purchased from them. One was numbered 13417, the other 13418."

Mme. Storey turned to Whittall. "Are you willing to concede that you gave one of these pistols to your wife, and one to Fay?" she asked.

"I refuse to answer without advice of counsel," he muttered.

"It doesn't matter," said Mme. Storey, undisturbed; "for we already know from other sources that you gave one to your wife and one to Fay, making the same remark to each.... Fay, where is yours?"

"In the bottom drawer of my bureau," came the prompt reply.

"Will you fetch it, please?"

Fay called for Katy. The girl immediately appeared in the doorway, looking white and scared. Evidently she had overheard at least part of what had occurred.

"Bring me the gun from the bottom drawer of my bureau."

The strangeness of this request completed the demoralisation of the maid. She stood there like one incapable of motion. Fay herself sprang up and ran into the next room. From there we heard her cry:

"It's gone!"

Then her excited questioning of the maid. Katy swore that she had neither touched nor even seen the gun. She had not yet reached that drawer when her packing was interrupted, she said. The girl got the idea, somehow, that her own honesty was in question. She had no idea that her words were convicting her mistress. Fay finally came back to her seat with a wandering and vacant air. She kept repeating: "I can't imagine...! I can't imagine...!" The Inspector looked very grave.

Mme. Storey remorselessly resumed: "I recovered Mrs. Whittall's pistol this morning. It is in my possession, properly marked for identification. The number of it is 13417. The pistol found in Mrs. Whittall's hand, that is to say the one from which the fatal shot was fired, was subsequently given by Mr. Whittall to the Captain of the precinct. I obtained it from the Captain this afternoon. The number is 13418. Here it is."

She produced the weapon from a little bag that she carried on her arm. She handed the sinister black object to Rumsey, who read off the number, 13418, and handed it back to her.

At first I couldn't take it in. Neither could Fay. Her wandering eyes, like a child's, searched from one face to another for the explanation. Mrs. Brunton and Whittall were sitting there, literally frozen with horror. Rumsey had got up. It was from his grave and compassionate gaze at Fay that I realised she stood convicted in his eyes. What a dreadful moment!

Fay burst into tears, and dropped her head between her outstretched arms on the table. "Oh, how can you! ... How can you!" she sobbed.

At that something seemed to break inside of me. I forgot everything; my duty to my mistress; everything. I was only conscious of the weeping girl whom I loved. I got to my feet. "It's a shame! It's a shame!" I heard myself crying. "She didn't do it! She *couldn't* have done it! Look at her! What does your evidence amount to beside that!"

Fay reached for me like a frightened child, and I took her in my arms.

Mme. Storey never looked at me. No muscle of her face changed. "The rest lies with you, Inspector," she said quietly.

Rumsey's distress comes back to me now. Then I was oblivious to everything. "It will be all right.... It will be all right," he kept saying. "I'm sure that a further investigation will clear everything up. But I'm sorry... I would not be justified ... I must ask the young lady..."

Mrs. Brunton jumped up with a shriek. "Is he going to *arrest* her!"

"Don't call it an arrest, ma'am; a brief detention...."

"Oh, no! no! no!" Mrs. Brunton flung herself down beside the girl, and wrapped her arms around Fay's knees. "It's all lies!" she cried. "All lies! ... It was *I* who shot Mrs. Whittall!"

I have scarcely the heart to describe the painful scene that followed. Fay was broken-hearted, of course, but the shock to her proved to be less than Mme. Storey had feared. It turned out that for weeks past, Fay had divined that her companion was carrying a load of guilt on her breast, though, of course, the girl had no idea of its nature. She was already secretly estranged from the woman who passed as her mother.

Nevertheless she loyally wished to accompany her to Police Headquarters, but the rest of us dissuaded her from it. Kreuger went with Mrs. Brunton, but Darius Whittall remained with us. He had to learn his fate. Before Mme. Storey and I, he said with a despairing hangdog air:

"It was not my fault, Fay."

She looked at him with gravely accusing eyes. There was nothing childish about her then. "No," she said quietly, "but you were not sorry when it happened." Unfastening the pearls from about her neck, and drawing off the ring, she handed them over.

He knew it was final. He went away, a broken man. When we three were alone together, Fay wept again. Mme. Storey looked as uncomfortable as a boy in the presence of emotion. From the little bag she took the gun she had produced at the table.

"Here is your gun, Fay," she said. "I took it out of your drawer when I went into your room to change my hat."

We opened our eyes at that. Nothing so simple had ever occurred to us.

"I hope you can forgive me for those terrible moments I gave you," Mme. Storey went on. "I couldn't help myself. That woman covered her tracks so well, there was nothing for it but to force a confession."

Fay forgave her freely.

"I owe Bella an apology, too," Mme. Storey said with a rueful glance in my direction. "For keeping her in the dark. You see, I needed that outburst from Bella to give the scene verisimilitude."

This made me feel rather foolish, but of course I was not troubling about a little thing like that then.

"I am alone now," sobbed Fay.

Mme. Storey murmured the name of Frank Esher. "I suggest that that woman may have fomented the trouble between you and him because he was poor," she said.

"She was always against him," Fay agreed.

"Why don't you write to him now?"

"I don't know where he is!" mourned Fay.

"In care of the British-American Development Company, Georgetown, British Guiana," said Mme. Storey dryly.

"Oh, Rosika!" This with her face hidden on my shoulder.

"In fact, why not cable?" said Mme. Storey.

"Oh, Rosika. You do it for me."

"Well, as a matter of fact, I have cabled already," said Mme. Storey.

I cannot do better than conclude by appending Mrs. Brunton's subsequent confession to the police—her real name was Elinor Tinsley. All that was so baffling in the case therein becomes clear.

"I am aware that anything I say may be used against me. I want to tell the truth now. I'm glad it's out. It was too great a load to bear. I did it for her; for the one whom I called my daughter. I loved her as much as I could my own child. In spite of all I said, I knew that she had not sufficient talent to maintain her as a star. So many new faces coming to the front each year. I wanted to secure her future. I wanted her to have the best.

"When Mr. Whittall began to pay her attention I saw our chance in him. But his wife was in the way. He was anxious for a divorce, but she wouldn't. I couldn't forget about it. I brooded and brooded on it. I felt I had to act quickly, because Mr. Whittall had a reputation for fickleness. I was afraid he'd take a fancy to somebody else. Once he told me the name of a man he thought his wife was secretly in love with—I won't mention it here; and that gave me my first idea.

"I got a sample of Mrs. Whittall's handwriting by writing her a begging letter under an assumed name, and I practised and practised until I was able to imitate it. Then I sent a letter as coming from her to this man I told you about, hoping that it would result in throwing them into each other's arms, and that there would have to be a divorce then. But weeks passed and nothing happened. I was no further forward than before.

"Then one day Mrs. Whittall asked my daughter and me to have lunch and tea with her at her place. And when we were having tea out in the pavilion, the whole thing seemed to unroll itself before me. I thought of the first showing of 'Ashes of Roses' that was coming soon, and what a good chance that would give me, and I made up my mind I would try again that night. I knew I wouldn't have any trouble with Fay, because she doesn't care for pictures, and I could easily persuade her not to go.

"I got a sample of that man's handwriting on another pretext, and I practised until I was able to write a letter that looked like his. I bought the gun at —— (a big department store) for cash, so the sale couldn't be traced. I knew the kind of gun Mr. Whittall had bought for his wife, and I got the same. I wanted to make it look like suicide. Then I wrote a letter to Mrs. Whittall in this man's name, asking her to come to me, for God's sake, in the little pavilion at nine-thirty that night. Of course, she ought to have known, after the other letter, but I figured if she was in love she wouldn't stop to think. If she hadn't come, I'd just have tried something else. I sent the letter the same afternoon with a special delivery stamp on it. Through a messenger it could have been traced.

"My daughter and I had special invitations to see the private showing of 'Ashes of Roses' that night. Without seeming to, I persuaded Fay to stay at home. I took a taxicab to the theatre, arriving there about eight-fifteen. I had the gun in my reticule. I greeted many friends in the lobby, so I could prove an alibi if anything went wrong. I took a seat on the side aisle, beside one of the exits, and when the lights were put out, it was easy for me to slip out through that exit without anybody seeing.

"I took the West Side subway to the end of the line, and walked up the hill to Riverdale, and on down the other side towards the river. I had fixed in my mind the road that ran alongside the wall of the Whittall property. I climbed the wall, and went up the hill to the pavilion. I was in plenty of time. I took the gun in my hand and waited, hidden behind a pillar. I kept my gloves on so I wouldn't leave any fingerprint on the gun. When Mrs. Whittall came running in, I pressed the gun to her temple and pulled the trigger. She fell back outside. She never made a sound. I closed her hand over the gun as well as I could, and went back the way I came.

"I had found out from Mr. Kreuger that he and Mr. Whittall would be dining at the Hotel Norfolk that night. I wanted to warn Mr. Whittall to secure his wife's gun. I knew he'd be glad enough to hush up any scandal. But I was afraid to stop at Van Cortlandt for fear somebody might remember seeing me in a telephone booth. So I rode on the subway down to 145th Street, and telephoned from a pay station there. Then I rode on the subway down to Times Square, and took a taxi to the hotel. That is all I have to say."

Murder in Masquerade

I

There were eight of us seated around the table, all in costume and masked. Of the eight the only one I knew was my employer, Mme. Storey. She had come as Queen Anne Boleyn in a superb black velvet costume with hoops and stays.

The dancers in the hall outside had unmasked long ago, but when midnight was approaching Mme. Storey had suggested to our little party that we would have more fun if we kept our masks on. Where all were unknown to each other there could be no inhibitions, she said; and the proposal was enthusiastically carried. The champagne and the fun flowed fast and furiously, but I couldn't help feeling from a certain tenseness in the atmosphere that there was more going on than appeared on the surface.

In the midst of it all Mme. Storey's partner, a stalwart, attractive young man in the gay costume of Harlequin, suddenly leaned back in his chair and lifted his mask—"to get air," he said.

I had a glimpse of a handsome, reckless, slightly drunken face, and then the mask snapped back. But the damage was done. It was immediately apparent to me that several people

around the table had recognised our Harlequin—particularly the two women who faced us. I knew it by the rigid, snake-like poise of their heads. They stopped laughing and I could imagine the cold glare of jealous rage behind their masks.

The woman to the left who was of mature figure was dressed as a harem favourite, and somebody had christened her Zuleika. In addition to the mask her face was further hidden by a veil covering the lower part of her face. The one on the other side was a slender girl whose trim figure was cunningly set off by a sailor suit. She had earned the name of Jackie, of course.

The man between them was all rigged out in the fantastic costume of a Turkish Janizary or something, enormously tall hat, voluminous breeches and a curved sword called a *yataghan*. We had christened him Abdullah.

It soon became evident from Abdullah's sneering remarks that he also knew Harlequin, and hated him. Harlequin himself appeared to be too much uplifted by wine to realise the damage he had done in lifting his mask. Or else he didn't care. It was the annual ball of the Butlers' Association in Webster Hall over on the East Side. Mme. Storey had heard of the affair through Crider, one of her operatives who was at that time serving as butler to the Creighton Woodleys, in an effort to clear up the robbery of Mrs. Woodley's jewels. The Woodleys' former butler, a man called George Danforth, had been given a clean bill of health by the police. Nevertheless, it was believed to have been an inside job, and our man Crider had been put in in Danforth's place to see what he could learn. Danforth presumably had got another job.

I knew nothing of the details of this Woodley jewel robbery, being all tied up at the time in the tangle of the Lear Caybourn case. In our office we were so swamped with criminal investigations that my employer had to delegate part of her work to me. Mme. Storey always says she would like to get out of the criminal part of our business; pure psychology is her line. However, she admits there is money in crime; also publicity. And publicity leads to more money.

I remember when our dresses for the ball were sent home I protested at their richness and elegance. "They will make us too conspicuous at a servants' ball," I said.

"We wish to be conspicuous," she answered, and even then I did not catch on. "This ball is going to surprise you, Bella," she added with a twinkle in her eye.

It did. But incidentally I may say that it surprised her too.

I was dressed as an Italian page of the Renaissance period; brown silk tights, velvet doublet and a cunning little cap over one ear. I blushed when I put on the tights, but I felt all right as soon as I got behind a mask. I really have very nice legs. Mme. Storey says I don't know how to ballyhoo my own charms. She christened me Lorenzo, and I answered to it all evening.

Mme. Storey as Queen Anne Boleyn in her gleaming black dress without any note of colour was easily the finest woman present. Harlequin told her so instantly, and thereafter he never left her side. I did not lack for partners

myself, but I confess I was a little scared amongst all those strangers, and I took care to keep my chief within sight.

It is curious to see how, even at a masked ball, the different cliques will form. Gradually, as the best-dressed and most elegant persons present, our little company of eight came together.

It was Mr. Punch who asked us to supper in a private room upstairs. He was the best turned-out of any of the men. A small man with a considerable paunch, the part suited him. Everybody knows the costume, doublet and knee breeches of alternate stripes of green and red velvet; white silk stockings and shoes with big silver buckles; grotesque hump and tall cap with the point turned down in front. A tiny gold bell hung from the point of his cap and tinkled every time he turned his head.

I got my second great surprise when I saw the supper room to which we were led, the banks of roses on the table, the magnums of champagne cooling in buckets of ice. At a butlers' supper! Of course Mr. Punch might have lifted the champagne from his master's cellar, but he must have paid for the roses. One would think it had taken a whole month's wages.

The eighth member of the party was a big man dressed in the flaming costume of Mephistopheles complete with horns and forked tail. He had a mask with headpiece that covered him entirely. All you could see of the man himself were his rolling eyes.

The mask was fixed in a devilish leer, though the voice that came out of it was mild enough. Such are the inconsistencies of a masquerade party. This man spoke with an English accent, and he was the only one who resembled one's idea of a butler.

"They are not butlers tonight," Mme. Storey whispered to me; "they are only men."

Upon taking our places we discovered that the bank of roses which filled the whole centre of the table was interspersed with dozens of tiny coloured electric lights. As soon as we had finished eating somebody suggested turning out the main lights of the room in order to show up the table decorations. This was done, and the effect was weird in the extreme. Imagine those little lights, red, green, purple, amongst the roses, throwing up changing shadows on the grotesque, masked faces around the table. Mr. Punch at the head and Mephisto at the foot looked like figures out of a nightmare. But it was all good fun.

Mephisto made a flowery speech to the effect that he had Henry the Eighth safe in hell, where he was making him pay with interest for his cruel treatment of the beautiful Anne Boleyn four hundred years ago. He described his torments with comic effect. Mr. Punch, not to be outdone, cut the little golden bell from his cap and begged the fair Anne to accept it as a keepsake.

"Back up! Back up, Punch!" cried Harlequin. "What do you mean making up to the ladies with that hump on your back?"

Mr. Punch wiggled his hump comically. "You don't know the half of it, my boy," he retorted good-naturedly; "that ornament gives me personality."

A laugh went around the table. It was at this moment that Harlequin, in a moment of forgetfulness, raised his mask, and I saw that we were in for trouble.

There was a silence while the two women across the table slowly stiffened. There was a great contrast in their appearance—the big woman in the flowing draperies of a Turkish *houri*, and the slender girl in the trim sailor suit; but Zuleika and Jackie were alike in their feelings. They had just had wine enough to make them forget concealment. A woman's naked jealousy is not pretty. Their masks gave nothing away, but I could fairly feel their ugly feelings coming across the table in waves.

The handsome Harlequin was oblivious of it. He jumped up and raised his glass. "Bottoms up! Bottoms up," he cried recklessly. "The party's getting slow!"

Abdullah in his grotesque high-crowned hat leaned across the table with a sneer—he was seated between the two women. "As usual, you're liberal with the wine when another man is buying," he said.

It was evident that all three people across the table knew Harlequin too well for their own peace of mind, though they seemed to be unknown to each other.

Harlequin paid no attention, having already launched forth in a speech. The men were always making speeches. What this one was about I couldn't tell you; a lot of windy, humorous nonsense. Abdullah sat opposite, glowering and fingering his glass; muttering to himself. Finally he said aloud:

"Oh, we've heard that before. Change your line! Change your line!"

Harlequin, feeling that he had the crowd with him, hooted with laughter. "Better a monkey than a crab," he retorted.

Abdullah sprang up from the table, trembling. "How about a blackguard?" he snarled. "A foul, lying blackguard!"

Harlequin gave a leap and quicker than I could follow the blow, struck him on the side of the head. Abdullah rocked drunkenly and the tall hat rolled to the floor. He seemed not to know how to defend himself, but just stood there taking Harlequin's lightning blows. His one idea was to keep his adversary from unmasking him; he pressed a hand over his mask to keep it on.

The wildest confusion followed. To my astonishment the two women who had seemed to be enraged at the gay Harlequin now turned on Abdullah, and the unfortunate Janizary was badly knocked about before aid could reach him. Following a blind instinct we all rushed to get into it, either to join the mêlée or to stop it, I can hardly say which. Only Anne Boleyn stood coldly to one side.

It was an ugly scene; men punching and cursing; women screeching and clawing. When the two women were pulled away from Abdullah, they attacked each other. I have a vague impression that some of the dancers ran in from the hall, and were hustled out again by Mephisto. I know that a couple of waiters appeared and helped to stop the fight.

Suddenly it was over. Harlequin and Abdullah were separated and pressed back. Harlequin was laughing. He had lost his mask for good now. The handsome, masculine face showed with extraordinary vividness amongst all the masked ones. I had never seen the man before that night.

I heard little Jackie moaning softly: "George! George!"

Zuleika turned on her, snarling: "Shut up, you fool! What is he to you?"

One of Abdullah's cheeks was badly clawed, but he had succeeded in hanging on to his mask.

And then simultaneously we all became aware of the ugly little automatic lying in the middle of the clear space where they had just been struggling. We gazed at it in horror. Nobody could tell how it had got there.

II

"Whose is it?" asked Mr. Punch hoarsely.

There was no answer.

"It must be somebody's," he said, looking from face to face. "Is it yours, Harlequin?"

"No," was the careless answer. "I couldn't hide a gun in this union suit."

It was obvious that he spoke the truth.

"Is it yours, Abdullah?"

"No," was the sullen answer. I doubt if anybody believed him.

"Yours, Mephisto?"

"No."

"For myself, I say it is not mine," said Mr. Punch.

One by one the women denied ownership, and the gun continued to lie on the floor. The waiters had retired and I don't believe they had noticed its presence in all the confusion.

Nobody would touch it for fear of incriminating himself. Finally Anne Boleyn came forward and coolly picked it up. My employer was the only one to whom it could not have belonged, because up to that moment she had never been on that side of the table. She opened the magazine.

"Fully loaded," she said.

Emptying the shells into her hand, she showed them to us all, and dropped them in a pocket of her skirt. She then tossed the gun carelessly on the table. It fell at the place to Mr. Punch's right; that is to say where Anne Boleyn had previously been sitting.

"The owner can claim it upon presentation of check," she said lightly.

"You seem to be well accustomed to firearms, Anne," remarked the plump Zuleika acidly.

"Now come, now come, ladies and gentlemen," said the suave Mr. Punch, rubbing his hands together. "We were all having a lovely time. Do not let this little unpleasantness spoil our evening. Let bygones be bygones. Take your seats again, I beg. There are still two magnums to be opened!"

Harlequin's face lighted up at the mention of more wine. As to the others, I cannot say what was passing in their minds, but nobody made any move to leave. I was desperately anxious to get away from there. In the general movement around the table I managed to whisper in Anne's ear:

"Oh, please, let's get out of this. There is certain to be more trouble."

"We must see it through, Bella," she murmured. "Crider is outside if we need help."

Harlequin stood behind Anne Boleyn's place holding her chair ready for her, but she coolly usurped Jackie's seat on the other side of the table at Mephisto's right.

"Jackie, you run around and take my old place," she said to the girl in the sailor suit.

Jackie obeyed with alacrity, for it placed her next to Harlequin. His face turned dark. "What's the matter?" he growled to Anne Boleyn.

"Oh, I've had enough of you for the present," she answered good-naturedly. "I want to commune with the devil awhile."

A laugh travelled around at Harlequin's expense, and he went as flat as a punctured tyre. It was a good stroke of policy on Mme. Storey's part. For a while it made things easier all around the table. Unluckily the situation was more serious than either of us suspected. Nothing we might have done could have averted what happened.

There was a very curious thing about that gun. When the waiter entered to serve more wine, Mr. Punch whispered quickly: "Cover the gun."

When I looked it was lying in front of Abdullah's place. How it got there I couldn't tell you. Nobody saw it moved around the table. Abdullah nervously dropped a napkin over it. As the champagne circulated the gun was forgotten again. It seemed of no importance because it was not loaded.

The waiter turned on the main lights of the room in order to see how to serve the wine. When he retired he turned them

out again, and we sat once more in the agreeable van-coloured glow like that of a Christmas tree. The door of the room was closed in order to keep out wandering groups of masqueraders. Like most masked balls, this was a very bibulous party.

Mr. Punch and Mephisto at head and foot of the table both worked hard to make things go. The latter gave us a rendition of "Casey Jones," which I suppose was all the rage when he was young. But Abdullah and Zuleika would not join in the chorus. Moreover, Harlequin soon tired of the sailor lassie, and started talking to Anne Boleyn across the table, whereupon Jackie became enraged again. That party was doomed from the moment when Harlequin had first raised his mask.

However, Mr. Punch was not yet at the end of his resources. He stood up at the head of the table, and rapped for order. He was a really impressive figure because his make-up was so good. He had some sort of a tin piece in his mouth that caused him to squeak and whistle in the manner one associates with Mr. Punch, and he sawed his arms just like the little figures operated by a hand from beneath. His false chin waggled in the most realistic manner. It brought back all the Punch and Judy shows of one's childhood, and most of us were immediately reduced to helpless laughter. Laughter puts you off your guard, and I foolishly began to think that the trouble was over.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he squeaked, "if you will be kind enough to give me your attention for a few moments I will recite for you the early history of the immortal Mr. Punch.

Laying aside the tragedy which overtook him, I am sure you will be glad to learn how Mr. Punch fell in love. It seems that when he was a young man..."

At this moment the table lights went out, and the room was plunged into total darkness. A loud "Oh!" of astonishment escaped from us all. Immediately afterward there was a flash and a shot across the table from me, followed by a heavy crash immediately on my left where Harlequin sat.

I instinctively slid under the table, and most of the others did the same. I brushed against Anne Boleyn under there, and smelled her perfume. In my terror I flung my arms around her, but she roughly thrust me away, and scrambled out of my reach. I was paralysed with terror.

Then I heard the click of a switch and the electrolier went on, flooding the room with light. Mr. Punch's terrified voice gasped:

"For God's sake, come out, all of you."

The others crept out and I followed. What a frightful moment that was! Harlequin was stretched out on the floor beside his overturned chair with a bullet-hole in his forehead. One glance at him was enough. He was stone dead.

Abdullah was sitting directly across the table staring, as if frozen, at the place where Harlequin had been. He was the only one who had not moved from his chair. He could not see the body where it had fallen. Before him lay the gun.

Mephisto snatched it up out of his reach. Mr. Punch was by the door. It was he who had switched on the lights.

There was a significant silence in the hall outside. Evidently they had heard the shot out there, and had stopped dead in their tracks. Presently we heard running feet approaching. Mephisto darted to the door and turned the key. People rattled the lock and pounded on the panels.

"What's the matter? What's the matter?" they cried.

"'S all right," said Mephisto in a carefully schooled voice. "Just a little friendly tussle. No harm done!"

"Open the door!" they commanded.

"You go to hell," said Mephisto, pretending to be a little drunk. "This is a private party. We don't want no intruders. 'S all right, I tell you."

The running feet retreated from the door again. We were too much concerned with the horror inside the room to consider what they might do out there.

Jackie cast herself down beside the body. "Oh, my darling! My darling!" she moaned. "Speak to me!"

Her mask had fallen off, revealing a pale, pretty face convulsed with grief. The girl was a stranger to me, but it was terribly affecting.

Zuleika ran around the table, and attempted to drag her away. "Who are you?" she cried. "Let me get a look at you.

Why, I never saw you before! What right have you here?"

"Well, who are you?" retorted Jackie.

The older woman snatched her mask off and thrust her distorted face close into the girl's. "Look at me! Look at me!" she screeched. "I'm his wife, that's who I am!"

Jackie collapsed in helpless weeping.

The raging Zuleika turned on Abdullah then. "He did it!" she cried. "He was right beside me. There's the murderer! Unmask him!"

Abdullah, with a terrified gesture, clapped a hand over his mask. Mephisto held the woman back from attacking him.

"I didn't do it!" Abdullah kept crying hysterically. "I swear to God I am innocent. I never fired a gun in my life!"

No one paid any attention to that. We had all seen the flash of the pistol from the spot where he sat. Moreover, it was soon proved that the table lights had not gone out by accident. The connection which was plugged into the floor under the centre of the table, between Abdullah and Harlequin, had been kicked out. Abdullah's feet had been the nearest to the plug, though any one of the four women might have reached it with a foot. Mr. Punch at the head of the table and Mephisto at the other end were too far away to have reached the plug.

All this happened in much less time than it takes me to write it. Anne Boleyn was standing a little apart from the

others, watching and listening. I remembered that she had been the last to creep out from under the table.

"How did the gun get loaded again?" she asked quietly. We looked at one another blankly.

"Well, it was lying under the napkin all that time," suggested Mr. Punch slowly. "Abdullah might have slipped it out and reloaded while we were singing."

"It's a lie!" cried Abdullah. "I never touched it! I have no shells on me. Search me! Search me!"

"You wouldn't need any more now," Mr. Punch dryly remarked.

It is difficult for me to write about these moments calmly. Most of us were in a state bordering on hysteria. Every second produced a new sensation. As long as Jackie lay on the floor Abdullah could not see her. When she arose he had his first glimpse of her unmasked.

"Oh, my God! Is it you?" he cried. "I might have known it."

She paid no attention to him. She suddenly began to screech loudly: "Let me out of here! Let me out of here!" Running to one of the windows, she pulled back the portières and raised the sash. "There's the fire escape," she screamed. "We can get out this way!"

Panic is catching. There was a general rush to follow her, but Mr. Punch dragged her back from the window and stood

blocking the way. "Wait a minute! Wait a minute!" he cried, waving his hands, struggling for calmness. "If we beat it we'd only incriminate ourselves. Get back, you fools. You didn't all do it. You've got nothing to fear. Get back, I say. I've got a character to lose, if you haven't. I'm going to see this thing through. Get the police."

We moved back from the window. His logic was unanswerable.

He seemed to have an impulse of mercy then. "Give the guilty man a chance if you want," he said with a glance at Abdullah. "If you're willing to let him go, it's all right with me. Give him a chance for his life. We can shout for the police when he starts down the ladder."

Pandemonium arose at this.

"Yes!" cried the good-natured Mephisto.

"No," screamed Zuleika, "let him go to the chair."

Abdullah himself settled the matter by refusing to go. "I didn't do it," he gabbled over and over. "I'm innocent—I swear it!"

"All right," said Mr. Punch with a shrug. He closed the window.

The next thing I remember (you must keep in mind that this whole scene lasted but about three minutes) was seeing Zuleika in a corner of the room busy with a powder pad and a tiny mirror. Like most women no longer young, as soon as

she began to get a grip on herself her first thought was to repair the damage to her make-up. It was absolutely a pitiable sight to see her dabbing at her cheeks, because the woman's eyes were quite daft.

Suddenly Abdullah levelled a shaking forefinger at her and yelled: "She's left-handed!"

It was true; Zuleika had started to apply lipstick with her left hand.

"She's left-handed! She's left-handed!" yelled Abdullah.

"Well, what of it?" said Zuleika, staring, lipstick poised in air.

"She sat at my right," cried Abdullah. "The shot was fired beside me. She's left-handed! She did it!"

"You lie!" cried Zuleika, showing her teeth. She had been a dark beauty in her day. The rest of us simply gaped at this new turn.

"If she is his wife she had good cause to do it," shrilled Abdullah. "He was always running after other women. He took my girl from me! Zuleika snatched up the pistol beside me. She did it! I will swear it on the Book!"

"You lie!" repeated Zuleika. "You accuse me," she cried suddenly; "how about *her*?" She pointed to the tall figure of Anne Boleyn quietly watching. "She was supposed to have emptied the magazine, wasn't she? She played a sleight-of-hand trick on all of you, that's what! Why did she change her

seat at the table? So she could slip between me and Abdullah when the lights went out and fire the shot! Take her mask off, and let's have a look at her!"

Mme. Storey smiled coldly at this tirade. She did not have to protect her mask, because there was nobody present with nerve enough to touch it. "I was the first one under the table," she said quietly.

"Then how did the gun get loaded again?" Zuleika furiously demanded. "You were the last one to touch it."

"No," said Anne Boleyn. "Because somehow it got moved from my old seat next to Harlequin around to Abdullah's."

This forgotten fact was received in a dead silence.

"Let me have a look at that gun, please," said Anne Boleyn to Mephisto, who had been keeping it all this time.

"Don't give it to her!" cried Zuleika.

"I've emptied it," muttered Mephisto. "We don't want any more shooting."

"You may keep it in your own hands," said my employer coolly. "I only want to look at the top of the barrel."

She glanced at it as Mephisto held it, and then threw a bombshell among us by saying: "This is not the gun I emptied and threw on the table."

We stared at her. Mephisto instantly became panicky. "I have no other gun on me," he stammered.

"I didn't say you had," she said.

"How do you know it's not the same gun?" cried Mr. Punch.

"Because I marked it when I unloaded it," she answered. "I scratched the barrel with my ring."

"Another gun?" said Abdullah huskily. "What has become of the first one?"

"That's what we'd all like to know," she said blandly. "Please stand where you are, and I'll try to dope it out."

She did not have to speak twice, for all were arrested by the new and peremptory tone in her voice. Stepping to the left of the head of the table—that is to say, almost on the spot from whence the shot had been fired—she went on thoughtfully: "The murderer had to make a quick substitution of the loaded gun for the empty. He or she had to hide the empty gun instantly—too dangerous to keep it on the person. He would have to take the handiest place, trusting to retrieve it later. Well, in any room there are only a limited number of hiding-places..."

The bright eyes through the slits in the mask travelled slowly around the room and finally came to rest on a wine bucket standing on the floor alongside the mantelpiece almost directly behind Abdullah's chair. The empty bottle was now sticking upside down in the ice and water. She

pushed up her sleeve a little way, and thrust her hand into the water alongside the bottle. She drew it out, grasping a second gun identical with the other.

Glancing at the barrel, she said casually: "There's the scratch I made behind the sight if any of you are interested in checking it up."

III

The silence in the room was broken by Zuleika, who said with a sneer: "Easy enough to find something when you know where you put it."

The effect of this remark was only to focus suspicion on Zuleika herself.

Abdullah muttered in a dazed way: "Two guns? Two guns? That lets me out, don't it?"

"Why should it?" demanded Zuleika. "You could hide a gross of guns in that costume. I knocked against one of them when I sat down at the table!"

Zuleika, it appeared, was ready to charge anybody with the murder.

"It's a lie!" whined Abdullah.

Mme. Storey meanwhile was comparing her gun with the one Mephisto held.

"Same style and make," she remarked. "No doubt they were carried by the same person."

We now heard a sound that threw everybody except Anne Boleyn into another wild panic. It was the distant clanging of a gong in the street. Instantly it was clear to us all that the people outside had sent for the police. With a moan of terror, Jackie ran to the window and threw it up. Mr. Punch made no move to stop her now. Out she went, followed by Zuleika and Abdullah. When it came to the point, Abdullah was not so anxious to face the police after all.

Myself, I was wild to follow. The dead man on the floor, the clanging of that horrible gong, the thought of a fight with the police—it was too much. My nerve failed me completely; but I waited for some sign from my employer. Mr. Punch seemed to have lost his head, too. He stood there biting his fingers in a horrible state of indecision. Mephisto at the window shouted to him:

"Come on! Come on! You can't face this out alone, you fool!"

Mr. Punch flung up his arms.

"All right," he cried. "You are all witness that I didn't want to go. If you must go, I've got a car in the street. I'll get you away." He turned to us and shouted: "Come on! They're already in the building."

Mme. Storey gave me a sign, and I hustled after Mephisto. I left her and Mr. Punch contending which should go last. She got her way.

Out on the fire escape my head reeled. The pattering of those descending feet on the iron steps below me made me shudder. It is a sound which suggests fire and catastrophe.

The fire escape was on the rear of the building. Late as it was, lights went up in the windows of the surrounding tenements, and bodies hung half out.

"What's the matter?" they cried back and forth to each other. "There they go! Look at them!"

Mr. Punch stood by my side, stamping with impatience, while Anne Boleyn was still only two-thirds down. "Come on! Come on!" he whispered frantically.

"Coming!" she answered serenely.

She reached the ground just as the police started issuing from the window above. Scrambling over the fence any way we could, we found ourselves in a narrow passage which communicated with the next street. The others were hovering in the mouth of the passage, uncertain where to turn.

"This way!" whispered Mr. Punch, taking the lead.

We ran around the first corner into an alley. It was evident from the sounds that a crowd was gathering in front of Webster Hall, but by the grace of Providence the dark streets behind were empty. Mr. Punch flung open the doors of a big

limousine standing in the alley. He took the wheel, and all the rest of us piled in pell-mell behind. When he started the engine the sound brought men running from the front of the hall to the other end of the alley, and the cry went up:

"There they go!"

The gong began to clang again.

As we crossed the street in the rear of the hall, the police were coming out of the passageway by which we had escaped a minute earlier. One of them shot at us. I saw the sparks where the bullets ricochetted from the paving stones. But we were only in sight for a moment before plunging into the second block of the alley, and they were all on foot. There was no car at hand for them to seize.

The awful strain relaxed a little. What a strange crew we were in the back of that limousine! All masked and watching each other out of the corners of the eye-slits. The two women had resumed their masks, though what they expected to gain by it now, it would have been hard to say. And what a load we carried beside the seven people! Love, hatred, guilt, suspicion, and fear, all squeezed up together as in an affectionate embrace.

Something, I don't know what, the suggestion of a new sound behind us perhaps, prompted me to peep under the curtain over the rear window. To my dismay I discovered that a light car filled with policemen had crept up almost upon us, and was gaining rapidly. There was no particular reason why

I should have feared the police, but I was terrified sick at the thought of more shooting.

"Oh, they're coming!" I gasped.

Scarcely slackening speed at all, Mr. Punch turned the first corner to the left. The heavy limousine reeled, teetered, slid, while we held our breath and clutched at one another. But the four wheels came down to earth again and we rushed through the side street in safety. Not so the policemen. The light car skidded half across the street, leaped to the sidewalk and crashed to a standstill against the house-fronts. I only hope the poor fellows in it were not seriously hurt.

That was the end of pursuit. Mr. Punch turned a few more corners and then, slackening speed, put on his mask and spoke to us through the front window. He was less suave now.

"I can take you folks to a place where you'll be absolutely safe until you can get some proper clothes. But, naturally, I don't want you to know where it is. Pull down the blind over the front window. If I catch anybody peeping I'll put you out in the street just as you are."

"That's fair enough, Punch," said Mephisto. "I won't let anybody look out."

"I want to go home!" wailed Jackie like a child.

"Nothing doing, sister," said Mephisto. "We're all in this thing together, and we got to stick together."

So the front curtain was pulled down. It made little difference to me, because I had no idea where we were anyhow. But I didn't like Mr. Punch's proposition a little bit. It was too smooth to come from an honest man, and Mephisto had fallen in with it a little too quickly. I began to feel as if they were all crooks together. My anxiety was chiefly on Mme. Storey's account. A woman as famous as she is has to be wary. She has many enemies. However, as she seemed to accede to it, there was nothing I could do.

The whole business of trying to escape from the police seemed senseless to me, and I could not imagine how Mme. Storey had come to fall for it. You can't trifle with murder. But presumably she knew what she was doing. She always does.

The red-clad devil produced a packet of cigarettes and offered them around. Only Anne Boleyn helped herself with a cry of thankfulness. "That's what I wanted!" She and Mephisto lighted up.

"Well, the worst appears to be over," said Anne.

Over? Our troubles are just starting, I thought. But I saw that her object was to recommend herself to these people as a good pal, and I kept my mouth shut.

"Yes," said Mephisto. "Mr. Punch seems to be a man of resource."

"Have you any idea who he is?" she asked offhand.

"Not the slightest. But he must work for very fine people, judging by the car."

Mr. Punch drove for a considerable distance, but from the number of turns we made, I judged he was merely trying to confuse our sense of direction.

Finally we came to a standstill. Opening the front window a crack, Mr. Punch said: "Sit still until I give the word."

I was greatly tempted to peep around one of the blinds, but I noticed that Mephisto was watching us narrowly. As it was, Jackie happened to push one aside for a moment with a movement of her shoulder, and I got a glimpse through the glass of the door. But all I saw was a dark and deserted street with lamp-posts at intervals. It was a fashionable quarter of the town, that was all I could tell.

I heard the squeaking of hinges, and afterward the car moved forward for a few yards and stopped again. A gate closed behind us, and Mr. Punch opened the car door. He had on his mask.

"Here we are," he said.

We were in a private garage that had once been a stable. Another handsome car lay alongside us, and through an open door we could see the disused stalls beyond. Opening a small door, Mr. Punch led us all out into a narrow courtyard with the stars overhead and the dark bulk of a great mansion looming before us.

"You will be safe here," he said. "My employers have gone south for the winter."

"How about your licence plates?" asked Abdullah anxiously. "The police in the small car certainly got the number."

"That won't do them any good," answered Mr. Punch with a laugh. "I always fasten on false plates when I go out in the evening—just to be on the safe side, you know."

He unlocked a door into the rear of the house, and switched on lights in the passage. I noticed that after we had all passed in, he locked the door with a key, and dropped it into his pocket. This did not make me feel any easier in my mind. In fact this so-called place of safety scared me more than the supper room at the hall, where there had been at least a crowd outside within call. The big house was as silent as the grave.

We crossed a spacious old-fashioned kitchen, and mounted a flight of stairs to the main floor. It was a really palatial mansion in the older fashion, with an immense central hall running through it, and a suite of three superb drawing-rooms on one side.

Everything had been dismantled in the absence of the family; hangings and rugs removed and all furniture and pictures swathed in white dustcloths. I noticed that all the windows on the first floor were closely boarded up outside, and I suspected that there was no way out except by the basement door to which Mr. Punch held the key.

He led us into the middle drawing-room and turned on a single bulb in a wall bracket, which created just a little island of light amid the crowding shadows. Queer-shaped objects peeped out of the corners; a shrouded harp, a statue on a pedestal with a sheet thrown over it and tied around its middle.

On either side opened a wide archway revealing a yawning pit of blackness beyond. To my disordered imagination the ceiling looked a hundred feet high. Our motley crew of masqueraders were like a little company of ghosts stealing through some long-deserted hall.

Jackie glanced around her, and fell to shivering. "What did you bring me here for?" she whimpered. "I want to go home."

"I reckon you're all wondering why I brought you here," said Mr. Punch suavely, "and you're certainly entitled to know. This is it. It's up to us to discover amongst ourselves who shot George Danforth, so that we all won't have to suffer for the crime of one."

George Danforth! The name rang familiarly in my mind. Then suddenly I recollected that George Danforth was butler at the Creighton Woodleys' when the big jewel robbery took place. So Mme. Storey's caprice in attending the butlers' ball was something more than a caprice.

IV

We four women were shown into a dressing-room on the first floor of the mansion to tidy up after our strenuous escape from Webster Hall. Naturally Mme. Storey and I did not unmask in the presence of the others. Those two, masked also, would not approach within a yard of each other. Suspicion divided us all. My employer and I lingered in the room until they had gone out, so that we could have a word or two together. What a relief it was to raise our masks!

"Are you scared, Bella?" she asked, smiling.

"You know I am," I answered tartly. "So there's not much use in denying it."

There was a telephone in the room. She took down the receiver and listened. "Dead," she told me, hanging up again.

"Where do you suppose Crider is?" I asked nervously.

"Heaven knows!" she said. "I couldn't foresee any such outcome as this, and he has no instructions to cover it. The poor fellow will be wild with anxiety.... We may solve our case through this accident," she went on thoughtfully, "but it's risky—it's risky!"

"Oh, what does a jewel robbery matter beside a murder?" I said, shuddering.

"It's all part of the same thing," she said gravely.

I stared. "Do you know where we are?" I asked. She shook her head. "I thought I knew most of the great houses in New York, but I've never been in this one. There can't be many of the type left. It's on Fifth Avenue, I should say, and probably it's somewhere in the Sixties. We'll dope it out before we leave. Ha!" she cried, suddenly pointing to the telephone instrument; "there's our clue! The telephone number is Buckingham 4-3773."

"But you can't go through the telephone book looking for that number!" I objected.

"I won't have to," she said, tapping the directory. It had been slipped inside an elaborately tooled leather cover which bore a big V on the front. "Undoubtedly the family initial," she said.

The Social Register lay beside the telephone book, and Mme. Storey picked up the blue volume as affording a narrower field for her search. Almost immediately she said: "I have it! A. A. Vandegrift. I was nearly right. This house is on Madison instead of Fifth, and behind St. Patrick's Cathedral. We have often passed it!"

"What does Vandegrift do?" I asked.

"Do?" she said, smiling. "He's a rich man of the third generation. He sits in a window of the Union Club during the rare periods when he favours New York with his visits and complains that times are not what they were."

"It's too bad the Social Register doesn't give the butlers' names, too," I suggested.

"I know it now, without that!" she said. "Crider told me that the president of the Butlers' Association was the Vandegrifts' butler. His name is Alfred Denby. That identifies Mr. Punch. We are making headway, my dear."

"We'd better go out or they'll be getting suspicious," I said, nervously.

"Just one moment! Mr. Punch, I take it, is preparing to hold a sort of hearing. I want you to testify against Abdullah."

"But I don't know anything against him."

"Then make something up. You'll see why later. And don't mind if I get you all tangled up on cross-examination. I don't want them to suspect we're working together."

We adjusted our masks and left the room.

Mr. Punch had placed a little table for himself under the single light in the middle drawing-room. He sat behind it on a sofa with six chairs in linen covers ranged in a semi-circle before him. It was certainly the most grotesque court ever held—if you could call it a court: Mr. Punch and six mummers. But all the fun had gone out of this mummery. The participants were distracted with grief, fear and suspicion.

He began in his suave and reasonable voice: "Abdullah—or whatever your name may be—all the evidence seems to point to you as the one who shot George Danforth. But we want to give you every chance. Have you got anything to say for yourself?"

"I didn't do it!" cried Abdullah. "I had no gun!"

"You knew who Danforth was?" Mr. Punch snapped.

"Sure, I knew," he said sullenly. "Everybody connected with the Association knew him."

"Then you're connected with the Association?"

No answer.

"You hated Danforth?"

"That's no proof," muttered Abdullah. "Plenty of others had it in for him. He was a blackguard with women."

Zuleika snatched off her mask, revealing her passionate gipsy face. "That's a lie!" she cried.

"A lie!" added Jackie with scarcely less violence.

Now that he was dead, I saw that both these women were getting ready to sanctify him. Well, that's the way women are!

"One minute, ladies," said Mr. Punch smoothly. Turning to Abdullah, he said: "If you didn't shoot him, who did?"

"The gun was fired beside me," said Abdullah. He leaned forward and looked at Zuleika. "I believe she did it!"

"He's lying, and he knows he's lying!" cried Zuleika, jumping up.

"No doubt," said Mr. Punch suavely, "but can you prove it?"

She glared around at us as if we were all her enemies. "Yes, I can," she said. "I'm a good shot with a pistol, and I don't care who knows it. But if it had been me I would have had to shoot on the level with my eyes. It's the only way I can shoot. And this gun was fired low down. As if it was resting on the edge of the table!" The woman was suddenly overcome by a hard dry sobbing. She covered her face with her hands and ran into the dark room adjoining.

"Can anybody confirm that?" demanded Mr. Punch. "You, Jackie, you were immediately across the table from the gun."

"She's right," said Jackie, sniffing. "The shot came from low down."

"What can you say, Lorenzo?" he said to me. "Did you see the flash?"

I shook my head. "Only the reflection. The flash was hidden behind the bank of flowers. The pistol was fired from the edge of the table, right there at Abdullah's place."

Mr. Punch rubbed his hands in satisfaction. "That seems to be conclusive then. That lets Zuleika out. Either Abdullah

fired the shot, or it was somebody who came between him and Zuleika. That could only have been you, Anne Boleyn."

"Mercy! I didn't shoot Mr. Danforth," she said with pretended nervousness. "Why, I scarcely knew him!"

He pounced on this admission. "Then you did know him?"

"I only met him once before tonight," she said. "It was at a cabaret in Harlem. It was then that he gave me a ticket to the ball tonight, and asked me to meet him there."

"Will you unmask, miss, so we can all see your face?" he asked suddenly.

My heart skipped a beat, for of course Mme. Storey's photograph has been published repeatedly. Everybody knows her face. But she was equal to the situation.

"I won't be the only one to show my face," she said, drawing back. "I'll take off my mask if you will."

He dropped the subject. "Can you prove to us," he said, "that you could not have fired the shot?"

"What do you expect me to say?" she answered with an innocent air. "If those were my two guns I would not have produced the second one, would I? I would not have shown you that they were of the same make."

"Of course, of course," said Mr. Punch suavely. "It stands to reason you didn't do it."

He next turned his attention to me. "Who brought you to the ball?" he asked.

Instantly I had to find a plausible answer. It came without thinking. "Mr. Smith," I said.

"What Mr. Smith? Where does he work?"

"I don't know," I said. "I only met him on his evenings off. He brought me to the ball."

"How was he dressed?"

"As Pierrot. There were so many of them I lost him. I didn't care."

"Will you unmask for us?"

Now my face is unknown to fame, and it occurred to me that I would inspire these people with confidence if I obeyed. So I lifted my mask for a moment and let it snap back. I saw the corners of my employer's mouth twitch. She approved of what I had done. And Mr. Punch was satisfied.

"What can you tell us about this business?" he asked.

It was clear to me by this time that he was only interested in getting evidence against Abdullah, and I tried to play up to him.

"Well, I could see that Abdullah was sore against Harlequin," I said. "He was watching him all the time."

"We know that already," said Mr. Punch. "What else?"

"Well, just before the lights went out I saw him lift the cloth and look under the table."

"Good!" cried Mr. Punch. "He wanted to see how to disconnect the lights. Will you tell this to the police?"

I nodded.

"Aw, you're all against me!" cried Abdullah despairingly, and my conscience reproached me. But I was only following instructions.

Mr. Punch turned to Mephisto. "Can you add anything?" he asked. He never asked Mephisto to unmask, and so I judged he already knew him.

"Well," said Mephisto with an air of seeming reluctance, "when the two of them were fighting I saw Abdullah pull the gun. He dropped it on the floor when they were separated."

"You lie!" cried Abdullah. "You're swearing my life away! If you saw this why didn't you say so before?"

"I didn't want to make trouble," said Mephisto deprecatingly. "I always want to avoid trouble. In the heat of passion any man is likely to do something he regrets afterward. As long as the gun was unloaded I thought it was all right. Never occurred to me you would be carrying two guns."

"I didn't even have one gun!" cried Abdullah.

Nobody paid any attention to what he said.

"Now we're beginning to clear this thing up," said Mr. Punch in great satisfaction. "We'd all be better off if you had taken my advice and seen it through on the spot. Will you swear to what you have said before the police, Mephisto?"

"If I must, I must," said the big man, spreading out his hands. "Though I don't wish the poor fellow any harm."

By this time Zuleika had returned to the room and seated herself as far as possible away from Jackie.

"Mrs. Danforth," said Mr. Punch, "will you swear that you knocked against the gun in this man's pocket when you seated yourself at the table?"

"Sure!" she said with a poisonous glance at Abdullah.

By this time the concerted plan to railroad the unfortunate fellow, whether innocent or guilty, was becoming almost more than I could stand in silence. I glanced anxiously at my employer, wondering when she was going to take action.

Mr. Punch was not yet through with him. "Jackie," he said to the girl, "you were directly across the table when the shot was fired. You ought to be able to tell us more about it."

Abdullah sprang up and approached the girl. "Kitty, for God's sake, don't join in this!" he cried brokenly. "You know me, Kitty. You used to be fond of me. Have you forgotten all that?"

"Don't touch me!" she cried, shrinking from him. "You are not worthy to tie his laces!"

"Sit down!" shouted Mr. Punch, pounding the table. The broken Abdullah dropped in his seat. "Then you know who he is," he continued to Jackie.

"Sure," she said sullenly. "I knew him as soon as he knew me. It's Frank Harris!"

Leaping up again, Abdullah tore off his mask and cast it on the floor. "Look your fill at me!" he cried recklessly. "Yes, I'm Frank Harris! What have I done to any of you that you're all trying to send me to the chair?"

Again we had that dramatic shock when another of the masked faces was suddenly revealed. Under stress of his feelings the man's face was scarcely human. But he looked like an ordinary, honest sort of fellow. You couldn't help but pity him.

"A member of the Executive Committee!" exclaimed Mr. Punch in a scandalised voice. The air was full of hypocrisy.

Jackie had no mercy on the poor wretch. These delicate girls can be as cruel as Satan when their feelings are aroused. "I'll tell you something more about him!" she cried stridently. "When he says he never handled a gun he lies! For six months past every hour he could get he's been practising with a pistol in a gallery on Fourteenth Street. He's a dead shot!"

Mr. Punch smiled cruelly between the false nose and chin. "I guess we've heard enough," he said. "Let's take him to the

police."

V

At last Mme. Storey spoke up—but she seemed to have no more mercy for the snivelling Abdullah-Harris than the rest of them. "You'd better make him come clean first," she suggested. "If he's going to deny everything the police will hold us all."

A general murmur of assent went around.

"I won't confess!" shouted Harris. "You can all be damned! Take me to the police! I'd sooner face them than a set of vultures like you!"

Mr. Punch tried in vain to browbeat the man into making a confession, but Harris only cried and cursed and turned stubborn. Finally Anne Boleyn said smoothly:

"Let me see what I can get out of him."

With a shrug, Mr. Punch moved over on the little sofa, and she sat on the other end, making two judges instead of one. She lit a cigarette and deliberated between every question she asked, blowing the smoke in the air.

"Harris, you're taking the wrong line altogether," she began smoothly. "If Danforth was a blackguard, as you say, let that be your defence. If you can prove it, no jury would convict you."

Harris calmed down, and scowled at her suspiciously. He didn't know how to take this. On the other hand Mrs. Danforth was angered by it.

However, Anne Boleyn smiled at her as much as to say, "I'm only trying to entrap the man," and the other woman subsided.

"Harris," said Anne Boleyn, "you knew George Danforth tonight even before he raised his mask. I was watching you."

"Well, what of it?" he grumbled.

"How did you know him?"

Harris twisted in his chair. "If you must know, Mr. Denby, our president, told me Danforth was going to wear a Harlequin outfit. With that lead I recognised him from his figure."

Mr. Punch's make-up hid his face well, but I could imagine that this disclosure made him uneasy. His whole poise towards my employer betrayed it.

"Was Mr. Denby aware that you were sore at Danforth?" asked Anne Boleyn.

"Sure," said Harris. "I told him how he had taken my girl, and he said he was a blackguard. Mr. Denby's a good friend of mine. He wouldn't let you hound me like this if he was here."

"If Danforth was a blackguard why wasn't he fired from the Association?"

"President Denby didn't want to do it," said Harris. "He thought it would make too much talk."

"And what did Danforth say?"

"Danforth went around bragging that they couldn't fire him out because he had too much on Denby."

"What did he mean by that?"

"I don't know. I didn't pay no attention. Danforth was a crook."

"Where has Danforth been working since he left the Creighton Woodleys?"

"Hasn't been working anywhere. Just swelling around. He said the Association would have to support him as long as he lived."

"But Mr. Danforth took me home in a high-powered car that time," said Anne Boleyn. "He wore diamonds. He gave suppers to the ladies. Was the Association paying for all that?"

"I didn't believe they were," said Harris. "Danforth was a crook."

"But don't you know?"

"No," said Harris sullenly. "That's up to the treasurer, Mr. Ebbitt."

"But you're a member of the Executive Committee."

"We left everything to Denby and Ebbitt. Those two are the strong men of the Association. They have a powerful hold on the members."

"What gave them such a powerful hold?" asked Anne Boleyn softly.

"Well, during their term of office they have added a hundred thousand dollars to our benefit fund. And fifty thousand to the Women's Auxiliary. They are fine men."

"Where did they get it all?"

"From investments. Mr. Ebbitt, the treasurer, takes the dues and invests the money in Wall Street and cleans up. He then hands the money to me for the benefit fund. I run that," Harris said, with a pitiful sort of pride.

"Has the treasurer ever made a report to the Association?"

"Nobody wants a report as long as the money's coming in."

"When did he last pay in something to the fund?"

"Six weeks ago. Ten thousand. But he took that back again."

"Why?"

"Said he saw a chance to double it on the Street."

"Six weeks ago? Wasn't that just the time when Danforth came out with his big car and his diamonds?"

"Well—yes," muttered Harris dubiously.

I could well believe that this line of testimony was making Mr. Punch sweat, but he couldn't say anything without showing his hand. However, Mephisto interfered.

"What's all this got to do with Harris's shooting Danforth?" he protested. "You ain't getting anywhere, miss."

"I'm trying to prove that Danforth was an out-and-out scoundrel," she said sweetly. "If I can show Harris that he has a first-rate defence, he'll confess and we can all go home."

Mephisto was obliged to make believe he was satisfied, but I doubted it.

"Danforth was a scoundrel all right," muttered Harris.

"But I'll never confess!"

Anne Boleyn took a new line. "Where did you get that costume?"

"What's that got to do with it?" he answered sullenly. "I've nothing to conceal. I hired it at Steele Bros., costumiers."

"Who sent you to them?"

"President Denby. He told me he seen this Turkish costume there just my size, and I went and got it."

"How was President Denby masked tonight?"

"I don't know. Nobody knew. He said he could have more fun if they didn't recognise him for the president."

"And treasurer Ebbitt?"

"I don't know that neither. He's a serious-minded man. Maybe he didn't come to the ball."

Mme. Storey then resumed her original line of questioning. "When did President Denby and Danforth first quarrel?" she asked.

"Just about that time," said Harris. "Six weeks ago."

"This would be just after Danforth had been cleared by the police of complicity in the Creighton Woodley robbery."

"Yeah. Mr. Denby wasn't on to him then. He wanted to show his confidence in Danforth and he offered to put him in

on the Executive Committee. But Danforth refused, and there was trouble."

"Did you overhear their quarrel?"

"Well, they were in the private office with the door closed and I was outside," said Harris. "I just heard a word or two."

"What was it?"

"Well, I heard Danforth shout out: 'When I gave you the layout I thought it was only talk! You tricked me!' I didn't pay no attention. I knew Danforth was crooked."

"What else?"

"Later Danforth hollered: 'I was an honest man until this happened! You made a crook out of me!' That's a laugh, all right. Mr. Denby making a crook out of that rat!"

"Did you tell Mr. Denby what you overheard?"

"No, I made out I didn't hear nothing just to save trouble."

"Did you hear anything else?"

"The last thing Danforth said was: 'I got hold of the receipt you gave Tony Yellow for the money. Never mind how. I got it!' And with that he came bursting out of the private office ____"

Mr. Punch could stand no more. He sprang up, trembling with rage.

"You lie!" he cried.

"Liar yourself," retorted Harris. "If Mr. Denby was here, he'd bear me out! He's a good friend of mine."

"This is Mr. Denby," said Anne Boleyn. "Let him speak for himself."

Now, Mr. Punch was a quick-witted man, and he realised if he delayed an instant in taking up her challenge he would only come off worse in the end. He snatched off his mask.

"Sure I'm Denby," he cried to Harris. "And I was a good friend of yours, Frank. But you can't save yourself from this murder by a tissue of lies!"

The false nose and chin still grotesquely obscured his real features, but they all knew him now. A murmur of amazement went around. Poor Harris gaped at him like a clown. The man's instinct warned him he had been tricked, but his wits were not sharp enough to work it out.

Mr. Punch then turned furiously on my employer. "Who is this woman that's so keen about our private affairs?" he cried. "Take off your mask, miss, and let's have a look at you!"

She coolly lifted it, and faced him out with a dry smile. Mr. Punch went staggering back.

"Rosika Storey!" he gasped. "Oh, my God! The detective!"

For a moment there was complete silence in the room. Mme. Storey's beauty and her contemptuous assurance laid a spell on them. In her superb black gown she looked the queen. They stared at her open-mouthed. Nobody moved.

Then Mr. Punch began to recover himself. A dark flush spread underneath his make-up. He smiled grimly.

"Do you realise what this means?" he said to the others. "This woman is out to smash our organisation. She cares nothing about the murder. She's after our benefit funds. Well, you're all members. Going to stand for it?"

"No! No!" they cried. It was strange to see how they instantly drew together when their money was threatened. Danforth's wife and his mistress forgot their jealousy; even Frank Harris, the poor fool they were trying to railroad to the chair, joined in with them. He was one of those morons who can conceive of nothing higher than a blind loyalty to the organisation. Mephisto obviously was hand in glove with Mr. Punch now as he had been throughout.

They all began to shout together: "She did it! She did it! She shot Danforth. I saw her do it, I'll swear to it!"

Harris put in: "She come between me and Zuleika and fired at him crouching down. I felt her there. I smelled her perfume. I'll swear to it!"

It was like an infernal chorus.

"We'll all swear to it! She can't get off!"

Which shows how much dependence you can place on human testimony!

Mr. Punch, however, had more sense.

"Quiet, you fools!" he shouted with an angry gesture. "You couldn't touch her. She has too much prestige. She's too clever for you. She'd go on the stand and make monkeys of you all. Besides, there's this other strange woman. They're in together. They would support each other on the stand."

Mephisto furiously shook his fist at us. "These spies shan't wreck our organisation!" he cried.

"Sure!" agreed Mr. Punch cunningly. "The money is rolling in without the slightest risk to us, and we want to enjoy it! If we stick together we five can make a little central finance committee."

This appealed to their cupidity.

"What will we do with them?" cried Mephisto.

All faces were unmasked now except for Mephisto's grinning headpiece.

"Well," began Mr. Punch. He paused, and that hideous smile spread between hooked nose and chin. "She's a clever woman, but she and her fellow spy are only mortal.... And this is a nice quiet house!"

The two women cried out a little. They were willing to swear our lives away, but outright murder scared them. As

for me, all the blood in my veins turned to water. I moved closer to Mme. Storey. She was smiling scornfully. The black pit of the front drawing-room yawned at our backs.

"Leave this to me," Mr. Punch said to the women. "I'll take the responsibility. All you've got to do is to stand by me afterward. There's a grand cellar under this house," he went on, smiling. "And the family won't be back for three months."

Mephisto drew the gun he had kept all this time and coolly reloaded it.

"Put it up!" said Mr. Punch sharply. "We'll do this quietly."

Mme. Storey affected to laugh with quiet amusement.

"Look in the back room," she said.

All five heads turned as one. She touched my hand, and we melted noiselessly into the darkness behind us.

VI

We had only one second's respite, of course. They discovered they had been tricked, and Mr. Punch yelled: "Watch the basement stairs! It's the only way out! Come on, Ebbitt!"

Mme. Storey seized my hand, and we headed diagonally across the front drawing-room for the main hall. As we reached it, our pursuers came tumbling out of the middle room. The grand stairway was immediately before us, and we sprang up. There was no other place to go. Terror lent wings to my heels. I never ran so fast in my life.

As Mr. Punch came through the lower hall, he paused to press some switches, and the whole central well of the house became flooded with light. Punch and Mephisto leaped up the stairs after us.

We opened the first door we came to, ran in, slammed it, and shot a bolt. Almost immediately the two men flung themselves against the other side. This was one of the principal bedrooms of the house.

Immediately it was only too apparent to us that the windows were boarded up like those below, and we could neither escape that way nor summon help. We had only run from one trap into another.

We heard the men run along the hall outside, and immediately guessed there was a way into our room from the front. I was for trying to find the communicating door, but she prevented me.

"Must get out of this," she muttered.

She softly drew the bolt, and we stole out into the stair hall again. Frank Harris and the two women were watching at the

foot of the stairs. All three of them were infected with the blood lust now.

The third floor of the house was all cut up into a maze of small rooms and passages in which we lost ourselves hopelessly. In the dark it was impossible to figure out the plan. We could no longer hear our pursuers—crouching in wait at some strategic corner, we supposed. It was agonising not to know.

"There must be back stairs," whispered Mme. Storey. "Look for them."

In slowly feeling our way along the wall of a passage, I leave you to imagine my feelings when my groping fingers suddenly touched fingers exploring from the other direction.

I screamed like a madwoman. Luckily the man was scarcely less startled than I. Mme. Storey and I dashed away down the passage, collided with the wall at the end, crossed some sort of open space, and hid ourselves in another passage before we dared draw breath.

"We are in the front of the house now," she whispered. "We must find the back stairs."

Finally the suspense became unsupportable. Having crept back to the beginning of the passage, we peeped around the corner. There they crouched waiting, Punch and the Devil, the latter still masked.

They sprang at us and we fled back through the passage. We were quicker than they. There was a door around the

corner, and we got it closed and bolted behind us as they flung themselves against it. I heard Punch roar with laughter.

"We've got them now!" he yelled.

We were in a small bedroom, evidently a servant's room, with a window opening on the air shaft. Through the skylight at the top of the shaft we saw that day was breaking. I heard Punch say: "Drive your foot through a panel of the door!"

A tiny room opening on a shaft and those fiends outside! Our position seemed absolutely desperate and I'm afraid I began to cry. Mme. Storey's face was sternly composed.

The door held for a brief while against Mephisto's furious blows, and Mme. Storey still had a trick up her sleeve. There was the window of another room cater-cornered across the air shaft, and while I steadied her she leaned far out of our window and got it opened. We then with considerable difficulty crossed over from sill to sill. I never could have made it had not the Devil been at my heels.

The room we entered was evidently lived in, and I gasped with relief to see that it had two unshuttered windows opening on the blessed outer air! But first we had to barricade the way we had come. With immense exertions we managed to shove a heavy wardrobe in front of the window on the shaft. This offered a formidable obstacle to anybody on the insecure perch of the window sill, and we did not believe they could follow that way. There was still the door of the room, of course. We discovered that it was locked, and no key in it.

When we had time to look about us we saw a man's personal belongings scattered about; clothes, shoes, knick-knacks on the dresser. On the wall was a framed photograph of an Association picnic.

"Ah," said Mme. Storey dryly. "Mr. Punch's own room!"

There was a ball of string lying on the bureau that she pounced on with the light of triumph in her eye. "If we get out alive we'll hang him with this!" she cried, and thrust the ball in the pocket of her skirt.

I could make nothing of this at the moment. A sudden thought had caused my heart to sink like a stone.

"If it's his room he has the key in his pocket!" I gasped.

Mme. Storey's eyes flashed around the room, searching. She snatched up a stick-pin from the bureau, stuck it diagonally in the lock, then hammered it with a boot so that it crumpled up inside the lock and the head broke off.

"He won't get a key in there in a hurry," she remarked.

By this time the two men had broken into the little room on the shaft. They must have been astonished when they found it empty. But when they saw the wardrobe backed up against the other window on the shaft they knew where we had gone.

"They're in my room!" yelled Mr. Punch. "Come on!"

A moment later he was trying to insert his key in the lock. Failing in that, they kicked the panels. Fortunately those were stout doors. "Wait a minute!" said Punch. "Fetch the fire axe from the head of the stairs."

Meanwhile Mme. Storey and I were busy shoving the bureau in front of the door, and the bed against the bureau to give them plenty to chop through. Then we ran to an outer window.

It was half day and the city lay in a curious stillness under the cool sky. Madison Avenue ran under the window, and across the way we could see the apse of St. Patrick's between the priests' residences flanking it on either side. The street lights were still burning and the early cats were coming out to sniff in the gutters. The only human in sight was an honest policeman leaning against a fire box on the corner, idly swinging his club on its thong. As I was about to yell, Mme. Storey clapped a hand over my mouth.

"If we raise an alarm they'll escape us!" she cried.

She picked up a hairbrush, and leaning out the window tapped it against the wall of the house. It made only a little sound, but in the stillness of early morning it was sufficient. The policeman looked up and saw us. What a strange shock he must have received, seeing Anne Boleyn and Lorenzo hanging out of the top window of an apparently shut-up house at dawn! One can imagine the eyes fairly starting from his head. Mme. Storey gave him the most dramatic pantomime of distress and terror, wringing her hands and

alternately pointing inside the house and towards the fire box. All the time she was murmuring to me:

"That ought to fetch him! That ought to fetch him!"

I don't know what he thought, but there was obviously only one thing for him to do. He yanked open the door of the fire alarm box, and pulled the hook inside. He then ran down the side street to try to get in the building from the rear.

For a moment or two there was silence in the room. I was desperately trying to figure how long it took firemen to reach a fire. The beating of my heart almost suffocated me. The silence must have alarmed Mr. Punch outside, for he vigorously rattled the door and called out:

"You, in there!"

Mme. Storey winked at me and answered in a trembling voice: "Oh, spare us! Spare us!" I wondered how she could joke at such a moment.

Mephisto arrived with the axe and they tackled the door. It proved to be a tough job, because the passage was too narrow to swing the axe effectively.

Almost immediately I heard the distant clang of the engines, and then I saw the wisdom of Mme. Storey's ruse. The men with the axe were making too much noise themselves to hear the engines. Even if they did hear they wouldn't connect it with us. After all, it's a common enough sound in the city. Mr. Punch had fairly to hew the door in

pieces before he could get sufficient leverage to push the furniture out of the way.

Meanwhile Mme. Storey and I were hanging out of the windows. When the fire trucks swept up below we stretched out our arms to the men just like all the pictures of distressed females we had seen. They swung the big hook and ladder truck around with marvellous skill, and started the machinery going, and the great ladder raised up and extended itself until it dropped with a light tap against our window sill. They had judged it to a hair. Then the men came scrambling up like monkeys.

Firemen are such handsome, well-built fellows, and so modest! Everybody loves the firemen, because they don't interfere with us as the police do—they only save our lives!

The firemen were in the act of scrambling over the sill at the precise moment when our two enemies, having succeeded in shoving the bureau a foot or two from the door, appeared from behind it. The surprise was mutual. Seeing the grotesque figure of Mr. Punch, axe in hand, and Mephisto, horns and tail, the firemen may well have thought they were in a madhouse.

"What's the matter here?" stammered the leader.

Mme. Storey, with a twinkle in her eye, said courteously: "I'm sorry, chief, there's no fire. But these gentlemen were bent on murdering us."

Mr. Punch and Mephisto turned to run, but the firemen leaped on their backs and quickly secured them. Such grand fellows! I disgraced myself by going into hysterics when it was over.

VII

The next scene took place at Police Headquarters. Of course a general alarm had been sent out for our party and the police had been combing the town for us all night. So we were rushed direct to Headquarters. I doubt if the building had ever witnessed a more bizarre scene than the seven of us in fancy dress lined up before the lieutenant at the desk. Ebbitt, the fat treasurer of the Butlers' Association, now carried Mephisto's grinning headpiece under one arm, while his spiked tail dragged forlornly on the ground. Ebbitt had just such a smooth and flabby face as you might expect in the butler who deferentially fills your glass.

At first we were all treated as malefactors alike. When Mme. Storey explained who she was the lieutenant received it with an air of incredulity that was far from polite. In fact he jeered. Whereupon she insisted on having our friend Inspector Rumsey sent for. After he got there all was clear sailing.

I cannot end my story better than by giving you my employer's statement to the police.

"In the course of my investigation of the Creighton Woodley jewel robbery," she said, "certain facts turned up which suggested to me that there was a very profitable racket being worked by an inner ring of the Butlers' Association in connection with expert jewel thieves. But it was difficult to secure evidence.

"The annual masked ball of the Butlers' Association to-night gave me an opportunity of mixing with these people in disguise, so I attended the ball and took with me my secretary, Miss Brickley. I also had an operative mixing with the dancers, but we became separated from him.

"As it drew on towards midnight my secretary and I were invited to join a supper party in a private room given by Mr. Punch here. I accepted because I suspected from his air of authority that he was an important man in the Association. Later I discovered that he was none other than Alfred Denby, the president, and the man I was most anxious to watch. The gentleman in red, yonder, is Ebbitt, the treasurer of the Association.

"Unfortunately I had no knowledge beforehand that there was trouble within the Association itself, or I could have taken steps to prevent the murder at the supper table. The murdered man, as you may know, is George Danforth, who was butler to the Creighton Woodleys at the time of the robbery, and, of course, a member of the Association. I am prepared to offer proof of every statement I am going to make to you. All this evidence turned up after the murder.

"Danforth was a handsome, pleasure-loving man, very popular among the ladies. Technically he was an honest man, and they tricked him into giving the layout of his master's house, and the information that enabled a successful robbery to be carried out. Danforth, you remember, was called away on the night of the robbery, and had therefore a perfect alibi.

"But he knew then, of course, that he had been tricked. Honesty is all a matter of degree. If he had been absolutely honest he would have taken his story to the police. But he saw a way of supporting himself in luxurious idleness and he fell for it. They offered to admit Danforth to the inner ring, but he refused, and he proceeded to blackmail the Butlers' Association out of large sums of money.

"The Creighton Woodley robbery was actually committed by Antonio Pagliariello, more commonly known as Tony Yellow. He is no stranger to you. Alfred Denby gave Tony a receipt for the money turned over to the Butlers' Association as their share of the loot, and in some manner this receipt came into Danforth's hands. Probably Tony double-crossed the Association and gave the paper to Danforth. It would be like him. This paper constituted Danforth's hold over the Association. It will undoubtedly be found among the dead man's effects." Mme. Storey paused, with a slight smile at the police officials' surprise.

"The inner ring," she went on, "resolved to put Danforth out of the way. They planned to use this man here, Frank Harris by name, as their instrument, but when they were unable to fan Harris's hatred of Danforth up to the killing point, Denby, the president, made up his mind to kill

Danforth himself and fasten the murder on Harris. The inner ring had nothing against Harris, who was a loyal member of the organisation, though not a party to the crookedness of the inner ring. Harris was a stupid sort of fellow, they figured, who would never see through the plot.

"The supper party tonight was staged for the murder. Mr. Punch there, or Denby, made sure of his men, Danforth, Harris, and Ebbitt—he had previous knowledge of the costumes they were going to wear; but apparently he picked up some of the women at random. So cunningly thought out was his plan that he wished to have strangers present to give disinterested testimony later. That is how my secretary and I happened to be included in the dinner party.

"A quarrel between Harris and Danforth lent the whole thing realism. At the proper moment, when Mr. Punch was on his feet making a speech, the lights went out and the shot was fired. When the lights were turned on again the smoking revolver lay in front of Harris.

"But Harris had not fired the shot, gentlemen. Mr. Punch had prepared a simple and ingenious scheme for disconnecting the lights under the table. He tied a string to the plug in such a manner, leaving two ends, that when he pulled one end it disconnected the lights, and when he pulled the other it loosened the string and he could gather it all in his hand, thus removing the evidence. When the lights went out he knelt on the floor between Mrs. Danforth and Harris, and fired. He dropped the gun on the table in front of Harris, and a second later he was turning on the switch by the door.

"In the confusion following upon the murder there was a general desire to escape. Mr. Punch, confident in the cleverness of his plot, was dead against it. He insisted on facing the thing out. But a few minutes later, when I had shown up the trick of substituting the guns, he became suspicious of me and encouraged a general flight from the scene. I was afraid he would escape—at that moment I hadn't yet discovered his identity, or that he would destroy valuable evidence; I had to act on the instant and so I made believe to run with them.

"He carried us to the house of his employers which has been shut up for months, an ideal base of operations for Mr. Punch. When he discovered who I was, he determined to put me out of the way. That's the whole story, gentlemen.

"Now, as to my evidence: When the shot was fired, like nearly everybody else present, I slid under the table. I took the opportunity of doing a little searching under there. By that time Mr. Punch had pulled away the string, of course, but I found, driven into the bottom of the table, the little staples by which he had led the two ends of the string to his right hand and to his left. They are still there, mute evidence of Mr. Punch's crime.

"I knew then what had happened, but it would not have been sufficient evidence to take into court, and I was obliged to search farther. When he went to the window of the supper room to try to prevent the others from leaving, I saw him drop something out, and later when we all left, I found the length of string entangled in the fire escape. Here it is, gentlemen.

"Still, a piece of string is only a piece of string, and I felt that I had not enough yet. My third find clinched the whole matter. On the bureau of Mr. Punch's own room, I picked up this ball of string. The same kind of string as the piece I just handed you. A brand new ball, you see, shows no dust nor marks of handling. Only one piece has been cut from it. String of this kind is made up into balls of one hundred and fifty yards. You can verify that from the makers. If you unwind this ball you will discover that it makes exactly one hundred and fifty yards, *when joined with the piece I first handed you*. That's all."

The Death Notice

I

I disliked the man's voice even before I took in the sense of what he was saying; a slow voice that seemed to dwell with pleasure on its own malice. He said over the wire:

"Is Madame Storey there?"

"Who is this speaking?"

He laughed sarcastically. "Oh, I haven't the pleasure of her acquaintance."

"What do you want to speak to her about?"

"That I can only tell her."

"Well, I'm sorry," I said, "but I am instructed not to disturb her unless I know it is for a good reason."

"To whom am I speaking?" he asked.

"Miss Brickley, Madame Storey's secretary."

"I have heard of the admirable Miss Brickley," he said with his insulting laugh. "I feel quite safe in sending her my message by you."

Then he paused, and I said: "Well?"

I could hear his breathing over the wire. He must have had his lips almost directly against the transmitter. "I have a communication to make in which Madame Storey is sure to take a keen professional interest," he drawled. "There is going to be a murder committed at number — East 75th Street this morning."

"What!" I gasped.

He laughed, well pleased with the effect of his words.

"Wait a minute," I stammered. "I'll connect you with Madame Storey."

"Oh, you can tell her," he said, and hung up, still laughing.

It gave me a nasty shock. My hand was trembling violently when I put up the receiver. Common sense suggested that it was only a hoax, but the ugly voice out of the unknown acted powerfully on my nerves.

Going into her office, I found her sitting at the big table writing a personal letter. She had a cigarette between her lips and was holding her head on one side in the familiar way to keep the smoke out of her eyes. At sight of my face she removed the cigarette and smiled provokingly. She is always amused by my agitations.

"Well, what is it now?" she asked.

I told her.

"Damn the telephone!" she said pleasantly. "It puts us at the mercy of every lunatic in the five boroughs."

"It's certainly a hoax," I said.

"Undoubtedly. Just the same, we dare not ignore it."

"After all, it's a matter for the police to attend to."

"Quite," she said, taking up her pen again. "Call up Rumsey and pass the buck to him."

While I was waiting for my call a sudden exclamation escaped from my employer. "What number did you say?"

"— East 75th Street."

"Good Lord! that's Mrs. George P. Julian's new house. I suppose I'll have to go there anyway."

I groaned in sympathy, for I had had ample experience of that lady's foolishness in the past.

When I got Inspector Rumsey on the wire, I handed over the instrument, and Mme. Storey told him what had happened. He evidently asked for further particulars about Mrs. Julian, for she went on to say:

"She's a widow with twenty million dollars, and she's almost the perfect fool. Need I say more? A sugar-bowl for every new fakir who sets up shop. I've already got her out of several scrapes, and that's why, God help me! I am elected to be her friend. Her principal is tied up in a trust fund, but she

has over a million a year income, and that's the honey that attracts the bees."

He asked her about her previous relations with Mrs. Julian.

"Well, she was one of Jacmer Touchon's patients. She got me some evidence against him without knowing that she was doing it, and I'm really in her debt on that score. Before that I saved her from handing over half a million to the notorious Walter Hanley. My first meeting with her was at the time of the Miller Moore case. Moore had been bleeding her for a couple of years. I succeeded in sending him to Sing Sing, you may remember."

When she had hung up, Mme. Storey said: "Rumsey is satisfied it's a hoax. He says as long as I feel obliged to go to Mrs. Julian's house he won't bother to send anybody.... He says I can attend to it better than any man," she added, with a side-long smile in my direction.

"Humph!" I said, "he can afford to be flattering when he's getting your services for nothing."

We 'phoned for a taxi and locked up the office. Though my employer affected to treat the matter lightly, I noticed a certain gravity in her expression, and on the way up I asked her if she thought it possible that Mrs. Julian's life was in danger.

She shrugged impatiently. "Sooner or later that woman is certain to get into trouble. So prominent, so wealthy, so foolish! It's a fatal combination."

"But if her money's all tied up in a trust fund, wouldn't it be like killing the goose that laid the golden eggs?"

"So it would seem. But there is this to consider. She has a habit of giving out largesse with a good size string attached to it. She gives these crooks great sums of money in the guise of loans. There is no record that any of it was ever paid back. But when she sours on her dear friends, she is apt to demand her money, and there have been some very ugly scenes. That might supply a motive."

We drew up in front of one of the newer mansions that line the blocks east of the Park. It was one of those houses that embody every known luxury and extravagance—except the trifling matter of sunshine. The few rooms which faced the narrow street got a certain amount of light, but as the house (as well as all its neighbours) covered about ninety per cent, of its lot, all the other rooms had to be content with electric light bulbs. Why be rich, one might ask, if you can't have sunshine? There is no answer. The rooms were filled with art treasures from every quarter of the globe, but you got no definite impression except that of mere expensiveness.

To match everything else, Mrs. Julian had the most expensive of butlers. His name was Bunbury, and he had been with her for years. He was a very handsome man. He seemed to have raised butlering to heights before undreamed of. He was like a celebrated actor playing the part of butler on the stage.

When my employer asked for Mrs. Julian, Bunbury looked deeply distressed. He knew that Mme. Storey was no

ordinary caller to be turned away. "Mrs. Julian was not expecting you," he suggested.

"No," said Mme. Storey blandly. "But that will be all right." She walked in.

"I'm sorry," he stammered, following us, "but Mrs. Julian is very much engaged. I have positive instructions not to disturb her."

"I'm sorry too," said Mme. Storey, "but I have to see her. It is a matter of the greatest importance."

"Madam, I cannot ... I cannot..." he protested.

"What's she doing?" asked my employer bluntly.

"She's ... er ... she's having a séance," he replied, embarrassed.

Mme. Storey started up the sweeping staircase with me following her, and the butler bringing up the rear, all but wringing his hands. "Madam, I beg of you ... I beg of you..."

"I will take the responsibility of disturbing her," said Mme. Storey serenely. "... If I insist on going in, you can't very well stop me, can you?" she added.

"It's as much as my place is worth," he whimpered.

"Very well, if you get fired I'll find you another place. You're an excellent servant."

He gave up.

The plan of the house was simple. On the first floor above the street there was a superb central hall with a peristyle of tall marble columns. The staircase swept on up behind the columns. In the front was an immense salon; in the rear a dining-room. The doors of the salon stood open and there was no séance going on in there. It could hardly be in the dining-room, so we kept on up.

The next floor was devoted to Mrs. Julian's personal suite; boudoir, bedroom, dressing-rooms and so forth. All the doors giving on the hall were closed. From behind a door in the front came the steady drone of a single voice—a disquieting sound. Mme. Storey made unhesitatingly for that door, and opened it. The butler had faded away.

II

The room was dark except for a patch of uncertain light towards the left. I had an impression of several motionless figures sitting around, and I saw a ghastly distorted face in the dim light. It seemed to have no body. It made my blood run cold. I almost cried out, though I guessed there was trickery in it.

The voice ceased when we opened the door. There was a silence, then Mrs. Julian's voice, sharp and angry,

demanding:

"Who is it? How dare you come in here?"

"Sorry, Aline," said Mme. Storey calmly. "I had to speak to you."

Mrs. Julian did not instantly recognise the voice. She continued to cry: "Get out! Get out!" The strange figure in the middle of the room broke in sulkily: "It is useless. Everything is spoiled now. You had better turn on the light."

Mme. Storey pressed the switch which was beside the door, and the lights flooded on. The room was Mrs. Julian's boudoir, and it presented a very odd scene. When I say the house had no character I should except the boudoir. That had plenty of character—of the wrong sort. A sea of baby-blue brocade with a foam of lace upon it. One might have guessed at a glance that this room expressed the soul of an elephantine blonde woman of fifty-odd.

To the left stood an elegant little lacquer table with a carved teak-wood stand upon it supporting in turn a crystal globe. This was a beautiful object, reflecting as it did all the lights in broken shining particles. One can easily understand how a crystal globe has always been an object of mystery. A foot or so above the globe hung a lamp concealed within a black shade. It was the light from this falling on the crystal which had created the eerie glow I had first seen.

Beside the table stood a theatrical figure, a short, plump man in a frock-coat that was too tight for him. He had a

chocolate-coloured face and shifty black eyes. His lank black hair was plastered over his temples in the very manner of an oily schemer. His shallow eyes rolled viciously at us. Anybody but Mrs. Julian would have distrusted him at sight.

Beyond the table in an over-stuffed baby-blue armchair sat Mrs. Julian, overstuffed herself, and enveloped in God knows how many yards of lavender chiffon. Her face which is naturally red showed a bluish hue under the powder. Perhaps that's why she wore lavender. She was a good-natured creature in her way, and I knew that my employer had a kind of fondness for her.

Along the far side of the room sat three other persons, two men and a woman, of whom I shall have more to say directly. All three had an unwholesome look like things that wanted the sun.

Mrs. Julian's puffy face presented a study when the lights went up. Dark with anger under her make-up, nevertheless she knew she could not afford to quarrel with Mme. Storey. She bit her lip and looked at the floor.

"It is nothing," she muttered; "only ... at such a moment of emotional tension it's a shock to have it broken."

My employer instantly took her cue from the scene.

"I know," she said sympathetically. "But I had a strong premonition that you needed me, Aline, and I hurried right here. You can't stop to question such feelings. I wouldn't let the servant keep me out."

This sort of talk was well calculated to impress Mrs. Julian. She looked at Mme. Storey, surprised to hear it from her, and began to melt. "Oh, Rosika! But I am all right, darling!"

"I'm so glad!" said Mme. Storey, taking her hand.

The East Indian, seeing the current turning against him, became sulkier than before. He placed the crystal and its stand in the middle of a brilliant silk handkerchief and began to tie up the ends in Oriental fashion. "With your permission I will retire," he said stiffly to Mrs. Julian.

"Oh, *please* don't go," said Mme. Storey in seeming concern. "I am *so* interested in everything pertaining to the psychic.... Introduce me, Aline."

"This is Professor Ram Lal," said Mrs. Julian a little unwillingly. Perhaps she suspected my employer of irony. "Madame Rosika Storey."

All the persons in the room glanced at Mme. Storey with fear and dislike. I began to feel there must be some foundation for the warning we had received, and a nasty chill struck through me. Was it possible that this scowling Oriental meditated an attack on Mrs. Julian, and one of his rivals, getting wind of it, had telephoned us?

"Do go on with your demonstration, Professor," said my employer cajolingly. "All my life I have been fascinated by the mystery of the crystal, and have been longing to meet somebody to elucidate it."

"I am sorry," he said with the pompous air that such people are bound to assume, "but the precious filaments that bind us to the infinite are too tenuous to be joined immediately when once they are snapped."

Mme. Storey listened to him with pretended respect. "Then let us sit and talk awhile," she said, matching his tone. "Let us try to put ourselves in tune with the infinite so that new filaments may be woven." Drawing a chair up beside Mrs. Julian, she produced her cigarette case. I sat down behind them.

Mrs. Julian, finding her friend so unexpectedly sympathetic, sighed with satisfaction, and took a cigarette. "Sit down, Ram Lal," she said carelessly.

He dared not go then, though I fancy he was still suspicious of Mme. Storey. Declining a cigarette, he sat down on the other side of the table with an air of forced patience.

"Do uncover the precious crystal," begged Mme. Storey. "I love to lose myself by gazing in its depths."

He obeyed with an ill grace.

"How inexpressibly beautiful!" she murmured. "The clear transparent sphere which seems to conceal nothing yet hides all! It is symbolic of the whole cosmos!"

Mrs. Julian, now completely persuaded, leaned over and patted her hand. "Oh, Rosika, it is so sweet to hear you talk

like this! Of course you're the cleverest woman in the world, but sometimes I have felt that ... that ... well, you know..."

"That I lacked soul?" murmured Mme. Storey reproachfully. "Oh, Aline, how could you!"

There was good comedy in this, but I felt no inclination at the time to smile. The East Indian's ugly expression kept me on tenterhooks.

"I see that Madame Storey is one of us," he murmured. "A true psychic!"

Mrs. Julian was quite carried away. The folds of lavender chiffon undulated with emotion. "Oh, Rosika, you have no conception of what a wonderful man he is!" she whispered. "In Ram Lal I have found a bridge to the beyond! He reads both the past and the future. I know that what he foretells of the future will come true because he is never wrong about the past. As soon as he begins to read the sphere the veils fall one by one!"

"Oh, my dear, how wonderful! And what does he say is in store for you?"

A shudder of ecstasy passed through Mrs. Julian's vast bulk. "Happiness!" she whispered; "a great happiness!"

Such a rigmarole! I had all I could do to keep from snorting out loud. It made me mad that such a fool should have so much money to throw to the dogs while intelligent people have to get along with the barest necessities.

Ram Lal was not supposed to hear Mrs. Julian's praises, but of course he could guess what she was saying. He lowered his eyes in mock modesty, but the smirk around his lips gave him away.

"And the wonder of it is," Mrs. Julian went on, "this is only an ordinary crystal, though it was the best to be bought in New York." She dropped her voice again. "Just wait until the great Julian crystal is finished, my dear!"

"What's that?" asked Mme. Storey.

"Ram Lal is having the biggest and most flawless crystal made that the world has ever seen!" she whispered. "It's a secret as yet between him and me. It's going to cost a hundred thousand dollars! Ah! just think what *that* will reveal!"

I wondered if she had given him the money yet. It seemed to me the whole situation depended on that.

"And I mean to build a perfect temple to house the perfect crystal!" she whispered ecstatically. "So that all men may be permitted to share in universal knowledge. That shall be my contribution to my age!"

"But I thought it was against the law," suggested Mme. Storey dryly. "Crystal-gazing, I mean."

"Only if you take money for it," said Mrs. Julian a little sharply. Evidently this unpleasant feature had been forced on her attention before. "I shall endow the temple, of course, so that knowledge may be free to all!"

Mme. Storey, while she occupied herself with the East Indian, did not overlook the other persons in the room. "Introduce me to the rest of your friends, Aline," she said pleasantly.

Mrs. Julian threw them an inattentive glance. Clearly their noses were out of joint for the time being. "Dr. Cushack, Mrs. Bracker, Mr. Liptrott," she said carelessly.

My employer arose and shook hands with each of them affably. The doctor was a small man with an inferiority complex; looked very fierce, squared his shoulders and talked in a deep bass voice. He had a small waxed moustache and used a slight foreign accent. That was to convey the idea that he had been educated abroad, you understand. He had the cheek to kiss my employer's hand in the Continental manner.

"I see that Madame Storey has a great sense of humour," he said, with a glance of contempt in Ram Lal's direction.

She made believe not to get it. "Oh, I hope so," she said with a silly-sounding laugh, and passed on to the next one.

Mrs. Bracker was one of these skinny little women who have reduced to within an inch of their lives. All the make-up in the world could not hide the gaunt lines of under-nourishment and the haggard eyes. She was, God save her! a beauty-culturist. She took Mme. Storey's hand in both of hers.

"It is an honour to meet the great Madame Storey," she simpered, while her eyes glittered with dislike. Well, naturally a beauty culturist wouldn't have much use for the real thing.

The third was an old man dressed in a respectable black suit. He talked a little like a down-Easter. He was like any other old man, except that his eyes had a crazy expression. As Mme. Storey approached him he fumbled with the straps of a square leather case, and drew from it a weird-looking box with various cords and attachments hanging from it.

"I am the discoverer of the invisible ray," he said impressively, "with which I shall rejuvenate mankind."

He plugged one of the cords into an outlet and a hissing, crackling sound issued from the box. My employer stepped back, a little disconcerted.

"Oh, for goodness' sake turn that thing off, Liptrott," said Mrs. Julian pettishly. "I've had enough of it!"

He obeyed for the moment, but presently I saw him slyly turn it on again. He played with it like a child, perfectly oblivious to the rest of us.

Professor Ram Lal's good humour having been restored, Mrs. Julian suggested that he resume the séance. Immediately there were objections from the other three.

"My dear Aline, the excitement is so bad for you!" said Mrs. Bracker.

"You promised to let me give a demonstration today," grumbled the old man.

Dr. Cushack produced an elegant Russian leather case from his breast pocket. Upon being opened two rows of little vials containing drugs were revealed. "At least you should take your medicine first," he said.

The sight of the drugs made me jumpy. Was this the potential murderer? I wondered. Was he going to poison her before our very eyes?

However, Mrs. Julian waved the dose away. "I don't need it," she said. "Ram Lal does me more good than medicine."

The East Indian stood up, pushed his chair back against the wall, and smoothed down his frock-coat. He glanced with insulting complacency at his beaten rivals. He made caressing passes with his hands over the crystal sphere. He was excessively vain of his hands, which were soft and plump with tapering fingers manicured to the limit. They looked vicious to me.

"Lights, please," he drawled affectedly.

Nobody moved, and Mrs. Julian said sharply: "Turn off the lights, Dr. Cushack."

Nothing in the room was visible except the lambent crystal, the pale hands waving over it, and the smooth inhuman face in the reflected light, staring at it with an awful intentness. He began to mutter something in an uncouth tongue that was supposed to be Hindoo, but was more likely

mere gibberish. Pure trickery, but horribly effective. In spite of myself I felt the unreasoning terror of a child. Goose-flesh rose slowly all over my body.

The man was clearly working himself into a hysterical state. As he went on his voice became convulsed; a vertical vein stood out on his forehead, and his lips turned back over his ugly, misshapen teeth. My own teeth were chattering. Trickery ... trickery ... I kept saying to myself, but I could not break the spell.

Finally he began to speak English in jerky phrases with long pauses between. "I perceive ... I perceive a hill-top garden.... It is winter, and the ground is covered with snow.... The garden is ringed with evergreen trees weighted under snow.... But at either end there is an opening amidst the trees which looks out over snowy hills and valleys...."

"It is my place at Newtown to the life!" gasped Mrs. Julian. "Yet he has never been there!"

I would have been willing to bet that he had been there.

"... An elegant woman comes through a gate from a lower level.... She bears herself like a queen.... Though it is winter she is clad in the rosy veils of Springtide...."

This was evidently intended for a portrait of Mrs. Julian.

"... As she advances the snow disappears.... The garden breaks into leaf and flower; the distant hills turn green.... Now I perceive a great throng of people silently gathered under the trees.... Their faces aspire with gladness; they raise

their arms above their heads.... For the queenly woman has brought light into their lives ... the light of universal knowledge...!"

The man now appeared to be completely possessed. His head rolled from side to side, only the eyes preserving their level stare at the crystal like water in a swaying vessel. He seemed to be speaking under an immense compulsion; his voice was hoarse and broken; a line of white foam edged his lips. It was too horrible, yet I could not drag my eyes away.

"There is a little pavilion in the centre of the garden.... It is completely embowered in vines.... I cannot perceive what is inside.... The woman advances towards it with firm proud steps.... Ardent ... aspiring with an inward fire.... She goes inside.... She finds..." He stopped. His eyes rolled up in his head until only the whites showed.

"Oh, tell me! tell me!" gasped Mrs. Julian.

"Joy supreme!" he yelled—and his body crashed to the floor in a heap.

We all cried out. Mme. Storey sprang up, and ran to the light switch. Nobody else stirred. The room was flooded with light again, and I covered my face with my hands. I heard my employer say in a crisp, resolute voice:

"What is this?"

Mrs. Julian had put her handkerchief to her eyes. "It always ends this way," she whimpered. "He gives so much!

The strain is more than mortality can bear. He will come to directly."

Mme. Storey relaxed. "Oh," she said, "probably epilepsy. I have heard that a fit can be induced in this manner."

"Oh, Rosika, how can you!" said Mrs. Julian tearfully. "... Please ring for the servants," she added in a more matter-of-fact tone.

The bell was alongside the mantel behind us. Bunbury and a second man entered almost immediately. It seemed as if they must have been expecting a summons.

"Assist Professor Ram Lal to the retiring room," said Mrs. Julian.

Bunbury took him by the shoulders, the other by the heels. His head lolled from side to side in a horrible manner, and his eyes were open. The two servants had impassive faces, yet it was clear they didn't like their task. They started for the door. Suddenly the butler dropped the body with a horrid thud on the floor. Somebody screamed.

Bunbury turned a livid face towards his mistress. "My God, madam! He's stopped breathing! He's dead!" he gasped.

III

How shall I describe the scene of confusion that followed? I was dazed. To see death strike in such an unexpected direction; to see a man die without any visible reason for it; it was too horrible. I could not collect my faculties.

The second man, when he discovered he was carrying a corpse, crumpled up in a dead faint. Bunbury dragged him out into the hall. Mme. Storey started to telephone for the police. At the first sound of the word police, Cushack, Mrs. Bracker and Liptrott made a dash to get out of the room.

"Don't let them out of the house!" cried Mme. Storey, 'phone in hand. But what could I do?

We found an unexpected aide in Bunbury. He ran in with outstretched arms blocking the way. His eyes flashed compellingly, and he had forgotten the smooth ways of the butler. "Stay where you are!" he cried. "Nobody leaves this room until the police come!" He kicked the door shut behind him.

The two men yelled to get out, the woman screamed in insensate terror. "Be quiet, you fools!" cried Bunbury. "You are only convicting yourselves!"

His strong voice quieted them. They returned across the room trembling, and turned their backs on the body. Mme. Storey pulled down a portière and covered it.

The police were in the house within a few minutes, bringing their own doctor. Inspector Rumsey followed close behind them. Our old friend's face was grave.

"This will look bad for me," he said to Mme. Storey; "after having disregarded your warning."

"My fault," she said. "You put it up to me and I failed you."

"Who could have foreseen this?" he said gloomily.

An examination of the body failed to reveal the cause of death. There was no wound upon it. The supposed East Indian's skin was really as white as yours or mine. He was discovered to be a drug addict. A hypodermic needle was found on him together with a half-filled bottle of cocaine. There were marks of the needle on his arms and legs, but apparently the needle in his pocket had not been used within the last half-hour or so.

"I should say heart failure at a venture," said the police doctor.

"I have reason to believe he was murdered," said Mme. Storey.

"Then it must be poison. Somebody else may have jabbed a needle in him. Could that have happened while the séance was going on?"

"Quite easily," she answered. "It was dark in the room and our eyes were fastened on Ram Lal's face. Somebody might have crept along the floor."

I was looking at that sweating trio when she said it, and I saw strange glances of terror pass between them. If they were

all in this together they must have foreseen what would follow, and why should they look at each other? It was completely baffling.

The body was removed from the house for an autopsy.

Inspector Rumsey then set about searching the suspected persons. Dr. Cushack came first. When the pocket medicine case came to light, the Inspector handed it over to the doctor for examination. The latter whistled upon reading the labels on the vials.

"A choice collection of poisons!" he remarked. "Some of them so rare I am not familiar with their properties.... Do you use nothing but poisons in your practice?" he queried sarcastically.

"I don't practice," muttered the young man. "I am engaged in research. Poisons happen to be my speciality."

"Which poison were you intending to give Mrs. Julian?" asked Mme. Storey dryly.

Cushack paled. I suppose he had forgotten that incident. "No poison! No poison!" he stammered. "This bottle," he pointed to one of the vials, "is marked antimony, but it only contains bicarbonate of soda. I ... I ... These labels ... are just a bluff."

Everybody smiled.

"If you don't believe me, analyse them! analyse them!" he cried.

One of the little vials was empty, which was suggestive if not exactly incriminating. It bore no label. Nothing else of interest was found upon him.

Next came the woman. From the side pocket of her smart jacket the Inspector lifted a little leather case which, upon being opened, revealed a hypodermic needle. She screamed at the sight of it.

"That's not mine! I never saw it before! I don't own such a thing! I don't know how it got into my pocket! You put it there yourself!"

"That's what they all say," remarked the Inspector wearily.

"I swear it! I swear it!" she screamed.

"Don't swear to me," he said. "You'll have plenty of it to do later."

She raved and beat her breast, but whether it was innocent or guilty terror I declare I could not tell. After all, they look much the same. You have to go by the evidence.

The old man Liptrott was fairly gibbering with fright when the Inspector reached him. It was impossible to get a sensible word out of him. Only crazy talk about his machine. Nothing incriminating was found on him. But Mme. Storey pointed out that the mysterious apparatus was plugged into the wall at the moment of Ram Lal's death, therefore the old man could not be freed of suspicion until the nature of his machine had been investigated.

"It couldn't hurt a fly!" cried Liptrott. "It's to save life, not to destroy it!"

"I'll put it in the hands of an expert for examination," said Inspector Rumsey.

The old man looked at him aghast. Then suddenly frantic, he aimed a kick at his beloved machine that would certainly have destroyed it, had not Mme. Storey coolly moved it out of the way. A policeman flung an arm around the old man.

"It's the work of a lifetime!" he raved. "They'll steal it from me! They'll steal it!"

As they were about to be taken away Mme. Storey said in that dangerously pleasant way of hers: "Which one of you sent me, or caused to be sent me, a message this morning warning me of what was going to happen?"

They stared at her blankly.

"Somebody telephoned me that a murder would be committed here this morning."

I shall never forget the looks of consternation that spread over those three faces. For the moment they were incapable of replying. Then each stammeringly denied all knowledge of the telephone call. Again they glanced at each other in fear and suspicion. One thing was clear, they were speaking the truth then. Such perfect surprise could not have been assumed. That, I suppose, was what my employer was after.

IV

I need hardly say that the case created a first-class sensation in the press. Mrs. Julian's wealth and prominence; the suggestions of mystery and chicanery; the weird Oriental flavour; it had everything. The public excitement seriously hampered the police and Mme. Storey in their work, but of course we could not blame the newspapers for making the most of a good story.

The reporters were already waiting for us in a body when we returned to the office. Mme. Storey is popular with these boys because she deals fairly with them. She will keep back information when it seems necessary, but she does not lie to them. She now gave them the plain facts of what had happened in Mrs. Julian's house, and asked them to withhold comment until the result of the autopsy became known.

"But the man is certainly dead," said one.

"Quite!" said my employer with a dry smile. "But it is possible he died from natural causes."

They glanced at each other peculiarly, and young Winship of the *Morning Press* dropped a bombshell at our feet by asking:

"Is it true, Madame Storey, that an unknown person called you on the telephone this morning, and warned you that a murder would be committed at Mrs. Julian's house?"

She bit her lip in chagrin. "Where did you hear that?" she asked.

"My city editor told me to ask you."

"We all heard the story," said the others in chorus.

Before she answered them Mme. Storey had me call up the city editor of the *Morning Press*. He told me he had been given the story by an anonymous person over the telephone, and that, of course, he would not run it unless Mme. Storey confirmed it. Presumably the same message had been sent to all the papers.

This put my employer in rather a difficult position. But she settled it promptly. "Yes, it is true," she said. "I thought it was a hoax, but I immediately called up Inspector Rumsey to tell him, and I went myself to Mrs. Julian's house."

She was immediately bombarded with questions. "If you knew it, why didn't you stop it? Why did you allow the séance to go on?" And so forth. And so forth.

"No more now," she said firmly. "I'm going to ask you boys to say nothing about the telephone call until we find out where we stand."

"Why? Why?" they asked.

"Well, for one thing, I'd like to disappoint the mysterious gentleman who is so keen about having it published."

They were all willing to keep this piece of information back for twenty-four hours except a man on one of those irresponsible sheets that would sacrifice their mothers if there was a sensation in it. I need not name it. This man slipped out of the room, and we knew he had run off to his office with the story. That let them all out, of course. They beat it for their offices.

My employer merely shrugged. "We can't reform the press," she said. "We have to work with it as we find it."

An hour or two later the first editions came out with scare heads. Well, it was a juicy story. We got a shock when we read it, for, in spite of the care Mme. Storey had taken to prevent such a thing, it included a preposterous interview with Mrs. Julian.

We taxied to her house at once, for there was no telling how she might react to the story of the telephone warning. Just as we were setting out, we received some interesting particulars from the police as to the so-called Ram Lal's antecedents.

Bunbury let us into Mrs. Julian's house. As befitted the perfect butler his aspect was calm and grave. You would never have guessed from him that a tragedy had been enacted upstairs that day. After all, he was the only person in the house who had kept his head, and Mme. Storey smiled at him encouragingly.

"How is your mistress, Bunbury?"

"Calm, madam."

"Bunbury, for her own sake you ought not to let her talk to newspaper reporters."

He shrugged deprecatingly. "What can I do, madam? I perceived from the first that it would be unwise, but she ignored my suggestions. I cannot aspire to influence her actions."

"What time did Ram Lal arrive here this morning?"

"Ten o'clock, madam."

"Did you notice anything unusual about him?"

"No, madam, I perceived nothing out of the way."

"Did he talk to anybody before he saw Mrs. Julian?"

"No, madam, I showed him directly to the boudoir. Dr. Cushack and Mrs. Bracker were already there. Mr. Liptrott came later."

As we moved towards the stairway Mme. Storey saw by Bunbury's face that he wished to say more. She paused.

"If I might add a word," he went on apologetically, "—I hope it is not unbecoming from one in my position—I have worked for Mrs. Julian for eight years and I am sincerely attached to her. I hope you will give her a good talking to,

madam. She will listen to you. From the first I perceived that something like this was bound to happen—indeed I feared it might be worse."

"I'll do my best, Bunbury," said Mme. Storey gravely.

We went on up to the boudoir. That woman's folly was simply incredible. We found her swathed in black chiffon, her face made up dead white. She was seated in front of the lacquer table, on which she had placed a photograph of the smug and unpleasant Ram Lal flanked with lighted candles. Turning on my employer like a tragedy queen, she shot out an accusing forefinger.

"You knew what was going to happen! And you didn't prevent it! I could almost call you his murderer!"

"Be yourself, Aline," said Mme. Storey calmly. "I thought it was a hoax. We are continually being hoaxed over the telephone."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Well, you are not a person that one tells things to. You carry on so!"

I doubt if this reached Mrs. Julian's understanding.

"I thought the threat—if there was a threat—was directed against you," Mme. Storey went on. "Who could ever have foreseen that it was worth anybody's while to murder Ram Lal?"

It was useless to try to reason with Mrs. Julian. She raved on, calling on Heaven to witness what a pure and holy man had been struck down. There was a sort of complacency in her that suggested she was thoroughly enjoying her own dramatics. Exasperating. However, Mme. Storey merely smoked on and let her rave. When she could get a word in edgewise, she said:

"When you quiet down we will discuss how to set about finding the murderer. That's all we can do for Ram Lal now."

This started Mrs. Julian off at a new tangent. "She did it!" she cried. "That woman! She was jealous of my favour. Oh, what black ingratitude! After the thousands I have spent on her!"

"How could she have done it?" asked Mme. Storey mildly.

"Stole up to him when it was dark, and stuck the poisoned needle in his leg! ... I saw her! I saw her!" she cried wildly.

Mme. Storey was not impressed. "Why didn't you say so at once?" she asked.

"I was too much shocked. I didn't realise.... But I saw her, I tell you!"

"Now come, Aline," said my employer. "Are you prepared to go on the stand and swear that you saw Mrs. Bracker do it?"

Mrs. Julian began to falter. "Well ... no.... But she did it just the same. They found the needle on her, didn't they?"

"She claimed that it was planted in her pocket."

"That's a lie, anyhow! She bought that needle a week ago. I know that."

Mme. Storey took more interest. "That's important if true. How do you know it?"

"One day after she had been here I found a little package on the table wrapped in druggists' paper. Not knowing whose it was, I opened it, and the hypodermic needle was inside. She was quite embarrassed when I asked her about it. Said she had bought it for a friend."

"Was the name of the druggist on the paper?"

"Yes. It was Almon and Emory."

"Can you fix the date?"

"Let me see ... I was wearing my new pink dress when I handed it to her. That was Saturday. It must have been Friday when she bought it."

"Friday, February fourth," said my employer. "Make a note of it, Bella.... How long have you known the woman?"

"About a year. She brought a letter from Mrs. Applewhite recommending her as a reducer."

"Who's Mrs. Applewhite?"

"Oh, she was my most intimate friend at that time, but we've quarrelled since. She's just a woman that you meet in hotels."

"Mrs. Bracker was a reducer?" prompted Mme. Storey.

"Yes, she had a new idea. No fasting, no drugs. She just demonstrated slimness."

"Eh?" said Mme. Storey, running up her eyebrows.

"Will-power," said Mrs. Julian.

"Hers or yours?"

"Oh, hers entirely. That's what I paid her for. I had nothing to do but sit and relax."

"I see."

"Seemed so modest and sensible," Mrs. Julian went on. "And you gotta admit her methods had been successful in her own case. She used to weigh 176 pounds. That little woman. Showed me photographs of herself step by step. She took off 68 pounds without denying herself a thing!"

"Did you see her eating everything?"

"No. She never took her meals here."

"I thought not. Go on."

"It was lovely to be able to eat as much as I wanted," said Mrs. Julian innocently. "I do enjoy my meals so. And I lost weight all the time!" She sprang up, gave her skirts a flirt in front of the mirror, and looked at herself coyly over her shoulder. "You gotta admit, Rosika, that I'm ever so much slenderer than I was last year."

"Optimist!" murmured Mme. Storey under her breath. "How much money have you given her?" she asked aloud.

"Latterly it's been five hundred a week. She claimed to be giving me her entire time. She didn't have to be with me, she said. She could sit in her own room and concentrate on my slenderness. She showed me the scales every week."

"Doctored," said Mme. Storey. "You hadn't stopped paying her, had you? Why was she jealous of Ram Lal?"

"Well, she wanted me to settle a lump sum on her."

"Had you promised to do so?"

"Not exactly promised. I couldn't seem to get the money together. I gave it all to Ram Lal."

"How much?"

"A hundred thousand for the crystal. I was trying to get two hundred thousand together to purchase a site for the temple. Nobody knew about the money I gave him. That was a secret between Ram Lal and me."

"I wonder if it was!" remarked Mme. Storey. "... How about Liptrott?" she went on.

"Oh, just a harmless lunatic," said Mrs. Julian impatiently. "I've been keeping him for years. There's that machine of his. Supposed to restore youth. He's always after me to start a company to manufacture it. Once I thought there was something in it, but latterly Mrs. Bracker and Dr. Cushack seemed to be doing me so much good I hadn't much time for Liptrott."

"So Dr. Cushack has been doing you good, too," said Mme. Storey.

Mrs. Julian paused and her fat face started to work like a child's about to cry. "I thought he was," she wailed. "But my family doctor says he's just been feeding me morphine! ... Cushack said it was a rare drug called adrianum. He imported it from the Great Gobi desert in China, and it cost five hundred dollars a gram.... Oh, it made me feel so good!" she added, dissolving into tears altogether.

"I don't doubt it," said Mme. Storey. "You need a nurse."

"I know it!" wailed Mrs. Julian. "I have the heart of a child!"

"For goodness' sake why don't you make friends with decent people?" asked Mme. Storey.

"Nobody likes me except the people I give money to," mourned Mrs. Julian.

My employer and I looked at each other. It was only too true!

"Where did you meet Cushack?" asked Mme. Storey.

"At one of Mrs. Piper's teas. She always has such clever people. He attracted me from the first because he talked so intellectually. I adore intellect. Had diplomas from all the best foreign universities. He had a new theory. Toxi-therapy, he called it."

"It's new all right," murmured my employer.

"You know, it means fighting poison with poison. It certainly sounded convincing. I asked him if my nervousness came from a poison, and he said certainly, and told me of this wonderful new drug. And after he had been to see me a few times I took some."

"You let him give you a poison!" exclaimed Mme. Storey.

"Oh, he took some himself first," said Mrs. Julian with her innocent baby stare. "He carried around the most terrible poisons, and took them quite freely, because he had made himself immune."

Mme. Storey could only shake her head. "How about Ram Lal?" she asked. "Did you meet him at a tea?"

"No, he wrote asking me to help the starving millions in India. No thought of self. I didn't pay any attention to his first letters; I get so many! But later he said something that proved he was psychic."

"What was that?"

"Oh, you'll only laugh. He wrote that the feeling kept coming to him that I was starving too, in the midst of my riches, and he was holding a thought of spiritual sustenance in his mind."

"So you asked him to call."

"Yes. Oh, my dear, if you could have seen him you wouldn't scoff. So thin and emaciated; his great eyes burning with an other-worldly light! He had spent years in abstinence and meditation."

"Seems to have put on flesh since," murmured Mme. Storey.

"Well, yes, a little.... But, oh, my dear! a true mystic! There was a little crystal on my desk, just an ornament. His gaze fastened on it and he began to read the past and the future. Imagine my joy!"

"How about the starving millions in India?"

"Well, we found that the reports were much exaggerated."

"The truth is," said Mme. Storey relentlessly, "Ram Lal's brown skin went no farther than his neck and wrists. I am informed by the police that his right name was Sam Gumpel. He was the son of an East Side tailor who threw him out years ago because he wouldn't work."

Mrs. Julian buried her face in her hands. "No! No!" she wailed. "I will not believe it! Oh, spare me my last illusion!" But in her heart she knew it was true.

"I assume you paid all these people by cheque?" said Mme. Storey.

Mrs. Julian, weeping, nodded her head.

"Then I want you to make me a list from the stubs of all the sums you have given them with the dates."

She promised to do so.

"Last year," said Mme. Storey severely. "I found you in the hands of a witch-doctor and a woman who called herself a physi-meliorator. What has become of them?"

"I sent them away," whimpered Mrs. Julian. "Bunbury caught them faking and told me."

"With you," my employer went on, divided between pity and exasperation, "life seems to be just one damn faker after another. What's to become of you if you go on like this? I can't spare the time to get you out of your scrapes."

"What am I to do?" wailed Mrs. Julian in one of her rare bursts of honesty; "anybody with a slick tongue can get around me!"

"Hire a watch dog to stand between you and such people. Get an incorruptible woman for a secretary; one who will tell you the truth!"

"Where could I find such a one?"

"I'll find her for you.... But mind you, if you fire her for telling you the truth, I swear I'll have you declared incompetent by the courts!"

"Oh, I'll do anything you say, Rosika! Anything!"

V

Inspector Rumsey was in our office to report on what the police had been doing, and to confer with my employer. I should point out that Mme. Storey's connection with this case was purely *ex officio*. It was entirely a police matter, and she worked with them merely because her reputation was involved owing to that confounded telephone call.

At the same time we were quietly busy on our own account. Crider and Stephens, two of our best men, had been detailed to watch the Julian house and to report on all who entered or left it. I had verified the sale of the hypodermic needle to Mrs. Bracker. Mme. Storey had sent for a transcript of the examination of the three suspects by the police, and was studying it. Psychology is her forte.

Everything still waited on the result of the autopsy. Dr. Chisholm, the toxicologist who was conducting it, had promised to meet the Inspector in our office at eleven.

"What progress have you made since I saw you?" asked Mme. Storey.

"I have been progressing backward," the Inspector bitterly answered.

She laughed and pushed the cigarettes towards him. "Well, it isn't the first time we've been stumped, old friend."

"It seems as if there was a regular conspiracy to baulk me!" he went on, pounding his thigh. "Matson, who runs the homicide bureau in the district attorney's office, won't act. Says the case is a mare's nest. In short, he leaves me holding the bag. On the other hand, the three suspects have engaged Jim Shryock to represent them. The cleverest and most unscrupulous shyster in New York! He's been a thorn in my side for years!"

"Has he made any move?"

"Yes. He's given me forty-eight hours to have his clients arraigned before a magistrate, or he'll swear out writs of habeas corpus, he says. When there is a suspicion of murder a magistrate would hold them upon the least bit of evidence. But I haven't even that. Shryock knows that he has me!"

"Oh, well," said Mme. Storey soothingly, "the result of the autopsy may force him to change his tune."

"I don't know," said Rumsey darkly. "He seems damn sure of himself."

"What have you learned about these people?"

"Very little. On the woman's cards she gave her address as the Hotel Vandermeer. I found for a fact that she had been living there nearly a year. An expensive suite. The management denied that she's been carrying on any business in the hotel."

"They would say that anyhow."

"Sure. She had her own telephone. The servants said she had no visitors. I found cocaine in powder form in her room, so I assume she is an addict. Nothing to throw any light on her past except half a dozen family photographs. I'm trying to trace them through the names of the photographers that appear on the cards."

"Here's a lead," said Mme. Storey. "I find that Mrs. Bracker purchased a hypodermic needle from the firm of Almon and Emory on February fourth. She presented an order for it signed by Dr. A. Cushack."

Rumsey sat up with a jerk. "Good!" he cried. "Then it was her needle that we found on her. It implicates them both. Now we have the beginning of a case!"

"We may have," said Mme. Storey cautiously.

"As to the Doctor," the Inspector went on, "I have had the contents of his medicine case analysed, and the so-called poisons turn out to be harmless. Common salt; coloured water; alcohol and the like. One contained morphine but not in sufficient quantity to kill. The fellow was actually speaking the truth!"

"Even a liar has to sometimes," murmured Mme. Storey.

"I visited his office; a single room in a commercial building on Forty-Second Street. There was chemical paraphernalia lying about; retorts, bottles, etc. No drugs. Nothing to show he had been working there lately."

"Probably cleaned up in expectation of a search," suggested Mme. Storey.

"No doubt," said Rumsey gloomily.

"Did you question the office cleaners?" she asked.

"Not yet."

"I'll do that when we learn the result of the autopsy."

"Very well.... There were no letters or personal papers," he resumed. "To my surprise, his diploma turned out to be genuine. He was graduated from Jefferson five years ago, and admitted to practice in this state the same year."

"You have inquired at the college?"

"Yes. Members of the faculty identified him from a photograph. Was remembered as a sharp lad but an indifferent student. Not well liked."

"And Liptrott?" asked Mme. Storey.

"I have been able to piece together a fairly complete life story for him. Has lived at the Sanford House on West

Eleventh Street for many years. An ancient hotel now much run down. Has several important inventions to his credit, but the money he got for them has been spent long ago. He is alone in the world now. Is considered slightly cracked by his associates in the hotel.

"There is no doubt that he has gone deeply into the nature of electrical phenomena. I had an expert from the G.E. laboratories to study his machine. Could make nothing of it. Says it appears to be a senseless conglomeration of tubes and wires and magnets. But he will not swear there is nothing in it without having some knowledge of what Liptrott was after. The longer you study electricity, he says, the greater respect you have for its possibilities."

"Quite," said Mme. Storey.

"I found cocaine in liquid form in Liptrott's room," said the Inspector, "but no needle. He's evidently an addict too. He's been whining for it all day. I don't know what's coming to the world!"

"Oh, the world is much as it always was," returned Mme. Storey. "These people belong to a special class, moral invalids; it's natural they should turn to drugs to buoy them up.... I suggest you give him a needle to steady him," she went on. "Bring him up here with his machine before lunch, and let him give you and me a demonstration."

Rumsey agreed.

"What have you learned about Ram Lal?" she asked.

"A month ago he rented a house on West Seventy-Ninth Street near Columbus Avenue. No one there when I entered it yesterday. Had been lavishly furnished in Oriental style. According to the neighbours he employed several servants, but they had vanished. I found nothing that threw any light on the manner of his murder."

Promptly at eleven the buzzer sounded in the outer office announcing the coming of Dr. Chisholm. He was the most famous toxicologist in New York and a good all-round man. We had had dealings with him before.

I led him into Mme. Storey's room. His face was giving nothing away. The Inspector jumped up eagerly. He could scarcely wait for polite greetings to be exchanged.

"Well, doctor?"

Dr. Chisholm spread out his hands deprecatingly. "The result of the autopsy is nil," he said. "I cannot tell you what killed Ram Lal."

It was a bitter disappointment. Inspector Rumsey dropped back into his chair with a grunt. My employer carefully knocked the ash off her cigarette.

I pushed forward a chair for the doctor. For a moment there was silence in the room. Finally Mme. Storey said incredulously:

"A man dies, and with all the resources of science at your command you cannot say why!"

"He died because his heart stopped beating," he replied. "I don't know why it stopped."

"No trace of poison in his blood?"

"None whatever."

"Or in his stomach?"

"None."

"How could he have been poisoned through the stomach?" put in Rumsey.

"To be sure," said Mme. Storey; "but I didn't want to overlook anything.... But do men die like that?" she went on to the doctor. "Without any apparent reason for it?"

"Oh, yes, Madame."

"Healthy men?"

"Few men over forty can be said to be perfectly healthy. His lungs showed some infiltration due to old tubercular lesions. His heart was a little enlarged, but without any pericarditis. There were also some suspicious spots in the pelvis. All common conditions."

"But none of them sufficient to have caused death?"

"Not ordinarily."

"Then if this was just an ordinary case the report would be that the man died of...?"

"Heart failure, Madame."

Mme. Storey and the Inspector looked at each other. Rumsey was very glum.

"But there are poisons, doctor," my employer insisted, "that may kill without leaving any trace of themselves in the body?"

"There are such poisons," he answered cautiously, "but naturally they are not known outside the laboratory. We never meet them in practice."

"There is a possibility this crime may be the work of a chemist."

"I am aware of it."

"Would you be kind enough to prepare me a list of such poisons together with their properties and effects so far as known?" she asked.

"Certainly, Madame."

"What's the use?" said Rumsey. "Even though there are such poisons, how can we go beyond the body?"

"Every precedent has to be created in the first place," she answered smiling.

"I say we're stalled," he said with his harassed air. "Aren't we justified now in assuming that it was only a coincidence?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, a practical joker calls up and tells you there is going to be a murder at Mrs. Julian's. You go there, and a man happens to die from natural causes."

Mme. Storey slowly shook her head. "That would be stretching the arm of coincidence too far. I don't believe he died a natural death, and you don't believe it. The public would never believe it, and if we tried to put it over it would only react to the damage of our own reputations."

"But what can we do?" he said helplessly. "There is no case!"

"We must build up a case."

"Have you a theory?" he asked eagerly.

"I have a theory," she answered dryly, "but the evidence is insufficient."

They agreed among themselves to withhold the result of the autopsy for a few hours, or at least until Dr. Chisholm had time to read up on the rare poisons that might have been administered to Ram Lal. However, as he was in the act of taking his leave, the telephone rang and a man's voice inquired for him.

I handed the instrument over to him. He presently clapped a hand over the transmitter and lifted a dismayed face.

"It's the city editor of the *Morning Press*," he said. "He tells me somebody has just called him up to say that the autopsy on the body of Ram Lal revealed no trace of poison. He wants me to confirm it. At my office they told him I was here."

Inspector Rumsey jumped up, swearing roundly. My employer used no expletives, but her face turned grim.

"This is the fine Italian hand of the murderer again," she said quietly. "He is vain of his crime."

"But the suspects are all locked up!" cried the perplexed Inspector. "How could they reach a telephone?"

She did not answer. "If the truth is out we would only make ourselves ridiculous by denying it," she said to Dr. Chisholm. "Tell the city editor his information is correct."

He did so, and hung up. Both men looked to my employer for inspiration. She arose and paced the long room, thinking hard. At last she said:

"When you find yourself up against it, unexpected measures are called for. Jim Shryock dares you to produce the suspects for a hearing two days hence. Why wait until he is ready? Shryock is famous for his success in making away with evidence. I suggest you produce them before a magistrate this afternoon."

"They'll be set free!" cried Rumsey.

"It doesn't matter much," she said impatiently; "none of those three is the actual murderer.... Have them up this afternoon. Summon your witnesses to court. But do not let the suspects be arraigned until just before court adjourns. If the case goes over until the next day so much the better. I take it you can arrange that?"

"Sure!" said the puzzled Rumsey. "Anything you say. But what's the idea. Just give me a hint of what you're up to so I won't make any mistake."

"It's simply this," she answered. "I want to collect the whole *dramatis personæ* in court this afternoon, and keep them there, so that I can do some intensive work on the case without interference."

"How about Liptrott?"

"I'll attend to him while I'm eating my lunch."

VI

In order to save time I had a light lunch sent in for Mme. Storey. She was eating it when Liptrott was brought up from Headquarters carrying his precious box. His guards were

invited to wait in the hall. Inspector Rumsey who had been away on some errand returned about the same time.

I have already described the old man with his decent black clothes and old-fashioned Yankee manner. There was no look of the potential murderer about him. On all subjects but one he seemed perfectly sane and shrewd, but when that blessed machine came up, his tongue went wild. Such borderline cases, of course, may be extremely dangerous.

"He's happy again," the Inspector whispered to Mme. Storey. "They gave him another needle."

And indeed the old man seemed as pleased as a child at a party. My employer had me order in some good cigars for him. He bit the end off one, and lighted it with gusto.

"The real Havana, mem. Once I smoked none but the best myself."

We grouped ourselves around the big writing-table.

"Mr. Liptrott," said Mme. Storey, "I didn't have them bring you up here to be worried with questions about that terrible affair yesterday. I am just curious about that wonderful machine of yours, and I'm hoping you'll give me a demonstration."

He sprang up with alacrity. "Happy to oblige, 'm."

I was sitting on Mme. Storey's right with my note-book on the table. The Inspector was opposite her with his chair turned half around so he could watch Liptrott. The old man

carried his apparatus to the nearest outlet in the baseboard, and lifted out the smaller box with the cords dangling from it, and switches and dials on top. Plugging it in, he turned a switch and I heard the familiar buzzing and crackling. The sound brought back the whole horrible scene in Mrs. Julian's boudoir.

Satisfied that it was working all right, he switched it off and gave us a little lecture. I shall not try to repeat it all. A crazy mixture of electrical and physiological terms, it sounded like utter nonsense to me. For instance:

"... And so, mem, just as a man-made generator gathers the vital principle out of the air and sends it to us in a current that we can use for light and power, so nature's generator which is the body, absorbs life through its organs. But as the body machine wears out it becomes less able to transmute raw life to its own uses, and so our vitality fails.

"My machine replaces the organs and glands of the body. It takes raw electricity from the power station and digests it into a form that the body can use. I am no quack doctor. I make no claim that it can cure disease. I only say that it will furnish you with the vitality necessary to resist disease and to keep you young."

The obvious question was, why didn't he renew his own visibly failing vitality? However, nobody put it to him.

"How wonderful!" said Mme. Storey. "Can you give us all a sample now?"

"Not all of you at once," he said. "One at a time. I must first find out the measure of a person's vitality, and set the machine accordingly. No two persons are the same."

"I see," said Mme. Storey. "We are all like radio receiving sets that only pick up the wave lengths for which we are set."

"Same principle, mem."

You see there was a crazy plausibility about his spiel. I could understand how a woman like Mrs. Julian might be deceived by it for a while.

Liptrott held out a small zinc cylinder that was connected to the machine by a cord. "If you'll grasp this a minute the dial will register."

Mme. Storey obeyed, and he read off the dial: "Seven four seven, point two five. Your vitality is very high, mem. You would not need my machine for many a year to come."

"That's nice. I suppose it won't hurt me."

"Oh, no. Nobody feels so good but what they couldn't feel better."

He took the cylinder from her. "What must I do now?" she asked.

"Nothing, mem. You may sit and eat. The best of my machine is, the user don't have to devote any time to it. You can go on about your business and it will still be doing its work as long as you're in the same room."

"How convenient!"

Seating herself, she took another sandwich. Meanwhile Liptrott turned a switch, and the crackling recommenced. He had set up a little vertical steel disc on top of the box, and turned it towards Mme. Storey. For a while nothing was said.

"Do you feel anything?" he asked at last.

"A sort of pleasant warmth stealing through my veins."

"That's it!" he cried exultantly. "Increased vitality ... I am only giving you a very little," he added. "Too much would be dangerous, very dangerous!"

It was impossible to tell from Mme. Storey's expression whether she was really impressed or not. Rumsey was watching her covertly.

Liptrott presently switched off the current. "That's enough," he said, "or you wouldn't get any sleep tonight."

"I am tingling all over," she said.

He carefully deposited the box in its case together with the various cords and handles, and locked it up. He then stood up with a manner that he intended to be very dramatic, but it was pathetic in one so old. His eyes were quite daft then.

"Now that I have convinced you of the worth of my invention," he said, "I have a statement to make."

Mme. Storey was calmly eating. "What is it?"

He folded his arms like an old-time actor. "It was me who killed Professor Ram Lal."

"Good God! how?" exclaimed Rumsey.

"With my machine. I gave him the full charge. It killed him. I told Mme. Storey over the 'phone I was going to do it."

"Yours was not the voice I heard over the 'phone," I said.

"I changed my voice to sound young."

"What did you do it for?" demanded the Inspector.

"He was a blackguard and a swindler! I killed him to save Mrs. Julian."

"Is there anything in this?" said the Inspector turning to Mme. Storey.

She glanced at the old man enigmatically. "I find it hard to believe," she said, "because I only experienced good from the machine." Clearly, this was to draw him out.

Mildly as the doubt was expressed, it roused Liptrott to a crazy fury. In order to justify his invention he was willing, it appeared, to send himself to the chair. "It's true! It's true," he cried stamping on the floor. "What can build up can also destroy! If I had an animal here, a dog, a cat, a bird, I could prove it to you. I would kill it before your eyes."

My employer pretended to raise objections. "I don't want anything killed."

"Then I won't kill it," said Liptrott. "I'll just drive it crazy for a while. That will show you.... Send out to an animal store," he begged; "get a guinea pig, a young dog, anything that has life!"

The upshot of this strange scene was that I was presently despatched to the basement to borrow the house cat from the engineer.

He had his machine out of the box again, and was testing it when I entered. He had calmed down, but his glance was still perfectly insane. "It will be a little difficult to take her register," he said. "You had better hold her since she's accustomed to you."

I held the cat on her back in my lap, putting the zinc cylinder against her breast as Liptrott told me, while he steadied her hindquarters. She was a gentle cat and made no protest at first, but suddenly with a loud miaow, she leaped from my lap and running to the door, scratched at it, and looked at me reproachfully over her shoulder.

"I have her register!" cried Liptrott, glancing at his dial. "It is seven six eight. A very strong cat. So much the better!"

Switching on the current he turned the steel disc in the direction of the cat. She, seeing that no further move was made against her, sat down with admirable composure, and started licking her paw.

It all seemed like crazy nonsense to me, nevertheless my heart was beating fast. There was something uncanny about it. There was no sound in the room but the muffled crackling and buzzing from inside the box.

Suddenly the cat with an uneasy whine arose and stood as if listening, twitching her tail. She crouched and whimpered, twisting her head from side to side. Then with a cry she began to run. She ran straight into the wall. She seemed to have increased to twice her size and her tail stood up as thick as a fox's brush. Faster and faster she ran like a creature possessed, until she seemed to be running straight around the walls.

Liptrott switched off the current. He laughed and slapped his thigh in childish delight. "Now will you believe me! Now will you believe me!" he babbled.

I stared at him in horror. Crazy he certainly was, but it seemed to me that he possessed the power of life and death in that black box!

"Good God, then it's true!" muttered the Inspector. "It was he who killed Ram Lal!"

"He had no more to do with Ram Lal's death than I had," said Mme. Storey coolly from her chair. "I suspected it from the first. Now I know it. There is nothing the matter with the cat but a shot of cocaine. I saw him give her the needle while Bella held her."

Poor Rumsey looked excessively foolish. I know I felt so.

Liptrott, when his trick was exposed, snarled with rage, and started cursing us all. His guards led him away.

"Nothing in it but a crazy desire to win notoriety for his machine," said Mme. Storey. "There's no use bringing him up in court. Better take him home to his hotel."

VII

Since I had inside information that the suspects in the Ram Lal case were not to be arraigned until near the close of the session, I did not go to court until after four. The place was the West Side Court on Fifty-Third Street. I was provided with a witness' card which would admit me to a seat on the front benches.

The gross figure of Jim Shryock was lolling in the corner seat of the front row. With a sneer fixed in his face, he was idly trimming his nails. An entirely unscrupulous lawyer with mysterious political affiliations, he was one of the most sinister figures in New York. Everybody knew he was a crook, but it seemed impossible to reach him. In the end I'm glad to say, Mme. Storey caught him with the goods. But that's another story.

I was astonished to see that he had old Liptrott sitting beside him. At the moment I was unable to figure out the significance of this move. Liptrott was quiet enough then.

The magistrate was McManigal, one of the newer appointees who take themselves very seriously.

As the moments passed, the frown on Inspector Rumsey's face deepened. He knew that he was doomed to cut a ridiculous figure in court unless Mme. Storey came to his aid before our suspects were arraigned.

Finally their names were called, and they were brought in. Cushack was trying to look nonchalant, while Mrs. Bracker was tight-lipped and defiant. Both wished to have it understood that though they happened to be arraigned together, there was no connection between them. Jim Shryock arose lazily, and entered the enclosure to whisper with them.

Rumsey started a speech to the bench relating all the circumstances of Ram Lal's death. He was obviously sparring for time, and his Honour soon became impatient.

"Inspector, it's scarcely necessary to go into detail concerning a matter that has been so thoroughly written up in the newspapers. Just present your evidence against these persons and I'll hold them."

Rumsey bowed, and called to the stand a clerk from the store of Almon and Emory who testified to the sale of a hypodermic needle to Mrs. Bracker, and identified the order she had presented for it signed by Dr. Cushack. The clerk was followed by a policeman who testified to the finding of a needle on Mrs. Bracker after the death of Ram Lal. Inspector Rumsey then called me to the stand to testify as to the

obvious jealousy and hatred that Cushack and Mrs. Bracker had exhibited towards Ram Lal.

"Is that all?" asked the magistrate, running up his eyebrows.

"That is all, your Honour."

Shryock spoke up. "If you please, your Honour, Mrs. Bracker would like to testify in her own behalf concerning that needle."

She was put on the stand and sworn. In her neat, close-fitting grey suit and shaped hat she was as smart as paint. Just the same she was a horrible-looking woman with those ghastly starved cheeks, and mouth like a red gash in her powdered face. She sat down, crossed her legs and spread her gloves on her knee with a great pretence of self-possession.

"Do you admit buying the needle at Almon and Emory's?" asked Shryock smoothly.

"Certainly. But that was not the one they found in my pocket."

"One moment! Just confine yourself to answering my questions, please.... For what purpose did you buy that needle?"

"Well, I told Mrs. Julian I bought it for a friend," she said volubly, "but that was only a stall. I'm not an addict but I take cocaine occasionally for my neuralgia. And Dr. Cushack told

me it was nicer to take it in liquid form. So I bought the needle. But I didn't like taking it that way, so I threw it away."

"Oh, you threw it away. Where?"

"One night when I was crossing Brooklyn Bridge in a taxi I threw it out of the window."

"What about the needle that was found in your pocket?"

"I know nothing about that!" she cried stridently. "It wasn't mine! It was planted on me!"

"All right," said Shryock. "That's all." He turned to Rumsey. "Will you question her, Inspector?"

"No," said Rumsey glumly.

Shryock's next move was to put Liptrott on the stand. "When Ram Lal fell down dead in Mrs. Julian's boudoir," the lawyer sad, "I understand that you and these two people were seated behind him and to one side against the wall."

"Yes, sir." The old man was perfectly composed. "I was nearest to the Hindoo, then Mrs. Bracker, then the Doctor."

"Did either of those persons move from their places while the séance was going on?"

"No, sir. They never moved."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure I'm sure. They couldn't have reached the Hindoo without passing in front of me."

"All right. Now I've got just one more question to ask you." Shryock glanced around the court as much as to say there was something good coming. "Can you tell me anything about the hypodermic needle that was found in Mrs. Bracker's pocket?"

A foolish grin spread over the old man's face. He scratched his neck with a forefinger. "Sure," he said, "that was my needle. I planted it in her pocket."

His words created a mild sensation in the room. All realised that what little was left of the Inspector's case had gone glimmering.

"Why did you do that?" asked Shryock.

"Well, when I seen Ram Lal was dead I thought maybe they'd try to hang it on me," the old man said with his witless grin. "I had the needle in my pocket, and I thought they'd make out I'd given him a shot of something since I was the nearest to him."

"That's all," said Shryock in high satisfaction.

"I protest, your Honour," said Rumsey indignantly. "This man is out of his wits. He's not a fit witness. I can prove it if you give me time."

"Just a minute, Inspector," said the magistrate. "As I understand it, this man Liptrott is an addict. You found a

bottle of cocaine on him, but no needle. Is that right?"

"Yes."

"Did you ever find his needle?"

"No."

"Then the chances are he's speaking the truth."

"I insist he's not a proper witness," said Rumsey, snatching at anything to gain a moment or two.

The magistrate shrugged. "Can you offer any evidence that Ram Lal died of poison?" he asked.

"No, your Honour."

"Then it doesn't matter whether this man's testimony is proper or not. You have no case, Inspector. And I have no alternative but to..."

He was interrupted by the entrance of Mme. Storey.

She entered by the side door smiling and beautifully dressed. She was carrying a small satchel and a man and a woman followed her; new witnesses, I assumed. They were unknown to me. Inspector Rumsey's glum face cleared as if by magic. A murmur of gratification travelled around the court—then dead silence. All knew her, of course, from her oft-published photographs. As a star attraction Mrs. Julian was nowhere alongside Mme. Storey. The people's silence seemed to say: Now we'll get a run for our money.

And they did.

VIII

Before I go on with my account of the magistrate's hearing I should explain that amongst the list of rare poisons furnished by Dr. Chisholm, there was one that could be quite simply prepared by distilling and redistilling a substance that is in universal use. This stuff may be purchased in any quantity from druggists or department stores, yet the poison derived from it is one of the deadliest known; moreover, it kills without leaving any trace of itself in the body.

The process of distilling is now so generally understood, that all the doctors in the case agreed it would be against the public interest to advertise this formula. Consequently this poison was never named in the case, and of course I must not name it here. I will simply call the stuff X and the poison distillate DX.

Magistrate McManigal greeted Mme. Storey gallantly and invited her to a place on the bench. As she seated herself she said:

"I have brought a little additional evidence in this case."

Ah! with what a sharp anxiety Cushack and Mrs. Bracker glanced at her then! The little doctor lost his nonchalance.

Jim Shryock chewed the ends of his ragged moustache, sneering still.

"Do you wish these persons to be called to the stand?" asked the magistrate.

"First of all I would like Mrs. Bracker to answer a few questions if she is willing," she said politely.

The woman glanced anxiously at Shryock, and he answered for her. "Certainly! She is not obliged to answer the questions unless it suits her."

So Mrs. Bracker took the stand again.

Mme. Storey began in a voice as mild as milk—it is at such moments that she is most to be feared: "I suppose you were well acquainted with Ram Lal through having met him at Mrs. Julian's so often."

"No, indeed!" said Mrs. Bracker with a toss of her head. "I never aspired to be his friend. I had nothing whatever to do with him."

"What is your explanation of his death?" asked Mme. Storey innocently.

"Oh, I suppose he had a stroke of some sort. Not surprising with the life he led."

"What about his life?"

"Don't ask me! One couldn't help hearing stories about what went on at that elegant seraglio of his on Seventy-Ninth Street."

Mme. Storey made no attempt to follow up this lead. "I suppose you have witnessed many of Ram Lal's séances at Mrs. Julian's?" she said.

"Sure," was the indifferent reply.

"Weren't you impressed by them?"

"No!"

"Then you believe they weren't genuine?"

"He was just a common faker!" said Mrs. Bracker scornfully. "That's known now, isn't it? East Indian! Huh!"

"But he seemed to me to be completely possessed," said Mme. Storey blandly; "to be lifted right out of himself as you might say."

Mrs. Bracker merely laughed disagreeably.

"Did they always end the same as yesterday in a sort of fit?"

"Sure! That was part of his game."

"But how could he fake that?" said Mme. Storey. "The frothing at the mouth and all."

"Used to slip a wafer in his mouth," said Mrs. Bracker laughing. "Sort of soapy wafer. That made the froth. It's an old trick."

"Did you see him do that?" asked Mme. Storey feigning to be greatly surprised.

"Sure. I used to watch for it."

"Did you see him do it yesterday?"

"Sure. I saw his hands go up."

"Thanks, that's all," said Mme. Storey unexpectedly.

Mrs. Bracker stared at her hatefully. She felt that she had been tricked somehow. "What's that got to do with me?" she demanded.

"Nothing whatever," said Mme. Storey sweetly.

Mrs. Bracker stepped down in somewhat of a fluster.

"What do you expect to show by this line of questioning?" the magistrate asked Mme. Storey. We all pricked up our ears for her answer. She said: "The first assumption was that Ram Lal had been poisoned through being jabbed by a hypodermic needle. That theory won't hold water. I now aim to show that he was poisoned by the wafer which he took into his mouth a few seconds before he died."

"But the poison, Madame?"

"I'm coming to that," she said pleasantly. "... I should now like to put this woman on the stand that I have brought with me. Mrs. Euphemia Larkin. She is really Inspector Rumsey's witness, but he hasn't had an opportunity to talk to her. So if you will permit me I will question her."

"Certainly," said the magistrate. "We are not sticklers for formality here. All we want is to bring out the truth."

Shryock arose with his disagreeable smile. Just the same the man was a little worried. "Excuse me, your Honour, but it is five o'clock. I'm sorry to have to mention it, but I have an important engagement..."

You could hear the whole room take a breath. They were afraid that the curtain was going to be rung down just at the most exciting moment. Well, his Honour was only human and he didn't want to miss the dénouement either.

"Will it take long?" he asked Mme. Storey.

"Less than ten minutes, your Honour."

"We will proceed."

Mrs. Larkin was a typical New York Irish char woman, a racy specimen. Still youngish and not at all bad-looking, she proudly displayed her Sunday clothes on the witness stand. A little intimidated by finding all eyes upon her, she was nevertheless enjoying her conspicuousness.

"What is your employment, Mrs. Larkin?" asked Mme. Storey.

"Cleaning woman in the Stilson Building on Forty-Second Street, ma'am."

Mme. Storey opened the satchel she had brought and took from it two square-sided quart bottles such as druggists use, a piece of wrapping paper, a length of string and a pink ticket. "Do you recognise these things?"

"Sure!" said Mrs. Larkin. "Them's the things I give you in my rooms a half-hour ago."

"Where did you get them?"

"Picked 'em out of the waste basket in room 1014 of my building."

"You can swear that it was room 1014?"

"Sure! Them's druggists' bottles, and 1014 is a doctor's office sort of, with a laboratory and all."

"When did you find them there?"

"Night before last at cleaning time."

"You are sure of the time?"

"Absolutely. I mind taking them home with me."

"What did you take them home for?"

"Well, bottles come in handy," said Mrs. Larkin with a grin that set the whole court roaring. "As for the paper I took that

to wrap the bottles in. They had come in that paper because the creases just fitted. And the string."

"How about this pink ticket?"

"That's a sales ticket from the cut-price drug-store in the Stilson Building. I pick up a lot of them in the waste baskets. If you save them till you get a hundred dollars' worth they give you a dollar credit in the store."

"Who is the tenant in room 1014?"

"Dr. A. Cushack."

"Do you know him?"

"No'm. He's always gone home before I do my work."

"That's all, thank you," said Mme. Storey.

Mrs. Larkin stepped down, a little disappointed that her turn had been so brief.

"If Dr. Cushack is willing to testify as to these bottles..." Mme. Storey began politely.

He was already on his feet. "Sure!" he cried. "I want the court to know what was in them!" He took the stand with a truculent air. The word natty might have been coined to describe that little man. A day in jail had rubbed none of the bloom off him. He pretended to be swelling with indignation like a little turkey cock.

"You admit, then, that these were your bottles," said Mme. Storey.

"I can't identify them," he said with a conceited laugh, "but if she says she got them out of my waste basket it's all right with me.... Tell the judge what was in them."

"Each bottle contained X," said Mme. Storey carelessly.

"Yeah, X!" he cried, thrusting out his chin at her. "I use it in my lab. work. I couldn't do anything without it. Everybody uses X for one thing or another. Thousands of bottles are sold every day. Is there any harm in X?"

"Why, no," said Mme. Storey. "... But a little goes a long way. I was just surprised that you used so much."

"Oh, I don't know how long I've had those bottles on hand."

That was his first slip. "I know," said Mme. Storey quietly. "You bought them the same day."

He stared at her speechlessly. She merely exhibited the sales slip.

"You can't prove anything by that!" he cried. "They don't enter the items on the sales slips. Only the amounts."

"Quite," said Mme. Storey. "The bottles are each marked thirty-nine cents. The slip is for seventy-eight."

"That doesn't prove anything. It's only a coincidence. Half the articles they sell are priced at thirty-nine cents."

"Well, what else did you buy that day?" She glanced at the slip. "February ninth."

He was dumb.

Mme. Storey gave him a brief respite. It was her way with a witness. "What's your idea of this case?" she asked confidentially. "Was Ram Lal poisoned?"

He rose to it immediately. "It's an open question," he said importantly. "As a toxicologist I aspire to do a little investigating myself when I get out. It's an interesting case!"

She returned to the charge. "What did you do with two quarts of X the day before yesterday?"

"I was conducting an experiment," he answered warily.

"Of what nature?"

"I refuse to answer. I make my living out of my experiments."

"No other drugs were found in your laboratory."

"Well, I used everything up."

"What did you do with the result of your experiment that day?"

"Poured it down the wash-basin. It was unsuccessful."

"Then why not tell me what other drugs you used; where you got them and so on."

"Why should I?" he parried.

"Ever hear of distillate of X?" she asked casually.

Some of the pink faded out of his cheeks. "Yes," he said. "Poisons are my speciality."

"You are familiar with its properties then?"

He hesitated briefly before answering. "I have read about it. Never experimented with it."

Mme. Storey started on another line. "Where did you go when..."

He interrupted her excitedly. "No, you don't! I perceive what you're after! You can't make an insinuation like that before the court without following it up!"

"All right," she said good-naturedly. "I'll follow it up. Did you make distillate of X in your laboratory the day before yesterday?"

"No!" he shouted. "It's false!" He wiped his face.

"What time did you leave the office that day?" she asked.

"I don't remember," he said sullenly.

"Now come," she said cajolingly; "only the day before yesterday."

"About six," he muttered.

"Where did you go?"

"Home."

"By the way, where do you live? I don't think I have been told."

"Hotel Shirley."

"Oh, the Shirley. Did anyone there see you come in?"

"I got my key from the desk as usual. It's not likely the clerk could remember that night amongst the others."

"Where did you dine?"

"At the hotel."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"Do you always occupy the same seat?"

"Yes."

"With the same people more or less at the surrounding tables?"

He saw where these apparently innocent questions were tending, and turned scared and stubborn. "I won't answer!" he cried shrilly. "I won't answer any more. If you're trying to pin this thing on me I don't have to answer!"

"Why, of course not!" said Mme. Storey with undisturbed good humour. "You may step down."

She then called the man she had brought with her, a lean young fellow with a bright eye. His name was given as John Withy; his occupation, free-lance writer.

"Where do you live?" she asked.

"Number —— West Forty-Seventh Street."

"What sort of building is that?"

"An old residence which has been rebuilt into stores, offices and small apartments. It's a walk-up building."

"Where are your rooms?"

"I have a one-room and bath apartment third floor rear."

"Have you ever before seen the man who last testified here, Dr. Cushack?"

"Yes, ma'am. Saw him in my building day before yesterday. That was Wednesday. About six-thirty p.m."

"Under what circumstances?"

"Well, I was coming home to wash up for dinner and I found him standing in the hall outside my door. Seemed funny, hanging around like that. So I left my door open when I went in to sort of keep an eye on him. My friend who lives in the front is out of town, and I thought maybe he aimed to get in there. But another fellow came upstairs in a minute or two, and it seemed this one was just waiting for him. The second fellow was the man who rents the hall room next to mine. Alfred Somers is the name in his letter-box downstairs."

"Did you hear what they said to each other?" asked Mme. Storey.

"Just a word or two. Somers says: 'Have you got it?' and this man"—he nodded in the direction of Dr. Cushack —"says: 'Yeah.' Somers says: 'Come on in,' and they went into his room. This sounded kind of mysterious to me, and I wanted to hear more. There is an old door between my room and Somers' which is locked now and the cracks stuffed with paper. I put my ear to the crack and I hear Somers say: 'How can I fix the wafer with this?' And this man said: 'Just pour a few drops on it and let it soak in.' That was all I could hear, and I thought nothing of it at the time."

"Mr. Withy," said Mme. Storey with delicate impressiveness, "I want you to look around this courtroom and see if you can pick out the man you know as Alfred Somers."

I jumped, her move was so absolutely unexpected. A breathless silence fell on the courtroom as young Withy's

eyes passed from face to face. It was apparent to all that this Somers must be the actual murderer of Ram Lal.

Withy's eyes travelled slowly along the front bench, came to Bunbury and stopped there. "Why," he said in a surprised voice, "why, that's the man!"

Court and spectators were held in a spell. Bunbury jumped up with a face as grey as ashes; then dropped back in his seat laughing. From the end of the bench Jim Shryock laughed loudly to create a diversion. As for me, I was stony with astonishment.

Shryock was quickly on his feet. "Your Honour, I must protest!" he cried. "This accusation is laughable, but is likely to do serious harm to a faithful servant and an honest man! Why, Bunbury has been working for Mrs. Julian for eight years. What possible motive..."

"I beg your pardon," interrupted Mme. Storey with a wicked smile, "are you representing Bunbury too?"

She had him there, but he didn't care so long as there was no jury present. "No!" he cried theatrically. "My words are dictated by motives of humanity."

She enjoyed a little private laugh at the notion that Jim Shryock had taken a case out of humanity.

"Mr. Bunbury, may I have the privilege of representing you here?" asked Shryock with a bow.

"Please do," mumbled the butler. He was a wretched figure then.

"Then I ask again," shouted Shryock, "what possible motive could this man have had for committing such a crime?"

"This is only a preliminary hearing," said Mme. Storey, "and it's not necessary to try the whole case. However, I am perfectly willing to give you the information. It is true that Bunbury has been working for Mrs. Julian for eight years. During that time a whole procession of fakers and charlatans has succeeded in wheedling great sums of money out of his mistress. Naturally, it made him sore to see all that going out of the house. He began to wonder if he couldn't divert the golden stream in his own direction. The knowledge of Mrs. Julian's character that he had gained, and his familiarity with every detail of her life and affairs gave him a special advantage. Naturally, he couldn't swindle her in his own person, so he engaged catspaws as they came along, Mrs. Bracker, Dr. Cushack, Ram Lal, and taught them how to do it."

"We have only your word for this, Madame," said Shryock sarcastically. "And you still haven't answered my question. If Ram Lal was Bunbury's own man, why in heaven's name should he murder him?"

"Because Ram Lal held out on him," said Mme. Storey sweetly. "It was partly out of revenge, and partly as an object lesson to the other faithful workers. Mrs. Julian has furnished me with a list of all the sums she has given these three people

with the dates. On the other hand my operatives have secured lists of Bunbury's deposits in his several bank accounts.

"These lists will be offered in evidence, of course, and we will show that for every payment made by Mrs. Julian, Bunbury deposited half the amount next day. With one exception. Mrs. Julian gave Ram Lal one hundred thousand dollars two weeks ago. Bunbury got none of that."

Shryock shrugged elaborately. It was all he could do. "Well, when I see your evidence," he said with a sneer, "I'll meet it."

"It is sufficient," said Magistrate McManigal. "I will hold these two persons as accessories before the fact. Inspector, I presume you will take care of Bunbury."

"I will, your Honour," said Rumsey grimly.

Bunbury had already recovered himself by the time they came to lead him out. He was a very remarkable man. His vanity was hurt by the recollection of that moment of weakness, and he was bound to make a good exit. He walked to where Mrs. Julian sat, and made a low bow.

"My keys, Madam," he said, handing them over: "I trust you will find everything in order at home."

Mrs. Julian was too much overcome to say a word.

Bunbury then faced the policeman who was ready to attend him. "Keep your hands off me," he said with dignity. "I shall make no resistance." He then walked out with the air

of a martyr going proudly to the stake. If it had been in the theatre he would certainly have got a big hand.

IX

Mme. Storey, Inspector Rumsey and I had dinner in a little Italian restaurant on Fifty-Second Street where the spaghetti with anchovies is something to dream about. We all felt the blessed sense of relaxation that follows on the completion of a tough bit of work. It was fun to hold a sort of post-mortem on the case.

Mme. Storey said: "The first thing that struck me was that Ram Lal was a stupid fellow playing a clever part. Particularly after I got his history from the police. Before the Ram Lal episode he was nothing but a sneak thief, the lowest order of crooks. This suggested that he must have been drilled in the art of crystal-gazing. His whole spiel sounded like something learned by rote.

"When I watched Mrs. Bracker and Cushack and read the transcript of their examination by the police I saw that they also were much too stupid to have thought up the parts they were playing—both parts, by the way, devilishly well calculated to deceive a woman of Mrs. Julian's character. There was a certain affinity too, in all these games. This put the idea into my head that there was a superior intelligence directing all three of them."

"When did you begin to suspect Bunbury?" I asked.

"Just as soon as I decided there was a master mind behind the three puppets, my intuition suggested that it was Bunbury. Many little straws pointed in that direction. Bunbury was the only person who possessed the requisite knowledge of Mrs. Julian's character. Believe me, nothing can be hidden from our servants! Then I learned from Mrs. Julian that Bunbury had been instrumental in getting the previous lot of fakers fired. All except Liptrott, whom he probably regarded as harmless. And for one brief moment in the boudoir I had a glimpse of the power that underlay the butler's smooth mask. He quelled Cushack and Mrs. Bracker with a word.... But on the whole it was chiefly a question of style."

"Style?" we echoed.

"Style is a mysterious thing," she went on. "You can't describe it, but you can feel it. You have noticed I suppose, that Bunbury talks in a style of false elegance. Upper servants are much given to it. 'Elegant,' by the way, is one of the words that are frequently on his lips. Few use it nowadays.

"Well, in Ram Lal, in Mrs. Bracker and in Dr. Cushack I kept hearing echoes of Bunbury's style. It is largely in the use to which words are put. Besides 'elegant' notice how every one of them says 'perceive,' a book word, when he means 'see.' And the word 'aspire,' generally used in an incorrect sense, is continually on their lips. Besides others. When

pupils are taught by rote the master's voice may be clearly heard.

"It is obvious that master minds do not work for nothing, and when I checked up what Mrs. Julian had paid out with what Bunbury had received, the motive for the crime became obvious. Ram Lal was too successful. He felt that he had become independent of his master. He had defied the master, and so he had to be made to feel his power."

"But," I objected, "if it was Bunbury who warned us, when we got to the house he tried to keep us out of the boudoir!"

"Think back, Bella," she said with a smile. "The objections he raised were of a sort to make us determined to enter! ... It is one thing to know who committed a crime and another to produce sufficient evidence to obtain a conviction," she went on. "The men I assigned to watch Mrs. Julian's house followed Bunbury to his room on Forty-Seventh Street, and so we discovered where he was accustomed to meet and instruct his accomplices. His Academy of Faking you might call it. But by the time they could get inside he had made a clean sweep of everything in the nature of evidence, of course. Bunbury made no such clumsy mistake as Cushack who threw the bottles in his waste basket.

"I questioned a dozen people in the house before I turned up one in the person of Withy. However, the word 'wafer' which Withy overheard had no significance until after I had tricked Mrs. Bracker into testifying that Ram Lal had taken a wafer. Then it took on a deadly effect. When one of these watertight crimes once springs a leak, it is all over."

"It's lucky for the sake of justice that Bunbury telephoned you that day," remarked Rumsey.

"Yes, that was his weakness," said Mme. Storey. "Like all criminals of his type, Bunbury is devoured by a secret vanity. The result of too many years' suppression as a butler perhaps. When his plot was all ready to shoot he was so crazy about it, it looked so absolutely detection proof, that he couldn't bear to let it work unseen. So he gave me a ring. It was obviously an afterthought because his associates were not informed of it. And he might have got away with it, too, had it not been for his fatal style!"

Taken for a Ride

I

The seats sent to Madame Storey and I were in row S about half-way back in the immense auditorium; the opera was *Siegfried*. The Terwilliger box was still unoccupied when the curtain went up, and I had to possess my soul in patience during the long first act, which was played to a completely darkened house. I was so excited I could give less than half my attention to the music. Owing to the prominence of the persons concerned, our new case bade fair to be one of the biggest things Mme. Storey had ever undertaken. Terwilliger is a name to conjure with all over the world. The Terwilligers are our Rothschilds.

The moment the lights went up I turned my head over my shoulder. The Terwilliger box is in the centre of the golden horseshoe; that is to say, where the royal box would be if this did not happen to be a republic. The party had come. In the right-hand corner I recognised the effulgent Mrs. Terwilliger in green velvet and diamonds, but the other two ladies were strangers to me. Neither could I identify the three gentlemen in the obscurity of the back of the box. I speculated vainly upon which might be Dr. Felix Portal, head of the Terwilliger Institute, and an even more famous man, if that is possible, than his wealthy patron. It was Dr. Portal who was responsible for our presence in the opera house that night.

We did not immediately leave our seats for the intermission, since we had no wish to advertise our presence generally in the foyer. We waited until people were beginning to drift back down the aisles before we got up and mixed with the gossiping, cigarette-smoking throng outside. When the bell rang to give warning of the second act we scurried along like everybody else, and so contrived it that the rising of the curtain found us in the secluded corridor back of the parterre boxes. It was quickly emptied of all save ourselves. When we were satisfied nobody was observing us, we opened the door leading into the Terwilliger box.

The door does not lead directly into the box but into a charming little ante-room furnished like the rest of the magnificent old building in red and gold. There were dainty little sofas and chairs with curved legs as in a boudoir. We were separated from the box proper by heavy velvet curtains which are kept closely drawn during the performance. As we entered, the curtains parted and a man whom I knew must be Dr. Portal joined us with a polite smile.

As in the case of most great men one's first impression was disappointing. He was a small man, and instead of the noble and venerable head I expected, I beheld a somewhat sharp physiognomy with a long nose and a retreating forehead. But I had not been a moment in his company before the real distinction of the man became apparent. I observed that the back part of his head was fine and full, and that, they say, holds the really important part of the brain. He had a noble eye, too, blue and gleaming with an inward fire. It had the curiously remote glance of one who dwells mostly in the realm of thought. It expressed an attractive compound of

wisdom and innocence. His voice too, had the measured quality of one who thinks before he speaks. Oh, there was no doubt that he was one of the exceptional men of our time.

Outside, the auditorium had been darkened again and the violins were making the whole house throb with feeling. It provided a strange accompaniment to the interview which followed. There was a deprecating quality in Dr. Portal's smile that was very winning, considering what a great man he was. In other words, he was a little in awe of the beautiful Madame Storey.

"So good of you to respond to my appeal for aid!" he murmured.

"Not at all," she answered quickly. "I feel flattered in receiving an appeal from you." And she meant it. She brought me up. "My secretary, Miss Brickley. I want her to take notes of what you tell me, so that I won't have to waste your time by asking you to repeat any of it later."

We sat down, Mme. Storey and Dr. Portal side by side on a little sofa, and me facing them with my note-book on my knee. Once the courteous greetings had been exchanged, deep harassed lines appeared in the famous scientist's face. Whatever this business might be, clearly it was no joke to him. He showed a curious petulance also, as if the scientist in him resented being dragged down from the calm realms of thought.

"You will think the manner of this appointment very strange," he said. "The truth is, I find myself followed and

watched wherever I go, and I wished to keep it a secret, at least for the present, that I was consulting you."

"You did right," said Mme. Storey. "Please go on."

The voice of the young Siegfried was now ringing through the house, supported by the murmuring violins. It lent an almost unbearably emotional effect to the doctor's tale of murder.

"It concerns the shocking accident which happened at the Institute a month ago," he began. "My principal assistant, Dr. Edgar McComb, was found shot dead in his office. I suppose you read of it at the time. It has attracted very little notice simply because there were no sensational circumstances to whet the public appetite. Now that a month has passed it remains just as much of a mystery as it was on the morning the body was discovered. The police pretend to be working upon the case still, but they have nothing to go on. No clues of any sort. Nobody saw the assailant enter or leave the building; no finger-prints were found in the room save those of the doctor himself. And what is even more baffling, no possible motive for the crime has been unearthed. Dr. McComb had no enemies; no difficulties either financial or amatory. He was happily married, and his private life was a model of regularity. Some have thought it must have been the chance act of a madman, but that theory won't hold water either; because the doctor must have made an appointment to meet his assailant in the laboratory that night, and must have admitted him to the building. What is more, they were heard talking quietly together shortly before the shot must have been fired."

"Who heard them talking?" asked Mme. Storey.

"The night watchman, Amadeo Corioli. In making his rounds through the bacteriological laboratory at ten o'clock he saw a light in Dr. McComb's office, and heard the sound of quiet voices as he passed the closed door. An hour later, when he passed, the light was out, and he supposed the doctor had gone home. Either Dr. McComb or I or both of us often worked in the laboratory until late. The body was discovered by the cleaning women in the morning."

"But a month has passed, doctor," said Mme. Storey reproachfully. "What can I hope to do with so cold a trail?... Why didn't you consult me sooner?"

"Ah, I wish I had! I wish I had!" he said with a painful gesture. "But to tell you the truth, it never came close to me until a few days ago. I was content to leave it to the police."

"Never came close to you?" said my employer. "What do you mean by that?"

He answered her indirectly. His agitation was visibly increasing. "True, the morning after the tragedy," he said, "Mrs. McComb, who was in a highly hysterical state, accused me in veiled terms of being responsible for her husband's death. I was inexpressibly shocked by the scene, but naturally I ascribed it to her condition. I never gave it a moment's thought until two or three days ago when I noticed that I was being watched and followed. It was a strange experience for me to have! ... Then I began to perceive that the attitude of those who surround me at the Institute had

changed subtly. Something ugly had come into their regard." The speaker shuddered. "Ugh! it was horrible! Finally I demanded an explanation from one of the young doctors in whom I have confidence. He told me..." For the moment Mr. Portal seemed to be unable to continue. "He told me," he said brokenly, "that a story was going around that I, actuated by a mean jealousy of a brilliant rising man, had procured the death of Edgar McComb!"

Mme. Storey and I gazed at him incredulously. It seemed impossible to believe that one whom the whole world looked upon as the high priest of science should be mixed up in anything like this!

In his agitation Dr. Portal sprang up and struck his clenched hands against his breast. Fortunately the swelling music drowned the sound of his voice. "Me! Me!" he cried; "accused of murder! Me, whose life has been as open as the day! Whose every thought has been given to my work! Is it not unjust? Is it not incredible that such a story should be circulated and believed? My informant said that he didn't believe it, but that there was no chance of stopping it now!"

"They circulate it, but I doubt if they believe it," said Mme. Storey gravely. "It is a common human failing."

"But how terrible ... how terrible to be the victim of such a slander!" cried Dr. Portal brokenly. "It has completely unnerved me! It comes between me and my work. I can do nothing! And my work has reached a fatally critical point where every ounce of ability that I possess is required of me. The polio serum..."

"What is polio?" asked Mme. Storey quickly.

"Ah, pardon!" he said, with a distracted gesture. "A bit of laboratory slang. Polio is short for poliomyelitis or infantile paralysis. I have been working on it for many years. I have not yet succeeded in isolating the bacillus, but I have prepared a serum from the blood of immune monkeys which, in the case of monkeys anyhow, arrests the paralysis. I am not quite ready for human experiments, but I soon will be—if I am only left in peace! ... Meanwhile the number of cases is daily increasing. Everything points to a coming epidemic. There is not a day to lose!"

Mme. Storey, too, had risen. She had instantly made up her mind as to the rights of this case. "How proud I will be if I can contribute to your work by ever so little!" she said, impulsively taking his hand. "I beg of you to put this preposterous slander out of your mind, and return to your work. Leave this to me. I promise you if I live I will lay it in its grave for ever!"

The doctor, as a man will, immediately began to make light of his own emotion. "There ... there," he said, shaking her hand, "my mind is relieved already. I feel safe in your hands. As for the expenses connected with this affair..."

"Not a word as to that," she said, holding up her hand. "That's my part.... All you have to do is to answer a few questions.... Where were you on the night Dr. McComb was shot?"

"Fortunately I can produce an alibi," he answered with a wry smile. "I attended a reception at the National History Museum to visiting British scientists. Hundreds of people must have seen me there.... However," he went on bitterly, "I understand that I am not accused of firing the shot myself. They believe that I had it done."

"What exactly did Mrs. McComb say to you on the morning after?"

"She said: 'This is your work! This is your work! Now I hope you're satisfied! For years you have been trying to keep him down, and when you found you could no longer do so you turned to *this*!' And much more to the same effect. No precise charge."

"Hm! jealousy," remarked Mme. Storey.

"Oh, yes, that had often peeped out," said Dr. Portal. "Such a pity! So unnecessary!"

"What sort of woman is Mrs. McComb?"

"A good enough sort as women go," answered Dr. Portal carelessly. "Highly conventional. Ambitious. On that account I considered her influence over her husband unfortunate. A scientist cannot afford to consider ambition; he cannot consider anything in the world but science!"

"You have not much use for women, I take it, doctor," suggested Mme. Storey with a dry smile.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," he protested. "Have I not put myself in your hands? ... The only thing I have against women is that they demand too much time. For me life is not long enough to include both science and women."

"It is a pity," murmured Mme. Storey. "Where is Mrs. McComb now?"

"She has gone abroad. I believe Mrs. Terwilliger sent her."

"Ah! a mistake in tactics. Perhaps we will have to bring her back.... Now tell me what you can about the crime, doctor."

"That is next to nothing," he said, spreading out his hands.

"You have spoken of the bacteriological laboratory. What sort of a place is it?"

"It is a small separate building connected with a main group by a covered passage. Dr. McComb and I have been working there exclusively during the past year. The monkeys that we use in our experiments are kept on the top floor. Some of them are sick, you see, and there is a male nurse on duty throughout the night just as if they were human. Dr. McComb's private office and my office were on the floor below."

"The nurse heard no sound?"

"No, Madame. The walls are thick."

"Describe the finding of the body."

"It was found by a cleaning woman at eight o'clock on the morning of November 9th. When she opened the door she saw the doctor slumped down in his chair with a bullet-hole in his forehead. His body was already stiff. He had evidently been shot from in front as he sat upright in his chair. The bullet had gone completely through his head and had lodged in the hard plaster of the wall behind him. A curious thing was, that the murderer had gone to the trouble to dig it out of the plaster and carry it away with him."

"Nothing strange in that," remarked Mme. Storey. "He had evidently heard of the new science of ballistics which enables us sometimes to trace the bullet back to the gun from which it was fired."

"Another strange feature," Dr. Portal went on, "is that the body was stripped of every trifling article of value; a seal ring, a cheap watch and a dollar or two in money, which was the most the doctor ever carried. It seems incredible that a man should be murdered for that."

Mme. Storey made no comment.

"Moreover," said the doctor, "the unfortunate man must have made an appointment to meet the murderer in the laboratory, for there was no work to call him back that night. We had discussed it in the afternoon. And he must have let the man in himself. Why should he have made an appointment with a robber?"

"Obviously robbery was not the murderer's main object," said Mme. Storey. "But having killed his man, he saw no

reason why he should overlook any little objects of value. From that I infer the shot was fired by a professional criminal."

"Now I call that clever!" said Dr. Portal admiringly. "Already we are making progress."

"But we have a long, long way to go," said Mme. Storey, smiling. "How about the Italian watchman?"

"He has been repeatedly questioned by the police. No suspicion attaches to him, I understand. He can account for every minute of his time that night by the time clocks he is obliged to punch as he makes his rounds through the buildings."

"But it only takes a fraction of a second to shoot a man," Mme. Storey pointed out.

"What object would he have? He knew Dr. McComb carried nothing of value upon him?"

"I don't know," said Mme. Storey frankly. "Have you any theory as to what happened?"

"None whatever," said Dr. Portal, spreading out his hands. "All I can tell you is, that McComb appeared to me to be in a highly nervous state during the last days of his life. But I have no idea what was troubling him."

Mme. Storey and I left the opera house in a curious state of exaltation induced by the insinuating violins and the poignant tenor voice. I felt (and Mme. Storey confessed the

same) that we were like two crusaders sallying forth to do battle for the benefactor of mankind against the powers of evil.

II

We proceeded directly to my employer's little house on East Sixty —— Street. It was still something short of ten o'clock, and Mme. Storey telephoned immediately to Inspector Rumsey. Upon being assured that the matter was of first-rate importance, the Inspector said he would motor right down to join us.

Inspector Rumsey glanced at Mme. Storey with pleasure when he came in. He is a little man of quite undistinguished appearance whose whole study it is to render himself still more inconspicuous. Ordinarily his face is as inscrutable as one of the little crooks whom it is his business to track down, but in my employer's presence he relaxes and becomes quite human. He is a first-class police official and absolutely incorruptible.

Mme. Storey went directly to the point. "Are you keeping Dr. Felix Portal under surveillance?"

"I am," he answered unhesitatingly.

"Why?"

"Well," he said deprecatingly, "I received an anonymous letter suggesting that he was responsible for the death of Edgar McComb."

"An anonymous letter!" said Mme. Storey disgustedly.

"Sure," he said calmly; "I despise them as much as you do. But in a case of this sort where I was absolutely up against it I could not afford to ignore it. The letter was typewritten on a sheet of cheap paper, and it had been mailed in the corridor of the general post office. I have been unable to trace it."

"What did it say?"

"It said: 'The story is going around that Dr. Portal did for Dr. McComb. You had better look into it.' ... How did you become interested in the case, if I may ask?"

"Between ourselves," said Mme. Storey, "Dr. Portal has consulted me."

"You mean he has engaged you to solve this mystery?"

"Yes."

"Well, that was a bold move!"

"If he is guilty it would be. But surely you do not think that he..."

"I have no opinion," said Inspector Rumsey, spreading out his hands. "All my investigation has shown is that he *might* have done it."

"But, good heavens!" cried Mme. Storey, sitting upright, "why should he have done it?"

"Professional jealousy," suggested the Inspector. "Dr. McComb, a much younger man, had been making great strides lately. His name was continually in the newspapers."

"But Dr. Portal is not the man to care about that," said Mme. Storey. "Look you, for fifteen years he's been at the head of the Terwilliger Institute and one of the most conspicuous citizens of New York. Yet one almost never meets him at public functions. And in all those years I have never seen a published photograph of him. I did not know him to-night until he introduced himself. Is that the record of a man who is keen about newspaper publicity?"

Inspector Rumsey did not answer.

"It is sacrilege to think a man like that in connection with a sordid murder!" Mme. Storey went on earnestly. "I should say if there is *one* disinterested man in this world of money-grubbers that man was Felix Portal!"

"Even so," said the Inspector with quiet obstinacy, "everybody knows that the higher the flights a man is capable of, the lower he may fall. The whole history of crime testifies to it."

"You have several children, haven't you?" said Mme. Storey, suddenly taking a new line. "What are their ages?"

"The youngest is three and the oldest eleven," said the Inspector with a smile.

"All within the danger limits for infantile paralysis," she murmured.

"Don't speak of it!" he said with a painful gesture. "It's a nightmare!"

"They say we are headed straight for an epidemic."

"It's horrible!" cried the Inspector. "A man is so helpless! When I see it coming I wish I could send them all up on a mountain top where they could be cut off from everybody!"

"That's what Dr. Portal is working on now," said Mme. Storey quietly; "working to save your children, all the children. He had almost attained success when this..."

Inspector Rumsey fairly groaned in his distress. "I've got to do my duty. I had hoped that he would never hear this story. Never discover that he was being watched."

"Well, he knows it now," she said gravely, "and his work is at a standstill.... You say he *might* have done it," she presently went on, "but he says he was at the Natural History Museum all evening where hundreds of people saw him."

"That is true and not true," said the Inspector. "He made a speech of welcome at nine o'clock and of course everybody in the building saw and heard him. But after he stepped down from the platform at nine-twenty, I am unable to find anybody who saw him until supper was served at eleven."

"That is no proof that he wasn't there."

"No, but unfortunately I have learned that a taxicab was called to the museum at nine-thirty, and that a man was driven from there to the corner of Avenue A and Seventy-Fourth Street, which, as you know, is just around the corner from the Institute. Well, if he could taxi over there he could taxi back, of course, in plenty of time for supper."

"Did this passenger resemble Dr. Portal?" Mme. Storey asked anxiously.

"Ah, there we are up against it again. The driver of that taxi has left his job, and I have not been able to find him."

"Pretty slim evidence," suggested Mme. Storey.

"Surely," he agreed. "But in the face of it, how can I give up watching Dr. Portal."

"Well, now the situation is somewhat altered," she said. "Dr. Portal has engaged me to solve this mystery. That's pretty strong evidence of his good faith in the matter. If I assure you that I mean to devote my whole time to the case, are you willing to call off your dogs? You and I will still be working together, of course."

"Sure," cried the Inspector heartily. "And darn glad of the excuse to let up on the doctor!"

They shook hands on it.

"Now tell me all you know about the case," said Mme. Storey, lighting a fresh cigarette.

It required a full hour for the Inspector to relate all the work he and his men had done. I shall not weary you with the recital, for there was little of it that proved to be of any service to us. Nothing in Dr. McComb's past life, nor in Dr. Portal's either, threw any light on the crime. In an association of five years they had never been known to quarrel, or even to have a serious difference of any kind. The only thing in the way of complete harmony was Dr. McComb's ambition —and that was mostly Mrs. McComb's.

As a matter of fact Mme. Storey had to begin from the beginning. It was a single word dropped by Inspector Rumsey which gave her her lead. In one of the gossiping stories patiently run down by the police, a young interne of the Institute had used the phrase: "As it was told to me, Dr. Portal hired a gunman to put McComb out of the way." This yarn was traced back to Mrs. McComb; but when the police questioned her she denied having said it. In fact she denied ever having charged that Dr. Portal was responsible for her husband's death. This was manifestly a falsehood. It was no doubt the Terwilligers who, with the best intentions, had shut the woman up. Mrs. McComb was the kind of woman who would be very much in awe of multi-millionaires.

"At any rate," said Mme. Storey, "'gunman' is our line."

"I have not neglected that line," said the Inspector. "The possible hired killers are pretty well known to us. Well, every man of that sort has been able to account for his actions on the night of November 8th."

"But there are always new killers coming up," suggested Mme. Storey.

"Sure," said the Inspector gloomily, "there are always youngsters who are crazy for a chance to qualify in that class. It is looked upon as the head of the criminal profession."

"Then we will assume," she said, "that this was a first killing by a man who had already served an apprenticeship in lesser crimes."

"But it was Dr. Portal who was said to have hired the gunman," said the Inspector, frowning.

"Well, maybe he did," said Mme. Storey airily. "In any case it provides us with a starting point."

III

Before we went to bed that night we made an appointment with Dr. Portal to come to his laboratory next day. What she had learned made it necessary for her to have another talk with him, Mme. Storey told him. After that she did not expect to trouble him again until she had arrested her man. She insisted that there was no need for secrecy now, and in fact she advised him to tell his associates that he had engaged her to clear him from the absurd scandal that had clouded his

name. "Let the matter be dragged out into the open," she said.

The great Terwilliger Institute, as everybody knows, stands in its own fine park on the bank of the East River. I should very much have liked to have gone over the whole place, but there was no time for that. We confined our attention to the bacteriological laboratory, which was for the time being entirely devoted to the researches of Dr. Portal and his assistants. The ground floor was given up to an immense general laboratory with apparatus of every description; the second floor was divided into special laboratories and offices, while the third floor housed the monkeys and other animals used in their work. I did not go up there.

The three of us were in his private room, an office rather than a laboratory, bare and speckless as a hospital ward. Mme. Storey said lightly:

"Among the different versions of the story which have been going the rounds, there was one to the effect that you hired a gunman to do the deed."

"How absurd!" said the doctor, half-amused, half-angry. "How on earth would I set about to hire a gunman?"

"Have you never known a man of that sort?" asked Mme. Storey carelessly.

Dr. Portal suddenly checked himself. "Why ... why, yes I did," he said blankly. "How strange! It happened just a little

while before the tragedy.... It never occurred to me there might be a connection between the two.... Why, there couldn't have been!"

"Nevertheless, tell me about it," said Mme. Storey.

Dr. Portal looked out of the window. His gaze became still more remote as he called up the past scene. "When you have been concentrating on a difficult problem for many hours—or days," he began slowly, "there comes a moment when the brain seems to slip its cogs, and you become conscious of a great weariness. It is a sort of warning signal, I suppose, and I always heed it at once. Generally I take a little walk in the grounds. Sometimes just a few minutes' relaxation is enough to restore me."

"I expect this habit of yours is well known," suggested Mme. Storey.

"No doubt. No doubt," he said. "There are certain individuals of the neighbourhood with whom I have become quite well acquainted through meeting them in the grounds. When I came here years ago the grounds were closed to the public, but I persuaded my patrons to open them. It is a crowded neighbourhood and there are too few parks. Moreover, I like to walk about and watch the people, and talk to them. But I have not always the courage to open a conversation. You will think it very silly, I am sure, at my age to be so diffident. I am glad when anybody speaks to me."

"I can understand that," murmured Mme. Storey.

He glanced at her gratefully. "I lead too solitary a life, having no family," he went on. "I get up in the morning and go to work. Most days I work until it is time to go home and go to bed again. I have myself pretty well disciplined—but not completely disciplined. There is something in me that sometimes rebels against this dryness, something that longs for colour and drama in life. I tell you this in order to explain what happened."

Mme. Storey nodded.

"One sunny afternoon," he went on; "it was just a few days before the catastrophe here; let me see, the following day was a Saturday; that would be two Saturdays before the tragedy, October 30th; I was sitting on a bench in the grounds throwing bread crumbs to the sparrows when a young fellow came along and sat down on the other end of the bench. I was immediately and strongly attracted to him...."

"Why?" asked Mme. Storey.

"Well ... I suppose it was the attraction of opposites. He was the exact antithesis of what I had been as a young fellow. He existed purely on the physical plane, one would say. A superb physical specimen; comely, vigorous and alert. He was very well dressed in a somewhat flashy style. I was surprised at his interest in me, for such a one naturally has little use for an old fogey of a scientist. From his handsome dark eyes and smooth, firm, dusky skin I put him down as an Italian, and as a matter of fact he told me later that his name was Tito Tolentino...."

"A mellifluous moniker," put in Mme. Storey with a dry smile; "probably assumed for the occasion."

"No doubt," said Dr. Portal. "Indeed, when we became better acquainted he confessed that he went under many names. An amazing tale."

"Don't skip any of it," warned Mme. Storey.

"He was a mere lad," the doctor went on, "not more than nineteen I should say, but he had an uncanny air of experience and assurance. I am rather alarmed in the presence of hard-boiled youths, but on this occasion I wasn't required to make any overtures, for he immediately started talking to me. With his uncanny sharpness he perceived that I was diffident, and laid himself out to put me at my ease, just as if he had been the elderly man of the world and I the gawky stripling."

Mme. Storey and I smiled at the picture this called up—the great scientist and the gunman! "What did he talk about?" asked my employer.

"It was about the sparrows at first. How they must have recognised that I had a good nature since they came right to my feet. Then he went on to tell me about himself; how he was the sole support of his widowed mother and small brothers and sisters; how he worked in a printing shop all night, slept in the mornings and came out in the afternoons for a breath of air. All this was delivered in a snuffling, self-righteous kind of voice. I suppose he thought this was the proper way to recommend himself to me; but it only made

me uncomfortable—it was so false, so out of character with the flashy clothes and the hard, handsome, predatory eyes that searched me through and through while he snuffled."

"He knew who you were?" suggested Mme. Storey.

"Yes; it did not occur to me then, but he must have known. From the first, I remember, he addressed me as 'Doctor'; he knew I was the head of this institution."

"Go on, please."

"In the end he perceived, I suppose, that I didn't believe a word of his self-righteous story. With that unnatural penetration of his he saw that the way to win me was by confessing his sins. At any rate he suddenly changed his tone. 'Aah, that's all baloney,' he said with a laugh. 'The truth is, I'm a bad egg, doctor. I shook my folks long ago. I play a lone hand. Never did an honest day's work in me life!' My heart warmed to him when he said this. It cleared the air. We got along famously after that."

Dr. Portal paused with his attractive smile, so shy and wise. He may have been innocent of the ways of the world, but he was nobody's fool. Always ready to smile at himself.

"How can I convey to you the extraordinary effect his story had on me?" he presently went on. "It laid a spell on my imagination. It was the first time in my life that I had ever come into contact with lawlessness, and all the starved lawlessness in my own nature leaped to meet it. Already at nineteen this lad had quaffed life to the dregs, whereas at

fifty-nine I had not even tasted it! I felt a kind of shame for my wasted opportunities."

Mme. Storey did not miss the irony in this. They laughed together.

"Of course it was only a mood," he said; "the result of too many suppressions. If I had a son I would say to him: 'Don't be too good when you're young, or the devil will get you later!'"

"I suppose women played a considerable part in his story," she suggested.

Dr. Portal held up his hands expressively. "Amazing! Amazing!" he murmured. "An incredible point of view! Such a complete absence of inhibitions! Such coolness and matter-of-factness! Apparently when Tolentino saw anything that pleased him he just reached out and took it, as one might help oneself to a peach from a dish! Of course he had been very much favoured by nature for this pursuit. Such a handsome little blackguard! The things he told me took my breath away. Girls everywhere; all kinds of girls; even girls of position, society girls. He used to pick them up at afternoon tea dances. 'They like a fella to be bad,' he said with his sly grin." The doctor shook his head mournfully.

"What was the upshot of this remarkable conversation?" asked Mme. Storey.

"The upshot was," said Dr. Portal, "that I came to myself with a start to find that the sun was going down and that I

was thoroughly chilled. When I got up to leave, my new friend suggested that we ought to meet again, and I eagerly agreed. I was still under his spell. He said as long as I was interested in that side of life, he'd like to take me around town and show me some places, and we agreed to meet at six the next evening at the Queensboro Bridge entrance. I chose a distant point because I was none too anxious to have my associates at the Institute see the kind of company I was mixing with. He promised to have a car."

"Good heavens!" cried Mme. Storey, "after all you had been told were you not afraid to trust yourself in his hands?"

Dr. Portal looked at her in surprise. "Why, no," he said. "The idea of danger to myself never crossed my mind. Who would want to injure me?"

Mme. Storey smiled at him somewhat grimly. "And you went?"

"Certainly, I went," he said, "and had one of the most interesting evenings I have ever spent ... though I got a little tight," he added deprecatingly.

"Well, I expect that was good for you," said Mme. Storey.

"Yes," he agreed innocently. "I tackled my work with fresh energy next day."

"Well, tell us all about it."

"Unfortunately my sense of direction is poor, and I cannot describe just where he took me," said Dr. Portal. "One turned

innumerable corners and pulled up in front of one door after another. I never knew where we were."

"What kind of car was it?" asked Mme. Storey.

"A little sedan, quite new, but I didn't notice of what make."

"Oh, well, it hardly signifies. It was undoubtedly stolen for the occasion and abandoned at the end of the evening. Go on, doctor."

"First we drove far down town into the crowded East side. We went into a basement restaurant there. It had no lights nor sign outside, but it was quite a large place and well filled. There was a little space for dancing in the middle. We ate our dinner there, and Tito pointed out all the celebrities of the place. There was a woman—I forget her name—who had been tried for the murder of her husband so many times, the jury disagreeing on each occasion, that finally the District Attorney had become discouraged, and she was allowed to go free, though everybody knew she had done it. Then there was Monk Eyster, the famous gang leader, and many other notorious criminals whose names were strange to me. It was a thrilling experience for me."

"Did these people appear to know your companion?" asked Mme. Storey.

"No. Nobody spoke to us."

"Naturally, he wouldn't have dared take you to any place where he was known. Go on."

"Afterwards we went to a sort of club on the second storey of a building. There were only men in this place. It was the headquarters of the stick-up fraternity, Tito said, and while we knocked the balls around a pool table, he told me who the different men were, and described their hair-raising exploits. Everyone was wanted by the police."

Mme. Storey smiled at him indulgently. "Did anybody speak to your friend here?"

"No."

"Humph!" she said, "he probably made up the story out of whole cloth."

"Perhaps," said Dr. Portal a little ruefully, "but it was very exciting at the time.... Afterwards he said he knew of a roadhouse up in Westchester County that was the worst place of all. Everything went there, he said, and nothing went any farther. But I would be all right, he said, as long as he was with me.... So we drove for a long time in the little car. It must have been somewhere north of the city, because I remember crossing the Harlem River, and passing through the suburb of Williamsbridge. I saw the name on a railway station. We came to the roadhouse..."

"Was it so very wicked?" interrupted Mme. Storey, smiling.

"Well, I didn't see anything out of the way," returned the doctor innocently, "but then I am not accustomed to such places. I wouldn't have known what to look for. As a matter

of fact I had a drink or two there, and I am not quite so clear afterwards as to what happened. All I remember is that I became excessively talkative—it was a great relief!"

"What did you talk about?" asked Mme. Storey.

"I can scarcely tell you. I suppose it was about the polio serum which fills my mind to the exclusion of everything else. In looking back on it I am astonished at the patience of young Tito in letting me run on so. It could not have been interesting to him. In spite of all, there must have been something genuinely friendly in him, don't you think?"

"I wonder!" said Mme. Storey grimly. "Go on."

"The next thing I remember is finding myself in the little car again, still driving away from town. For some reason or another we drew up alongside the road, and remained there a while, I still talking. It must have been a very lonely spot; there were woods on either side of the road; no cars passed that way. In my slightly fuddled condition all this seemed perfectly natural. I was still talking garrulously about my work, I remember, when I happened to notice that Tito was playing with an ugly little automatic gun on his knees...."

"Good God!" murmured Mme. Storey, aghast.

The doctor, however, was entirely unconcerned. "I remonstrated with him," he said. "I told him to put the thing away before there was an accident...."

"And then what?" asked Mme. Storey tensely.

"He put it in his pocket," he said calmly; "and we drove home. That's all."

"And that is the strangest part of all!" cried Mme. Storey. "What could have persuaded him to spare you?"

"Hey?" said Dr. Portal, blinking.

"Don't you realise that you were taken for a ride?" she said.

"Certainly I was taken for a ride..."

"No! No! I mean in the special sense of that phrase; the sense in which it is used in the underworld. You were taken out to that lonely spot to be shot, and your body thrown into the woods. The mystery is, how you contrived to escape!"

"Why should anybody want to shoot me?" gasped the doctor.

"You escaped," she went on, "but Dr. McComb was not so lucky!"

"Do you mean to say that Tito shot McComb?" he cried.

"I don't know. Another tool may have been used in that case. Tito was only a hired assassin, of course. There may have been several. What is clear is that somebody had it in for the whole Terwilliger Institute!"

"Why? Why? Why?" asked the dismayed doctor. "We injure nobody. We threaten nobody's interest. Our work is for

the benefit of the whole community!"

"I don't know," said Mme. Storey sombrely. "It shall be my task to find out. Our only clue lies through this Tito."

"How terrible!" murmured Dr. Portal, thinking of his near escape. "And I suspected nothing!"

"Give me the best description of him that you can," she said.

The doctor spread out his hands. "I'm afraid I'm not very good at it ... nineteen or twenty years old; about my height but much more muscularly built. Very quick and graceful in his movements. Brown eyes; smooth, warm-coloured face that still preserved some of the roundness of boyhood; regular white teeth. Ordinarily he wore a mask over his face; his expression was perfectly inscrutable...."

"This tells me next to nothing," said Mme. Storey. "Try to give me something characteristic, something peculiar."

"Well, he had a trick of keeping a perfectly smooth face and speaking out of one corner of his mouth," said Dr. Portal.

"No good!" said my employer ruefully. "They all do that.... Did he mention any names in his story? Did he ever let fall what they called him?"

Dr. Portal shook his head. "No, I noticed that he was careful about names. It was always 'him' or 'her' or 'this fellow' and 'that fellow.'"

"Then how about place names?" she asked. "Did he ever mention the names of any places that he frequented?"

After thinking awhile the doctor said: "Yes. He spoke of Bleecker Street. More than once I remember him saying: 'I went down to Bleecker' or 'I ran into him on Bleecker.'"

"That helps a little," said Mme. Storey, "but not much. Bleecker is the main street, the white-light district for the whole of little Italy.... Can you give me anything else?"

After further thought the doctor brightened. "Here's something," he said. "On the occasion of our second meeting he appeared wearing a coon-skin coat like a college boy."

"Now we're getting on," said Mme. Storey. "Coon-skin coats cannot be very common down on Bleecker Street."

"But he didn't wear it down there," said the doctor. "I chaffed him about it a little, and he said he wouldn't dare be seen in it around home. He said he always hired it when he wanted to step out up-town. When I expressed my surprise that you could hire anything so valuable as a fur coat, he said he had a pull with the old clo' man, that they did business together regularly."

"Then our first task must be to find that old clo' man," said Mme. Storey.

IV

My instructions were to find a cheap restaurant or lunchroom along the most frequented part of Bleecker Street, and to get into conversation with the lady cashier. I chose three-thirty as the hour when such places would be least busy. I was disguised as a servant girl on her day out. I found my lunchroom and ordered a piece of mince pie and a cup of coffee for which I had not the least desire.

When I paid my check I lingered beside the cashier's desk with a smile of foolish good-nature.

"I allus eats my lunch late," I said. "You kin take your time and eat comfortable wit'out bein' pushed by the crowd."

The cashier's glance said that she didn't give a damn if I never got any lunch, but I didn't care. I had her penned behind her little counter where she couldn't escape. By degrees I came round to the inevitable "boy-friend." She yawned behind her manicured fingers. I told how my boy-friend was going to take me to a dance at Webster's Hall on Sat'ay night. I described the dress I was going to wear.

"Pink satin with ribbon dangles ending in little pompoms!" she repeated, elevating her plucked eyebrows as much as to say: You would!

"I do hate to wear me old coat goin' in," I said. "If they was on'y some place I could hire a fur coat I wouldn't mind spendin' the money. I don't care what I spend to look good.

That's me. My boy-friend, he said he'd hire a coon-skin coat to match me if he knew where to go for it."

"Go to Ikey's at — Sixth Avenue," she said; "they hire fur coats for ladies and gents. It's the on'y place I know of."

"Is zat so?" I said, and talked on for a while. Finally I drifted out followed by a crushing glance from the lady cashier.

I proceeded directly to Ikey's, which is on Sixth Avenue not far from Bleecker Street. Ikey, I learned from Mme. Storey, had long been suspected of being a fence, but the police had never succeeded in getting the goods on him. At any rate he is the friend of every crook in town. He sells more than old clo's. He will outfit you with any kind of a disguise that you require, and is prepared to sew you up on the spot.

Unlike other stores, Ikey puts his worst foot foremost. All the shabbiest and most disreputable garments are on display, while the fancier articles are only brought out upon demand. To the hook-nosed saleslady who approached me (they have them of both sexes) I said:

"Me brutter wants to hire one of them coon-skin coats like college boys wear for an evenin'. Have you got any?"

After consultation with somebody in the rear the saleslady reported: "Yeah, we got them coats for hire, but you'll have to put up a hundred dollars deposit."

"A hundred dollars!" I cried. "He might as well buy him a coat."

"What ja expect?" she asked scornfully. "That ya could walk out with a fur coat for fi' dollars? You git your money back when you bring it in."

"Well, I'll take a look at it," I said.

She presently flung the coat across the counter; quite a luxurious-looking garment. But all that interested me about it was a card tied to the collar bearing mysterious letters and figures. I supposed that this was the record of the times it had been given out and returned, like a library card. All I could read were the final entries. There was a C on each line followed by two dates. I made believe to look the coat over, and even tried it on, but the woman kept the card out of my reach. Finally I said:

"I don't know if me brutter wants to put up a hundred bones on it. Got any utters?"

"That's the on'y coon-skin coat."

"Then show me somepin cheaper. Somepin with an elegant fur collar, like."

To my joy she went away leaving the coat lying on the counter with the card attached. I made haste to examine it. The first entry on the card read: "Chico, — Bleecker," and then the dates presumably when it was given out and returned. All the subsequent entries merely had a C and two dates. Apparently it had never been taken out but by the one

person. A great satisfaction filled me when I read the last date that it had been taken out; October 30th. This was the night Tito had taken Dr. Portal for a ride. There could be but little doubt this was the right coat.

Well, I got out of Ikey's with a vague statement that I would "tell me brutter," and hastened back to Bleecker Street. The number I was in search of proved to be just across the street from my lunch-room. There was a shoe store on the street level, and a tenement overhead. In the narrow entry alongside the store there was a row of letter-boxes with names in them, mostly Italian, which suggested nothing to me. "Chico" was a common nickname, and not of very much use in running my man down. As I stood there in uncertainty, a loiterer on the pavement outside said:

"Who ya lookin' fer?"

"Chico," I said at a venture.

"Oh, Chico Cardone," he said. "He boards with Mrs. Mora, top floor."

I climbed the stairs with a heart full of gratitude towards my unwitting helper. Luck was with me today.

The upper floors were still unchanged from Bleecker Street's palmy days when the house had been a private dwelling. That is to say, all the rooms opened directly on the stair hall. I knocked at the principal door on the top floor and it was opened to me a crack by a handsome Italian girl with a sullen expression. On the way up I had evolved a new story.

"Excuse me, dearie," I said in the oily voice of the low-grade book agent, "have you any young men in your family?"

"No," she said, and made as if to slam the door, but I shoved my foot forward and held it open. "Wait a minute, dearie," I said glibly. "I got a publication here no young man can afford to be without...."

"Take your foot away!" she said angrily, and added a good masculine oath. "There's no young men here."

"Excuse me," I said again, "but the name of a Mr. Cardone was give me as a boarder here."

"He just rents the middle room from me mutter," she said, with a jerk of her head towards the next door. "He don't board here. Anyhow he ain't home now."

"Well, I'll come back tonight," I said.

"That won't do you no good," she said with a curious bitterness. "Nights you'll find him at Luigi's café."

With that she aimed a kick at my foot and I hastily withdrew it. The door slammed, and I went downstairs with a light heart. I smiled to myself, thinking of the girl's bitterness. Had Dr. Portal's handsome little blackguard been trifling with her affections, I wondered.

I returned to the office full of the consciousness of work well done.

"Good!" said Mme. Storey when she heard my tale. She called up Benny Abell, who is our principal liaison officer with the underworld; "Benny," she said over the wire, "I want to visit Luigi's café at Number — Bleecker Street tonight. Get busy and find somebody who knows the joint and can take me. I'll disguise myself, of course, so I won't look out of place there. You'd better come along too."

When I was for retiring to the back room to scrub the paint off my face and resume my own clothes, she said: "Why go to all that trouble? With a change of dress you'll do very well for tonight as you are. We can eat here before we start."

V

We met our men at nine o'clock that night in a cheap Italian restaurant near Washington Square, so that we could have a couple of hours in which to familiarise ourselves with the parts that we were to play later. In addition to Benny Abell Mme. Storey had called upon George Stephens, another operative, because the plan she had in mind called for two men in addition to the Italian who was to conduct us to Luigi's.

This case followed soon after the Jacmer Touchon affair during which Mme. Storey had been obliged for purposes of disguise to cut her hair short. Her hair was now about two inches long, and tonight she wore it in a tangle of dark curls

all over her head like a tousle-headed boy. It lent her an impudent prettiness that was irresistible. Wherever we went that night men's eyes followed her. She was wearing a smart cheap little red dress and called herself Madge Regan. She has the art of making herself look common without losing anything of her attractiveness.

As for me, I modelled myself upon her so far as I was able. Luckily when she was present I was not obliged to do much talking.

At eleven o'clock the Italian joined us. Benny introduced him simply as Joe. Benny refused to vouch for him beyond a certain point, consequently he was not taken into our confidence. He supposed that we were a party of people from uptown who had disguised ourselves in order to see a little low life.

We went on to Luigi's. It was in the basement of one of the ancient buildings on Bleecker Street that still retained its old-fashioned high stoop. A barber shop occupied the parlour floor, and presumably there was a tenement above. My heart sank at sight of the place. True, I knew that Mme. Storey had taken Inspector Rumsey into her confidence, and that several plain-clothes men were hanging about the neighbourhood ready to aid us if necessary; but what good would they be to us, I asked myself, if they arrived on the scene after we had been shot?

Luigi's was a depressing-looking joint and I felt sorry for those who had to take their pleasure there. There was a long room beside the entrance passage with a row of little tables

around it and a narrow space for dancing in the middle. It was absolutely empty. Behind it was a smaller room with a bar where several men were drinking and talking loudly.

The real sanctum sanctorum of Luigi's was in the rear. It was a sordid, dirty little room, evidently part of an extension to the main building. A heavy fog of tobacco smoke filled the air. It was only big enough to hold four tables, of which two were occupied when we entered. A large party of young men pressed around a table in one of the farther corners playing some sort of gambling game with a deal of noisy talk. Beside the door sat three girls with a depressed-looking man who was paying very little attention to them. The girls were evidently employees of the place, but business was poor, and they had fastened to the man merely to keep themselves in countenance.

I could not help looking at them curiously. They started to talk brightly among themselves when we entered, but it was a hollow pretence. What a life! One of them, I was surprised to see, was as fresh and pretty as a schoolgirl, a tiny little thing formed like a fairy, with the pure oval face that painters love to depict. I noticed that she was continually glancing in a sullen fashion at the group of noisy young men. I supposed that she had a sweetheart amongst them, and resented the fact that he preferred to gamble rather than talk to her.

We seated ourselves around the table in the other far corner, that is, next to the gamblers. Presumably our man was amongst them, but we were careful, of course, not to betray any curiosity concerning them. We ordered *grappa*, the fiery liqueur that is so popular south of Washington

Square, and busied ourselves in our own talk. Benny was supposed to be my boy-friend, while the tall Stephens devoted himself to "Madge," as we called her. Joe appeared to be what he in fact was, merely our conductor.

The waiter came and went noiselessly between us and the bar. He was an unnaturally pale and haggard little fellow who looked as if he had never seen the sun. Occasionally a fat Italian entered the room, very flashily dressed and having a big watch chain with a bunch of charms and a diamond flashing on his fat finger. He jingled his charms, exchanged loud witticisms with the players while he gave us all the once-over with his hard glittering eye, and went out again. This, we learned, was the genial proprietor.

As opportunity offered I sized up the card players. Some of them had their backs to us, but as the game progressed they shifted their places from time to time, and in the end I was able to get a look at each one of them. Nearly every man at the table answered in a general way to the description furnished by Dr. Portal. Nineteen or twenty years old; well-dressed in a somewhat flashy style, good-looking in the Italian manner. Handsome, black eyes, and well-oiled black hair.

After eliminating the ill-favoured ones and those who were clearly more than twenty years old, my choice finally narrowed down to a warm-coloured young man who sat with his back against the end wall, while his hard eyes travelled from face to face of the other players. He was certainly the best-looking one at the table; his features had a grace and harmony that would have earned him a good living as an

artists' model; moreover, there was that hint of boyish roundness in his cheeks that Dr. Portal had spoken of.

Presently I noticed that it was towards this face that the sullen eyes of the little girl at the next table were so often directed. Was she another victim to his infernal good looks? He paid no attention whatever to her. Finally one of the other players addressed him as "Chico" and he answered. Mme. Storey and I exchanged a fleeting glance.

As soon as we had spotted our man, Mme. Storey began to make play to attract his attention. She did not immediately look at him, but addressed herself rather to Stephens in a drawling, provocative voice that was bound to arouse Chico's notice. Not more than five feet separated their chairs. Chico, hearing that siren voice, looked—and having looked once, looked again. The tousled curls netted his fancy. However successful he may have been with women it was not often that one so beautiful as Mme. Storey could have come his way. He stared. Finally she allowed their glances to cross; she sneered at him lazily. At the implied challenge his eyes began to burn. It was a fascinating game to watch, but so dangerous it fairly made me sick with apprehension.

It was not long before the little girl at the other table perceived what was going on. Her friends addressed her as Tina. She rose quickly, and edging herself close to Chico's chair, stood between him and the charmer at our table. It was a childish and rather piteous manoeuvre; the little thing's face was tormented with jealousy. She put her hand on Chico's shoulder. This proprietary gesture caused the other players at the table to grin, and their grins enraged the conceited Chico.

"Get out of here!" he snarled; and added a coarse oath.

Tina, with a flippant parade of indifference, returned to her former place, and began to talk animatedly to the other girls. But her eyes were tragic. It wrenched one's heart to see it, but of course a poor little may-fly like that could not be allowed to interfere with Mme. Storey's plans. If she got hurt that was her lookout.

Mme. Storey and Chico continued to fence with their insolent glances, each making out to scorn the other. The old, old game. Chico was evidently an adept at it. Finally, according to pre-arrangement, Stephens began to quarrel.

"Turn around!" he said harshly. "You can look at me, see? I didn't bring you here to hand out smiles to another fellow!"

"Aah, what's the matter wit' ya?" retorted the supposed Madge stridently. "You don't own me. My eyes are my own, I guess, and I can do what I want wit' 'em. You ain't so much to look at as I can see."

Stephens subsided into a sullen muttering, and Madge (it is easier under these circumstances for me to refer to her as Madge) smiled at Chico in open defiance. Presently Stephens broke out again, and Benny and I made believe to be trying to soothe him. More drinks were ordered at our table. The card players grinned at Chico. Apparently they were quite accustomed to seeing him as the storm centre when there were women around. Chico went on playing his cards with an air of absolute indifference.

Stephens alternately quarrelled with Madge and ordered up fresh drinks. It was a very pretty bit of character acting that he was giving. It was a common sort of scene in that place and nobody paid much attention. Once Luigi with his hard eyes and his unctuous voice gave us a jocose warning to cut it out. Finally Stephens, making believe to be thoroughly drunk, jumped up.

"Aah, come on home," he snarled. "I'm not gonna stand for this."

My heart beat like a trip-hammer as the critical moment approached. I could scarcely fetch my breath.

"Go home yourself if you don't like it," retorted Madge. "I'm well enough pleased. I'll stay here with Benny and Belle."

Benny and I got up. "No! No!" we said. (All this had been rehearsed beforehand.) "Come on, Madge, let's all go. George is gettin' ugly now. You know what he is. We'll quiet him down outside."

"No!" cried Madge obstinately. "Just because he's turned ugly he's not gonna spoil my fun! You can all go home and be damned to you! I'm stayin'!" And she sent a sidelong smile in Chico's direction.

Stephens appeared to be infuriated by this smile. Seizing Madge by the wrist, he jerked her roughly to her feet. "You come on!" he cried.

She tore herself free. "Lea' me alone!" she yelled. "You ain't got any rights over me!"

In the background Benny and I made soothing noises. "Aw, let her alone, George, and she'll come.... Aw, come on, Madge, you see how he is!" And so on.

But Stephens seized her bodily and started dragging her towards the door. Madge fought like a wildcat. Stephens kept her in front of him so that she could not reach his face with her nails. Benny and I made futile attempts to separate them. Behind us play had stopped, and the twelve players watched the struggling couple with cold, mask-like faces. They were not the sort to interfere in what did not concern them.

"Lemme go! Lemme go! or I'll kill ya!" yelled Madge.

He had shoved her almost to the door when suddenly she reached down, snatched a gun out of the top of her stocking, and wrenching herself around, pressed the muzzle to his side. Everybody in the room saw the act. They did not know that gun was loaded only with blanks. There was a deafening report. Stephens released the girl and went staggering back against a table, pressing his hand against his side.

"I'm shot!" he groaned.

Madge stood there in a daze with the smoking gun in her hand. Benny disarmed her without resistance, and dropped the gun in his pocket. He then turned to support the wounded man. He ordered Joe, the Italian who had come with us, to take his other side. Stephens sagged between them in a most

realistic way, his hand still pressed over his wound, his head hanging on his breast. I felt the same horror as if it had all been real. The absolute stillness of everybody else in the room was uncanny. Most of the faces bore cynical sneers. It was no business of theirs.

The door banged open and Luigi and his waiters ran in. The fat man was livid and moist with excitement. "Who done it?" he yelled.

"She did! She did!" cried Benny, pointing a shaking forefinger at Madge. "She shot my pal!" And he put his arm lovingly around Stephens' shoulder.

"Get him out of here! Get him out of here before he drops!" yelled Luigi. "My God! I can't have him dyin' on me! This will ruin me if it gets to the police!"

"We'll get him out if you'll call a taxi," growled Benny.

Luigi scampered away to do his bidding, and Benny and Joe slowly followed him out of the room, supporting the fainting man between them. All this happened so quickly that the bystanders had no time to wonder why no blood appeared around the hand that Stephens was pressing to his side. Madge made a move to accompany them, but Benny turned on her violently.

"Get back!" he snarled. "Ain't you done harm enough?"

Presumably they got their cab, for they did not return. Madge and I were left behind. She dropped in a chair and, spreading her arms on the table in front of her, hid her face

upon them. I sat down beside her, and put an arm around her shoulders.

"Oh, why did you do it? Why did you do it?" I moaned.

Play started again at the next table as if nothing had happened. At the other table the three girls, with painful sneers in Madge's direction, resumed their low-voiced talk.

In a few moments Luigi came bustling back into the room. "Now, then, girl," he said harshly, "out with ya! Ye're lucky to git off so easy. Never let me catch you in my place again. I don't care who brings ya."

Madge raised a dry-eyed, terror-stricken face. "I dassent ... I dassent go out in the street," she said hoarsely. "Benny'll be layin' for me. He took me gun off me. He'll git me for this."

"That's nothin' to me," said Luigi. "Out wit' ya!"

"Oh, I dassent! I dassent!" whispered Madge, glancing around desperately for help.

Chico gave over his hand to the man who was standing next him, and arose with a swagger. "That's all right, Luigi," he said with a lordly indifference, "these ladies are wit' me, see? I'm buyin' for them. What'll you have, girls?"

"You're a fool, Chico," said Luigi, shrugging, "you had oughta leave the women alone. You're like to get plugged yourself for this." However, his scorn was tempered by a grin. Chico was evidently a favourite.

"Thanks for the tip," said Chico insolently. "I know my business."

Little Tina suddenly sprang up, livid and trembling with passion. "You would, would you?" she cried. "With the likes of *that*! She's a murderess! Put her out! Put her out!"

Everybody turned on Tina. "Yah! are you tryin' to make trouble now?" snarled Luigi. "I don't have to take it from you! Git your things and git, see!" He pointed a stubby forefinger towards the door.

Tina's voice rose shriller and higher, but Luigi bellowed her down. "Git! ... Git! ... Git!"

The girl suddenly collapsed and stumbled out of the room, weeping tempestuously. There is no justice in such matters. Luigi followed her out.

VI

In obedience to a glance from Madge I moved around to the other side of the table, leaving the place next to her for Chico. We sat down. More *grappa* was brought to our table, and everything went on just as if there had been no shooting five minutes before. I may say that Madge and I made no pretence of drinking all this stuff. Luigi didn't care, of course, so it was ordered often enough. The full glasses were

whisked away from in front of us, and I have no doubt brought back again directly afterwards.

It was very thrilling to find oneself so close to the redoubtable Chico. He was so frankly the preening, strutting male I was almost ashamed to look at him. "Aah! buck up, girl!" he said to Madge with his scornful grin; "you're too good-lookin' a girl to mind a little thing like that! Nobody's gonna do anything to a girl like you!"

However scornful his words might be, there was a dangerous purring quality in his voice whenever he addressed a woman that was—well, weakening! The little wretch was too good-looking, too sure of himself. It wasn't fair. Madge permitted herself to smile wanly in his direction.

"What's yer name?" he demanded. "Me, I'm Chico Cardone."

"Madge Regan," she said.

"And who's she?" he asked, with a contemptuous jerk of the head in my direction.

"Me sister Bella."

"Well, say, they ain't nobody layin' fer Bella outside," he said coolly. "Why can't she beat it home?"

"Nix," said Madge. "Me and Bella allus sticks together."

"Aah," he drawled, at once contemptuous and cajoling, "send her home, go on."

"No," said Madge.

Their hard glances contended for the mastery. In the end it was Madge who faced him out. Chico was inveigled by the touselled head. "Well, drink hearty," he said, lifting his tiny glass. No more was said about sending me home.

Chico, with his insolent narrowed eyes fixed on her face, picked up her hand and fondled it. "Pretty damn quick on the draw aw right," he said grinning. "Me, I like 'em dangerous, meself. They's some kick about a girl that totes a gun. What makes me tired is the kind that blubs all over the place.... Just the same when you go out wit' me I'll make sure first-off you ain't got no gun in your stockin' before I git it meself."

Madge pulled her hand away. "I ain't gonna get messed up with you," she said, giving him scorn for scorn.

"Why ain't ya?"

"Too many women runnin' after ya. I don' hafta enter no free-for-all to git a fella."

"Is zat so?" drawled Chico.

"You heard me."

"Nobody ever caught me by runnin' after me. I pick me own."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah!"

It is impossible to convey in words the spirited exchange of glances that passed back and forth. I wondered where Mme. Storey could have learned the technique of Bleecker Street love-making. She was as good as Chico. "You don't exactly hate yerself, do ya?" she asked with arch scorn.

"Why should I?" retorted Chico grinning. "I never lie to a woman."

"No, you don't!"—very sarcastically.

"Sure, I don't. That's what makes 'em sore. They expect a man to lie."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah! But I allus give it to 'em straight." He drew her arm through his, and leaned warmly towards her. "Listen, kid," he murmured thrillingly, "I'm for you, see? ... There it is, you can take it or leave it, and I ain't sayin' you're the on'y girl in the world neither."

"Nor are you the on'y fella," she retorted.

Luigi had returned to the room and was watching the couple with a cynical grin. The scene between them was interrupted by the clanging of a gong in the street. Everybody looked at the door uneasily. The haggard little waiter ran in.

"The police," he gasped; "the police..."

A window was thrown up and Chico went over the sill, pulling Madge after him by the hand. Chico never thought of

me, but you may be sure I stuck close to them. We dropped on damp flagstones outside, with a high wooden fence looming before us. There was a ladder lying in the yard, which Chico placed against the extension. We scrambled up, and he pulled it after us. We crossed a flat tin roof that crackled underfoot, and went over another window sill into the main house. We found ourselves in a bedroom. There were actually two people lying in the bed. One rose up as we crossed the room, but Chico said: "'S'all right, Mike;" and he lay down again. It was like a crazy dream.

Gaining the main hall of the house, we went up three more flights of stairs, and up another ladder. Chico pushed open a scuttle, and once more we found ourselves under the sky. Chico carefully closed the scuttle. I had a momentary impression of peaceful still beauty high above the confusion of the town. The sky threatened rain, and the low-hanging clouds reflected the street lights with a delicate pinkish radiance.

Chico ran over the roofs pulling Madge after him, and I close at their heels. We climbed over the low parapets that separated the houses. The noises of the street came up to us slightly muffled. I counted the houses we crossed. On the fourth house Chico dropped to his knees beside a little skylight in the roof, and lifted it.

"This is me own room," he said. "We'll be as safe here as in church."

He dropped out of sight into the black hole, and presently his voice came back: "Wait till I shove a table under, and

then let yourself down easy." And a moment later: "Now!"

I had a moment of horrible panic when Mme. Storey dropped into the blackness, thinking she might be spirited away from me. But when I let myself down, I found the table under my feet, and Chico's hand to guide me. He steered me to a bed.

"Sit there," he said. "I gotta close the shutter before I light up."

Mme. Storey was beside me. I was trembling like an aspen leaf, and she pressed my hand to reassure me. By a little catch of laughter in her breath I knew she was enjoying every moment. Well, that is her way. It made me a little sore at the time, because my nerves were in strings.

The light flashed on, and I beheld a sordid little inside room with only the skylight overhead to admit light and air. It was closely shuttered now. The place was clean enough, but utterly cheerless; the sagging iron bed on which we sat, the rickety pine table; a cheap bureau marked all around the edge with the burns of innumerable cigarette butts; and two broken chairs. The only humane touch in the room was a photograph stuck in the glass on the bureau. Curiously enough it was not of a woman, but a handsome Italian boy, thirteen or fourteen years old.

Chico stood before us grinning. "Well, here we are!" he said. "On'y I wish to God Bella was home and in bed."

Madge now assumed a sullen and rather scared look. "If she wasn't here I wouldn't stay," she muttered.

"Would you sooner run out into the arms of the cops?" asked Chico teasingly.

"Yes, I would," she muttered. "When can I get out of here?"

"I don't care if you never go," said Chico ardently.

Now that we had separated him from the gang, Chico showed us a new aspect of his character. He was not on parade now. There was no necessity for him to play the part of the swaggering little bravo, who felt nothing and cared for nothing. Now that he had us practically at his mercy, something perilously like decency and kindness appeared in his hard face. I gradually lost my fear of him.

"Aw, I ain't a gorilla," he said cajolingly to Madge. "I ain't a gonna bite ya. What ya scared of, kid? You was game enough when the utter fella got ugly."

Gradually Madge allowed herself to be won back to a smile. In his room, however, her manner was entirely different from what it had been in the café. There were no more scornful challenges from her dark eyes. She was friendly and gentle as if she trusted him—and Chico responded to it. Nobody is completely bad, of course. He talked to her like any simple fellow to his girl.

Chico poured out the story of his life and adventures as if it was relief to unburden himself. It was a lurid tale. He was

mum as to the particular incident in which we were interested. He still boasted, of course, but there was a simplicity about his recital that disarmed one. The poor lad's moral values were hopelessly confused: he boasted of his crimes, and apologised for his better impulses.

Madge took advantage of a lull in his talk to ask: "Who's that a pitcher of in your bureau?"

Chico sprang up and fetched it to the bed. "That's me kid brutter, Tony," he said eagerly. "Ain't he a swell-lookin' kid?" The question unlocked the last stronghold of Chico's guarded breast. There was something almost piteous in his eager fondness. "Say, I cert'ny am foolish about that kid," he went on. "Have to keep it dark around the fellas or they sure would razz me.... There's on'y the two of us, him and me. Our folks is all dead, and I'm raisin' the kid, see? I mean, I'm payin' for his raisin'. I got him in the Paulist Fathers' school up-town. Damn good school, too. The sons of judges and doctors and politicians and all kinds of high-ups go there, and my Tony's as good as the best of them!"

"The sons of doctors and lawyers and all!" exclaimed Madge as if amazed.

"Sure, I know you'll t'ink I'm a fool," said Chico shamefacedly, "but that kid's gotta have the best education money kin buy. None of the rough stuff for him; none of what I went troo. Me, I got my education in the prisons. He don't know where the money comes from that pays his bills. He thinks I'm a travellin' man. Gee! it would raise a stink up in that school if they ever found out, eh? But I'll take care of

that. The on'y thing that bothers me is, suppose I was to get mine sudden. Suppose I stopped a bullet or got sent up for a long stretch. I tell ya that shakes me nerve. What would happen to the kid if I kicked out?"

"Maybe the fathers would keep him just the same," suggested Madge.

"Maybe," said Chico frowning, "but I wouldn't want him to be a charity pupil. He has his pocket-money with the rest of them, and belongs to the swell clubs. He's on the basket-ball team—the junior team—and he plays football too. He's gonna be a regular husky when he gits his growt'. Bigger'n me. Sometimes I go up to watch their games, but he don't know I'm there."

"Don't you ever see him?" asked Madge in surprise.

"Sure, I go up there sometimes," said Chico uncomfortably, "but it's a kind of a strain to hafta talk to the priests and all. I'm afraid of givin' the snap away. So mostly I make out I'm travellin'. I took him to the movies once or twict on a Sat'day aft-noon, but hell! you never know what yer gonna see in them movies. They puts ideas in a young kid's head."

"Ain't it the troot!" murmured Madge, entering fully into sympathy with his story.

"I feel just like a fat'er to that kid," said Chico with an attractive, shamefaced laugh. "Ain't it hell to be a fat'er! Allus worryin' about him, how to keep him from learnin' bad

and all; allus thinkin' he's gonna get one of these diseases that kids get."

"Like infantile paralysis," suggested Madge softly.

"Oh, God! that's the worst," said Chico. "Fair puts me in a sweat just to think of it. And they say there's an epidemic comin' on."

"I read in the papiss how there was a doctor guy gonna wipe out infantile paralysis," said Madge. "At the Terwilliger Institoot."

Chico made no answer.

"Did you read that?" she asked.

"No. I didn't read it," he said slowly. "But I know that doctor guy; Dr. Felix Portal."

"Sure, that was the name," said Madge; "you know him?"

There was another pause, then Chico said impulsively: "Say, if you'n me's gonna be pals I'll tell you this." Apparently he looked around at me here. "Do you t'ink Bella's asleep?" he asked apprehensively.

"Sure, she'll sleep wherever you put her down," said Madge.

"Listen," said Chico lowering his voice—and you can imagine how I stretched my ears for what was coming; "there was a fella hired me to take Dr. Portal for a ride."

"What!" cried Madge.

"Yeah, and I took him, too. Way to hell and gone up in Westchester County. And I had me gun in me hand ready to smoke him, and I couldn't do it."

"Why?"

"Because he was talkin' about this now, infantile paralysis, and how he was gonna save all the kids from it, and I happened to t'ink about my Tony, and I couldn't do it. I put the rod in me pocket and I drove the old man home. And I ain't never regretted it neither, though it cost me a grand."

"But what fellow would want to bump him off?" asked Madge.

Chico turned wary again. "I'm not tellin' that," he said shortly.

"But there was some trouble up there," said Madge. "Anot'er doctor guy was shot. I read it in the papiss. Don't re'clect his name. Was you in that too?"

"Aah, you wanta know too much fer yer own good," said Chico, wary, but perfectly good-tempered.

"I don't want to pry into yer secrets," said Madge with an offended air, "on'y it seems funny why anybody would want to go after two doctor guys who was on'y workin' to save the kids."

"Yeah, and it *is* funny too, if the troot was known."

That was as far as she could get him. Mme. Storey let the talk drift away to other matters. Before she could bring it back we were startled by hearing a slight, peculiar tap on the door. Madge and I sprang up in alarm.

"'S'all right," said Chico soothingly. "That's the knock of a friend." Going to the door, he opened it an inch or two. Madge and I were out of the range of vision of whoever stood outside. "What's the matter?" asked Chico. "Must be near four o'clock."

"Well, you ain't in bed yet," responded the voice of an angry woman. "Who you got in here? I'm gonna see!"

She pushed past Chico and I saw the handsome, buxom Italian girl who had opened the door to me that afternoon. My heart sank like a stone. The worst of it was, I was sitting up on the bed, staring directly at her. It was too late then to lie down and make believe to be sleeping. My only hope of escaping recognition lay in the fact that it had been pretty dark in the stair hall that afternoon.

"Two of 'em!" she cried furiously. "Two of 'em! Here's a nice thing! Bringin' 'em in here right next to me mutter's room! You got no shame at all!"

Chico was much more respectful towards this girl. I suppose she had some sort of hold over him. "Now Ria, now Ria," he said placatingly, "you get this wrong! I never seen these ladies before tonight."

"The more shame to you!" she cried, "bringin' 'em here! Huh! Ladies! Don't make me laugh!"

"You can see for yerself there's nothin' wrong," protested Chico. "We was just sittin' talkin', like."

"Yeah, and you was tellin' 'em all you knew, eh? I could hear you talkin' through the wall!"

"I just brought 'em in here to get 'em out of the way of the police," said Chico.

"That's a likely story! Maybe they're police spies theirselves!"

It was only the random shot of a jealous woman, but it made my blood run cold. She came closer to the bed, peering into our faces. "I thought so!" she cried in shrill triumph. "They *are* spies! Anyhow, the red-headed one is," pointing to me.

Our backs were against the wall then. "It's a lie!" cried Mme. Storey. "It's a lie!" I echoed. "You're crazy!" muttered Chico.

"Crazy, am I?" sneered the Italian. "She come to the door this afternoon lookin' for ya. Made out to be a book agent. 'Mr. Cardone's name was give me,' says she so nice. Yah! Well, I didn't suspect nothin', and I told her she'd find you at Luigi's speakeasy tonight. She did find you there, didn't she? And now you've told her everythin' you know!"

Who could ever have foreseen this? It was just a rotten piece of luck. Chico backed away from the bed, his face turning pale and hard. His hand went slowly to his hip, and reappeared grasping an ugly little automatic. I closed my eyes, thinking our last moment had come.

"Oh, spare her! spare her!" I moaned.

"Be quiet, Bella," commanded my employer.

The Italian girl cried out too. "Chico, no! no!"

He had become the hard and self-controlled little gunman again. "Shut your noise," he growled out of the corner of his mouth. "I'm not gonna croak them.... Call your dad."

The girl stuck her head out of the door and called tremulously: "Padre! Padre!"

Chico and Mme. Storey measured their steely glances against each other. "I thought you was on the square wit' me," sneered Chico. "You fooled me nice, didn't ya? I gotta hand it to ya."

"I shall be on the square with you," she answered. "You'll see it yet."

"Yeah? You're no Bleecker Street girl. I can see it in your eye. You've got the look of one of the high-ups."

A burly Italian shuffled into the room clad in slippers, pants and shirt, with his suspenders hanging. He too had a

gun in his hand. I was sick with terror. "What's the matter, kid?" he growled.

"Ria says them two women are police spies," said Chico. "Maybe they are and maybe they ain't. I ain't takin' no chances. Keep them here while I make a getaway, that's all. Give me ten minutes and then let 'em go, see? Let 'em go and be damned to 'em!"

Chico thrust the photograph in his breast pocket and snatched up his cap. He had had this cap during our flight over the roofs.

"Where's your overcoat?" asked Ria.

"Left it at Luigi's. Get it tomorrow, will ya?" Without another glance in our direction, he made for the door.

The tears were rolling down Ria's round cheeks. "Oh, Chico mio," she mourned.

He paused only long enough to jerk up her chin with his forefinger and print a kiss on her lips. There was something infinitely savage and graceful in the gesture. He sped downstairs. Ria wept unrestrainedly. Mme. Storey's face was like a mask. I was surprised to see her take his escape so calmly, but I was not familiar with all the details of the arrangements she had made in advance.

Chico's footsteps died away as he descended through the house. Then suddenly far below we heard the sounds of a scuffle followed by a heavy fall. After a moment a voice, not

Chico's, cried exultantly: "I have him!" A breath of relief escaped Mme. Storey.

The other Italian's face turned black with rage. "By God! they've got him!" he cried. "But I've got you!" And he raised the gun.

Once more Mme. Storey and I looked straight into the face of death. She never flinched. Ria flung herself on her father. "No! No!" she cried. "The police are downstairs. They'll send you to the chair for it! These women are nothing to us!"

While they were still struggling there was a crash overhead. The shutter under the skylight swung down, and a man dropped into the room, landing on his feet like a cat. Another followed. Both were armed. The first was George Stephens, the second, one of Inspector Rumsey's plain-clothes men. In a trice they had the Italian covered, and forced him to drop his gun.

And so we were saved. In the powerful reaction that overcame me, all my strength seemed to desert me for a moment. I dropped on the edge of the bed. Mme. Storey said:

"Give me a cigarette, George."

"Where's Chico?" asked Stephens.

"They have him safe downstairs."

He jerked his head towards the scowling Italian and his daughter. "Shall we take these two along?"

"No," said Mme. Storey, "they are guilty of nothing except standing by a friend."

"But he pulled a gun," objected the plain-clothes man. "I've got to take him up for that."

"It was my gun," said Mme. Storey quickly. "He took it from me."

The gun was returned to her. "Come on," said Stephens; and we filed out of the room. Mme. Storey was the last to go. She slipped the gun to the Italian, whispering: "Take out a permit for it, and you'll have nothing to fear." He stared at her in dumb amazement. Such magnanimity, I suppose, was absolutely unheard of in his world.

VII

Chico was lodged in the Tombs. After a couple of hours' sleep Mme. Storey and I were again hard at work on the case. Events followed fast that morning. Acting upon a suggestion of Mme. Storey's, the police were searching the sewer catch basins in the immediate vicinity of the Institute and in one of them was found an automatic pistol of the latest Rives and Jackson model, 38 calibre, from which one shot had been fired, and also a slightly flattened bullet. The bullet exactly fitted the hole in the plaster of Dr. McComb's office.

Steps were immediately taken to trace the sale of the pistol by means of the manufacturer's number, and in the meantime I was sent up-town to secure some photographs of Dr. McComb if that were possible, and also to run down Amadeo Corioli, the night watchman at the Institute, and invite him to visit Mme. Storey's office. A policeman accompanied me upon the latter errand, but as it happened, Corioli came quite willingly. His air of innocence was almost too childlike. In taking these measures Mme. Storey, you will perceive, was following a theory that she had formulated in advance.

By the time I got back to the office it had already been established that the gun in question had been sold on October 28th, to a well-dressed, heavy-built man about forty years old; red-faced and wearing glasses; had the look of a professional man. When photographs of Dr. McComb were shown the clerk, he positively identified him as the purchaser. McComb had been shot with his own gun.

The final links were forged by the testimony of little Tina, the girl who had been so rudely ejected from Luigi's. The police rounded her up and brought her to our office shortly before noon. Corioli, meanwhile, was being detained in our back room. Still wearing her bedraggled party dress, her make-up ruined by tears, and almost paralysed with terror, Tina was indeed a pitiable little object. Mme. Storey applied herself to soothing her fears. It was a long time before she could persuade Tina that she was not accused of anything herself, but was merely wanted as a witness.

"We know," said Mme. Storey, "that Chico Cardone shot a man called Dr. McComb on the night of November 9th."

This was news to me, and I strongly doubted if my employer was sure of it yet either. It is frequently necessary, of course, to take this attitude in dealing with a witness.

"I don't know nottin' about it!" cried Tina. "I swear before God I don't know nottin'!"

"You are not suspected of knowing anything about it," Mme. Storey patiently explained. "I just want you to answer a few questions referring to circumstances that led up to it."

"I don't know nottin' about it," wailed Tina.

"You wouldn't want to see Chico go to the chair, would you?"

This was answered by a mute shake of the head amidst a fresh flood of tears.

"Then if you help me to prove that someone was behind him in this killing, that somebody put him up to it, he will get off easier."

At this point Corioli was introduced into the room.

"Have you ever seen this man before?" asked Mme. Storey.

Corioli scowled a mute threat at the girl, but she answered truthfully. "Yes, I see him. He come to Luigi's sometime. Ev'body at Luigi's know him."

"Did he ever bring a stranger to Luigi's?"

"Yes. One time he bring a man from up-town."

"What sort of looking man?" asked Mme. Storey.

"Big man," said Tina; "red face; wear glasses. Look lika politician."

"Look at these," said Mme. Storey, calling the girl's attention to the photographs of Dr. McComb spread upon her desk. "Did you ever see this man?"

"Sure," said Tina with rising excitement; "that is the up-town guy Amadeo bring to Luigi's. You know t'at? How you know t'at?"

"When was this?" asked Mme. Storey.

Tina shrugged. "How can I tell? It was before election, because I t'ink he was politician."

"Long before election?"

The girl shook her head. "Jus' two, t'ree days."

"See if you can't fix the exact night in your mind," said Mme. Storey persuasively.

Tina shook her head helplessly. However, after thinking it over for a moment or two, she suddenly said: "It was Wednesday night. I know that because the next night there was an orchester. Luigi hires an orchester Thursday nights."

"The Wednesday before election," said Mme. Storey turning back the pages of her desk calendar; "that was October 27th. Good! Now we are making progress.... What happened on this Wednesday night?"

"Amadeo Corioli, he call Chico over," said Tina. "Introduce him to the up-town guy. They talk quiet. By and by Amadeo go away an' the up-town fella and Chico they talk long time so quiet. I know they fixin' up some job toget'er. Afterwards I ask Chico what he want but Chico on'y laugh.... The nex' night he come again ..."

"So he came again the next night?" repeated Mme. Storey.

"Yes. That was the orchester night. I wouldn't dance because I scare for Chico. I watch them two. They not talk so long this night. I see the up-town guy slip Chico little box under the table and Chico put it in his pocket. When the uptown feller go home, Chico go in wash-room. After he come out I find the little box empty on the wash-room floor, and the paper and string..."

"Was there anything written on the box? any label?" asked Mme. Storey eagerly.

"There was a label say: 'One Rives and Jackson automatic pistol, 38 calibre.'"

"This was on the night of October 28th," said Mme. Storey in high satisfaction, "and we already know that Dr. McComb had bought the gun that afternoon. On the following day

Chico scraped acquaintance with Dr. Portal. Our case is complete!"

I was far from seeing it myself at that moment. When the witnesses had been taken away and my employer and I were alone, I said helplessly: "I can't understand it! It seems that Dr. McComb himself handed the gun to Chico with which Chico shot him ten days later!"

Mme. Storey was in a deep study. "Think it over," she said with a provoking smile. "... The problem that confronts me is, what to do with Chico?"

As a result of her deliberations she finally called up the District Attorney, also Inspector Rumsey and Dr. Portal, and arranged for us all to meet at the Institute after lunch, and for the Inspector to bring Chico. The District Attorney at this time was Frank Everard, a first-class man, and one with whom we maintained excellent relations.

And so the last scene of all took place in the bare little laboratory office with Dr. Portal, all in white, presiding over it like a disembodied face. From time to time I saw him glancing wistfully at Chico, and I suppose he still felt a sneaking fondness for the lad. And I confess I did myself. At this moment my heart was heavy for the little gunman. Chico, of course, had resumed his hard, professional air. His face was like a mask.

Mme. Storey said: "Dr. Portal, I promised I would not trouble you again until I had found the man who shot Edgar McComb.... Well, there he is."

"I'm sorry ... I'm sorry," murmured Dr. Portal commiseratingly. "Why did he do it?"

"Why did you do it, Chico?" asked Mme. Storey.

"I ain't sayin' I done it," replied Chico with a hardy swagger. "I ain't sayin' nottin' a tall."

"Well, I'll tell you why he did it," said Mme. Storey gravely. "McComb had hired him to shoot Dr. Portal."

We all exclaimed in astonishment. "Oh, good God! ... no!" gasped the horrified Dr. Portal.

"When he saw that the poliomyelitis serum was going to be a success McComb wished to reap the full glory," she went on relentlessly. "He foresaw that it would be one of the great accomplishments of science that would make its discoverer forever famous."

"What saved Dr. Portal?" asked the District Attorney.

"At the moment that Chico had his gun in his hand Dr. Portal saved himself by speaking of what he was about to do for the children. As it happens, Chico has a young brother who is the dearest thing on earth to him."

Chico suddenly lowered his head. The poor lad could not bear to have us see the softness that overcame him at the mention of Tony.

"I suppose Chico brooded upon it afterwards," Mme. Storey went on. "It occurred to him that McComb could

easily find another instrument to carry out his will. He shot McComb to save Portal.... I'm not saying that his reasoning was very good, but anyhow, that is what happened."

"Strange are the workings of the human heart!" murmured Dr. Portal. The rest of us were silent in amazement.

"I called you gentlemen together to put it up to you what is to be done with Chico?" Mme. Storey went on. "He killed the man, and ordinarily it would be our duty to let justice take its course with him. But it seems to me that this is a case where justice would not be justice. How can we punish him for acting upon what was a generous impulse, however misguided? And how can we let him bear the brunt when the real instigator of this crime—I refer to Mrs. McComb—cannot be reached by the law? What do you say, Mr. District Attorney?"

Mr. Everard did not answer immediately. He looked very uncomfortable. Dr. Portal broke the silence by saying in his quiet, deliberate way:

"I have a solution to propose."

Everybody looked at him. Chico forgot his unnatural self-control, and gazed at him with the wild hope of any lad in the shadow of the electric chair.

"I need a human subject in my experiments," said Dr. Portal. "If Chico is willing ..."

"What does the District Attorney say?" asked Mme. Storey quickly.

Everard's face cleared. "I say that if Chico volunteers this," he replied unhesitatingly, "I will not undertake a prosecution."

"Then, Chico, it is up to you," she said with a curious gentleness.

"I ... I don't get it," he said hoarsely.

"Listen, Chico," said Dr. Portal rising. There was something magnificent about the little man at that moment; the disembodied face was pure intelligence. "I propose to make you sick with this disease that you know about, poliomyelitis or infantile paralysis, and then I propose to cure you with my new remedy. I believe that I can cure you, or I would not propose the experiment, but there is a certain risk, of course, because it has not been tried before on a human being."

Chico's lips were parted. He was breathing hoarsely. "And ... and if it works," he stammered, "then you can give it to all the kids that gets sick?"

"That is the idea."

"But ... but *my* kid!" cried the poor lad; "suppose it don't work? Suppose I kick out, or ain't able to do nottin' no more? What will happen to Tony?"

"Oh, let me take that on myself," said Dr. Portal, deeply moved; "let me bring him up as if he were my own son."

"I'd like to share in that," said Mme. Storey quickly.

"And I," murmured the District Attorney.

Chico stiffened his back, and endeavoured to call back the old swagger. "All right, Doc, I'm on!" he said flippantly. "But make it snappy, Doc. Don't let me be t'inkin' about it too long."

"Now's as good a time as any," said Dr. Portal. "Come on upstairs."

It Never Got into the Papers

I

Commodore Varick died very suddenly about half-past five in the afternoon. The cause of death was given as heart failure induced by a violent attack of gastritis. The news caused a great shock because the Commodore was looked upon as a man in the very prime of life. As a matter of fact, he was fifty-five, but so brisk, well-preserved and straight-backed a little man as to seem years younger. He used to drive on the Avenue in his open automobile, sitting up on the back seat with a haughty stare just like royalty, with his bodyguard sitting in front.

I received my first news of the affair from Mme. Storey when she came into the office the following morning. The Varicks were friends of hers. Tossing a newspaper on my desk, she said:

"Poor Bill Varick is gone. Shockingly sudden. I dined there two nights ago."

She went on into her room and I read the paper. It had spread itself on the event, of course, for Commodore Varick was more than a mere individual, he was an institution. There was a three column head on the first page, and a half page obituary inside, reciting the Commodore's life story,

and the history of his family. He was the fourth William Henry Varick of his line, and his name was woven into the very texture of the annals of New York if not of all America. In fact, all over the world, Varick has become a synonym for the American millionaire.

The third William Henry left a number of sons and daughters, consequently the fourth William Henry, he whose obituary I was reading, did not inherit his entire fortune. But he was the head of the clan, and still an enormously rich man. This one's accomplishments had been mostly in the social line. He married an ambitious woman, and New York soon became too small for them.

The title of Commodore had been bestowed on him by our most important yacht club. His yacht *Manahatta*, a dream of luxury, was a familiar sight in the harbours of the old world. Before the war he had entertained the King of England on board; besides King Leopold of Belgium and a host of lesser potentates. And, of course, he was always in the forefront when royalty visited our shores. The Princess Cristina von Habsburg was staying at his house at the moment of his death. The mere recital of his clubs filled a long paragraph, and all in all the newspaper did not exaggerate in terming him "our first private citizen."

And now he was dead after half an hour's illness, and his mantle had fallen on the muscular shoulders of that delightful scapegrace, William Henry Varick fifth, better known as Hank Varick. In the newspapers of late, the fame of the Commodore himself had been overshadowed by the escapades of his son. I did not suppose that he was any worse

than other young men, nor did I believe more than half I read about him. He was a sort of crown prince, and his slightest actions were, therefore, front page stuff.

Apparently the reporters followed him all around the country on the chance of picking up copy. The stories were of the usual sort where youth, irresponsibility and wealth are in conjunction. He was handicapped by being an only child. At this time I had never seen him, but his oft published photographs depicted a handsome, stalwart, laughing young fellow. All the gifts of the gods were his.

I was still reading the newspaper when Inspector Rumsey entered my office. Rumsey had an admirable command of his features, but at this moment he was plainly disconcerted. It startled me. "What's the matter?" I asked.

"A bad business," he said curtly. He nodded towards the next room. "Is she down yet?"

"Yes," I said. "Go right in."

"You'd better come in, too," he said. "She'll want you to hear this."

I locked the outer door to guard against interruptions, and followed him full of trepidation. I had never seen the matter-of-fact Inspector so upset, and it had the effect of a convulsion of nature.

In the long room Mme. Storey, clad in one of the clinging Fortuny robes that become her so well, was lounging with her elbows on the big Italian table, a negligent cigarette in

one hand, and in the other a lump of sugar that she was holding up for Giannino the ape to nibble at. At sight of our good friend's face, she straightened up and let Giannino have the lump of sugar. "What is wrong?" she asked.

"I'm in the deuce of a hole!" he said in a voice of extreme bitterness. "I'm a poor man, but I would give a thousand dollars to be away on my vacation this minute!"

"Can I help?" she asked.

"If you won't, nobody can," he said laconically.

From his inside breast pocket he took an envelope and handed it to her. I was looking over her shoulder. It was a cheap commercial envelope of the sort that is sold by the million. It had come through the mail. It was addressed in block letters very painstakingly formed:

INSPECTOR RUMSEY
POLICE HEADQUARTERS
CITY

Inside there was a little slip of white paper on which was lettered in the same manner:

COMMODORE VARICK WAS POISONED

None of us spoke. For the space of thirty seconds or so the room was so still you could hear Giannino's little teeth nibbling at the sugar. The possibilities that loomed ahead of us were truly dreadful.

Then the Inspector broke out: "There may be nothing in it. Very likely it's the work of the sort of crank that such an occasion always brings to light."

"Yet, you've got to take notice of it," Mme. Storey put in quietly.

"Sure," he cried, "that's the damnable part of it! There may be something in it. And if it should come out later that I had been warned, and had taken no action, I'd be ruined."

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"What am I going to do?" he echoed. "Push in amongst the cardinals and bishops and governors and senators who are leaving their cards at the house this morning, and demand that an autopsy be performed?"

"It is a bad business," murmured Mme. Storey.

"The reporters are there," he went on, "and even my appearance at the house at such time would be enough to start an ugly scandal. Or anybody connected with the department that I might send. And suppose I get my autopsy, and everything proves to be all right, the scandal will go on just the same. The public will never believe but that Commodore Varick was poisoned, and that we were all

engaged in a conspiracy to hush it up. A nice figure I would cut!"

"I see what you're getting at, Inspector," said my employer with a very dry smile.

"You're a friend of Mrs. Varick's," he said cajolingly. "You could go to the house to leave your condolences without exciting any remark. I suppose you would be going there anyway this morning."

She nodded.

"Show her this communication privately," he went on, "and tell her from me that I am very reluctantly forced to insist on an autopsy. I'll send doctors not known to be connected with the department to the house at any hour she sets. It can be performed in perfect secrecy, and if everything proves to be all right, as I am sure it will, no whisper of it need ever reach the press."

Mme. Storey arose and took a turn down the room. Her brows were knitted. "Really, Inspector, this is a bit thick!" she said. "You find yourself in a hole, and you're attempting to climb out on *my* shoulders! I think a lot of you, my friend, but..."

"Oh, leave me out of it," he said earnestly. "I'm not thinking of myself so much as of the Varick family. I hate the idea of starting an unnecessary scandal at their expense. And with death in the house at that. Why, the reputation of a grand old family like that is like a work of art that cannot be

replaced. I don't want to have a hand in defacing it. It's the property of the public, so to speak, and you and I are servants of the public, aren't we?"

Mme. Storey smiled at his ingenious sophistry. While he was speaking she had made up her mind for quite different reasons. "Since you put it that way I can't very well refuse," she said ironically. "I will go. It is necessary to act quickly. I will change my dress. You will come with me, Bella."

II

The Varick house was a great palace of Vermont marble occupying a frontage of half a block on the Avenue, facing the Park. It was one of the older houses of that neighbourhood, and was already at this time becoming hemmed in by hotels and apartment houses; but it had been rebuilt and modernised on several occasions, and was still among the two or three most imposing dwellings in town. There was a grand effect in its severity and plainness that the French châteaux and Italian palazzi strive for in vain.

We drove up in a taxicab which looked rather undignified amidst the long line of elegant private cars crawling up to the front door through the side street. But Mme. Storey cared nothing about that. The arrangements at the house were perfect, of course. There was a footman on the sidewalk to open the door of our car, another to open the great steel grille

lined with plate glass, a third to receive our cards and to separate the sheep from the goats, and still others to usher us the way we should go. Back of them all stood the majestic figure of Jarboe, the Varick butler, overseeing all. All the men servants were dressed in black morning coats.

This ceremony was taking place in a superb marble hall that ran right through the centre of the building flanked by a double row of antique marble pillars, and ending in a great bay filled with gigantic tropical ferns. In the centre of the hall was a little fountain of porphyry, and a great shallow stairway with a wrought steel balustrade swept up at the right. Among the visitors the merely great left their cards and went out again, but the very great were ushered into the state drawing-room at the left to be received by Mr. Varick's brother, while members of the family connection were ushered into a more intimate room on the right.

We hardly belonged to any of these categories but Mme. Storey caught the eye of Mr. Jarboe who came directly to us, a signal honour. To him she whispered her request to be allowed to see Mrs. Varick.

"Mrs. Varick is seeing *nobody*," he answered with a slightly shocked air.

"May I send her a message?"

"Certainly, Madame."

She scribbled a few words on her card, and handed it to him. She asked if we might wait in a place where we would

see nobody, and we were therefore shown into a soberly furnished office behind a masked door.

Presently a footman came to say that Mrs. Varick would see Madame Storey, and led us, not up the great stairway, but into a little elevator hidden in the wall, where no one saw us enter. We alighted in another noble hall panelled in oak, and lighted by a great dome of Tiffany glass. There were a dozen doors all around, and I wondered mightily what was behind them all. Our conductor opened one of them, and we found ourselves in a foyer with more doors. The interior of that house was like a maze, and I wondered if the occupants ever got lost in it.

The footman opened another door, and we found ourselves in Mrs. Varick's boudoir. I had merely the impression of an amber effect, luxurious and flattering to the complexion. The mistress of it all was seated in a *chaise longue* holding a cigarette between fingers that trembled slightly. She was most beautifully dressed, not all in black; black and white. I remember it struck me as strange that she should be wearing a hat. Later I learned that she never appeared in the daytime without one. It was a lovely French hat partly shadowing her face, and the whole effect was of some rare and exquisite orchid—a little withered. Servants were continually coming and going, and she was issuing instructions with a forced air of calmness very painful to see.

While Mme. Storey approached her, I remained standing near the door. Thus I was out of earshot, but I could follow all that occurred with my eyes. Mrs. Varick was surprised to see my employer at such a time, and more than a little

inclined to resent my presence. Mme. Storey hated what she had to do—I could tell it from her stony expression, but went about it directly and simply. Finally she drew the fateful slip of paper from its envelope, and showed it to Mrs. Varick.

When the widow read the words upon it, she forgot that she was a great lady. A little strangled cry escaped her, and she clapped the back of her hand to her mouth, that piteous gesture common to all women. Several of the women in the room ran to her side, but she waved them back.

"Leave me! Leave me!" she said sharply. "... All except you!" She clung to a slender blonde girl in black. This, I presently learned was her personal secretary, Estelle Gilsey. "Look! Estelle, look!" she whispered, showing the slip.

The girl cried out strangely, seemed about to faint. This, I remember, struck me as rather excessive in one who was merely a paid employee.

I drew a little closer to the group. To Mme. Storey, I heard Mrs. Varick say in a strained voice: "But this is probably the work of some mischief-maker, some insane person!"

"That is what we think," said my employer.

"Then why torment me with such a suggestion?"

Mme. Storey patiently explained the situation.

"Oh, why isn't Henry here!" mourned Mrs. Varick. She referred to her son. It appeared that nobody knew where he was. They were telegraphing all over the country for him.

Mrs. Varick angrily repudiated the suggestion of an autopsy, and my employer with the greatest gentleness and patience undertook to show her that she had no choice in the matter, that even the great Mrs. Varick was amenable to the commands of the law, and that we were all working to save her feelings, and the feelings of the family so far as it might be done. Finally, with a flood of tears she gave in. The tears relieved her, I think. The secretary did not cry; throughout all that followed, white-faced and stunned, she was a more tragic figure than the widow.

Mrs. Varick clung to my employer's hand now. "Rosika, you manage everything," she said imploringly. "You are so wonderfully capable! There is nobody else I can trust. Oh, keep it out of the newspapers! And above all, don't let my husband's family know!"

"I will do my best," said Mme. Storey gravely.

In two minutes she had Inspector Rumsey on the wire, and within a quarter of an hour, the three doctors appointed by the police department had been admitted to the house by a rear door. They were all men of discretion, and in order to guard against possible leakages, they had volunteered to conduct the autopsy entirely by themselves without the usual assistants. The body of Mr. Varick was still lying in his bedroom, and there they operated. No one else was permitted in the room. The servants, I think, must have suspected what was going on, but they were wonderfully loyal. No whisper of it was ever revealed.

During the dreadful period of suspense that followed, Mme. Storey and I remained in the boudoir with Mrs. Varick and Miss Gilsey. My employer having explained who I was, Mrs. Varick no longer resented my presence. She lit one cigarette after another in her trembling hands, and tossed them away after a puff or two. I do not remember that a single word was exchanged. I spent the time looking at Miss Gilsey who was very beautiful, and who seemed to be of a gentle and open nature; but she was like one who had received a blow on the head, not quite all there. I wondered at it.

At length Dr. Pulford the senior of the three physicians, came in. His face was like a mask, revealing nothing. He said in measured tones:

"I regret to have to inform you that Commodore Varick met his death as a result of having taken poison through the mouth. It was one of the alkaloids, probably aconite, which is the most powerful of the alkaloids, but it will require an analysis to determine that for certain."

With a sigh like an infant, Mrs. Varick fell over sideways into the arms of her secretary. The girl's face was like death.

III

Dr. Pulford brought Mrs. Varick around by simple measures. The poor woman then went off into a helpless, shaken weeping, very affecting to see. But notwithstanding her high position, her air of authority, she was a shallow woman. Her husband's untimely end did not distress her so much as the threatened family disgrace. The girl, Estelle Gilsey, who never made a sound, took it much harder, really; but I couldn't tell what was the nature of her feeling, whether grief, horror, fear or guilt.

Mrs. Varick's whole cry was to keep it out of the newspapers. "Rosika, I depend on you for that," she wept, fondling my employer's hand.

"My own idea would be to keep it secret as long as possible," said Mme. Storey dryly, "simply in order that the guilty person might not escape. However, the police must decide."

"The police!" cried Mrs. Varick. "Oh, keep them out of the house! That would kill me! Rosika, you take charge of everything. I engage you for that purpose. Money, you know, is no object."

"But I could not accept an engagement on such terms," said Mme. Storey. "My object would be the same as that of the police, to discover the truth."

"Of course! Of course!" cried the weeping woman. "But you do it. They ought to let you do it. You are far cleverer. Keep the police out of the house!"

"Inspector Rumsey must decide that," said my employer. "... There is one thing that I would recommend," she added. "Under the circumstances a public funeral would scarcely be permitted. Let all the arrangements be cancelled, and let it be given out that Commodore Varick is to be buried privately at the convenience of the family."

"Even that would create a scandal!" cried Mrs. Varick.

"But not so great a scandal as the other," remarked Mme. Storey dryly.

"Have the orders given!" cried the distraught widow.

When Dr. Pulford took his leave, Mme. Storey signed to me to detain him outside the room. There she presently joined us.

"Can you add anything to what you have told us?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Not much at this time. Commodore Varick died as the result of having taken a powerful dose of a poison, probably aconite."

"A very large dose?"

"Yes, Madam, it must have killed him almost instantly. Well, in half an hour perhaps; in an hour at the outside."

"Putting aside the possibility of suicide for the moment, how could he have been induced to take it?"

Dr. Pulford shrugged and spread out his hands. "How can one say? It is true that aconite, like all the alkaloids, has an intensely bitter taste, but on the other hand, an infinitesimal quantity would be sufficient. As small a quantity as one three-hundredth of a grain is enough to set up symptoms. How much Commodore Varick got I cannot say; half a grain, maybe."

"Could it have been administered in tea or coffee?"

"It is possible."

"Could the symptoms have been mistaken for those of gastritis?"

"Evidently they were," returned Dr. Pulford dryly. "Was there only one physician present when he died?"

"Only Dr. Slingluff, the family physician."

"A very distinguished man," said Dr. Pulford prudently. "It seems a little strange, but I should not like to commit myself."

"Is there any antidote for aconite poisoning?" asked Mme. Storey.

"Atropine," he answered promptly.

"Could aconite in so highly concentrated a form be readily procured?" was her next question.

"It is in the pharmacopoeia," he said. "Aconitina is the terra applied to the alkaloid. Therapeutically it is little used nowadays; it would be difficult to obtain, but possible."

"One last question, doctor. In poisoning cases of this sort, does the victim retain consciousness until the end, or near the end?"

"It is usual," he said gravely.

"Thank you very much."

He went away. We had no sooner returned to the boudoir than a footman entered to announce that Dr. Slingluff was in the house and wished to know if Mrs. Varick desired to see him. Mme. Storey and I exchanged a glance. Coming at this moment, it seemed almost as if the family doctor had received some intimation through the air of what was going on. At Mme. Storey's suggestion Mrs. Varick retired to her bedroom, and we waited in the boudoir for Dr. Slingluff. It was curious to see how completely my employer had assumed command in the great house. From Mrs. Varick down, all yielded her implicit obedience. At such moments Mme. Storey is very impressive. Her beautiful face becomes as cold and grave as a sybil's. Only the glowing dark eyes reveal the forces within.

Dr. Slingluff was in the forefront of his profession. Having started many years before as a general practitioner, he had gradually won to a commanding position as a heart specialist. It was only for the Varicks and a few other old family friends that he still acted as a general consultant. He

was a handsome, dignified man about sixty, with an open face, a man you would like ordinarily; but I noticed that he changed colour at the mention of my employer's name; in fact, I saw a fine sweat spring out on his forehead, and that hardened my heart against him.

Mme. Storey went to the point as directly as an arrow.

"I am Rosika Storey," she said. "Mrs. Varick has asked me to see you. It has been discovered that Commodore Varick met his death by poison. For the moment, I am acting for the police."

At the word "poison" the doctor went staggering back, and his face became ghastly. *But he was not surprised*. "Oh, my God!" he gasped. "Who told them?"

This answer clearly revealed guilty knowledge, but for the moment Mme. Storey affected not to notice it.

"I am not at liberty to divulge that," she said.

He made a desperate effort to recover himself. "Poison!" he said, straightening up; "this is preposterous!"

"It was revealed by an autopsy."

He was freshly shaken. "An autopsy!" he stammered. "Without my knowledge."

"By order of the police," said Mme. Storey.

Some moments passed before he could give a coherent account of the death-bed scene. "At a few minutes before five yesterday," he finally began, "I was called to the telephone by William Gabbitt, the Commodore's valet. Gabbitt told me that his master was very sick; that he had found him lying helpless on the floor of his bedroom; that it seemed to be a gastric attack such as he had had before, only worse. So I hastily gathered a few things together, digitalis..."

"Digitalis?" she interrupted, "what was that for?"

"Heart," he said, "that was the danger. I instructed my secretary to telephone for Orrin, the stomach specialist, and I ran here—I live just around the corner. I was here within five minutes of receiving the call, but I instantly saw that my old friend was done for; he was already at the point of collapse."

"Who was with him?"

"Gabbitt, and Jarboe, the butler. I sent for Mrs. Varick, but she was out of the house. I wouldn't allow anybody else in the room. I did all the things that one does, but it was too late. I sent Gabbitt running to my office for atropine, and Jarboe to the pantry for an ice-pack. Before either of them got back the Commodore was dead."

"Atropine?" said Mme. Storey, softly, "is that a gastric remedy?"

"I wanted it to accelerate the beating of his heart."

"Why didn't you bring it with you?"

"One can't foresee everything."

"Then you were alone with him when he died?"

"Yes."

"Why did you send Jarboe out of the room? There were plenty of footmen."

"To tell you the truth, I couldn't bear to have a servant see my friend in such an extremity."

"Was he conscious?"

"I cannot say for certain. He was incapable of speaking."

"Then he said nothing to you before he died?"

"Not a word, Madame."

"H'm!" said Mme. Storey. I knew the same thought was in her mind as in my own; that it was very painful to see a naturally decent and upright man struggling to tell a convincing lie. I wondered what *had* taken place in that death chamber.

"Was it not rather unwise to have no other witness to his death?" asked Mme. Storey.

Dr. Slingluff drew himself up. "Well, I did not expect anybody to accuse me of having poisoned my friend," he said with dignity.

"Nobody has," said Mme. Storey mildly. "Had you no doubts as to the cause of death when you signed the certificate?"

"I would not have signed it if I had had. Doctor Orrin joined with me in signing it when he came."

"Did he suggest an autopsy?"

"No, he was quite satisfied with my explanation. Every one of us makes mistakes."

"This one is likely to have important results for you, doctor," said my employer mildly.

"Ruinous!" he cried in despair.

While she was still questioning him, we heard the sounds of a commotion out in the middle of the house, a new voice, young and ringing. At the sound of it, Dr. Slingluff turned paler still.

"Henry!" he gasped. "Oh, God! I can't face him now!"

With that he turned and fled through a door. It gave on some sort of service passage. Presumably he knew his way about the house. Mme Storey and I looked at each other.

"Shouldn't he be stopped?" I said.

"He is not the sort of man who can escape," she said. "We can always find him."

"Was it *he*?" I stammered.

She slowly shook her head. "He wouldn't have sent for the antidote," she said.

"But he knows who did it!"

"So it would seem," she said with her most cryptic air.

A young man burst into the room, followed by several persons. I don't know who they were, servants of some sort, I assume. All these people moved surrounded by a mob of dependants of one sort and another. The young man turned around and waving his arms, cried: "Get out! Get out!" They melted silently through the door, and closed it.

I recognised the heir to the Varick millions, a handsome young giant with a mop of tawny hair, and eyes as blue as the sea. At the first sight of him something went out of me to him that I could not get back again. I soon learned that it was the same with everybody, man, woman or child, but especially women, of course. I could even see by the softened expression in Mme. Storey's eyes that she felt it, too. I cannot explain it; he was handsome and vigorous, but so is many another young man who leaves you cold. I do not care for young men, as a rule. This one had the combined attraction of a boy and a man, but that was not the whole of it. There was something you could not resist. If he had been a longshoreman's son it would have been the same.

At the moment the tears were coursing down his cheeks. He was quite unashamed of his emotion. In fact, he was so distraught by emotion that he accepted the finding of two strangers in his mother's boudoir as a matter of course. He started speaking as if he had always known us.

"My father!" he cried, searching our faces for some hope. "Is it true? Is it true? Is he dead?"

"He is dead," said Mme. Storey.

"Oh, nobody will ever know what this means to me!" he cried, clapping his hands to his head. "Fathers always die, of course, but this is different!" He turned to us again with streaming eyes. "Because I was a bad son to him! a bad son! And now I can never make it up to him!"

His mother heard his voice and came running in from her bedroom, followed by her secretary. She precipitated herself into her son's arms. From his protective attitude one might have supposed him to be the parent.

"Poor little mother!" he crooned. "Poor little mother! This is hard on you!"

But a strange thing happened. Over his mother's head he exchanged a look of the most poignant meaning with the girl behind her. Their very souls were in that glance, then both quickly lowered their eyes. Mme. Storey did not miss that swift look, of course. I knew it by her great carelessness of manner.

I could not bear to be present at so intimate a family scene, and I turned my back on it. But I could not avoid hearing what went on; the widow's self-pitying complaints, and her son's clumsy attempts to comfort her. There was something shocking in seeing the great Mrs. Varick go all to pieces. The exquisite and flower-like woman was sadly wilted now. So incoherent and disconnected was her speech that it gave no hint of the real situation beyond the fact that her husband had died with frightful suddenness. In the end the girl spoke, electrifying us all by saying, in a curiously breathless voice: "Henry, your father was poisoned. There has been an autopsy."

He dropped his mother, and stepped back. "Poisoned!" he said hoarsely. "Poisoned! ... Then God help us all!"

Mme. Storey caught my arm and led me from the room. The others never noticed whether we were there or not. In the little foyer I resisted, thinking of my employer's duty in the case.

"It is terrible!" I said, "but should you not stay? Will not the truth come out?"

"Enough has come out for my present purpose," she said dryly.

IV

We made a tour of Commodore Varick's private suite under guidance of Gabbitt, the English valet. This Gabbitt was a quaint-looking person, like the figure of a barber out of an old-fashioned print; a neat, brisk, spare little man with a great bush of hair that looked as if it had been artificially curled. One expected to see a comb sticking in it ready for use. It would have been impossible to guess the man's age. It transpired that he had served the Commodore for over twenty years. He was devoted to his master, but took the present situation very philosophically. He had the air of a man who has seen so much that nothing can astonish him any more. He answered Mme. Storey's questions promptly and with seeming candour. It did not appear to occur to him that, as one of the last persons who had seen Commodore Varick alive, he might be under suspicion too.

First we entered a plainly-furnished room at the north end of the second floor, that Gabbitt called the office. There was a young woman operating a typewriter here, who neither paused in her work nor so much as looked around when we passed through. This struck me as strange. I wondered what on earth she could be writing at such a time. Adjoining the office was the Commodore's study, a handsome corner room corresponding to Mrs. Varick's boudoir at the other end of the house. It was luxuriously furnished in masculine style with immense leather-covered easy-chairs grouped round the fireplace, and many rare sporting prints hanging from the panelled walls.

Mme. Storey's first examination of this room was hasty, but she did not miss much. A sheet of paper lying with others on an open escritoire attracted her attention. There was a

drawer below with a key in it. She put the paper in the drawer, locked it and took the key. "Something I will study later," she said.

Outside the study there was a little foyer, and from that a short passage leading to the other rooms of the suite. Opening off the passage were, in order, a serving pantry, a little bedroom for Gabbitt, and the Commodore's bathroom. Here Mme. Storey opened a wall cabinet. Her eyes skated rapidly over the miscellaneous articles on the shelves, and fastened on two kinds of medicine; a liquid, and some capsules in a little pasteboard box. She asked what they were.

"Digitalis in the bottle, 'm," said Gabbitt. "For the heart. Fifteen drops in water three times a day. The capsules were for the digestion; one after every meal."

"The Commodore was taking these at present?"

"Yes, ma'am. The prescriptions were refilled regular."

We took these medicines, and afterwards sent them to a chemist to be analysed.

Next came the dressing-room, another comfortable lounging place, with a dressing-table, chiffoniers, and with clothes presses built into the walls. Beyond it was the Commodore's bedroom, where his body still lay. A man was on guard there. I averted my eyes from the bed. Mme. Storey did not examine the body at this time, but merely inquired what lay beyond the farther door. It was Mrs. Varick's

bedroom, Gabbitt said, and beyond that were the other rooms of her suite. Both suites extended along the Fifth Avenue front of the house. Between the two of them, these little people, neither of whom exceeded five feet six in height, spread themselves over eight or more immense private chambers. Such is earthly glory!

We returned to the study, where Mme. Storey questioned Gabbitt at some length. The valet told how he had been having tea in the servants' hall when a call over the house 'phone summoned him to his master. He found the Commodore lying in agony upon the floor of the dressing-room. I omit the harrowing details. Assisting his master to his bed, Gabbitt telephoned for the doctor and for Jarboe. He tried to get Mrs. Varick, but she was out of the house. During the brief interval that elapsed before the arrival of the doctor, the valet applied what restoratives his experience suggested.

"Gabbitt, did you suspect poison?" Mme. Storey asked. (I ought to state that the valet knew by this time what had happened.)

"Well, ma'am," he answered, "I think the thought was somewhere in the back of my head, but I did not acknowledge it. Being but a servant, I left it to my betters."

In one respect Gabbitt's story differed sharply from Dr. Slingluff's. Up to the moment that he was sent out for atropine, the Commodore's mind, he insisted, was perfectly clear. The sick man would allow no one to be sent for but his wife and the doctor. He evinced an agonising anxiety lest the

doctor might not come in time, but it was not with any idea that he could be saved. He knew he was dying.

"Did he suggest that he had been poisoned?"

"No, ma'am, no! He kept sayin' it was gastritis."

"H'm!" said Mme. Storey.

"He said one thing that was strange," Gabbitt went on, biting his lip—it was the first evidence of emotion the little man had shown; "He says, 'Gabbitt, if I should go out of my head, I beg of you never to repeat what I say! Bury it in your breast!'" The little valet turned away and made believe to arrange some objects on the table. "That hurt me, ma'am," he murmured. "But I didn't let on anything. I just pressed his hand, and he seemed satisfied.... As if I would have given him away! After twenty years!..."

He straightened up and went on in his ordinary voice: "There was no need for me to go for the atropine, but I got the idea the Commodore had something private to tell the doctor, so I left the room. I have seen men die before, and I knew that neither atropine nor nothing else could save my master then. I wasn't gone but ten minutes. When I got back he was dead."

"Gabbitt," said Mme. Storey, "who was the last person he saw before he was taken sick?"

"Why, ma'am, so far as I know it was Miss Priestley," was the answer. "Him and her had their tea together every afternoon at four when he was home."

"Miss Priestley?"

"His secretary, 'm. That is to say, his literary secretary. That is the young lady who is working the typewriter in the next room."

"Why do you call her literary secretary?"

"To distinguish her from his private secretary and his financial secretary. Those two are gentlemen. The Commodore was writing his memoirs, and Miss Priestley was engaged to help him with that. Every afternoon from two until four, when his engagements permitted, they worked together, and after tea the young lady went home."

"And tea was served yesterday as usual?"

"Yes'm. I took it in myself from Hannaford, one of the maids, and set it out on this very table. Then I called my master, and went down to my own tea in the servants' hall."

"What did the tea consist of?"

"Just thin bread and butter, 'm, and a plain cake. The Commodore ate very plain, along of his gastritis, but he does love his tea—did love it, I mean. He would drink two or three cups of an afternoon."

"Gabbitt, tell me the exact arrangement of the tea tray," said my employer. While she listened to him, she lit a cigarette.

"Yes'm. All they sent up from downstairs was the bread and butter and the cake; also cream if required; the Commodore did not use it himself. The Commodore's own special brand of tea I keep up here in a silver tea-caddy, also the silver kettle which plugs into an electric outlet. The Commodore had his own notions about how tea should be made; he wanted every cup made separate. So the tea was put into silver tea balls which were dipped into the cups after the boiling water was drawn."

"Did the Commodore do this himself?"

"Oh, no, 'm. If there was a lady at the table she did the honours."

"Did the Commodore take his tea weak or strong?"

"Very strong, 'm. He liked to taste it bitter."

"Did the Commodore and Miss Priestley always have tea alone together?"

"No, 'm. There might be other guests from time to time. Or if the Commodore had special guests, Miss Priestley might take her tea in the housekeeper's room."

"When you were called back upstairs had the tea things been removed?"

"I can't say, ma'am. I was too excited to take notice. After my master was dead I tidied up, not knowin' what else to do. They was gone then."

Mme. Storey pressed out the lighted end of her cigarette in an ash tray. "All right, Gabbitt; thank you very much," she said. "We had better talk to Miss Priestley, since she is close at hand."

V

When we entered the office for the second time, the girl arose from her machine and turned around as if she had guessed what we came for. I was astonished when I saw her. Certainly the Varicks, both husband and wife, had a flair for beauty in choosing those who served them. Miss Priestley was a very Juno, a maiden Juno, tall and dark with Juno's short upper lip, straight nose and haughty glance. Superb! However, I withheld my judgment for a while because I have learned that these goddess-like shells sometimes house very small souls. I wondered if the solution to the mystery lay in her. She was visibly all keyed up, but that was natural. She had herself under good control.

She knew as much as Gabbitt did of the situation, consequently it was not necessary to enter into explanations. My employer introduced herself, and, in order to persuade the girl to relax, murmured the obvious things about what a sad occasion it was, etc., etc. The secretary rose to it like any woman—in words, but with a curiously monotonous voice like a child repeating a lesson. Her remote glance did not

share in what she was saying. She was like a beautiful statue with a phonograph inside it.

"Yes, I have lost more than my job here," she said, "I have lost a friend. All I can do for him now is to finish his work." She waved her hand towards the machine.

"Sit down," said Mme. Storey soothingly. "I am told that you were perhaps the last person to see the Commodore before he was taken sick, and I look to you to help me."

"Certainly," said Miss Priestley—but she did not sit. "Anything I can do. However, I am not the one you are looking for."

Her odd manner intrigued my employer. "No?" she said with half a smile. She was studying the girl through her lashes.

The secretary went on in her toneless voice: "You have been told that I had tea with the Commodore yesterday, but I did not."

"Who did?"

She made a slight gesture with her hand. "Secrecy was enjoined upon me, but I suppose everything has got to come out now. It was the Princess Cristina von Habsburg."

The amused look faded out of Mme. Storey's eyes. "So?" she said quietly. "What were the circumstances?"

"Commodore Varick wished to have a private talk with the Princess without anybody in the house knowing about it. Everything is gossiped about so. The Princess is staying in the house. As soon as the tea had been brought, and Gabbitt had gone down to his tea, I was sent to fetch her. Her suite is on the south side of the house. I brought her to the door of the Commodore's study, and then I went down and had tea with Mrs. Colford in her room."

"Mrs. Colford being the housekeeper?"

"Yes."

"What did Commodore Varick want to talk to the Princess about?"

Miss Priestley answered with a perfectly expressionless face: "I don't know. That is outside my province."

It was pretty clear that she was lying here, but it would have done no good to tax her with it. Mme. Storey went on: "How long did she remain in his study?"

"I can't tell you. I did not see her again. After I had finished my tea, I went home. That was before the news of the Commodore's illness had got about. I knew nothing of it until I read it in the newspaper this morning."

"What a shock it must have given you!" murmured Mme. Storey.

"Yes," said the girl. Not a muscle of her face changed when she said it. An extraordinary person.

"Where is the Princess now?" asked my employer.

"I understand that she has left the house, but I cannot tell you where she has gone."

"Let us ask Jarboe." My employer looked about the room. "May I ring?"

"The telephone is quicker," said Miss Priestley. She took down the receiver, and said in the same cold toneless voice: "Please ask Mr. Jarboe to come to the Commodore's office for a moment."

While we waited for Jarboe, Mme. Storey lit a cigarette. Miss Priestley declined one. My employer sauntered about the room making polite conversation. But I knew of old that her mind was not necessarily idle when she was making idle talk. I could see that her eyes were busy; I could see too, that the secretary was covertly watching her with a strained air; and for the dozenth time that day I asked myself: What dreadful secret does this grand house conceal!

Jarboe was quickly at the door. He knew that Mme. Storey was a person to be deferred to. She asked him at once what had become of the Princess.

Jarboe, of course, had had to be taken into the family confidence as far as anybody, but he was the butler of butlers, and though murder stalked through the house, there was not the slightest alteration in his usual demeanour. His superb aplomb might have concealed anything—or nothing. He said:

"Her Highness left the house shortly after four yesterday afternoon, Madame."

"Did you see her go?"

"No, Madame, nobody saw her leave except Wilcox the footman, who was attending upon the front door."

"What did he tell you?"

"He told me that the Princess came running downstairs alone, in a high state of agitation. In fact, she was weeping. Wilcox was very much upset. He thought it most unseemly that her Highness should appear upon the street in such state, and he hesitated about opening the door. She stamped her foot, and commanded him to open it, and of course, he had no recourse but to obey. He came immediately to tell me, and I went to the Princess's suite. I found that her lady-in-waiting, Madame von Hofstetter, did not know that the Princess had left the house. She was greatly upset. However..."

"Wait a minute," interrupted Mme. Storey; "did she have no hat on when she ran out of the house?"

Miss Priestley answered. "She already had her hat on when I fetched her."

"I see. Go on, please, Jarboe."

"While I was still talking to Madame von Hofstetter," he continued, "the telephone rang, and it was the Princess. She ordered Madame von Hofstetter and her maids to follow her

immediately to the Hotel Madagascar. They packed very hastily, and left within half an hour."

"Then they were all out of the house before the alarm of the Commodore's illness was raised?"

"Yes, Madame. I sent the trunks to the hotel later."

"Have you any idea of the reason for the Princess's abrupt departure?"

"None whatever, Madame."

Who could say if he was telling the truth?

My employer turned to me. "Well, let us go ask her, Bella."

It turned out that there was quite a crowd hanging about the front door, which included both reporters and photographers. It was of the highest importance that our comings and goings should not be remarked, so Jarboe put us into a car in the rear courtyard of the house. We pulled down the curtains and got out unseen.

"Big game, Bella!" said my employer to me with a curious dry smile. "The Princess is a member of one of the greatest houses of the old world. Her ancestors have ruled for centuries. The ex-King of Saxony is her brother-in-law, I believe, and she calls the King of England cousin. It is the first time we have stalked Royalty!"

"How strange that Priestley girl's manner was," I said.

"That in itself signifies nothing," she answered. "Everybody in the house was acting strangely. Except Gabbitt. Perhaps Gabbitt did it. He was the only one who had his wits about him."

But I did not think she was speaking seriously.

In three minutes we were at the Madagascar. Mme. Storey asked for the manager. We did not suppose, of course, that the Princess had registered under her own name. "A young foreign lady of high position," said my employer. "She came yesterday alone, and was followed later by her companion, and several maids."

"Oh, you mean the Countess von Hilgenreiner," said the manager. "She left an hour ago to go on board the *Baratoria*."

An exclamation was forced from my employer. "Good heavens! And the *Baratoria* sails at three!"

Our eyes flew to the clock on the wall. The hands pointed to ten minutes to three. And the pier was three miles away, the streets crowded with traffic! We ran out of the office leaving the manager staring.

"Quick, Bella," cried Mme. Storey. "Jump in that car at the door and drive as fast as you can to the ship. Go down Tenth Avenue."

"I can't possibly make it!" I stammered.

"Go!" she cried. "The ship is connected by telephone. I will get the Commander on the wire and ask him to wait for you. Tell him that there are police reasons for detaining the Countess von Hilgenreiner, or whatever she calls herself. I will follow you as soon as I can pick up Inspector Rumsey. We will need official support in this."

VI

The *Baratoria* was queen of the Brevard line fleet, and her commander was a knight, Sir Everard Bertram, R.N.R., K.C.M.G., and goodness knows what else beside. I was greatly relieved to see the liner's huge bulk and her four mighty red funnels towering over the pier when I arrived. Evidently the telephone message had got through. On the pier everything was at a standstill; the passengers lining the ship's rails and a great crowd of friends filling the pier openings, everybody wondering no doubt why she did not sail. The gangplanks were still in place and I hastened aboard. At the head of the gangplank a cabin boy was waiting to conduct me to the Captain.

I found him pacing his cabin, watch in hand, a magnificent personage, resplendent in gold braid. Mme. Storey has crossed with him many times, and he knew me by sight. His face cleared when I entered.

"Here you are!" he said. "I thought I recognised Mme. Storey's voice over the telephone, but I feared it might be a hoax. What is the trouble?"

"There is a lady aboard who is wanted by the police," I said.

"What is her name?" he asked, picking up a passenger list.

"When we last met her she was calling herself the Countess von Hilgenreiner. She won't be on your list because her decision to sail was a sudden one."

"What's her right name?"

"Please wait until Mme. Storey comes," I begged him. "She has stopped only to pick up a police official."

In a minute or two my employer came sauntering in, perfectly cool and smiling. She and the Captain greeted each other as old friends. She said immediately:

"I won't waste your time, Sir Everard. I can rely on your discretion. The person we want is the Princess Cristina von Habsburg."

"Good God!" he cried in dismay. "A royal princess! What a frightful scandal this will let loose!"

"I have it in mind," said my employer dryly. "Is she aboard?"

"Yes. I have spoken to her. I had them put her into the Tudor suite on B deck. What is she wanted for?"

"At the moment, as a material witness only. No charge has been laid."

"Have you the police back of you?" he asked anxiously.

Mme. Storey opened her handbag. "Here is a warrant for her arrest. Furthermore, if you will look over the side you will see Inspector Rumsey there in a police launch. I didn't want him to show himself to the reporters on the pier. They hailed me, but I told them I was just coming aboard to bid good-bye to a friend."

"But when you take her ashore the jig will be up. The reporters have interviewed her."

"I don't want to take her ashore," said Mme. Storey coolly. "I want the reporters to think that she has sailed for Europe. It is of the utmost importance that the frightful scandal you speak of should not be released prematurely."

"Then what do you propose to do?"

"I have sailed on vessels when belated passengers were put on board through a door in the hull," said Mme. Storey. "When you get straightened out in midstream can't you open a door on the side hidden from the pier, and put her aboard one of the tugs? The tug can steam off up the river, and by-and-by the police launch will overhaul her, and receive the Princess."

By this time Sir Everard had read the warrant. "Very well," he said. "It shall be done."

"Then come on, Bella," said my employer briskly. "We mustn't hold up the *Baratoria* a moment longer than necessary."

The bravest of men is subject to terror in some form or another. The magnificent Sir Everard turned pale. "Good God, Madame Storey," he cried, "don't leave me to face that woman alone! Picture me putting a royal princess aboard the tug kicking!"

My employer laughed. It was the first time I had heard that silvery sound all day.

The Captain saw nothing funny in the situation. "Come with me and prepare her for what is to follow," he urged. "The *Baratoria* can wait for that."

"All right," she said. "Lead the way."

A moment later we were knocking at a door opening from a corridor on B deck. It was opened to us by a worried little lady, very elegant in a German fashion, evidently Madame von Hofstetter. Over her shoulder I glimpsed a delightful little sitting-room with doors opening to the right and left.

"Compliments," said the Captain with stiff courtesy; "I should like to speak to the Princess for a moment."

"I am very sorry," said the lady-in-waiting in excellent English, "but her Highness is seeing nobody."

"I am more than sorry," said Sir Everard dryly, "but I am the Commander of this vessel, and it shall not sail until I have spoken with the Princess."

She had no recourse then but to give way. We entered the room. She tried to make a stand against Mme. Storey and me,

"Who are these persons?" she demanded.

"Representatives of the police," said Sir Everard dryly.

"Oh, *Mein Gott*!" cried the little lady, and made haste to shut the door behind us. "I will prepare the Princess," she said tremulously, and started to move towards one of the doors.

But Sir Everard was before her at the door. "Pardon me," he said; "there is no time for that. The ship waits. These ladies must be admitted to the Princess immediately. I will wait here."

So Mme. Storey and I entered the adjoining room, a bedroom. It was the first time I had ever been so close to a royal Princess, and I was all eyes. In a word she was an exquisite little person, a blonde with dark eyes. It was not at all one's idea of a German princess, but I recollected that she was of Vienna, the most elegant of European capitals. She was little more than a girl, but so perfect was her finish, her air of distinction, she might have been almost any age. A Dresden china princess, but with nothing insipid about her. She was seated in an arm-chair with her handkerchief

pressed to her eyes, but the instant she perceived that we were strangers she sprang up, electrified with indignation.

"What is the meaning of this intrusion?" she cried with a stamp of her foot. "Leave the room! ... Madame von Hofstetter, who are these persons?"

But the lady-in-waiting had dissolved in tears, and was unable to explain.

I will pass quickly over the scene that followed. It was a lively one! The little Princess endeavoured to crush us with her royal anger, but she met her match in Mme. Storey, who smiled down at her in an amused and tolerant fashion, and patiently explained that she must prepare to leave the ship.

"This is outrageous!" cried the Princess. "I am the Princess Cristina von Habsburg! Do you not know what that means? I am not subject to your laws! I will communicate with our ambassador!"

"I believe that Austria is now a republic," said my employer mildly.

She never got it. "The City of New York shall suffer for this insult!" she cried. "Why should the police seek to detain me?"

"Commodore Varick died yesterday afternoon," said Mme. Storey.

"Did he?" she said coolly.

"Didn't you know it?"

"No."

Mme. Storey's face turned grimly humorous. "The newspapers..." she began.

The Princess tossed her head. "I don't read your horrible newspapers."

Alas! for royal truthfulness. There was a newspaper lying on the sofa at that very moment, with the name Varick uppermost in the headlines. Mme. Storey pointed to it mutely.

The Princess was not in the least abashed. "I haven't looked at it," she said. "And anyway, what of it? I was merely their guest. I am sorry for them, but it has got nothing to do with me."

"Commodore Varick was poisoned," said Mme. Storey in a low tone, "and you were the last person to see him before he was taken ill."

The Princess stared at her in what appeared to be the purest amazement. One could not be sure, of course. "That was not in the newspaper," she said naïvely.

"No," said my employer dryly.

The little lady was breathing hard with emotion. She seemed to be scarcely capable of speaking. "And do you mean," she gasped, "do you dare to charge that *I* poisoned

him? In heaven's name why should *I* poison an American millionaire."

"I don't know," said Mme. Storey. She patiently explained the measures she had taken to protect the Princess from newspaper publicity.

"I will not leave the ship!" said the Princess with another stamp of the royal foot.

Mme. Storey shrugged. There was no use waiting for more. The rest was up to Sir Everard. He shook his head lugubriously as we passed him on the way out.

VII

The scene now shifts to Mme. Storey's maisonnette in East Sixty —— Street. The address of this recherché establishment is not in the telephone book, and I shall not give it here. My employer had made an arrangement with Inspector Rumsey to bring the Princess there, and while we waited for them we had a much needed bite of lunch. Mme. Storey ate with an abstracted air, and was disinclined to talk of the case.

In about an hour Inspector Rumsey brought the Princess and Madame Hofstetter along in a taxi-cab, while the two maids followed with two plain-clothes men in another. Maids

and plain-clothes men were put into the dining-room to wait, while the rest of us gathered in the 1850 parlour overhead. There was a great change in the little Princess. The royal air was subdued, and she was much like any other frightened girl. But there was a hardness about her that was not girlish. In fact, she was an exotic specimen, quite outside my experience, and I could not make her out. I will say for her that the daughter of a hundred Habsburgs was not craven. She kept her head up.

Mme. Storey's manner towards her was kindly. "Sit down," she said, "and let us talk this matter over quietly. You are not charged with anything."

"*Merci, Madame*," said the Princess ironically. "May I have a cigarette?"

"Surely!" said my employer, offering the box. "If you'd rather talk to us women alone, Inspector Rumsey will wait downstairs."

"It doesn't matter," she said indifferently. She puffed gratefully at the cigarette.

"Please tell us exactly what took place between you and Commodore Varick yesterday afternoon," said Mme. Storey.

"I cannot do that," said the girl impatiently. "It was a private matter, and has nothing to do with the public or the police."

Mme. Storey drew a long breath for patience. "Pardon me," she said, "but in view of what happened immediately

afterwards, it is of the greatest concern to the police, and you must tell."

An agonised look came into the girl's face. "*Mon Dieu*! it would kill me if these things were printed in the newspapers!" she murmured. "You cannot understand my feelings! You are republicans!"

We Americans smiled a little at this, though goodness knows, it was piteous, too. Mme. Storey said gravely:

"I promise you it shall not appear in the newspapers unless it has some connection with the death of Commodore Varick."

The Princess would not sit down. Standing by the mantelpiece, she began abruptly to tell her story. She did not appear to be of any particular nationality, but was merely of the great world. Only her continuous, slight, graceful gesticulation betrayed her foreignness.

"I met the Varicks last winter at Cannes. They have a big place near there. Pushing people, but not ill-bred for Americans. They courted me, and I, well, my family is ruined, and I cannot afford to be too particular; I allowed myself to be courted. Presently the son was brought forward; a personable young man, but somewhat crude in manner. I took that to be American. He bestowed his attentions upon me. We were seen everywhere together. A few years ago he would never have presumed, but, as I say, my house is fallen, my father is dead, and I must do the best I can for myself. My mother, the Archduchess, was invited to stay with the

Varicks. Mrs. Varick sounded her out in respect to the match, and my mother expressed herself as being agreeable to it. No definite proposal was made, but I was given to understand in many ways that all had been arranged. The behaviour of Mr. Henry Varick ... possibly I do not understand American customs...."

A spasm of pain passed across the girl's face. She paused before continuing. "When the Varicks departed for New York, I was invited to accompany them, but my mother thought that it would be unseemly for me to do so. It was arranged that I should follow them later, and visit them in New York. My mother having a dread of the ocean, my friend Madame von Hofstetter accompanied me. We arrived a week ago. It was immediately apparent that some hitch had arisen. The manner of both Mr. and Mrs. Varick towards me was strained. Day after day I waited, and the young man did not appear. Finally I learned that he had been in the house and had departed again without seeing me.

"Yesterday afternoon," she continued, "Commodore Varick sent his secretary, and I was conducted with much secrecy to his study. He was in a state of painful embarrassment. From his stammering and beating about the bush I gathered that there was an impediment to the match. Me, I am accustomed to speaking plainly. When I taxed him with it, he said yes, to his great regret, everything was definitely off...." The girl's cheeks flushed red at the recollection. "*Mon Dieu*! to *me*, a Habsburg! After I had condescended to these *canaille*! After I had allowed myself to be brought across the ocean! *Dieu*! I thought I should die with rage. What could I do? I ran out of

the house that moment, and sent back for my servants to follow me."

A silence followed the completion of her story. The little Princess stood there breathing fast. We all felt, I think, that she had been pretty badly used. Finally Mme. Storey said, in a casual manner:

"Before you left the room, had you and Commodore Varick drunk tea?"

The girl struck her forehead. "Let me think! Yes, I remember that tea was made. I made it with little silver balls."

She said this in a seemingly open manner, but she was far from being a simple maiden, and how could one tell?

"Was it drunk?"

"I did not drink any," she said quickly.

"And the Commodore?"

"I do not know.... Yes! I have a recollection of seeing him swallow it, of the emptied cup."

"Was this before or after he made his announcement to you?" asked Mme. Storey softly.

"I can't remember," she said listlessly. Then she started. "Before! Before! Before!" she cried excitedly.

"H'm!" said Mme. Storey. She took a turn up and down. "Did Commodore Varick give any reason for breaking off the match?" she asked, off-hand.

The Princess's back was stiff and her chin up as she answered. "Yes, he said the young man was disinclined to it." She got it out all right, then came a disastrous breakdown. She extended her arm along the mantel, and dropping her head upon it, broke into an uncontrollable sobbing. "I wish I was dead!" she gasped. It was piteous.

Madame von Hofstetter flew to her and took her in her arms. The elder woman turned an imploring face over her shoulder towards Mme. Storey. "Where can I take her?" she asked.

"Into my bedroom across the hall," said the latter, opening the door.

They disappeared. When my employer returned, Inspector Rumsey said anxiously: "What do you make of it?"

Mme. Storey's face looked pale and drawn. "The proud little Princess has a heart just the same as any common girl," she said. "She has had the misfortune to give it to Hank Varick, who has more hearts than he can use."

"A nasty case!" said the Inspector. "It will be difficult to bring it home to her. No witnesses."

"I'm not satisfied that she did it," said Mme. Storey, pacing the room.

"But her rage!" he said. "And she comes of bad stock. Those royalties have been accustomed for centuries to remove their enemies in just such a manner."

"Quite!" said Mme. Storey, smiling a little at his honest Americanism. "But I never before heard of a girl who killed the father because the son had jilted her. The motive does not seem adequate. Moreover, it is hardly credible that a royal Princess should be carrying around a dose of aconite ready to administer to anybody who might displease her. Aconite is not a habit-forming drug. Nobody takes aconite for the kick in it."

"Then who did it?" he asked blankly.

"Oh, I'm not saying she *didn't* do it," said my employer. "Frankly, I don't know. What I do see is, that we have scarcely scratched the surface of this case as yet. There is a deal of hard spade work before us. Is it your wish that I should continue to represent you?"

"Sure!" he cried, "you must not desert me now."

"Very well," she said, "I will return to the Varick house and stay there until I see light. I will communicate with you by telephone when necessary, according to the method we have used before. You and your men must trace that anonymous letter to its source if it is humanly possible to do so. The Princess and her entourage will stay here in my place, under guard. Bella goes with me."

While Mme. Storey was still issuing instructions, her maid Grace entered, bearing a letter on a salver. She said: "This has just come, Madame. It is marked urgent, so I brought it right up."

Mme. Storey put out an inattentive hand for the envelope. But when her eyes fell upon it she started. "Look at this!" she cried, holding it up. The address was printed in the same sort of carefully-formed characters that had appeared on the anonymous letter addressed to the Inspector. She tore it open. It contained a slip similar to that other slip, with a single line of printed characters:

> LOOK INTO HANK VARICK'S MOVEMENTS YESTERDAY.

VIII

In my employer's quaint and charming parlour, Mme. Storey and Inspector Rumsey laid out a joint plan of campaign. It was of prime importance to trace the two anonymous letters to their source. The Inspector had already set the police machinery in motion to trace them through the mails, while Mme. Storey was to work to the same end inside the Varick house. It was fairly obvious now that they had originated in the house, since no one knew that Mme. Storey was at work upon the case except certain persons in the Varick household. Inspector Rumsey further agreed to have

the recent movements of young Henry Varick investigated as far as possible, and a report prepared for Mme. Storey covering the young man's whole career, so far as the details might be learned from old newspapers, and from inquiries amongst his associates. By this time the Inspector's doctors had definitely reported to him that Commodore Varick had come to his death as the result of a powerful dose of the alkaloid of aconite. Tannin was also found, and the inference was that he had taken the drug in strong tea. But this was not positively established. The police were already at work endeavouring to trace any sales of the drug aconitina that might have been made lately. Sales of this powerful drug were rare.

In order to provide us with additional assistance inside the house, Mme. Storey arranged to have Crider, our cleverest and most dependable operator, apply to Jarboe, the Varick butler, for a job as footman. She arranged with Jarboe later to take him on. The Princess Cristina von Habsburg, her lady-in-waiting and their maids, were to be accommodated in Mme. Storey's maisonnette for the present. Mme. Storey's servants were to feed them and make them as comfortable as possible, and a plain-clothes man would be on guard in the entrance corridor at all hours of the day and night. The Princess was given the privilege of consulting counsel, but she made no move to do so. I need hardly say that she very willingly joined with us in our little conspiracy to keep this case out of the newspapers for the moment. We expected it to break sooner or later.

All these arrangements having been effected, Mme. Storey telephoned to the Varick house for the same car that had

carried us away from there three hours earlier. It was a closed car, having shades that pulled down inside the windows, and by this means we returned to the house, through the courtyard, without having been recognised by any of the loungers or watchers in the street. We made our headquarters in Commodore Varick's office on the second floor. It was now nearly six, and Miss Priestley, the "literary secretary," had gone home. We had learned that Mr. Henry Varick was still with his mother, but Mme. Storey made no effort to see him as yet. She wished to avoid giving him any reason to suspect that he was being investigated. We interviewed several members of the household whom I need not mention, since they contributed nothing of moment to the case. My job was to take notes of all interviews.

It was not until Mme. Storey had her second talk with Gabbitt, the Commodore's valet, that we began to strike pay ore. The quaint little fuzzy-headed man made an excellent witness, but how far he was telling the truth, I could never have undertaken to say. He was a philosopher in his way. There was a curious reasonableness about him—I mean, that while he was devoted to his master, he nevertheless felt free to criticise him. At this time we were making a more intensive examination of the Commodore's suite.

"Gabbitt," said my mistress, "what were the relations between Mr. Henry and his father?"

"Bad, ma'am," said Gabbitt. "All the world knows that."

"But how do you mean bad?"

"Well, ma'am, it was the usual thing between a rich father and his son. Particularly when it's an only child. When he was little, Mr. Henry was spoiled, and when he grew up his father blamed him because he turned out wilful."

"When did the trouble between them start?"

"Four, five years ago when Mr. Henry was in college. He was very wild. It was one scrape after another."

"With women?"

"Yes, ma'am, gen'ally speakin'. Mr. Henry complained to me once that it wasn't his fault, that they fair flung themselves at his head. Quite apart from being William Henry Varick, and all that, Mr. Henry is a very attractive young man, so gay and full of life."

"So we have perceived," said Mme. Storey.

"He wasn't to blame for all the trouble, though it is only fair to state that he wasn't no Sir Galahad neither."

"It is scarcely to be expected," said my employer dryly.

"His name made him a fair mark for scoundrels, and there was always somebody, either man or woman, trying to blackmail him. It cost the Commodore a pretty penny to settle with such people. The Commodore was very sensitive about any scandal attaching to the family name. Mrs. Varick would take her son's part, naturally, and there were bitter family scenes. My memory is hazy about the details of these scrapes..."

"Never mind that," said Mme. Storey. "Proceed."

"The Commodore was always reproaching his son for doing nothing but spend money," Gabbitt continued, "and some time after he had left college—he did not graduate—Mr. Henry undertook to go into business on his own account. In college the only thing he had been any good at was chemistry...."

"Oh, chemistry," said Mme. Storey.

"Yes, 'm, and so his thoughts naturally turned towards the chemical business. His idea was to form a combination of all the drug manufacturers in the country, and to found a great research laboratory that would advance the whole business. It looked like a good scheme, and his father backed him heavily, stipulating only that the family name be kept out of it. The Commodore didn't want to be connected with trade in any way."

"Quite!" said my employer.

"It started off all right, but something happened. I don't understand the details. Mr. Henry always claimed that he had been rooked. Very likely he lacked the skill and experience to conduct so vast an enterprise. At any rate, there was a tremendous crash, and whereas it had cost the Commodore a few thousands to get his son out of his college scrapes, his liabilities in the chemical affair ran into the millions. The family finances were seriously affected. It led to a bitter quarrel between father and son, and since that time, Mr. Henry has not been seen much about the house. It is said that

he visited his mother secretly. Last summer Mrs. Varick patched up a truce between father and son, and in the fall Mr. Henry accompanied us to Europe."

"Gabbitt," said Mme. Storey, "from your observation, would you say that the affair between Mr. Henry and the Princess Cristina was a serious one?"

"She thought it was," said the little man promptly, "and Mr. Henry was undeniably smitten. But we who had watched him grow up were not taken in by it. He was easily smitten. As soon as we sailed home she passed out of his mind. Why, there was a girl on board ship..."

"Never mind her," said my employer good-naturedly, "but tell me what was the last occasion that Mr. Henry saw his father."

"Day before yesterday, 'm. This is Wednesday, yes, it was Monday afternoon."

"What were the circumstances of his visit?"

"The Commodore had been telegraphing and telephoning all over the country to find him, the Princess Cristina being here. The general feeling amongst us servants was that Mr. Henry was purposely keeping out of the way. Be that as it may, when he was sent for he had to come. He came on Monday afternoon, and there was a terrible quarrel between him and his father in the study. I supposed that it was over the Princess, being as the Commodore's heart was set on that match. I was in and out of the dressing-room and the pantry,

and just at the end, Mr. Henry opened the door into the foyer, and I heard his father call after him: 'I never want to see you again!' And Mr. Henry's answer, hard and bitter: 'You shan't!' Then the slam of the door, and Mr. Henry was gone!" Gabbitt made a dramatic pause.

"Go on," said Mme. Storey.

"It had happened before," he resumed, "and I didn't take it so serious. Not until yesterday morning, that is, when the Commodore's lawyer turned up and a new will was made."

"Oh, a new will."

"Yes, ma'am. That had happened before, too. But on former occasions the lawyer had been called in and instructions given him, and after a few days he would come back with the will to be signed. This time the will was made on the spot, so I knew the Commodore was bitter angry. The lawyer wrote it out himself on Miss Priestley's typewriter, and afterwards Miss Priestley and me was called into the study to witness it. It was a short will; scarcely filled one sheet of paper. The top part of the sheet was turned under when we signed, and I don't know what was in it."

We were in the pantry at this moment, and while Mme. Storey listened her eyes were passing along the rows of cups and glasses on the little buffet. "One moment," she said. "Have you got a magnifying glass of any sort? A reading glass will do."

It was fetched her from the study. She examined the shelves. "Gabbitt, how many of these cups did you set out on the tea-table yesterday?" she asked.

"Two, ma'am. No guests were expected."

"Any of these glasses?" pointing to a row of tall, iridescent tumblers.

"No, ma'am. Those are for whisky and soda. The Commodore don't indulge at tea-time."

My employer passed on into the study without offering any comment. "Well, go on," she said, and then, very unexpectedly: "Mr. Henry came back yesterday afternoon?"

"Why no, ma'am," said Gabbitt in great surprise. "Not after such a quarrel!" It seemed to me that he was a little *too* open-eyed, too innocent then.

"No?" said Mme. Storey carelessly. "Well, that's all now. Thank you very much, Gabbitt."

He lingered in the doorway, eyeing her anxiously. He was longing to ask *her* a question, but did not dare. Mme. Storey affected to ignore him. He went out.

IX

Mme. Storey questioned several of the servants with a view to learning if young Henry Varick had been in the house on the day before. All blandly denied it, nor could she entrap them into any admission.

"Lying," she said coolly, when the last had gone. "Notice that they did not say, 'I did not see him,' but all said, 'He was not here.'"

"Why not ask Mrs. Varick's pretty secretary, Miss Gilsey?" I suggested. "She could tell you."

"Quite," said Mme. Storey, "and would immediately tell Henry that I had asked. I don't want to put him on his guard. I want to meet him as if by accident, and fall into casual talk. If I am able to bring that about, don't you dare to let a notebook appear. Remember all that passes as well as you can, and put it down afterwards."

With Jarboe, my employer pursued a slightly different method. She told the butler it was necessary for her to have a complete lay-out of the house in her mind, especially the second floor, and the three of us strolled around, while he pointed out the different rooms. Mme. Storey said: "The Commodore's suite, and Mrs. Varick's, which adjoins it, occupy the whole of the Avenue frontage on this floor. I've got that straight. What else is there?"

"On the south side is the guest suite lately occupied by the Princess Cristina," said Jarboe, indicating. "And there's an extra bedroom at the back that was given to her lady-in-waiting. Would you like to see the rooms?"

"Oh, no," said Mme. Storey. "I don't suppose they left anything behind."

"Next to the back bedroom comes the grand stairway," Jarboe continued, "and this passage on the left of the stairway leads to the elevator, and on back to the main service corridor and service stairs."

We looked into the service corridor.

"Next to the passage comes another guest-room," Jarboe said, proceeding; "not occupied at present; and on the north side of the house is Mr. Henry's suite, which consists of study and bedroom. The rooms have been his since his schooldays, and are still kept for him with all his things, though he has had a private apartment outside for the past two years."

It was strange to hear how the perfect butler's carefully modulated voice coloured with emotion when he mentioned the darling of the house.

"Mr. Henry is in the house at present," he went on, "and would, I am sure, be glad to have you see the rooms if I mentioned it to him."

"Never mind, thanks," she said.

"On the third floor," said Jarboe, like the guide on a sightseers' 'bus, "there are twenty-five rooms, including several suites for guests, the housekeeper's suite, rooms for the maids, and so on. The footmen sleep in the building

across the court, which was once the stables. Would you wish to go upstairs, Madame?"

"No, thanks," said my employer dryly. "Jarboe," she said, in a voice that arrested his spiel, "there's a door there in the back corner, adjoining Mr. Henry's suite, that you have passed over every time we have been around? Where does that go?"

"Another stairway," he said, with an air of great carelessness.

"And where do the stairs go?"

"Just to a passage below."

"And where does that passage go?"

"Nowhere in particular, Madame, just around the court."

"Who uses that stair?"

"Nobody uses it now, Madame. What it may have been designated for originally, I cannot say."

"Well, let us explore it," said Mme. Storey.

The butler followed very unwillingly. The straight, narrow stairway led us into a bare passage with windows looking out on the court. At the right, this passage ended with a door opening on the main service hall and stairway; at the left, it turned a corner and continued around the north side of the court. On this side there was a small door opening from the

passage. My employer, trying it, found it locked. The dignified butler had a very unhappy air. He said: "That door leads into the ballroom, Madame. It is used only when there is an entertainment, to facilitate the service. Shall I send for the key?"

"No matter," said Mme. Storey, continuing.

The passage ended on this side at a heavy door locked by a spring lock on our side. That is to say we could open the door, but could not come back that way without putting it on the latch. The wall we passed through here was over a foot thick; evidently a party wall. On the other side of the door the passage turned sharp to the left again. This part ran on endlessly, and was perfectly dark except for a glimmer of light through a glass door over a hundred feet away. There were no doors in it. It was a weird feature to find in a modern house. The door at the end, we found, gave on the street, but it was ingeniously masked by a stoop built over it. There was a heavy iron grille outside, such as they use to protect basement doors. The street we looked on was one strange to us. However, it was not difficult to deduce that it was the next cross street to the north of that on which the public entrances of the Varick house opened. My employer looked at the disconcerted Jarboe with a smile.

"Jarboe," she said, "you are the chief servant of this household. How ridiculous to pretend that you did not know of the existence of this passage. Why, who sweeps it?"

He spread out his hands in gesture of surrender. "Madame, you must pardon me. A good servant never betrays the

private affairs of his master. The habit of years was too strong to be broken."

I thought it rather a neat apology.

"You're forgiven," said Mme. Storey, cheerfully. "Now tell me the history of this passage."

"It was constructed during the last rebuilding of the house," said Jarboe. "The Commodore owns the houses at the back of his property, and had this passage made under one of them so that he could enter and leave his house privately. So many people hang about the front door, newspaper reporters, photographers...."

"Process servers," put in Mme. Storey slyly.

"My master was a man of blameless life," said Jarboe with dignity.

"Oh, quite! I don't blame him. What's the use of being a millionaire, if you can't have a little privacy?"

Jarboe looked relieved. We strolled back.

"Jarboe," said Mme. Storey, "think before you answer my next question. The truth is bound to come out and you can best help the family by assisting me to get at it as quickly as possible.... Did young Mr. Henry also use this passage?"

Jarboe stumbled in his speech, gulped hard, and finally blurted out. "Yes, Madame. Mr. Henry was also provided with the two keys necessary to come in this way."

"Did his father know about it?"

"I fancy not, Madame. I fancy Mrs. Varick must have procured the keys for Mr. Henry."

"Ah! Now, Jarboe, the truth! Did not Mr. Henry come in this way yesterday for the purpose of seeing his father?"

"No, Madame, no!" he replied agitatedly.

"But couldn't he have come this way, and gone out again without ever your seeing him?"

"If he had been in the house I should certainly have heard of it, Madame. There are servants everywhere, and everything is talked about among them."

"That is not quite an answer to my question. Is it not possible that Mr. Henry came this way yesterday and went out again without your seeing him?"

"Of course, it is *possible*, Madame," said Jarboe, with an unhappy air.

X

By-and-by Jarboe came to the office to say: "Mr. Henry Varick's compliments to Madame Storey. He is dining

downstairs at half-past seven, and wishes to know if Madame Storey will do him the honour of joining him."

It amused my employer to treat the magnificent Jarboe in an off-hand and facetious manner. "But, Jarboe, I have nothing to wear!" she said.

He never smiled. "Under the circumstances, Madame, I am sure Mr. Henry will understand."

"Very well. Tell him that Madame Storey and Miss Brickley will be happy to join him."

Jarboe looked a little dubious at the inclusion of my name. However, he marched off.

"Mr. Henry has decided to take the bull by the horns," remarked Mme. Storey to me.

When the hour arrived, my mistress and I went slowly down the sweeping stairway arm in arm. How I wish I could convey in a phrase the stateliness of that great house. I think proportion had a lot to do with it. The height and width of those noble halls upstairs and down were in exactly the right relation to their length. There were several footmen in the lower hall in plain evening dress. The astute face of our man Crider was amongst them. Certainly no time had been lost in installing and outfitting him. One of the footmen (not Crider) approached us, saying: "Mr. Henry is in the gold room," and led the way across the hall into the middle one of the three great drawing-rooms that filled the Fifth Avenue side of the house. Our young host came forward to greet us.

"I have already seen you today," he said to Mme. Storey, "but I did not know you. My mother has told me about you now, and what you are doing for us. It is wonderful of you!"

My employer brought me forward: "My secretary, Miss Brickley."

I turned hot and cold when he looked at me. He had the bluest eyes I have ever beheld, blue as the tropical sea. It was perfectly ridiculous, but the same feeling of helplessness came over me every time he looked at me. After a courteous greeting, he paid no further attention to me. Giving an arm to Mme. Storey, he led her through the state suite.

"It was very good of you to have us downstairs," she said.

"Oh," he said, with a painful gesture, "nothing is to be gained by crying and carrying on about our loss. I'm done with crying now. Things have got to go on. I ordered dinner downstairs hoping that I could persuade you to join me. We must become acquainted; we must work together."

"Surely," said Mme. Storey.

I resented her coolness. I was enraged by the thought that she was, as I thought, trying to bring the murder home to him. God forgive me! I was jealous of my mistress. Issuing out of the farther drawing-room, we crossed the great central hall again. The dining-room was opposite. It was another long and lofty room with a row of windows at the end that must have looked out on the court. It was dark except for a cluster of shaded candles on the small table, and another

cluster on the sideboard. The density of the shadows made the lofty ceiling recede even farther. I felt like an insect under it. Yet, as I presently learned, this was only the family dining-room. There was a state dining-room somewhere else.

Mr. Varick put Mme. Storey at his right and me at his left. "I ordered a small table," he said, "because the family mahogany is depressing for so intimate a party. Would you like more light?"

"This is perfect," said Mme. Storey.

The meal commenced; *hors d'oeuvres*, soup, fish, and so on. In the beginning the conversation was merely polite; it seemed to be tacitly agreed that all painful subjects must be deferred until we had at least got our food down. Nobody cared about eating, and many things were sent away untasted. It threatened to go on for ever, until Mme. Storey said in her brusque and humorous way: "Look here, *must* we eat any more?"

"No, no!" he said, rousing himself. He spoke to the footman behind his chair. "Never mind the game, or dessert. Just fruit, coffee, cognac, and cigarettes."

When this was put on the table the servants left the room for good. Mr. Varick leaned towards my mistress. "Well ... what's the real situation?" he asked in a strained voice.

She spread out her hands. "I have collected a lot of information, but I seem to be no nearer a solution. All I have done is to detain the Princess Cristina."

"She could hardly have done it!" he said with a half smile. In spite of grief and fatigue that incorrigible smile was always near the surface. "She had nothing against the old man. If it had been me, now."

"My idea, too," said Mme. Storey. "But I had to prevent her sailing."

Quite simply, and with a glint of mirth in his weary eyes, he told us of his affair with the Princess. To his father his casual frankness must have seemed scandalous, but it is only the way of the younger generation. "It was never put up to me in so many words, but of course I knew they wanted me to marry her. And I was willing; she was easy to look at. Besides, I wanted to please the old boy; I've been a thorn in his side ever since I grew up. I had made such a mess of my own affairs always, I thought they might as well have a try at settling them.

"And so it started. But I soon forgot it was a made-up affair. I had never known anybody like Cristina. In fact, I got perfectly crazy about her, though I suppose it didn't go very deep. But I never let on to her she had me going; I didn't dare. For she was a terrible girl, you know, imperious. Wanted to get her little foot firmly planted on your neck, and keep you down. Well, not for Joseph! So I just joshed her. What a delicious little spitfire! We spent the time quarrelling like devils—and making up. It was a heap of fun. Be cause, you see, in public she was always very much the Princess, and as soon as we got alone together, whew! the lid blew off!

"It wasn't Cristina that I baulked at; I could have tamed the little termagant, and enjoyed doing it. It was her life, her gang, it was everything she stood for that stuck in my crop. I don't know if I can explain what I mean. That crowd of decayed aristocrats and cast-off royalties that fluffs around Europe from one expensive resort to another sponging on millionaires. In a going concern like England, the King is a real person, but the others are just play-actors. The whole business of Highnessing them, and going down on your marrow bones, and slipping them loans on the sly, is a comic sham. Yet my Dad couldn't see it. If he could buy lunch for a hereditary Prince he was happy.... Do you know Europe, Madame Storey?"

"I know it," she said dryly.

"Then I need say no more. By God! that atmosphere would have suffocated me! I'm an American. I must have air. I must be free to say my say, and walk out on the show if I don't like it."

"Oh, quite!"

"So I saw almost from the first that marriage was out of the question, and after that I was just out for the fun there was in it. I swear I never thought Cristina was taking it seriously. A hundred times a day she called me a boor, a peasant, a barbarian—with trimmings. She said she'd sooner marry her footman than me. However, since she came to America, I suppose she *did* take it seriously. Those girls over there don't savvy like ours do. Maybe it's because they don't

want to. At any rate, they're not such good sports. Oh, well, anything I ever started was bound to turn out badly."

He swallowed a pony of brandy, and continued: "Where I made my mistake was in not having it out with the old man in plain words. But it was impossible to have a thing out with him, unless you both got in a rip-roaring passion. When I tried to talk to him about it, he turned it aside. So I just drifted. When we left Europe I thought the scheme had been dropped. Wrong again! I was soon made to understand by little things that the match was *settled*. In short, that I had to marry the girl. That turned me stubborn and I..." He suddenly broke off and took another drink.

"You what?" prompted Mme. Storey.

"Oh, I made up my mind I'd be damned if I would!"

This was obviously not what he had started to say. However, my employer let it pass. "Her coming brought things to a head," she suggested.

"Yes," he said ruefully. "I lit out. But the old man ran me to earth, and I had to come back. Got here Monday, day before yesterday. We had it out then with a vengeance. I tried to reason with him, but he wouldn't listen. Insisted that I had compromised myself. That made me laugh. 'Good God!' I said, 'if a fellow had to marry every girl he had petted, Brigham Young would be nowhere!' He said, in his stiff way: 'It is somewhat different when a Princess is involved!' 'Princess, my eye!' I said; 'her family was kicked out of that job nearly twenty years ago!' We were soon shouting at each

other in the old way. He said I had allowed him to commit himself so far that he couldn't draw back, and I said that I didn't give a damn for his commitments, that I was the one who had to marry the girl. He mounted his highest horse. He said that I *had* to marry the girl, and there was no argument about it, so then I played..." He suddenly bit his lip, and seized his glass again.

"Played your trump card?" suggested Mme. Storey.

"No," he said with an embarrassed smile, "I didn't have any trumps. Played my last card, I was going to say. I said I wouldn't marry her, and stood pat."

There was clearly an important omission here, but as Mme. Storey was not supposed to be examining him, she couldn't very well take notice of it. He went on to describe the final scenes of his quarrel with his father. In doing so he completely forgot himself; his cheeks became flushed, and his eyes sparkled with remembered anger as he acted the scene out. "He said he'd cut me off without a cent! And I said go to it!"

In the middle of this the blue eyes suddenly went blank, and he caught himself up gasping. "Oh, God! what am I saying! And he lying upstairs cold!" He sprang up from his chair, and walked away into the shadows. He leaned his arms against the wall, and dropped his head upon them. It was terribly affecting.

"However, that has got nothing to do with the tragedy of yesterday," said Mme. Storey soothingly.

"No," he said heavily. He returned and dropped into his chair. All the light had gone out of his face. He stared before him, fingering a wine-glass without noticing what he was doing. "That is a complete mystery," he murmured. "Surely the doctors must be mistaken. Who would want to kill my Dad?"

"Did he cut you off?" asked Mme. Storey—though she knew very well.

"Yes," he said indifferently. "Made a new will yesterday morning."

"When did you learn that?"

"Just a little while ago, from my mother. The lawyer has talked to her."

"How did your father receive you yesterday afternoon?" asked Mme. Storey in a conversational tone.

I could have shrieked a warning to him, but anyhow it would have come too late. He fell directly into her trap. "Well, he had quieted down some," he said gloomily. "But he wouldn't let me talk."

A second later he realised that he had betrayed himself. He lifted a ghastly face towards my employer.

"How ... how did you know I was here yesterday?" he stammered.

"I didn't know," she answered. "You have just told me."

A horrible silence fell upon us three. I was enraged with my mistress. It didn't seem like the square thing to do, to accept his invitation to dine merely for the purpose of entrapping him. On the other hand I felt a kind of fierce joy in the young man's desperate situation. It seemed to bring me a little closer to him. If the whole world abandons him I will still be his friend! I told myself.

XI

After a while Henry Varick raised his head, and said with a kind of weary defiance: "Well, suppose I did see my father yesterday afternoon? What of it?"

"Nothing," said Mme. Storey mildly. "I am only wondering why you tried to conceal the fact?"

"Well, I was tempted because it seemed easy to conceal it. I came through a secret entrance, and I met nobody. Nobody knew I was in the house except ... my mother."

"And Miss Gilsey," put in Mme. Storey.

He stared at her again. "You are a terrible woman!" he murmured. "... Yes, Miss Gilsey saw me come, because she is always with my mother. But she would not have betrayed me."

"Nor your mother's maids?"

"Nor my mother's maids either. I didn't notice whether they saw me or not.... As for my reason for concealing my visit, surely that must be clear to you. It appears that my father was taken sick a few minutes after I had left him. Anybody could foresee what a nasty story that would start. The scapegrace son, and all that. My whole past life raked up. My object was simply to keep a dirty mess out of the papers. I had no fear of the outcome. Why, no sensible person would believe that I had done it. A son does not poison his father! It is incredible! Am I a monster?"

Mme. Storey expressed no comment.

"And, anyhow," he went on, "what a fool I would be to make an attempt on my father's life when he had just made a will cutting me off!"

"But you did not know that," she coldly pointed out. "You told me you had just found it out. Yesterday all you knew was that your father *intended* to change his will. On former occasions it had not been accomplished so quickly."

The young man pressed his head between his hands. "Oh, God! what a frightful position I am in!" he groaned.

"Why did you come back yesterday?" asked Mme. Storey.

"For the most natural reason in the world. I had cooled off. I was sorry for some of the things I had said. I hoped he might be sorry too."

"Were you prepared then to accept the Princess?"

"Oh, no! There was no question about that," he answered quickly. "I just wanted to say I was sorry. I suppose it won't be believed, but I loved my father. Besides, why not confess it? I am only human. I was worried about the will. I care for money as little as any man, but the threat that had been held over me was that Theodore Varick, my father's nephew, was to get it all, in order to carry on the family traditions—Oh, my God! The thought that that ... excuse me! that *he* might be able to crow over me! that snooper! that worm!—he's not a man, he's a water-cooler! Why, for the last five years he's been sucking up to my dad, sympathising with him for having such a graceless son! Gad! once I had the pleasure of smashing his pasty face and I hope to do it again! Anything to keep Theodore out! I came back prepared to eat humble pie, to agree to anything short of marrying myself to that foreign woman."

"You went direct to your mother's room?" prompted Mme. Storey.

"Yes."

"Did you send word to your father that you were in the house?"

"No, indeed, he would only have refused to see me. I went to his study. I went through all the rooms of the two suites so I wouldn't show myself outside."

"Was the Princess still with him?"

"No, he was alone when we..."

"Who was with you?" interrupted Mme. Storey.

"Nobody," he said. "A slip of the tongue. I was thinking of my mother. We had been discussing whether she ought to come with me, but she didn't."

"Now, come," said my employer with dry good-humour. "Isn't it a fact that Mrs. Varick was out of the house altogether at that hour?"

"Well ... yes," he said sullenly. "If you know everything already why ask me? She was out. Is that important?"

"No," said Mme. Storey. "Go on."

"Cristina must have just gone, I could smell her perfume, and my father was still fussed."

"That made it more difficult for you then."

"No, on the contrary, I think he was relieved that the thing was done with. He treated me pretty decent—for him. Of course, he was pretty stiff with me, he was never the one to admit he had been wrong. But I think he showed it a little. At any rate, he didn't refuse my hand. He had his tea, and I drank a whisky and soda ... Gabbitt must have found the glass! Was it he who gave me away?"

"No," said Mme. Storey. "Every servant in the house knew you had been here, and all of them lied."

"Well, bless their hearts!" he said with a twisted smile. "I seem to get everybody in wrong. It would have been better if I'd never been born!"

"What did your father say to you?" she asked.

"He scolded me for having sneaked into the house secretly. Said it was very *infra dig*. He was afraid somebody might find me in his study. He sent me away, and told me if I would come back after things had cleared up—by that he meant after Cristina had left the country; she was not named between us—and would come in by the *front door*, he would be glad to see me."

"He did not refer to the new will he had made?"

"Not a word! He wouldn't, you see, if he was feeling more kindly towards me. He would just tear it up afterwards. At any rate, I thought he had climbed down a good deal, and I went away happy.... At Buffalo in the middle of the night the telegram was put on the train that brought me back. And now everything is ruined! My father is dead, and Theodore has his shoes, I suppose!" His head went down between his hands again.

"Where were you going on the train?" asked Mme. Storey.

"Nowhere in particular. Just keeping out of the way until Cristina sailed."

"How unlucky that there was no witness to the final interview with your father," remarked Mme. Storey. It had the sound of a question.

He hesitated for the fraction of a second; his eyes bolted painfully; then he blurted out: "No, there was no witness."

XII

Soon afterwards we left the dining-room, and sauntered down the great hall. Following upon the little outburst of emotion that I have described, we had assumed the ordinary appearances of good form. It is instinctive. Nothing in my employer's manner suggested that Henry Varick had rendered himself an object of suspicion by his disclosures. She talked of ordinary matters in an ordinary manner. He answered in kind, of course, but I could see from his uneasy glances that he did not know what to make of her. He was wondering whether he had to deal with an agent of the police who was trying to entrap him, or with a woman of the world who took everything as it came. As a matter of fact, my employer was both.

"The library is at the other end," he said; "it's a pleasant room. Let's go in there."

It was a most inviting room, but "library" I judged to be a polite fiction; there were no books visible. Though the spring was well advanced there was a wood fire burning on the hearth which gave off a most agreeable warmth. We ranged ourselves before it in luxurious easy-chairs, and talked like congenial acquaintances, who had nothing in particular on

their minds. This sort of rambling casual conversation is one of Mme. Storey's most insidious lines of attack, and I could see that Henry Varick was growing more and more visibly uneasy. He must have been under a terrible strain. The only other light besides the fire was given by a shaded reading-lamp in a corner.

I say we talked, but the truth is they talked, while I sat perfectly silent, feeding my infatuation with the sight of that handsome young face in the firelight, haggard with passionate emotion. It was most of all tragic when he smiled in a reckless boy fashion, trying to carry things off lightly. I was in a rapt state, scarcely mistress of myself. It only needed a spark to set me off. While we sat there a footman came in with a note for Mme. Storey. This I judged must come from Inspector Rumsey via the underground channel they had provided. She read it with a bland face, tore it into small pieces, and tossed them on the fire.

"From Inspector Rumsey," she said. "He says he can trace no sales of aconitina recently."

I guessed that there was more in it than this, and so, apparently did Henry Varick. He watched the little pieces catch fire one by one with an expression of baulked curiosity.

More conversation followed. Mme. Storey discussed her work on the case with apparent frankness. Some time afterwards, long enough anyhow for us not to connect what she said with the arrival of the note, she brought the talk around to the plan of the second floor. "In order to be able to figure out what happened, I must have that clear in my

mind," she said. "I visited most of the rooms today, but I didn't like to go into your suite without having you along."

There was but one thing that he could reply to this. "Shall we go up now?"

"If you don't mind."

It was rather touching to find in that grand house a simple boy's room. I judged that it had been changed very little since Henry Varick was fifteen or sixteen years old. The school pennants were still tacked on the walls, and that type of picture that adolescent boys like, depicting flamboyant misses in sports clothes. There were fencing foils and masks hung up; a set of boxing gloves; a shotgun, a rifle, and various sporting trophies. There was an armoire full of baseball bats, hockey sticks, tennis rackets and like impedimenta. Evidently young Henry had been no effete son of luxury.

This was the "study," which like "library" downstairs was a misnomer. Two shelves, and those not full, contained all the books. Many of them I noticed dealt with chemistry and drugs. Mme. Storey pulled out a fat green volume that was entitled: *Pharmacology and Therapeutics* and skimmed through it. "Have you consulted this lately?" she asked.

"Not in years," he said carelessly.

She then did something that I had seen her do before; a simple trick that has an uncanny effectiveness. Holding the book loosely between her two hands, she let it fall open of

itself. She repeated this two or three times. "Yet I should say that it *has* been consulted recently," she said quietly, "and more than once. See! It opens of itself on page 425."

We looked over her shoulder, he on one side, I on the other, and there we saw staring at us from the page a chapter heading: XXI—ACONITINE.

It gave me a horrid shock; Henry Varick, too. He stepped back, his face working spasmodically.

"Well," he said harshly, "does that prove anything?"

"No," said Mme. Storey, closing the book and putting it back.

"Anyhow," he went on, in a loud, strained voice, "I am perfectly familiar with the action of aconite. I wouldn't have to consult that book." This was an answer that cut both ways. The next object of interest in the room was a glass fronted curio cabinet that contained the schoolboy's collections. One saw the usual things neatly set out on the shelves; the minerals, the fossils, the arrowheads and pipe bowls. And on the lower shelves; butterflies, beetles, birds' eggs and miscellaneous souvenirs. It was more comprehensive than the usual youngsters' gatherings, because this boy had been well supplied with money. I could picture the handsome, intent stripling arranging his treasures.

"Where is your collection of drugs?" asked Mme. Storey quietly.

It came like a blow. He caught his breath, and started to answer, but she checked him with a sudden, involuntary gesture. "Ah, don't lie to me!" she said with real feeling. "It shames you and me both. I am to blame. I will deceive you no longer. The letter that I got from Inspector Rumsey said: 'I have learned that Henry Varick while he was engaged in the drug business caused a collection to be made of samples of every drug. The samples were contained in a walnut case which was sent to his home. Presumably the drug aconitina was included amongst the rest, but I cannot verify this at the moment. See if you can trace the case.'"

"I wasn't going to lie to you," Henry Varick said in his rapid, strained voice. "I had such a collection, but I destroyed it two years ago. When the trust busted I was sick of the business. Besides, such a thing was too dangerous to have lying around."

It was only too clear that he was lying then. It made me feel sick at heart.

"How did you destroy it?" asked Madame Storey.

"Burned it up entire in the furnace downstairs."

She said no more, but led the way into the bedroom adjoining, a bare and sparsely furnished chamber almost like a hospital room. Amidst the almost oppressive luxury of that house it was like a breath of fresh air. In one corner stood a narrow white bed.

Mme. Storey stood in the doorway looking around her without speaking. Out of the corner of my eye I could see that the face of the young man beside me was livid and sweating. I suffered with him. Finally, my employer said in a deadly quiet voice: "Turn down the mattress, Bella."

A groan was forced from the young man that seemed to come from his very entrails. "Oh, God! I'm lost!"

With trembling arms I obeyed my mistress. Between mattress and springs there was revealed a flat square walnut box of the sort that artists use to carry their paints in. Evidently, it had been hastily thrust there while a better hiding place was sought, or a chance to destroy it.

"Have you anything to say?" asked Mme. Storey.

He broke into a bitter fleering laughter. "Say? What do you want me to say? You've got a case against me, haven't you? Better proceed with it. I guess I've reached the point where I'd better keep my mouth shut without advice of counsel." This was merely the bravado of one who was half-crazed.

Meanwhile, I had laid the box on the bed, and let the mattress fall back into place. The box was locked.

"Have you the key?" asked Mme. Storey.

"What the use?" he cried. "I admit the stuff was there, and it's gone now." Nevertheless, he produced his keys, and sought for the right one.

"Have those keys ever been out of your possession?" she asked.

"No."

"Was there ever another key?"

"No."

I could no longer keep still. I was in a state approaching collapse myself. "You are convicting yourself!" I cried to him.

"Oh, what does it matter?" he said.

My mistress gave me a curious glance of pity. I didn't want pity from her. In the condition of mind that I was in, she represented the enemy. "When did you put it under the mattress?" she asked.

"This afternoon. I intended to burn it tonight when the house was quiet."

"Oh, keep still! keep still!" I cried, clasping my hands. Neither paid any attention to me.

"Where was it before that?"

"In the curio cabinet."

"Has anybody a key to that cabinet but yourself?"

"No."

By this time the box was open. It was lined with red velvet, and was divided into scores of little grooves holding glass phials full of drugs, stopped with wax or some such substance. Each phial had its label neatly pasted around it; and as a further precaution, there was a number under each groove, and an index pasted into the top of the box. *One groove was empty*! Under it was the number 63, and our eyes flew to the index above. We read opposite 63—Aconitina.

XIII

Mme. Storey sent for Jarboe, and Mr. Henry was locked in his bedroom. The windows looked out upon a stone paved well or court about thirty feet below, and there was no way he could have escaped short of wings. However, the house was full of the young man's friends, and my mistress telephoned to Inspector Rumsey for a guard to be sent. This man, Manby, was posted in the outer room of the suite. Jarboe was heartbroken by this turn of affairs. We took nobody else into our confidence. When Mrs. Varick learned her son was a prisoner we expected the devil to pay.

Mme. Storey and I slept in the house. Early next morning the body of Commodore Varick was privately removed to the family vault in Woodlawn cemetery, there to await further orders from the police. There had been no official reading of the will, but everybody in the house now seemed to know what it contained. The Commodore had created a great trust

fund of which his wife was to be sole beneficiary during her lifetime. Upon her death the fortune was to be divided into three equal parts, of which one was to go to the New York Hospital, one to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and one to Yale University. Mr. Henry's worst fear was not realized inasmuch as Mr. Theodore Varick's name did not appear.

In describing the dramatic scenes that took place inside the house, I must not omit mention of the efficient, but quite unspectacular spade work that was going on outside. There was a small army of operatives engaged on the case. To ensure secrecy, Inspector Rumsey had agreed that, at any rate for the first twenty-four hours, our men should be principally used on this work. Every move of Dr. Slingluff's and Miss Priestley's was shadowed. On Miss Gilsey we could get no line because she lived in the house, and had never left it since the murder. The valet, Gabbitt, and indeed, all the servants in the house were picked up whenever they went out. Frequent reports from these operatives reached Mme. Storey under cover to Mrs. Varick.

In addition to these outside men, our best operative, Crider, was installed as a footman inside the house. Crider's work however, resulted in nothing. He complained that from the very first, every servant in the house was aware of who he was, and became mum in his presence. This looked as if Jarboe had played us false, since none but he knew where Crider had come from. By a clever piece of detective work the police had established that the first anonymous letter (the one addressed to Inspector Rumsey) had been mailed in a pillar box on Lexington Avenue somewhere between 36th and 42nd Streets shortly before eleven on Tuesday night;

whereas the second letter (addressed to Mme. Storey) had been dropped in a chute at the branch post office in the Grand Central Station at 3.30 on Wednesday afternoon. The peculiarly formed characters had aided in the tracing of these letters.

A report had been received from the chemists to whom Commodore Varick's medicines had been sent the day before. It was to the effect that they contained nothing but what was represented on the labels; the first, a tincture of digitalis of the usual strength; the second, capsules containing a simple compound of pepsin and bismuth.

Mme. Storey and I established ourselves in Commodore Varick's office. My mistress dictated to me some notes she had taken of an examination of one of the maids while I was busy elsewhere. This maid, Nellie Hannaford by name, had removed the tea things from the Commodore's study. Hannaford said she met nobody in the Commodore's suite. She said that Gabbitt had already been sent for to come to his master, but there were three doors between her and the Commodore's bedroom, and she saw nothing, or heard nothing that led her to suppose the master had been taken sick. In fact, she hadn't heard anything about his sickness until after he was dead.

She said she found on the study table two empty cups that had contained tea, and another cup in the service pantry full of tea that had been made and not drunk. Four of the tea balls had been used, indicating that four cups of tea had been made. The cups belonged to a tea service that was kept in the Commodore's suite, and it was her duty to wash them in the

pantry, and return them to the shelves. She denied having found a glass that had contained whisky and soda. (In making this statement we supposed she was lying.)

"Who could the third cup of tea have been for?" I asked involuntarily.

"Think, Bella," said my employer with a smile. "Surely it was obvious when we questioned Henry Varick last night, that he did not go to his father's study alone. Mrs. Varick was out of the house, remember."

The picture of a lovely blue-eyed face rose before my mind's eye, a face stony with distress. Estelle Gilsey! I thought in amazement. Another one! Good Heavens! this young man was entangled amongst women like a horseman in a thicket! While we were still engaged in routine work Miss Priestley entered the room. The tall dark girl still had faintly the look of one suffering from shock. Her curious parrot-like utterance carried out the idea. What she said seemed to have no relation to the remote, sombre glance of her dark eyes. It was her room that we were working in, and Mme. Storey apologised politely.

"Oh," said Miss Priestley with a gesture, "I scarcely know what right *I* have here now that the Commodore is gone. The bottom has fallen out of everything. It is just a blind instinct that brings me back to finish his work as far as I can.... I will carry it into the study if I am in your way."

"No, indeed!" said Mme. Storey. "If anybody moves, it shan't be you. At present we are only engaged in routine

work."

Lighting a cigarette, my employer leaned back in her chair, and started chatting with the girl in offhand, friendly fashion. She told Miss Priestley many of the details of the case that had come to light overnight, but not the more important developments. And then, characteristically, she graduated by insensible degrees from the act of *giving* information into that of *seeking* it.

"I expect that will be a very interesting book," she remarked, with a nod towards the pile of typescript that the secretary had taken from a drawer.

"Oh, yes!" said Miss Priestley; "the Commodore was acquainted with all of the most eminent persons of his time."

"And, of course, his end will give the book a tragic interest now."

"Oh, don't!" said the girl with one of her curious wooden gestures. "It is too dreadful to reflect that what you say is true!"

"Is it nearly finished?" asked Mme. Storey.

"Yes. I shall be able to bring it up to the end of 1918. That will include all the most interesting parts of the Commodore's life."

"How long had he been working on it?"

"Since last May. It is just a year since he engaged me to help him with it."

"A year!" said Mme. Storey. "Bless me! Isn't that a long time to take in writing a book? I understood that books were written overnight nowadays."

"Not this one," said the girl patting the sheets. "The Commodore took the greatest pains in polishing his style.... Besides, you must remember that he was a man of many engagements. He could not spare very much time to it."

"Did he work on it when he was in Europe last winter?"

"No. He had no intention of doing so. The script was left at home."

"What did you do during that time?"

"I stayed at home. The Commodore was good enough to pay me my salary while he was away. I was so familiar with the work that he wished to be sure of getting me to go on with it when he returned."

"Was Mr. Henry interested in this work of his father's?"

"I can hardly say that he was interested in it. Mr. Henry is not very literary."

"But he knew that it existed?"

"Oh, yes. He was in and out of the house all last summer at Easthampton while we were working on it. A

reconciliation took place between Mr. Henry and his father in June, and he stayed a month with us."

The conversation was rudely broken off at this point. If my description of the plan of the house was clear, it will be remembered that the room beyond the Commodore's office was Mr. Henry's study. There was a door between, but it was not used. I suppose it had been locked when the rooms were first divided into suites. From the next room we heard a suppressed shriek. Mme. Storey and I both jumped to our feet, but Miss Priestley was before us. That strange girl, as if electrified by the sound, was out of the door like a flash and in through the next door, Mme. Storey and I making a bad second and third. In Mr. Henry's study the situation could be read at a glance. The detective stood barring the way to the bedroom door. Facing him stood Estelle Gilsey frozen with horror, one hand clapped over her mouth as if to still an incontrollable need to shriek. A black dress emphasized the fragility of her fair beauty. She turned to my mistress.

"He won't let me in!" she gasped. "... He is a policeman! ... Henry is arrested...!"

Before my mistress could answer her Miss Priestley spoke. The dark girl held herself like a very Juno then, her handsome face icy with scorn. Her self-control was in very odd contrast to her mad dash out of the room just now. Verily, as I knew to my cost, a woman's infatuation leads her to cut strange capers! I perceived in Julia Priestley still another victim. She said with a superb air of scorn: "What are you doing here?"

The blonde girl beyond half a glance paid no attention to her. She repeated her agonised question of my mistress: "Is he arrested?"

"What are you doing in his room?" reiterated Miss Priestley. "In his bedroom? Have you no shame?"

Miss Gilsey turned on her then. It appeared that the blue eyes could flash sparks, too. "What business is it of yours?" she demanded.

"You would not have dared while the Commodore was alive!" cried the other girl. "His body has scarcely been carried out of the house. You are shameless!"

"Be quiet!" cried the blonde girl, stamping her foot. "Everybody knows what's the matter with *you*!"

What a scene! It appeared that the delicate little thing could show her claws, too. We are indeed all alike under our skins. My mistress was taking it all in with a sphinx-like regard. To add to the confusion Mr. Henry began to pound on the other side of the bedroom door. "Let me out! Let me out!"

Mme. Storey nodded to the detective, who thereupon opened the door. Henry Varick seemed to catapult out of the inner room. He had eyes for none of us except Miss Gilsey. He seized her in his arms. "Oh, my darling!" he murmured.

She, too, forgot the world. Her arms wreathed themselves around his neck. "Henry! ... Henry...!" she murmured. I thought she was about to faint.

So it was revealed at last which one among the many girls young Henry favoured. I experienced no feeling of jealousy against Estelle Gilsey. In the first place, I had seen from the beginning that there was some sort of an understanding between them, and anyhow, in my crazy infatuation there was no thought of self. I cannot say as much for Julia Priestley. She surveyed this scene with cold and amused scorn, but the rising and falling of her breast betrayed the inner tempest. She uttered two words: "Good comedy!"

That drew Henry's attention to her. When he perceived who it was he dropped his girl as if she had been red hot. He flushed and then paled, and a craven look came into his face that was very painful to see if you were fond of him. The tall girl seemed taller still, regarding him like an empress with flashing eyes. He could not face the situation. He turned and fled back into his bedroom.

Estelle made as if to follow him. "Henry!" she gasped. But at that moment there was a knock on the outer door, and she stopped. Strange it was to see how we all drew masks over our faces. There was one thing all were agreed upon in that house; to hush things up. Estelle allowed the detective to lock the bedroom door. Meanwhile, Mme. Storey opened the other. It was Jarboe, showing an anxious face. Evidently he had heard something, but had succeeded in keeping the other servants off. Mme. Storey reassured him with a word, and he went away again.

But the interruption had put a permanent quietus on the scene. Both girls had had time to reflect on the danger of giving too much away. Each was now elaborately ignoring

the other. As soon as Jarboe was out of the way, the tall beauty marched out of the room with her head up, and, as you might say, all colours flying. When she disappeared the little blonde's head went down, and she began to shake. She struggled hard to get a grip on herself, but couldn't make it. Apparently she thought it was useless to ask to see Henry again. With her face working incontrollably, she suddenly darted for the outer door.

Mme. Storey detained her for a moment. "Keep the secret from Mrs. Varick as long as possible," she said. "Don't return to her until you can show a smooth face."

The girl nodded her head mutely, and flew. When we returned to the next room the other one, extraordinary creature! was tapping away at her typewriter as if she had never left it.

XIV

The next thing that happened was the arrival of Inspector Rumsey at the Varick house. It transpired that Mme. Storey had sent for him before I was up. He arrived in a closed car by way of the courtyard. We three retired into the Commodore's study to consult.

"I must yield up my responsibility in this case," said Mme. Storey at once.

"Hey?" said the Inspector, very much startled. "What's the matter?"

"The situation here grows worse and worse," said my employer, "and I cannot any longer be responsible to the police. It ties my hands. It forces me to act in a manner counter to my best judgment."

"But you have full liberty of action," he protested.

"No, I have not. Sit down, and let me tell you the whole situation," which she proceeded to do. I helped out by reading portions of the notes I had taken.

When she had come to an end the Inspector shook his head heavily. "Bad! Bad!" he said. "I quite understand your feelings. But my duty is clear, of course. I must arrest Henry Varick."

"That is what I expected you to say," said Mme. Storey with a faint smile; "and that is why I must wash my hands of you. Because *I am not satisfied that Henry Varick poisoned his father*."

My heart jumped for joy hearing her say this. I felt that I had found my dear mistress again. I blamed myself for having doubted even a moment that her heart was in the right place.

"But," protested the Inspector, "Commodore Varick died of a dose of aconite; his son was the last person to be with him before he was taken sick; by his own admission he had

eaten and drunk with his father; and Henry Varick *had the aconite*. Why, it's a *prima facie* case!"

"Not quite," said my employer. "And anyhow, I don't care if it is or not. I may say that there is even more damaging evidence against Henry Varick. I know it is there, though I have not yet brought it out. It wouldn't make any difference. All the evidence in the world would not satisfy me."

"You are illogical," complained the Inspector.

Mme. Storey arose and tossed her hands up. "Ah, there's the rub!" she cried. "There's the old point of division between you and me. You work by logic, my friend, and I by intuition. Oh, everybody is on your side—everybody except Bella here, who is just another silly woman and doesn't count—lawyers, judges, juries and the great public, all on your side, all they think of is evidence. It's absurd the importance they attach to evidence, which is the most unreliable thing in the world."

"You can't take intuition into a court of law," said the Inspector.

"So much the worse for the court," she retorted. "That's why so many trials are solemn farces. And look at the work it makes for me! Three quarters of my time, I suppose, is spent in digging up 'evidence' to prove what anybody can see is so at a glance!"

It was impossible to tell whether she was speaking quite seriously or not. This was an old subject of dispute between

her and the Inspector.

He said: "Well, to return to Henry Varick; what makes you suspect he may not have done it?"

"The whole character of the man, and all the former acts of his life so far as they have come to light."

"I can't go with you there!" said the Inspector. "My whole experience teaches me that murder crops out in the most unexpected places."

I saw a retort spring to my mistress's lips, but she withheld it, for fear, I suppose, of hurting our old friend's feelings. She said: "Granted. I base my opinion of Henry Varick's innocence on what I have observed of him during the past twenty-four hours. On what he said; on the way he looked when he said it; and on the tones of his voice. There are men, of course, who can simulate anything, but he is not one of them. He is just an ordinary, scatterbrained, impulsive young fellow, who has been a little spoiled by too much kindness—especially from our sex; and who has never taken serious thought of anything in his life."

"I have not had the advantage of seeing him," said the Inspector dryly. He thought that Mme. Storey had fallen a victim to the young man's charm like all the other women.

It did not escape her. "It is true, what you are thinking of," she said with a laugh. "I am crazy about him. But, letting that go for the moment, consider his actions. A murder by poison, of course, is not committed in the heat of passion; it requires

planning. If he planned this out, is it reasonable to suppose that he would go off to Buffalo, and leave that tell-tale cabinet of drugs here in the house?"

"They always forget something."

"Surely! But not *the* thing."

"Does your intuition suggest who *did* commit this murder?" he asked dryly.

"I may have my notions," she said, "but I do not intend to speak of them until I have dug up the necessary evidence."

"How long will that take you?"

"How can I tell?" she said, spreading out her hands. "I may never get it. Lots of things which are as plain as the nose before your face cannot be *proven*."

"What is the additional evidence against Henry Varick that you spoke of?" he asked. "I suppose I have the right to ask for that."

"Oh, assuredly!" she said, turning away with a gesture. "But it's so painful! so very painful! However, all must come out, of course." She turned back. "Will you promise me not to allow this last disclosure to reach Henry Varick's ears for a week?"

"But why?" he demanded.

"Simply because it would break his heart."

"Oh, very well," he said, a little nettled. He thought we had both lost our heads over the young man.

"Let us find out if Dr. Slingluff is in the house," said Mme. Storey. "He has been making frequent visits to Mrs. Varick."

My heart began to beat as soon as this name was mentioned. From the first I had suspected that the secret was in the possession of the family doctor. Gabbitt was despatched to find him. Within five minutes he returned, having the handsome, dignified practitioner in tow. Mme. Storey introduced the two men to each other. As soon as he learned that he was facing a police officer, Dr. Slingluff began to sweat. He was such a nice looking man that it was painful to see. My employer wasted no time in beating around the bush. She said: "Doctor, we had a painful interview yesterday, and a still more painful one is before us. It was perfectly evident to me yesterday that you were—if you will excuse me, lying! It may have been from the highest motives, but it was nevertheless—lying!"

He puffed out his cheeks. "Madam!" he cried, "Your sex protects you. No man would dare..."

"Why become angry?" she interrupted with a smile. "If I am wrong you can afford to laugh at me."

He subsided.

"What the Inspector and I want to know is," she went on, "why you signed that certificate as you did, when you knew that Commodore Varick had been poisoned."

"I did not know it!" he cried. "I have already told you..."

"Now, doctor," she said cajolingly, "with your skill, your vast experience, you cannot expect us to believe that."

"I don't care whether you believe it or not!" he cried. "It's true!"

"You're a naturally truthful man," said Mme. Storey, "and lying like everything else to be successful requires practice." She pointed to a little diamond-shaped mirror that was let into the top of the escritoire. "Look at yourself in the glass, doctor. If you saw that face upon another would you not say that the man behind it was lying?"

He would not look, of course, but strode away, cursing under his breath.

"Consider a moment," she went on. "I am your friend because I believe that you are actuated by the highest motives. Won't you fare better with me than you would with a bawling lawyer in open court? You can't get away with this. If you persist in trying to do so, an inevitable public humiliation awaits you."

He dropped in a chair and flung up his hands. "Very well," he said, "I was lying! ... Oh, God! what a relief!" He wiped his face and forehead with his handkerchief.

"Why did you lie?" asked Mme. Storey.

"Because the Commodore asked me to. He was my oldest friend."

"Asked you to!" interpolated the Inspector in astonishment.

"The moment I clapped eyes on the Commodore I saw that he had been poisoned," said Dr. Slingluff. "I suspected aconite owing to the intolerable prickling of the skin of which he complained. No other poison gives rise to that symptom. I sent Gabbitt on the run to my office for atropine, but I saw that it was too late for atropine or anything else. My real reason was to get the man out of the room because I saw my friend had something of a private nature to say to me. He took one of my hands between his; he was perfectly conscious, but I had to stoop low to hear him. He said: 'Fred, I have been poisoned!' I nodded. He said with an agonised look of entreaty in his eyes: 'Keep it a secret, Fred. It rests with you. Oh, God! don't let me die with the fear of disgrace and horror on me!' And so I promised, and a look of relief came into his dying eyes. Could I have acted differently?"

"Certainly not," said Mme. Storey. "But was that all?"

"That was all."

"You're an enlightened man," she said, "you're the sort of man, I take it, who reserves the right to think and to act for himself on all occasions."

"I hope so," said Doctor Slingluff.

"Well, wouldn't it be consistent with your idea of what is right to give such a promise to a dying man to ease his death,

and then break it afterwards if the public interest demanded?"

He saw that he was in a trap, and refused to answer.

"You see," said Mme. Storey mildly, "you have not yet told me why you lied."

Silence from the doctor.

"Commodore Varick also, was a man of the world," she went on, "he must have known that in asking such a thing of you, he was asking you to betray your professional reputation, your duty to the State. Didn't he appear to be aware of this?"

"No," said Dr. Slingluff.

"Didn't he give any reason for making such a request?"

"No!"

"Didn't he," Mme. Storey asked very softly, "didn't he tell you who poisoned him?"

The same symptoms of extreme agitation appeared in the doctor's candid face but he said, as before: "No!"

Mme. Storey sighed. She said: "It may help to clarify the situation if I tell you that Henry Varick has been under arrest since last night. We have built up a strong case against him."

Doctor Slingluff started up out of his chair, and dropped back again in a heap. His eyes seemed to start out of his head in horror. Then he covered his face. "Henry arrested!" he groaned. "Then everything is over!"

"You see there is no further occasion for lying," said my mistress gently.

"No!" he murmured wretchedly. "No! God help us!"

"What were Commodore Varick's last words to you before he died?" asked Mme. Storey.

"He said," came the husky reply, "he said ... 'Henry poisoned me.'"

I pass over my private feelings at that moment. The others shared them at least to some degree, I fancy. As Mme. Storey had said, the situation was too painful. After the stricken doctor had left the room, Inspector Rumsey turned to my employer in a kind of amazement. "And you knew it all the time?" he said. "You knew what was coming?"

"Yes, I knew it," she said soberly, "in a way."

"How *could* you have known it?"

"By intuition. There was no other way of accounting for the doctor's agony of mind yesterday when I questioned him."

"Can you still tell me that you are not satisfied as to this young man's guilt?" demanded the Inspector.

"I am not satisfied," said Mme. Storey stoutly. "In this latest disclosure there is merely an emotional effect, there is no proof. You are crushed by the horror of that father's death, believing that his son had poisoned him. Suppose he was mistaken?"

"Impossible!"

"Suppose the Commodore had taken several substances into his mouth about that time, how could he know which might have contained the poison?"

"By the remembered taste afterwards."

"It may have been disguised."

"You are simply hoping against hope," said Inspector Rumsey. "My duty is clear. I must take Henry Varick down to headquarters."

Mme. Storey spread out her hands in surrender.

XV

However, Henry Varick was not taken away just then. Mme. Storey said; "Before we part company in this case, Inspector..."

He interrupted her in great concern: "Part company?"

"Well, hereafter, I suppose you will be for the prosecution and I for the defence. But let us try one last expedient together with a view to discovering the truth."

"What do you propose?" he asked.

"You are familiar with the criminal procedure in France and Italy," she answered; "how they bring accused and accusers face to face in the court room, and let them shout at each other, the idea being that the truth will somehow reveal itself in spite of them. It's not a perfect method, but it has its points; if there must be shouting in court it seems more reasonable to let the principals do it than their hired lawyers, as we arrange it over here. I propose that we have Henry Varick and his accuser in here together."

"But his father was his accuser," objected the Inspector, "and he is dead."

"He has another accuser," said Mme. Storey. "Telephone to Manby to fetch him in here, and I'll produce her."

He did so. Meanwhile Mme. Storey went to the door into the office. When she opened it one could hear the uninterrupted tapping of the typewriter within. She said: "Miss Priestley, will you be good enough to come in here for a moment."

The secretary entered with a look of polite surprise. Inspector Rumsey's eyes opened at the sight of her, and that indefinable change took place in him that one always sees in a man upon the entrance of beauty. My heart began to beat again, foreseeing another painful scene. I wished myself away from there, for I felt that I had had about all I could bear.

A moment later Henry Varick was brought in. The detective was sent back to wait until he was called for again. Henry knew by instinct, I suppose, that the stranger in the room was a police official, and a desperate look came into his eyes. When he saw Julia Priestley also, he changed colour, and looked around him wildly like a trapped creature. All this created a very unfavourable impression on the Inspector. Guilty! his look said just as clearly as if he had enunciated the word. But good heavens! the unfortunate young man was half mad with grief and terror. How could he have looked any differently? If I had been in his place, I should have looked just the same. So far as I could see, Miss Priestley never looked at him.

"Sit down," said Mme. Storey to Miss Priestley. My employer had assumed a bland and smiling air that might have concealed anything.

Henry was not invited to take a chair, but he did so anyway, not having become accustomed as yet to being treated as an inferior. So there we were, the five of us. We were grouped around a table at the end of the room farthest from the fireplace. It was the same table upon which tea had been served two days before—the Commodore's last meal.

The Inspector was seated directly at the table, and myself a little behind him. My mistress had told me not to produce a note-book, so I had nothing to do but sit with my hands in my lap and look on. Mr. Henry had his back to the windows, and Miss Priestley was across the room. Mme. Storey was between them, but she did not remain in one position, frequently rising to pace back and forth.

She said to Miss Priestley with her blandest air: "I asked you in, knowing your great interest in this matter. Our labours are completed for the moment. It would not be proper for me to say that Mr. Henry Varick is guilty, but our case against him is complete. He is about to be arrested."

A haunted look came into the young man's face as he listened to this. It seemed like gratuitous cruelty on the part of my mistress, but it was all part of her plan.

"Inspector Rumsey and I want to thank you for the great assistance you have rendered us," she said.

The girl started. "I don't understand you," she said.

"I am referring to the two letters you wrote," said Mme. Storey. "One to Inspector Rumsey and one to me. The first started this investigation, and the second directed it into the right channel."

This was a surprising piece of news to me, and, likewise, to the Inspector. But both of us looked as if we had known it all along.

"I wrote no such letters," said Miss Priestley with an air of great astonishment.

"Oh, I quite understand your reasons for wishing to keep in the background," said Mme. Storey with a friendly smile. "They do you credit. But unfortunately we need you for a witness."

The girl shook her head with a mystified air. "What reason have you to suppose that I wrote the letters you speak of?" she asked.

Mme. Storey went to the escritoire, and unlocked the drawer that I had seen her lock on the day before. From it she took the sheet of paper she had then put away. There was a slip clipped to it that she detached. "This appears to be a sketch for a title page to Commodore Varick's book," she said. "As soon as I saw the lettering I recognised the same hand that had written the two anonymous notes. There is just as much character in block letters, of course, as in written ones. You have a taste for lettering, I see. The characters are formed with care."

Miss Priestley did not turn a hair. Glancing at the paper, she said with a smile: "I am sorry for the truth of your deductions, but that sketch was made by Commodore Varick, not by me."

"That can hardly be," said my employer, still most polite, "because this slip was pinned to it. I read upon it: 'Here is a sketch I have made. I hope you like it.' And signed with your initials: J. P."

"Oh, then I have made a mistake," said the girl with the utmost coolness. "So many sketches were made at different times; some by the Commodore and some by me.... However, I know nothing about any anonymous letters."

"Ah, you can't be allowed to keep modesty in the background," said Mme. Storey smiling. "In the net of espionage we have spread you had to be included, of course, and we know all about your movements during the past thirty-six hours. You live in an apartment on Lexington Avenue at Thirty-Seventh Street. From a hall boy there we have learned that you went out about nine-thirty on Tuesday night, returning in a moment or two with a newspaper. The incident was fixed in the boy's mind, because he wondered why you hadn't sent him for it. The late editions that night carried the first news of Commodore Varick's death. When you read that his death had been ascribed to natural causes, you feared that the ends of justice would be defeated, and you wrote the first letter. You came out with it a half-hour or so later, and again the hall boy wondered why you didn't let him post it. But you had a very good reason, of course. It was addressed to Inspector Rumsey at Police Headquarters. Through the post office we have established that that letter was posted on Lexington Avenue somewhere between Thirty-Sixth Street and Forty-Second, and was taken up in the eleven o'clock collection."

Miss Priestley listened to this with an enigmatic smile. It was all a mystery to Henry Varick, of course. He sat forward in his chair listening with strained anxiety.

"The second letter we can bring even closer to you," Mme. Storey went on. "You will remember you and I were talking in the next room about half-past two yesterday, when the name of the Princess Cristina was suddenly injected into the case, and I went tearing off to find her. Again you thought the real criminal was likely to escape, and you sat down and wrote the second note. You left this house at 3.10, somewhat earlier than your custom. You were picked up by a detective and followed. You entered the branch post office in the Grand Central Station, and dropped a letter in a chute. My operative could not see the address; however the post office has reported to us that the second anonymous letter was received through a chute in that post office and cancelled at 3.30."

"Well, I give in," said the girl with a calm gesture. "I didn't want to appear in this horrible case, but I see it is inevitable."

"Inspector Rumsey and I have only one question to ask you," said Mme. Storey. "How did you know that Commodore Varick had been poisoned?"

"I didn't know it," she said quickly, "I only suspected it."

"Your first note stated it as a fact."

"I know. I thought an investigation ought to be made. I thought that would be the best way of bringing it about."

"Oh, quite. What made you suspect that he had been poisoned?"

Miss Priestley hesitated. She glanced fleetingly at Henry through her lashes. "Ought he to be present when I am telling these things?" she asked.

Mme. Storey looked at the Inspector in seeming concern. A glance of intelligence passed between them which the girl could not have seen. "How about it, Inspector?" my employer asked. "Is it proper for him to hear this?"

"Oh, yes," said the Inspector with a judicial air. "A man is always entitled to hear what he is charged with."

I doubted very much if this was the usual practice; however, the girl could have known no better. She resumed with the air of one conscientiously performing a disagreeable duty: "Mr. Henry knew all about poisons. I knew that he had a collection of dangerous poisons. In the past I had heard him talk about poisoning people..."

"Oh, no!" cried Henry in a shocked voice.

The girl looked at Mme. Storey. "I knew this was going to be painful," she murmured.

"Let me explain!" cried Henry desperately. "It is true that I have talked to her about poisons. I have described to her how men would die after having taken different poisons; aconite, strychnine, arsenic and so on; but I never proposed to poison anybody!"

"It is not important," said Mme. Storey smoothly. "The fact that you had talked about poisons is not sufficient in itself to have aroused her suspicions." She turned to the girl.

"How did you know that Mr. Henry had been in the house on Tuesday afternoon?"

"I saw him," was the calm reply. She went on: "In my anxiety to keep out of all this, I suppressed part of the truth yesterday. I did not, as I then told you, go downstairs as soon as I had admitted the Princess to the Commodore's study. I went into the office where I had some work to finish. A few minutes later I heard the rumble of a man's voice in this room. I was greatly astonished, because I had not heard the Princess leave, and I knew that the Commodore had no other appointment. In fact, I was alarmed. We all considered it a part of our duty to protect the Commodore from possible intruders. I went to the door between the two rooms and opened it a crack. I saw Mr. Henry in here."

"Was he alone with his father?"

A pinched look came into the girl's face. "No," she said stiffly, "Miss Gilsey was here too—if that is her name."

"Ha!" cried the Inspector.

"I told you that," said Mme. Storey.

"But you only surmised it. This is direct evidence."

My mistress smiled. To the girl she said: "Please describe what you saw in this room."

"Oh, as soon as I saw it was a family matter I closed the door," she said. "I had only the briefest glimpse."

"What did that glimpse show you?"

"As I opened the door I heard the Commodore saying: 'Not a cent! Not a cent! Let the marriage be annulled and I'll settle!'"

Mr. Henry started up. "My father never said that!" he cried.

"Please be silent!" commanded the Inspector.

"What marriage did he refer to?" asked Mme. Storey.

"The marriage between Mr. Henry and Miss Gilsey."

The young man dropped his head between his hands. "I wanted to keep her out of this!" he groaned.

"Oh, they're married, are they?" said my mistress coolly.

The girl's nostrils became pinched again. "He said they were. But that was on the day before. On Monday afternoon Mr. Henry saw his father alone, and they had a violent quarrel. They talked so loud I could hear a good deal in my room. Mr. Henry told his father then that he was married to Miss Gilsey. I don't know if it's true, or if he just said so to get out of the match with the Princess. At any rate the Commodore was infuriated because he looked upon Miss Gilsey as an adventuress. He told his son not to expect a cent from him, and ordered him out of the house."

"That was on Monday," said Mme. Storey; "now, returning to Tuesday, what did you see when you looked in this

room?"

"They were grouped around the tea-table—this table. As it happened it was just in line with the crack of the door. The Commodore had that moment risen, and was walking away towards the window there. His back was therefore turned to me. Mr. Henry was standing between me and the table, and his back was towards me. Miss Gilsey was seated at the table with the tea-tray before her, and I could see her face...." The girl hesitated.

"Well?" prompted Mme. Storey.

Miss Priestley was breathing quickly. "Nothing happened," she said with a jerky gesture. "Nothing that I could swear to on the witness-stand. It was just a glimpse.... I saw her give him an extraordinary look. His hands were hidden from me ... but he bent over the table a little ... it seemed to me that the movements of his arms were suspicious ... that's all."

It was a horribly vivid picture that she called up. I think we all shuddered. Mr. Henry's face was hidden.

"And from that you thought...?" Mme. Storey prompted further.

"Well, taken in connection with what had happened the day before," said Miss Priestley. "I knew that Mr. Henry feared the will was going to be changed. As a matter of fact it had already been changed, but he could not have known of that. I supposed that he had brought the girl along in a final

effort to soften the Commodore's heart, and when that failed he was rendered desperate."

"Quite!" said Mme. Storey.

XVI

It seemed as if Mme. Storey's plan to confront them would come to nothing, owing to Henry Varick's having been utterly crushed by the girl's statement. He sat with his elbows on his knees, and his head pressed between his hands. In order to stir him up, the Inspector said in a rasping voice: "Have you nothing to say, sir?"

The young man started to his feet with a wild, despairing face. "What she says is nearly true," he cried; "but just that little difference makes all the difference between life and death to me!"

"You may question her if you wish," said Mme. Storey.

He quieted down. "I don't want to question her," he said, "but I want to tell her something." He approached the girl, looking at her steadily. Something new had come into his face, something firm and fine; it was the look of a man brought to the last extremity of grief and danger, who is suddenly lifted out of himself.

"Julia, is it worth it?" he said.

She was shrinking away from him with a look of repulsion. "Do I have to submit to this?" she murmured, appealing to Mme. Storey.

"It is his right to break down your story, if he can," said my mistress.

The girl drew a long breath, and stiffened herself. "He can't do that," she said confidently, "because I have said nothing but the simple truth. But let him try." She sat down in the same chair that she had before occupied, and met Henry's glance with a cold smile.

This time his eyes did not quail from hers. "Julia," he went on, in a low, moved voice, "I'm sorry for the way I treated you. I am a coward where women are concerned. I can't bear to hurt them. Ever since I grew up it seems I have been running away from women. And that only made matters worse, of course. I wouldn't face things out. But now I must face things out. If only for once I could find the right words to express the truth! Julia, I treated you badly. Must I die for that?"

He paused, searching her face to see if his words had had any effect. How she was able to withstand the appeal in those deep blue eyes, I could not comprehend. The only sign of emotion she gave was to rise suddenly, and press herself against the wall, as if to get as far as possible from him. Her face was like marble.

"You know that this story you have told will send me to the chair," he resumed. "It's so nearly true that you can tell it with an easy conscience. But is it worth it? In your heart you know that I am incapable of killing my father. *You know me*! Why, the whole trouble between us arose from the fact that I was too tender-hearted and easy-going, and you were ambitious. You scorned me, remember, because I hadn't the heart to whip a puppy at Easthampton that had nipped me."

I cannot hope to convey in print the moving quality of that grave, young voice, low and shaken in tone. I know the tears were rolling unchecked down my cheeks, and I could see that both the Inspector and my mistress were affected. But the girl listened with a twisted smile in her white face; the smile of one who would die sooner than give in.

"You are mistaken if you think I lied when I told you I loved you," he continued. "Your beauty laid a spell on me. I worshipped your beauty. You possessed me entirely.... But I couldn't marry you. Our natures were too different. We would have driven each other mad. I should have told you this, or written it, plainly, but I couldn't bring myself to write the words that would hurt you. I hoped you would just forget me when I went away.... But we were happy while it lasted, weren't we? I was in Paradise. If you send me to my death you will forget your anger against me, you will only remember the times that we were happy. How will you feel then? Is it worth it, Julia? I cannot believe that anybody so beautiful can have a bad heart.... Do you remember..." He took a step closer to her, and murmured something none of us could hear. "After that," he asked gravely, "after that, can you bring yourself to swear my life away?"

She strained her face away from him. "I'm sorry," she said in an unnatural, twanging voice, "but the truth is the truth! I have nothing to change in what I said."

Henry Varick slowly raised his shoulders, and spread out his palms; then his whole body sagged. "Well, that's that," he said in a flat voice. "I'm done for, I guess." A painful recklessness appeared on his face. "Come on, Inspector!" he cried out. "Come on, old cock, let's go! I don't know where I'm going, but I'm on my way!" He stopped short, and an awful goneness sounded in his voice. "Oh God! I wish it was to the death chamber that you were taking me! That is over in a minute, but the weeks before that...!"

The Inspector seemed disposed to linger, to talk things over with Mme. Storey, and the young man cried out sharply: "Come on! Come on! I can't stand any more of this!"

At a glance from my mistress the Inspector bestirred himself. As the two men reached the door, the girl shrieked. The sound seemed to be torn from her breast. "Stop! Stop! I cannot bear it! I lied!"

The two men turned back. When the girl's unnatural self-control broke, everything went. Her convulsed face seemed scarcely human. It was dreadful to see so complete an abasement.

"I lied!" she moaned. "I lied from beginning to end. He didn't do it! It was I who poisoned Commodore Varick. Oh, what a wretch I am!" She struck her head with her clenched hands.

Henry Varick stared at her like one transfixed with horror. "You killed my father!" he murmured from time to time: "You killed my father!"

I was dazed with the suddenness of it. My mistress motioned to me, and I automatically drew a sheet of paper towards me, and with trembling hands started to take down what the girl said, scarce knowing what I wrote.

Her body swayed forward and back. The words came gabbling from her lips, as if some terror urged her to get it all out before she could think. "I will tell all! It has been in my mind for a long time. But it was Henry that I meant to kill. Because he was false to me. First with that foreign woman, and afterwards with the contemptible Gilsey girl. It was the poisons that put it into my head. Always they were in the next room, tempting, tempting me. I found a key that would open the door, and I could go into Henry's study at any time without anybody knowing. He was never there. There was a book in there, too, that described all the different poisons and how they acted....

"I collected old keys. I bought them in junk-shops and other places, many, many keys, until I had got one that would open the curio cabinet, and a little one that opened the box of drugs. I took out the bottle of aconite, and locked all up again, and threw away the keys. Then I bided my time, and studied how to give Henry the poison. But I could think of no way. I never saw him any more. I wrote asking him to come to see me, but he paid no attention to the letter...."

"She did ... she did!" murmured Henry, like one in a trance.

"Then I heard Henry tell his father that he was married to that white-faced blonde, and I went mad ... mad! I changed my plan. I couldn't get at Henry, but I had plenty of opportunities with his father. I wanted to strike at them, I didn't care which one. I made up my mind to wait until the Commodore had changed his will, and then kill him. That was to be my revenge. I didn't think until later of putting it off on Henry. That made it sweeter!

"I knew the Commodore took a capsule after every meal. There was a white powder in it that looked just the same as the aconite. I got some empty capsules and filled them with the aconite. There was only enough to fill three. When Henry and the girl were with the Commodore in his study, I sneaked around outside, through the foyer of the suite and into the bathroom. I took the capsules out of the box, put the poisoned ones in, and went back to my room. I watched and listened. I saw Henry and the girl go. The Commodore was half-reconciled to them, and it made me smile to think how I was going to dish them all!

"When the Commodore left his study, I followed and listened at the crack of the door. I heard him go into the bathroom and come out again. Then I knew the thing was done. I knew that I would have just as much time as it would take for the capsule to melt in his stomach. Plenty of time to get away. He returned to his study, but he never saw me. I was back in the office then. I went around through the foyer into the bathroom. There were only two capsules in the box,

so I knew there had been no slip-up. I replaced them with two of the harmless capsules, and went downstairs."

So much for the facts of her story. I shall not speak of the unfortunate girl's ravings. It is too painful. Too great an effort of self-control is followed by the collapse of all resistance. It left her exhausted and shaking, finally apathetic. Detective Manby was called in, and she was handed over to his care. Unable to speak above a whisper then, she begged for permission to rest for ten minutes in the office. This was granted.

The other four of us were left looking at each other, scarcely able to comprehend what had happened. I for one was conscious of an immense weariness. I felt as if I should drop in my tracks. But it was a delicious kind of weariness, the feeling that comes after a shattering storm, when you find quiet in your ears once more. Blessed, blessed quiet and peace. At first you can hardly believe it. But I looked at Henry Varick, and there he was, safe, and my heart was content.

He, I think, was the first to speak. "And are you through with me, now?" he asked wonderingly. "Am I free?"

"Free as air," said Mme. Storey, laying a hand on his shoulder. "Go to your wife and tell her. And to your mother. You appear to have lost your fortune, but you have them!"

Gladness shone out in his face like the sun breaking through. He had already forgotten the poor, hysterical wretch

in the next room. Well, such is youth! "What do I care for the money!" he cried. "If I am free." He ran out of the room.

"Well, I expect your mother won't let you starve," remarked Mme. Storey dryly. "And wills have been broken before this!"

"And so you were right after all!" said Inspector Rumsey generously.

"As it happens," said my mistress, smiling. "But I was not nearly so sure as I made out to be."

Our excitements were not yet over, for presently Detective Manby burst into the room with a dismayed face. "She has given me the slip!" he cried.

To make a long story short, at a moment when Manby was not looking directly at her, the prisoner had slipped from the office into Henry's study adjoining. Manby was not even aware that she had unlocked the door. She slammed it in his face, and got out into the main hall. By the time Manby got through the two doors, she was nowhere to be seen. None of the servants had seen her. To us, of course, it was apparent that she had gone down the enclosed stair, of which Manby knew nothing, and out through the secret passage. The Inspector was in a rage, but Mme. Storey took it with more than usual calmness.

"It is all for the best," she said enigmatically.

"For the best!" he exclaimed indignantly.

"I take it she has gone home," said my mistress, gravely. "But wherever she has gone she will soon be found, my friend. The resolve to kill herself was in her eye."

"Justice will be defeated!" cried the Inspector.

"Man's justice," murmured Mme. Storey with an imperceptible shrug.

"We must follow her!" cried the Inspector.

"No! Let us not be seen there," said my mistress, laying a hand on his arm. "Send Manby."

And so it was done.

In my note-book I find the following clipping:

"At 11.15 yesterday morning the body of Miss Julia Priestley, 26, was found dead at No. —— Lexington Avenue, with a bullet through the heart. A new .38 automatic was clutched in her hand, and her clothing revealed powder burns. From the position of the body it was apparent that she had stood in front of a mirror to aim the gun. She was found in the bedroom of a small three-room apartment that she occupied alone at the above address.

"The body was discovered by Detective-Sergeant James Manby. Sergeant Manby had been sent to Miss Priestley's apartment as the result of a mysterious message received by Inspector Rumsey at headquarters a few minutes earlier. Inspector Rumsey was advised by a woman's voice over the telephone, that he had better send a detective to the address given. When he asked for particulars, his informant hung up. It is supposed that this was Miss Priestley herself. When Sergeant Manby reached the apartment, he found the door open as if for his convenience. The woman's body was still warm.

"For the past year Miss Priestley was employed by the late Commodore Varick as an amanuensis in the preparation of a book that he was writing. It is supposed that the death of her employer, which came with such shocking suddenness on Tuesday evening, and the consequent loss of her employment, temporarily deranged the young woman's mind. Her nearest relative is a brother living in Cleveland, Ohio, who is on his way to New York to take charge of the body."

And that is all that ever got into the papers.

THE END

[End of *The Almost Perfect Murder* by Hulbert Footner]