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BY CAROLYN WELLS

THE OUTLINE OF HUMOR
THE FOURTEENTH KEY
CROSS WORD PUZZLE BOOK
FACE CARDS

Face Cards

By

Carolyn Wells

Author of "The Fourteenth Key," etc.

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FACE CARDS

CHAPTER I

THE KING OF CLUBS

The constructor and interior decorator had done their work; such scars to the grounds as piles of unused building material had been removed; and today, with the new addition and appointments complete and in order, a few week-end guests were expected at Clearman Court by way of celebration.

These guests were few, and not entirely easy in mind. House guests had not been usual at Clearman Court since the master's astounding second marriage. For one thing Stephen Clearman and his wife rarely cared for the same people, and just as rarely did the guests at Clearman Court desire to go again.

They might pretend to be amused at the legend of the Curse of Clearman Court, yet there was an undeniable spell of Oriental exoticism saturating the place. One felt it even in the Clearman limousine that called at the station for one; although it bespoke Detroit or Indianapolis in every glint of its body, every thrum of its motor, within it the guest thought of bamboo, teak wood, gongs, idols.

Perhaps the car had a strangely sweet perfume in it. It would not have been beyond Stephen Clearman to have put some curious scent in the upholstery just to foster respect for the legend of the Curse. There was no amusement in the legend for him.

What an extraordinary composite the man was! His cultured side was evident to the world at large. He was wealthy, educated, basically intelligent. A cosmopolitan, having traveled and lived in many countries, he had the poise anywhere he found himself of a notable man-about-town. In short, like his exclusive kind, he was well-bred, well-fed, well-read.

He belonged to a great number of clubs, some of which he had himself organized and most of which had at one time or another called him President. Worthwhile clubs they were, the great city clubs, the exclusive country clubs, clubs of a special sport or game and the wiseacre clubs devoted to lore and research.

To so many of these had he given assistance, both in the way of prestige and financial support, that he had come to be known by the title of the King of Clubs. This pleased him and he had his note paper engraved with a miniature King of Clubs copied from a playing card.

Now the other side of Stephen Clearman, the bizarre side, was known only to the few house guests who came up from the city to Clearman Court for week-ends—and to his family and servants, of course.

It was a side of him that scorned civilization, that reveled in the savage, the barbaric, the primitive.

He claimed, himself, that this odd deflection of his personality was a birthright, that he inherited it from his forebears. For since the time long ago when an ancestor of his had traveled in far distant lands, and had come home with many strange tales and fancies, there had always been a member of the family who had followed the lead.

It was nearly two centuries since old Dathan Clearman had fared forth and his wanderings had taken him to islands near New Guinea, where strange rites and ceremonies prevailed then, even as they do now in such far lands.

Dathan Clearman had come home, the legend ran, to find that his son had added to the Connecticut homestead, building a wing here and raising a roof there, until the house had lost its original symmetry and type. The stern old New Englander, seething with white rage, cursed his son in many terrible blasts, disowned him, and sent him away.

As a guardian of the Clearman homestead against further alteration, Dathan formally and solemnly set up on the mantel-tree of the great hall a hideous mask which he had brought home, and which was known in the savage tribe from whom he obtained it, as the Duk-Duk.

In its native home, the Duk-Duk is the great arbiter of morals, and is a supreme power, who accuses and punishes at will. So, argued Dathan Clearman, who was a convert to the heathen religions, the mask of Duk-Duk will protect my home from further despoiling.

For with the mask went a great curse, a malediction on any descendant of Dathan, who should add to or take from the building as it stood. Even so much as the cutting of a window or the addition of an ell, would be punished by speedy and violent death to the offender.

Ever since, the monstrous, frightful-looking thing had stood where Dathan had placed it, untouched by any desecrating

hands.

Twice in the passing years, however, the curse had been scoffed at, and the consequences braved. Additions and alterations had been made in the old house, and in both instances the originator of the improvements had quickly died—not a natural death. Such was the legend of the Clearman Curse.

At any rate the future heirs were benefited by the ill-fated changes, for now the old home stood, a great and noble structure, symmetrical, harmonious, beautiful—bearing little resemblance to the first Clearman homestead built so many years ago.

It fronted on a wide terrace, of century old flagstones, through whose uneven crevices the grass-blades crowded. The view from this terrace included some of the most picturesque hills and lakes of New England, and below, down a mile or so of winding road, lay the tiny village of Valley Falls, quite evidently named with a careful attention to topographical detail.

The present owner of Clearman Court, the King of Clubs, paced the terrace in the late June afternoon.

"Yes," he said, as with vigorous step and pocketed hands he strode back and forth, "the place is just about perfect now. I have it all exactly as I want it, and all I shall do, from now on, will be in the way of polishing off and finishing up. Thanks to you, Raynor, for following my instructions so meticulously. Few architects would have been willing to obey implicitly. You are a rare type."

"Yes," Jack Raynor grinned, assentingly, "they don't make 'em like me, often. I'm mighty glad you're pleased and all that, Mr. Clearman, but I feel I must say that I might have kicked over the traces if I hadn't agreed with your ideas in my own heart. Now, if you don't drop dead, we can look upon the whole matter as an overwhelming success."

"Oh, I shan't drop dead. We should never have proceeded if I were not sure of circumventing old Duk-Duk. I'm immune."

"I do hope so," said a sweet tremulous voice, and Miss Phoebe Clearman looked up with a gaze of troubled apprehension.

The placid little woman was a physical contrast to her big stalwart brother, but there was a similarity of feature, and a decided likeness in their quiet way of speaking, and the never failing correctness of their manner.

"You see, Mr. Raynor," she turned to the young architect, "Stephen is unafraid, always,—but he has braved the curse,—the family curse——."

"That's all right, Phoebe," her brother broke in, "don't mull over that any more. I'm sure Raynor is tired hearing about it."

"No," the architect returned, "not that, for I admit a certain apprehension. When a curse has made itself felt twice, one can't scoff at the possibility of a third time."

"But there's no possibility, Jack," his host insisted. "I know more than those ancestors of mine who fell under the ban. I know how to ward off the danger, and I shall never suffer the punishment."

"So far, so good," and Raynor shrugged his shoulders. He had no wish to see Stephen Clearman overtaken by the threatened fate, but he had a trace of the almost universal fear of the supernatural.

To be sure, the architect's knowledge of the occult was largely derived from book lore, but just because he had never before run up against what he called a real, live Curse, he was deeply interested to see how it worked out—or failed to do so.

If Stephen Clearman carried through, if he suffered no inexplicable disaster or stroke, then Raynor was ready to believe the stories of the past were all poppycock. But if Clearman should be mysteriously killed, then—well, it would give food for thought.

It was hard to connect the idea of death with the big, hearty figure striding the terrace. Few men showed more brawn and brain; more energy and vitality than Stephen Clearman. His broad shoulders were square and firm and his coats hung from them as from a well built rack. At sixty-three, his graying hair was the only sign of advancing age, and his impatient will power and hair-trigger intellect were as young as ever they had been.

The architect of course was an important factor at the week-end celebration, and he had been permitted to invite a friend of his own, one Nicky Goring, who was expected on the next train.

Raynor was the son of a college chum of Clearman's and, besides being a first-rate architect, was an all-round good

fellow. If he was a trifle in love with Clearman's wife, that was merely because she was the only woman around except the elderly Miss Clearman, and Raynor was accustomed to feminine worship.

Called Jack of Hearts by his chaffing friends, he did live up to the title.

He hit it off all right with Stephen Clearman, for in the matter of planning the changes in the house, their ideas were seldom at variance, and readily adjusted. Both were diplomatic, so there had been no friction.

The new building was practically self-contained, being a large wing that should house only Clearman and his wife. It included bedroom, bath and living room for each, but these, with their attendant dressing rooms, halls, balconies and sun porches, made up what almost equalled a good-sized house.

The plans being perfected and settled upon, the Clearmans had gone off for a long trip to Eastern lands, and Raynor had pushed the work through as expeditiously as possible.

He had had occasional slight misgivings whether the curse might not fall vicariously on him, but nothing untoward had happened, and now the owner was back to resume the command—and the danger.

Yet who could look for trouble, this lovely, soft June afternoon, the distant hills quivering under the passing purple shadows, the glistening lakes coquetting with the darting rays of the setting sun.

And then Carlotta Clearman trailed out from the house. Long, slender and pointed were all her effects.

Her exquisite face was long and delicate, with a pointed chin and her long dark eyes were full of hinted possibilities of passion and sorrow.

Yet Carlotta was a merry thing and often kept a whole company amused with her drolleries.

Her gown, of trailing black tulle, was long and pointed, and on the points of its draperies dangled jet tassels. Her long jet earrings did not dangle, but, for the most part, hung quietly, a frame for her pale, perfect face.

Though she was more than thirty years her husband's junior, they were congenial in many ways and compatible in all ways,—or, all but one.

He had married her for her beauty, she had married him for his money. Not a unique instance, but one which had turned out rather better than might have been expected.

As his passion was for rare antiquities of certain sorts, so hers was for diamonds. No other gem did she care for; diamonds she adored. And he had showered them upon her. In all cuttings, of all sizes, but of only the rarest quality, he had given her the jewels, until she well deserved the title that so naturally ensued, and was called the Queen of Diamonds.

Now, her black gown was caught here and there with a few diamond buckles and a slender string of perfectly matched stones hung round her throat.

Never did she overdo her ornamentation. Never did she wear too many or too large ones for the occasion.

Yet they were so much a part of her, that it would have seemed strange to see her without them. As one of her friends observed, "Carly could wear a tiara to breakfast, and get away with it!"

She trailed across the terrace and sat herself on a low balustrade, drawing one knee up and clasping it in her arms with a careless grace.

Her husband came toward her, and she looked up into his face and smiled, as she asked, "When the old Duk-Duk gets you, will he get me, too?"

Her air was half serious, half whimsical, and Clearman looked down on her, his eyes full of admiration.

"I hope to Heaven he will!" he said fervently, "I'll never depart this life and leave you behind. You're too beautiful!" He lifted her pointed chin with one forefinger, kissed her lightly on her wistful lips, and turned away, as his ear caught the advent of a newcomer.

It was Nicky Goring, the friend of Raynor's, an alert, wide-awake young man, who had caught sight of the marital caress and was faintly smiling.

Clearman's greeting was hearty and unembarrassed. It would take much to disturb his poise.

Raynor introduced the visitor, and then tea came, and they all felt acquainted and friendly at once.

Stephen told briefly of their wanderings in strange countries and among quaint primitive peoples, and narrated a few instances of tragic or humorous interest.

"And did you enjoy it all, Mrs. Clearman?" Goring asked.

"Not all," and the long pointed eyes smiled as she turned them to her husband for an instant. "There were so many places not—well, not so clean, you see."

"Yes, my wife's housekeeping instincts were sadly shocked by Oriental squalor," Stephen chuckled. "I'm sure she wanted, more than anything else, to show those poor, benighted heathen how to use a vacuum cleaner."

"Indeed, I should," returned Carlotta, with spirit, "but it would have been wasted on them. The heathen in his blindness, kneels down to wood and stone, but he wants that wood and stone properly dirty. He wouldn't worship clean wood and stone."

"My goodness, Carly, is it as bad as that!" exclaimed Phoebe, "I'm glad I didn't go with you two. How did you ever stand it?"

"It was awful," Carlotta shuddered at the remembrance; "and, incidentally, it's the dirt that's largely responsible for the heathen's blindness."

"Oh, child, the hymn doesn't mean that kind of blindness——"

"Well, they have all kinds of blindness,—and all kinds of dirt——"

"For Heaven's sake, Carlotta," Clearman broke in, "do stop talking about it! You women seem to revel in revolting subjects——"

"Not half so revolting as your old mud masks!" his wife flung back. "Do tell me *you* don't like mud masks, either," she turned to Nicky Goring. "My husband and Mr. Raynor are crazy about them."

"Yes, we eat 'em up," agreed Raynor, watching the play of smile and frown on Carlotta's lovely face.

"They're not on my *menu*," Goring declared, "and as a matter of fact, I'm almost entirely unacquainted with them. Are they like birds'-nest pudding? Do they agree with you, Miss Clearman?"

"They're terrible!" Phoebe said, in her quiet way, that often carried more weight than vehemence. "They're fearful! But they're not edible,—you know."

"I say, Goring, aren't you up on the things?" Stephen Clearman shouted. His boisterousness equalled his sister's placidity. "Well, then, you've a treat ahead of you! After dinner, I'll show you my collection, and before the evening is over, you'll know more about masks than you ever dreamed there was to know."

"Oh, not tonight, dear," his wife begged, her eyes full of pleading; "Lulie is coming home, and you know how she dislikes the things."

Clearman looked at her, as if he were studying some beautiful but inanimate object.

"That's a good gown, Carlotta," he said; "those jet points suit you perfectly."

Then he turned back to Goring and said, as if uninterrupted, "yes, after dinner I'll initiate you into the fascinating lore and mysteries of the East."

"Is Miss Clearman coming tonight?" asked Raynor, partly to change the subject and partly because he wanted to know more about it. "I've never met her, you know."

"And you nearly missed out on it this time," Phoebe informed him. "Yes, the child has been visiting friends in the South, and stopped for a time in New York. She expected to stay there another week, but plans were changed, and she'll be here for dinner. Bless her! It will be a joy to have her back."

"What's she like?" asked Raynor, idly, with the freedom of intimacy.

"Like a fair, pale lily," said Miss Clearman. "Like a Burne-Jones picture, like a Blessed Damosel or a Lily Maid of Astolat."

Stephen Clearman laughed.

"Fine, Phoebe," he exclaimed, "but I can't have my daughter maligned like that. She's just a sweet, dear, everyday girl,— isn't she, Carlotta?"

"Yes, dear, but you are both right; Phoebe as to her appearance, you as to her real self."

"Is she real?" asked Goring. "It doesn't seem as if a young lady answering to such descriptions could be real."

"She is my daughter," Clearman asserted, with a mock swagger. "So she must be more or less of a paragon, eh, Carly?"

His second wife looked at him with a quizzical smile.

"Am I supposed to agree to your being a paragon?" she chaffed. "Well, *I* certainly think you one."

"Ha," cried the King of Clubs, "that's the thing! All for love and the world well lost! Now, Carly, since you're so devoted to me, I'll let you take this rather fascinating Mr. Goring for a stroll in the garden before dinner. Don't flirt with him."

"Shan't promise," said the Queen of Diamonds, her gems flashing as she rose and caught the last flickers of the sinking sun. "Come, Mr. Goring, we have peacocks and a family spectre. I can't promise to show the spectre, but the peacocks may be on view."

"Never mind the enumerated live stock," Nicky said, following her down the terrace steps. "Just let's stroll through a rose garden or by a lily pond. I daresay I shall get enough excitement this evening. Lead me to some bosky dell where all is peace and quietness. That's my *métier*, always."

"Really?" and Carlotta turned an inquiring face. "You seem so—so energetic, so——"

"So fidgety, I suppose you mean. Well, I am. But I am trying to overcome it, and acquire a supine elegance. My first governess taught me 'all haste is vulgar,' and though I continually forget it, it comes back to me now and then."

"What brought it to mind just now?" The tone was chaffing but the long, dark eyes seemed to demand a serious answer.

"I don't know. Wait, till I run over my sequence of thought—oh, yes, without doubt,—that was it! I have it! I was impressed by the word picture Miss Clearman drew of the young lady who is arriving. I gathered she would not like a fidgety man."

"If opposites are likable, she would. Lulie is the calmest thing in the world, the most serene, most imperturbable, but, and perhaps for that very reason, she rather favors more lively types."

"And old Raynor has never seen her?"

"No,—it has so happened that she has never been at home when he was here. She was brought up in a convent abroad,— that is, after her mother died. And, lately, she has traveled or visited with friends a great deal. As you must know, Mr. Goring, a stepmother and stepdaughter is not always the happiest of relationships. Yet, I think I can say that Lulie and I get along better in most ways than she does with her own father."

"Yes, I gather that Mr. Clearman, fine as he is, is not as wax in any woman's hands."

"He is in mine," Carlotta cried, quickly, as if in some way her vanity had been touched.

"Oh, well," and Nicky resumed his bantering tone, "if a second wife can't twist a man round her finger, nobody can."

"True, and if a woman can't wind any man round her finger,—she isn't——"

"Isn't much of a siren."

"No; and, surely, to be a siren is the first duty of woman?"

"Oh, surely." Nicky was beginning to enjoy himself. "I know you have Jack Raynor completely under your spell. But, that's not so much of a feat, for he is, you know, called the Jack of Hearts."

"I won't have my spell belittled like that! As a punishment, I shall charm you."

"Do, I'll help. By the way, are you all Face Cards up here? Jack tells me your husband is widely known as the King of Clubs and yourself as——"

"As the Queen of Diamonds, yes. I love the stones, not colored ones, only pure, flawless white ones, and large, but not too enormous."

Carlotta spoke as if half to herself. She was running through her fingers the necklace of small, pure stones, like a chain of light. She watched it with a rapt look, then suddenly remembering herself, dropped the chain and turned to him with a slightly abashed smile.

"When you know me better," she said, "you'll know my love for diamonds is not a pose, it's an innate and ineradicable fetish."

"I didn't think it was a pose," he said, simply. "And if it's a fetish, as you call it, it's a very beautiful one."

"There is, there must be, I think, a barbaric strain in my nature that makes diamonds an obsession——"

"Not exactly barbaric,—to me that word connotes glaring colors and blaring sounds——"

"Not necessarily. But perhaps I mean savage. Anyway, it's some throwback,—or whatever they call it, that makes my love for diamonds stronger than any other passion I have ever experienced."

"If necessary, you would steal them——" he whispered, for the mere fun of leading her on.

"Yes," she whispered back, "or kill for them. Or betray my friends for them. The most heinous sin would be nothing to me, if it brought me my treasures."

Again she had picked up her long chain, and was caressing it almost as a snake charmer might fondle a serpent.

Goring looked at her curiously.

Of course she was fooling. She had already shown herself quite ready to meet his gayest banter, quite ready to respond with seeming seriousness to his most absurd chaff.

"We must go in and dress for dinner," she said, in a matter of fact tone. "Lulie brings a friend with her, and there will be one or two stray guests."

"And after dinner,—mayn't I come out here with you and see the peacocks again, instead of seeing the Mudheads?" he said, coaxingly.

She laughed outright.

"I'm glad you liked the peacocks," she said, "but after dinner, you must obey my husband's behests, whatever they are, or ——"

"Or what?"

"Or the Duk-Duk will get you!"

"And you don't want to lose me yet——"

"No, not yet."

CHAPTER II

LULIE

The dinner guests were all assembled when Lulie and her friend appeared in the drawing-room.

"This is *not* to make an effective entrance," Lulie declared, laughingly, "but because I couldn't get Nan ready any sooner. Isn't she wonderful!"

Lulie Clearman presented her friend as if she were a work of art, and the pretty girl, with her dark hair and eyes and her flame-colored frock was an arresting sight. Nan Loftis smiled impartially around, greeted everybody as she was presented, and finally singled out Jack Raynor as her quarry, and sidled to him with a plaintive, "Please like me."

"I do like you," returned the Jack of Hearts, with enthusiasm, but with an involuntary glance at Lulie herself.

Lulie Clearman, a complete contrast to Nan, was well worth many glances.

She was, as her aunt had said, distinctly of a Burne-Jones type, but so modernized or rather vivified, that it was like a picture come to life.

Of medium height, slim, graceful and gracious, she was also alert and perceptive. Her hair was of the true ash blonde, so often seen in England, so seldom over here. Her eyes can only be described as amber or beryl or tawny, or any of those hackneyed terms for that peculiar brown with glistening lights in it.

Her face was pale, with the merest touch of makeup, and she wore a simple chiffon gown of a deep ivory color, that by its contrast made her hair almost golden.

"I say, but you know how to dress!" was Nicky Goring's low-voiced comment, as they went together to the dining room.

"Praise my clothes, if you like," said Lulie, indifferently, "but don't tell me how beautiful I am."

"You must be sick and tired of hearing it," he returned, fervently. "You remind me of that wonderful poem written by somebody or other in that book about the Queen's Doll House."

"Haven't read it,—what is it?"

"I don't remember it all, but the principal line is: 'I am a Doll and very beautiful.' I don't know why, exactly, but I think that's a wonderful line."

"The line is all right, but why do you think me a doll?"

"I don't. In fact, I haven't had time to classify you at all yet. But the line seems to fit you. It has your calm."

"My calm is my pride and delight. I glory in it."

Lulie spoke with a quiet seriousness that made Goring look at her twice to see if she were chaffing him. And still he didn't know. Nor care. He adored girls, and gratefully accepted each new one as Heaven's last, best gift.

"Your friend is pretty, too," he said, conversationally.

"Yes," Lulie agreed, amused at this casual wag, and accepting his structural plans for talk. "But she is muffin-minded."

"She would be. Sports girl, in civilian dress, isn't she?"

"Yes. You knew it from her muscles."

"And from her face. She has that eager, prize-is-set-before-us look."

"Yes, she has," and Lulie looked appraisingly at Nan. "Tell me about Mr. Raynor. He seems charming."

"Oh, he is. He is Prince Charming and Jack of Hearts and Paris and Apollo and all the gods at once."

"Shall I adore him?"

"Of course. Every girl does."

"The man that all are praising is not the man for me!"

"Good! Take me, then. Nobody praises me, though I richly deserve it. I say, after dinner your father is going to take us to

his study, and show us Mudheads,—or something."

"Well?"

"Well, they don't interest me. I asked Mrs. Clearman to go strolling in the moonlight with me instead, but she refused. Won't you go?"

"Not if Dad orders otherwise. He's King of the Home as well as of Clubs."

"What a tyrant! And you put up with it?"

"Hug my chains. I adore Dad. Except——"

"Except when? But I've no right to ask."

"No, you've no right to ask."

"Tell me about this Mudhead complex. What's it all about?"

"You'll get enough of that after dinner. Let's have fun now."

So they did. Goring was quick-witted and his type of wit pleased Lulie, who met him halfway in his jesting.

But when, dinner over, Stephen Clearman decreed an adjournment to his study, none was brave enough to demur.

The great room was a museum, and its curios and treasures were of surpassing interest, even to uneducated observers.

There were collections of fearsome looking death-dealing instruments, daggers and swords of various centuries and various countries. There was armor and there were battle flags, as well as more peaceful effects of musical instruments and curious carved chests and cabinets.

But most important of all was the great collection of masks, and these, a novelty to most of the audience, interested them more than the curios more frequently seen.

They were, for the most part, hideous, monstrous faces, which, though repulsive to look at, held the attention by a sort of leering fascination.

"Now, don't think," Clearman was saying, "that these are merely a lot of junk. On the contrary, they are a power, and they may be a menace, a foe.

"The mask," Clearman began to take on his professorial manner, "is nearly as old as humanity itself. The first mask, that of the aborigine, was, of course, merely paint, as—" he smiled as he glanced round at the women's faces, "as it is now. But rapidly the cult or habit progressed and masks were made of wood, of wax, of *papier maché* and even of clay."

"Did people really wear them?" asked Goring, interested in spite of himself.

"They did and they do. In Australia, in New Guinea, in South America, New Mexico, Alaska, in many countries, the mask is still in use——"

"But what is its use?" interrupted Nan Loftis. Her eyes were sparkling with interest; she waited breathlessly for information.

"Its main, its primitive use," Clearman went on, "is the propitiation or coercion of spirits."

"I knew there was a catch somewhere!" exclaimed the irrepressible Nicky. "Nothing but a Spiritualist lecture!"

"Not a bit of it," declared Clearman, good-naturedly. "Not spirits, as the mediums and their dupes regard spooks. Nothing of that sort. It's magic, the real old dyed-in-the-wool magic. Primitive man, and some of his descendants today, believe in the strongest and most powerful spirits. These, whether good or bad spirits, can, they believe, be persuaded or coerced, frightened or propitiated by masks——"

"Worn?" put in Nan.

"Sometimes worn, sometimes carried——"

"I didn't know they were ever carried," Carlotta said, musingly. She, of course, was more or less familiar with the subject in hand.

"Yes," her husband said, a little impatiently, "of course they are sometimes carried, but more often worn. It is a

protection. Then again, it is merely an ornament or decoration, to be worn at funerals, weddings or other ceremonies."

"Not much decoration about that one!" declared the frivolous Nicky. "Is that their idea of ornamentation?"

He indicated a particularly hideous face that leered and glared in a diabolical way.

"That is a funeral mask of the Alaskan Indians. They dance in it at the burial, and then leave it at the grave for the dead man to use in the other world, as a protection against demons."

"Hard on the demons," Nicky murmured.

"Yes, you know they visit the grave twice a day,—I mean, the demons do,—to pester the poor corpse."

"Hard on the corpse, then, too. Here's a really lovely one!"

"Yes, that's a ghost mask, and beautifully ornamented. That's to charm the dead man back to earth again."

"Does he come?"

"They say he does, and brings presents to his family. Now, here's a skull mask. This is Toltec, and is used to denote the impending murder of a chief. This merry event is gracefully described as a 'going-away,' and this mosaic mask is hung on his ancestor-post by way of recompense."

"It's got me!" said Goring, seriously. "I'm going to study up these matters. I'm already interested—I mean it."

"You can't help being, once you start in," Clearman told him. "Now, here's the Mudhead. Perhaps the plainest, least melodramatic of the whole bunch in appearance, but one of the most feared. The Zuni Indians pray to him, and watch their step mighty carefully, lest they offend him."

"How did you come to take up this study, Mr. Clearman?" Nan asked, curiously.

"Because my ancestor, Dathan Clearman, did before me. He was a traveler and an antiquarian, and he started this collection. But he believed in the Magic himself, at least, I think he did. I have his old diary, and it seems incredible, I know, but he was nearly as much under the spell of these things as the savages themselves."

"And by the way, dear," said Carlotta, "I found a few more leaves of that old diary today."

"You did! Where are they?"

"I'll give them to you later. If I give them now, you'll immerse yourself, and be lost to us all." She smiled at him, and he resigned himself to her decree with a whimsical scowl of impatience.

"And have you no belief in the Magic part of it?" asked Jack Raynor, looking at the King of Clubs a little quizzically.

Clearman reddened a bit, then laughed outright.

"I may as well confess," he said. "I don't think I really believe in the whole confounded business, but I've studied and pored over it so much, that—well, I began it in fun,—but now, I——"

"I'll tell you what he does!" cried Lulie, laughing. "He sits here in this room for an hour every morning, with a mask on ____"

"What!" cried several voices at once.

"Yes, he does," averred the girl. "He locks himself in, but while he is in here alone, he wears one of the masks!"

Clearman looked a little sheepish at first, then his face grew stern, and he said:

"Well, I suppose I've a right to. If it's superstition, many a man has a pet foible of that sort. If it's mere silliness, that surely is no crime."

"No, it isn't," cried Carlotta, with quick sympathy. "Lots of men carry a rabbit's foot, or won't walk under a ladder, or sit at table with thirteen! Stephen has as good a right to a bit of superstition as the next man!"

"Of course he has," agreed Raynor, promptly. "But, I say, Mr. Clearman, *is* it superstition?"

Clearman smiled. "I think it's habit," he said; "that, and tradition. My ancestor, Dathan, firmly believed in it all. Other ancestors have dabbled in it more or less, and, so far as I am concerned, I'm—amused by it."

"Only amused?" asked his sister Phoebe.

"Well, now, look here," Clearman spoke as if cornered, "these heathen people wear a mask to frighten away evil spirits, or to propitiate or coerce them to good. If I choose to wear a mask for those same reasons, does it harm anyone? Does it matter to anyone? My wife likes diamonds, my daughter likes to paint her face, my sister likes to tell her fortune by cards or tea-leaves. Harmless foibles, all of them. May I not be allowed to ride my hobby, too?"

"Of course you can, Dad," Lulie cried, gaily, "of course you shall, of course you do! Doesn't he, West?"

She spoke to West, the valet and body servant of Stephen Clearman. West had been long in the household, and by reason of having held various consecutive and even simultaneous offices was more or less a privileged character. Yet he had never presumed on the favors shown him, and merely answered, "Yes, Miss Lulie," in a monotone.

West was a character by reason of his very lack of characteristics. A perfect valet, he could also be a chauffeur, a gardener, a handy man or perform whatever office might be suddenly demanded, yet in pursuit of each calling he was the same colorless, unobtrusive servant.

He rejoiced in the rather impressive cognomen of Gallagher West, but Clearman had long ago condensed this to Galley West, and the name stuck.

"You see," Lulie went on, for she loved to rag her father, "Dad sits in here of a morning, writing letters, and wearing,—yes, actually *wearing* one of these heathenish contraptions,—sometimes one, sometimes another,—I suppose according to what sort of evil spirit he wants to exorcise."

"Or in an endeavor to keep away from you certain evil spirits that would be justified in tormenting you!" her father retorted, pretending to scowl at her.

"And where is the Duk-Duk?" asked Nicky, not knowing if the sparring might not get serious.

"The old original that my ancestor brought is down in the hall," said Clearman, "but here is another, which I brought home myself. It is equally authentic, of course, as a heathen mask, but it hasn't the power of the family curse, as the one downstairs has."

"You believe in that curse, then?" asked Goring.

"Not so you'd notice it!" Stephen declared. "Do you suppose I'd have built this wing if I had? That is,—don't misunderstand me,—I believe old Dathan cursed us all right enough, and I believe he expected to see that his Duk-Duk carried out the specifications of his decree, but—and here's the little joker, I have learned enough of this sort of thing to know how to circumvent and render harmless——"

"Oh, come now, Stephen," said his wife, laughing, "really, we've all had quite enough of this sort of thing. If anyone wants to stay here with you and delve deeper into these mysteries, let him, the rest of us are going down to the hall for a dance."

"Good!" cried Nan Loftis, "I'm glad of it. I love this old, wise lore, but—well, a little of it goes a long way with me. Let's dance tonight, and duck ducks tomorrow."

Most of the party agreed and trooped off to descend the great staircase to the hall.

Nicky Goring tarried a while with Clearman and his sister, as the rest disappeared.

"Don't mistake my interest for curiosity," Nicky said, "but do you really do this mask-wearing business? I ask you as man to man, not as an idle question."

"As man to man, Goring, I do. If I am a fool, it is a harmless foolishness. And if, as may be," his eyes seemed to look far away, "there is anything in it, it may save me—may have already saved me from tragedy."

"You are in earnest?" Nicky was astonished. He had fully expected Clearman to say it was all a jest.

"Very much so, and not at all ashamed of it."

"Put one on," Nicky begged, "let me see the darned thing in action."

Without hesitation, the King of Clubs selected a terrible affair of carved and painted wood, with fearful protruding eyes and a malignant gaping mouth. It was, it seemed, of light weight and easy adjustment, and apparently not at all uncomfortable, yet on Clearman the effect was so frightful as to make even the practical Nicky quiver.

Miss Phoebe surveyed her brother critically.

"That's from Ceylon," she said; "that's the mask that cures leprosy. The doctor puts it on and dances around the patient three times a day."

"Right!" said Clearman as he took the mask off. "Good for you, Phoebe! You know a heap!"

"As I said," Goring went on, "I'm intrigued. I'm going to study up these things. May I look in this room tomorrow?"

"If I'm here," Stephen replied. "No one may come in here in my absence."

"Right-o! Now I'll run down for a dance, but I fear I'll make a savage dance of it! I shall, in my mind, anyway."

He went off, and the brother and sister sat alone amidst the grinning, scowling faces of the painted primitives.

"I don't like it, Stephen," she said, at last.

"Don't like what, sister?"

"Oh, the whole thing,—this new building of yours, this idea of yours to ward off the curse by a mask, for I know that's why you wear it an hour every day."

"Oh, come now, Phoebe, don't be foolish. The curse hasn't struck yet!"

"No,—but in the other two cases it delayed for a time——"

"All right, never cross a curse until you come to it. Now, skittle, old lady, I'm going to read."

"Aren't you going downstairs?"

"Not unless I have to. Not unless Carlotta demands my presence. Did you hear what that rascal said? That she has found some more leaves of old Dathan's journal?"

"Where did she find them?"

"I don't know. I suppose up in that old loft, where she's everlastingly rooting, in hopes she can find something that will please me."

"Has she ever?"

"Lord, yes. She unearthed several old letters and documents of more or less interest, genealogically. She's a brick, you know, Phoebe. Think how she traveled with me all through those heathen places, when she hated them and was just longing to get to Paris and civilization once more."

"Yes, she's a good wife to you, dear. Are you getting her some more diamonds?"

"No, the child has enough for the present. How beautiful she looks tonight!"

"Yes, and Raynor thinks so, too."

"Raynor may think what he likes. I trust my Carlotta implicitly."

"She's a good woman, Stephen. But very different from Lulie's mother."

"I should say so! Lulie's mother was a saint, Carlotta is a siren. Run off, now, Phoebe, I want to read."

Miss Clearman went off obediently, and the King of Clubs became so absorbed in his books that he thought of nothing else until a laughing voice cried:

"Well, old bookworm! Going to read all night?"

Two soft arms went round his neck, and the lovely woman he had called a siren made good her claim to the title.

"Where are those leaves of the journal?" he asked, ignoring her caress.

"I'll get them—want them now?"

"Yes, of course. Why didn't you leave them for me before you went downstairs?"

"Forgot it. Kiss me—don't be a Mudhead!"

"Bring me the papers, then I'll kiss you."

The papers were brought, a kiss was given with a somewhat preoccupied air, and Stephen Clearman settled down to the

examination of the new find.

Carlotta went to her room and went to bed. The others had all retired, and save for the study of the master of the house, the place was in darkness.

Servants had put out the corridor lights and no sound was heard for an hour or more.

Then there rose a scream, a loud shriek from somewhere, that was audible all over the still house.

It seemed to come from the other wing, the part of the house opposite the new addition.

Clearman jumped from his books and flung wide his study door. Almost simultaneously, Carlotta appeared in her door, slipping into a kimono as she moved. Behind her stood, hovering, her maid, Violet, a tall, slender negress, who, looking scared herself, kept close guard on her mistress.

"What is it, Stephen? Who is it?" Carlotta asked, but Clearman was already striding along the corridor. He flashed on lights as he went, and at last came to his sister's room.

She was sitting on the edge of her bed in a state of collapse. A wrap had been hastily flung round her shoulders, and she was shivering with fear and sobbing hysterically.

"I saw it, Stephen!" she cried, as he sat beside her and put his arm round her.

"Saw what, Phoebe? Saw what, dear?"

"The Skull mask! Oh, Stephen, it is the warning! Oh, my boy, the curse is about to fall!"

"Phoebe, stop! Pull yourself together! You are disturbing the whole house. You have had a terrible nightmare, I'm afraid. Go back to bed, dear—Shall I send Violet to you?"

Violet was the inappropriate name of Carlotta's gaunt negro woman. Phoebe was not inclined to have a maid of her own, being of a certain old-fashioned type; she preferred to do for herself.

"Violet? Nonsense. And it was not a nightmare, Stephen. I was wakeful, and so I wandered about, as I often do, when I can't sleep. And I stepped out into the hall, and there it was moving slowly along, high in the air—a head without a body—a mask—nothing else, just the terrible, dreadful Skull mask! Oh, Stephen, the curse will get you—it *will!*"

"Hush, Phoebe, you are hysterical. No, it won't—come in, Carlotta—see if you can help quiet her."

Carlotta came, followed at a respectful distance by Violet, but Phoebe wanted no such comforting.

"Go to bed, Carlotta," she ordered. "Violet, put your mistress back to bed. Stephen, you can go too. Nothing can be done about it. I tell you I *saw* that thing. I had no nightmare, it was not imagination. I saw it——"

"How could you see it?" asked Carlotta. "Wasn't the hall dark?"

"Yes, but the thing shone—*shone*, I tell you. Oh, Steve," and she wept in her brother's arms.

"There, there, Phoebe," he soothed her. "Forget it, dear. As you say, we can't do anything about it. Go back to bed, won't you?"

"Of course I will. What else is there to do? Go back to your room, Lulie," for the girl's fair head was peeping into the hall.

Other doors had opened a little and closed again. Phoebe Clearman was as good as her word and went back to her bed.

CHAPTER III

MASKS AND FACES

The next morning was Sunday, but breakfast was served at nine o'clock, as on other days. There was no compulsion but the family usually drifted to the dining room soon after the hour.

All except Lulie. She was the only one who cared to sleep late, and she was never disturbed until she chose to make her appearance. None of the women at Clearman Court cared to breakfast in her room, so the morning meal was generally rather a pleasant function.

This morning when Stephen and Carlotta came down, they found Phoebe and Jack Raynor already there and eagerly discussing the strange episode of the night before.

Almost immediately Nicky Goring appeared, and then Nan Loftis came flying in, her carefully dressed bobbed hair shaking as she excitedly flung herself into a chair.

"What was it?" she cried. "Oh, Miss Phoebe, what did you see?"

"How do you know I saw anything?" demanded the spinster, looking sharply at Nan.

"Because we heard you. I'm in the next room to Lulie, and she stuck her head out of the door, but she wouldn't let me stick mine out, she ordered me back to bed, and—you know what Lulie is!"

"What is she?" asked Raynor, with interest.

"Why, she's a—oh, a power,—a compeller,—how can I put it strongly enough? I mean, when she tells you to do a thing, why—you just do it, that's all."

"Yours not to reason why——"

"Yes, just exactly that. And she doesn't raise her voice, or speak sternly or anything like that. It's sort of like 'England expects,' and you just do as she says, without thinking about it. She's always like that. At school, we all obeyed her unquestioningly."

"You loved her?" Jack asked.

"Oh, of course, nobody could help it." Jack nodded assent. "But it was a love tempered with a sort of——"

"Fear?"

"No—not quite that, but a terrible uncertainty as to what she would expect next. But, I say, Miss Phoebe, tell us what you saw?"

"Nonsense, Phoebe," put in her brother. "Don't be foolish enough to recount that nightmare story!"

"It was no nightmare," said Phoebe, doggedly. "I saw what I saw. I'm no addlepated ninny to think I'm awake when I'm asleep. I was wandering about, wakeful, you know, and I stepped from my own little hall, out into the big hall and there was that head, floating high in the air, luminous, ghastly——"

"Ooh!" screamed Nan, wriggling with half-scared, half-pleased excitement.

"It's too absurd——" began Stephen, but Carlotta interrupted him. "No, dear, it isn't absurd. You can't tamper with these mystic things and not have them come back at you." She spoke gravely. "You've braved the spirits or demons or whatever they are, and now they're accepting your challenge. You have invoked the curse,——"

She stopped, her eyes full of horror at the thoughts which came flocking to her brain.

"What are you talking about?" said Lulie, calmly, as she entered and took her place at the table.

"About the spook last night," said Nan, with a half hysterical giggle.

"Don't say spook," Clearman said, angrily. "I hate that word!"

"Don't speak to my guest like that, Father." Lulie raised her eyes at him, and their translucent depths showed a slumbering fire. "Nan shall call it a spook if she likes. I saw the thing, myself."

"What!" cried two or three voices at once.

"Certainly I did," Lulie was as calm as if speaking of the weather.

"You weren't in the hall," said Carlotta, but Lulie returned.

"I know, but I had just opened my door a moment before and I saw the thing floating high in the air, just as Aunt Phoebe describes it."

"Who did it?" asked Nicky Goring. "Might as well own up now. It was a good joke while it lasted, but it's lasted long enough."

"Are you implying it was a practical joke of somebody's?" demanded Miss Phoebe, with an injured look, as if she resented having her scare spoiled.

"Exactly, ma'am, you've grasped my meaning perfectly," Nicky responded. "And I wish the joker would own up, before I get any scarer."

"You're wrong," Phoebe spoke with decision. "It could not have been anything of that sort, for there was nothing to it but that terrible head, that frightful Skull mask, moving slowly along toward my brother's door."

"From where?" asked Raynor, who had been quietly listening.

"I don't know. It didn't seem to be going from one point to another,—it just—just hovered,—you know."

"Yes," Lulie agreed, "it just wavered,—floated,—as if it were a disembodied spirit,—and then, it was gone."

"Lulie, hush!" commanded her father, sternly. "You're making all that up. You didn't see anything of the sort, you know very well. And you're pretending you did by way of chaffing me. I won't stand it. Stop it, at once!"

Lulie slowly turned her head, until her gaze rested on Clearman's face.

"Don't you tell me I lie, Dad," she said, and though her tones were soft and even, there was a glint in her eyes that showed a deep anger. "It was exactly as I said. I glimpsed it only for a moment, but it was the Skull mask, and it did float and disappear."

"It did not! It couldn't have done so! The Skull mask is in my study, where it belongs. Don't you dare to contradict me, you chit! You silly!"

For answer Lulie looked her father full in the face and smiled.

It was a most irritating smile. The sort of smile one would give to a child or a half-wit. A tolerant, amused smile and with just enough disdain in it to make Clearman furious. He was accustomed to deference from his wife and sister and to have this slip of a girl try to put him in wrong was too much.

"Go to your room!" he stormed, with a maddened look at her.

"Indeed I won't," she said, calmly. "I'm hungry for my breakfast."

"Then I will," Clearman said, with equal calm, and rising, deliberately, he left the table.

Lulie gave a clear, ringing little laugh.

"Poor old Dad," she said, "I have to teach him his place."

"You were very rude," Carlotta commented.

"I had to be, Carly. Dad and I have always been like that. We have fearful spats, though we love each other dearly."

"But did you see the spook?" queried Goring.

"Oh, I don't know whether I did or not. I guess so. Anyway, Aunt Phoebe did, so it must have been there. Didn't you, Auntie?"

"I won't speak to you. You are a wicked girl to talk to your father like that. Don't speak to me."

Lulie sighed.

"Auntie thinks I'm still a child," she said, looking round on the company at large. "Carlotta thinks so, too. Dad thinks so. I have to assert my independence to let them know I've grown up. Will you stand up for me, Mr. Raynor?"

"Against the world!" Jack declared, fascinated by the smile she gave him.

Lulie's smiles were rare gifts. Usually her calm face was serious, almost grave.

"We'll all stand up for you, Lulie," Nan offered, "but you oughtn't——"

Whatever cautionary advice Nan planned to give never left her lips, for a glance from Lulie stopped it. Surely, thought the two young men, Lulie Clearman is a power—of some sort!

The maid, coming in with a dish, looked in surprise at Clearman's vacant chair.

"What is that, Ellen?" Lulie said.

"It's Mr. Clearman's custard, Miss. Shall I leave it here?"

She stood, irresolute, and Lulie said:

"No, give it to me. I'll eat it. I love it."

"Oh, Lulie," Carlotta remonstrated, "your father will want it."

"He can have some more, then. I want this."

"What is it?" asked Nan, curiously, "looks like a dessert."

"It is, almost. It's a cup custard, flavored with bitter almond. It's Dad's regular morning stunt, instead of a cereal. I don't see why we don't all have it."

"None for me, thanks," said Nan, sniffing at the delicacy. "I hate that flavor. I say, who's for tennis? The day is great."

The two young men and the two girls proved to be the answer to that question and Phoebe and Carlotta drifted out to the terrace.

"I'm sorry Lulie is so quick-tempered," Phoebe said, as if she were responsible. "But she and her father often have a little flare-up. It doesn't mean anything."

"I suppose not," the other returned, slowly. "You see, I don't really know Lulie yet. She seems a strange combination. That gentle calm,—covering that fiery temper."

"Quick,—scarcely fiery," Phoebe observed. "She gets her calm from him, her vivacity from her mother."

"Oh well, let it pass, so far as I'm concerned," Carlotta shrugged her shoulders. "Of course her father can take care of himself. Tell me about the—the apparition, Phoebe. What did you think you saw?"

"Don't put it that way, Carlotta. I did see a mask,—I know them, you know, and it *was* the Skull mask. That portends death. It means what they call a 'going-away' and it is meant for my brother."

"Don't be so absurd——"

"It isn't absurd. As you know he dared the curse, and the curse will get him. Within a few days my brother will be dead."

"Phoebe Clearman, stop! You give me the shivers! I won't listen to such stuff."

"You don't know the masks, and I do. I've studied them—it's surprising how little you know about them, definitely."

"No, I don't care for that sort of learning, that's all. Stephen often tells me about them, but I stop him, or—go to sleep. I have no interest in them, and of course, no belief."

"Yet you hunt in the loft for old papers."

"Oh, yes, because he is so pleased when I find any. He is, even now, I suppose, poring over those pages I found yesterday. Oh, my goodness!"

"What?"

"I just remembered. I merely glanced over the old writing myself, but it was all about the appearance of a mask and the death that followed!" Carlotta looked aghast. "I wish I hadn't given them to him. It will get him all stirred up!"

"No, it won't. He says he can get around the mask demons——"

"And so he can! It's all rubbish, Phoebe. You know very well, there's no truth in it. Those old Clearmans died by

accident or coincidence,—not by the sinister influence of a mask or a curse—and as soon as it's twelve o'clock, I'm going to see what he says about it all."

It was Clearman's invariable rule to shut himself into his study, behind locked doors, every morning from eleven to twelve, and only the most vitally important reason was sufficient to allow of his disturbance.

What he did was no secret; he usually wrote letters, read, studied his heathen lore or perhaps amused himself with a lighter book, but that hour was sacred to his solitude.

In case of an urgent message or letter to be sent, he might summon West to take it for him, and it was on such occasions that West had seen his master wearing one of the grotesque masks.

At first it had startled and frightened the man. But now, accustomed to it, Galley West was no more afraid of the masks than they were afraid of him.

Today, Clearman sat absorbed in the leaves of the diary which Carlotta had found.

It was a very old diary, of a long ago Clearman, and had lost its binding and many of its leaves.

Occasionally a stray page of it came to light, or a page or two of other writing, a letter or a document; and whenever Carlotta, by diligent grubbing among the old archives found any such thing, it was welcomed warmly by her husband and not infrequently was rewarded by a gift of diamonds. Probably she would have been given the gems anyway.

But diamonds had been less frequent of late. For Clearman had a new use for funds in a plan in mind that was to provide missionary stations for certain Far Eastern peoples, who, he thought, might be benefited. Not religious missions, but schools for practical instruction and training in Domestic Economy and business efficiency.

He had conceived this idea when he and Carlotta had traveled among the ignorant and benighted people, and together they had talked over and planned for some means of helping them.

And so, today, when he read his great-great-uncle's diary, and realized how one long dead Clearman had braved the curse of the house, and had fallen a victim to it, it gave him pause, and he was forced to bolster up his belief and conviction that his processes would save him from a like fate.

Clearman was very superstitious, partly because of inborn tendency that way and partly because of his travels and sojourns in the hotbeds of heathen traditions.

His firm belief was that the spirits of good and of evil could be cajoled or threatened to the extent of changing their plans and designs.

He argued that this belief is innate in the human breast, or why do men pray for rain, or pray to end a war, or believe themselves miraculously cured of disease?

But his beliefs took him into the field of demonology, and he believed with the savages who had taught him, that when he put on a mask, he was in some way released from his soul and it could do things and perform deeds that he could not compass in his own identity.

He believed that as he sat there, masked, and attended to his daily avocations, his soul roamed at will, placating the evil spirits, circumventing the curse and protecting his life.

He knew he had broken the law of his tribe, he knew he was under the ban, but he proposed to conquer fate and emerge triumphant.

This state of things had not come about suddenly, but had grown on him by reason of his long and continued devotion to the study of the subject, and doubtless, even more by the desire he had to have his way, and avoid the consequences.

He rang for West, and that functionary appeared.

"Galley West," he said, "here's only one letter this morning, but it must be dispatched at once. Don't merely put it in the box on the porch, take it to the post-office yourself, and at once."

"Yes, sir," returned West, looking unmoved on the spectacle of his master, sitting at his massive carved table desk, garbed in his usual morning suit, but wearing on his face a hideous totem mask, painted in glaring colors and showing a demon grin.

Through the large eye holes, Stephen Clearman's eyes looked at West in normal fashion, and West took the letter and

departed; whereupon Clearman relocked the door and went on with his work.

In the hall, Galley West chanced to pass Violet, Carlotta's maid.

"Has he got it on?" the negress asked in a whisper, rolling her eyes toward Clearman's closed door, with a look of fear and curiosity blended.

"Yes," said West, "a terrible one! Looks like this!" and he made a grimace at the woman with the intent of startling her.

She gave a stifled scream, and West said, crossly, "Don't make that noise. Don't you know any better than that?"

"Huh?" said Violet, "Whatcha sayin'? Don' you know I'm deaf? Speak up, man!"

But with a further gesture warning her to silence, West took his own noiseless way down the stairs.

West was a perfectly trained servant, and though Violet well knew the rules, as she often expressed it, her "deefness" kep' her out of a lot of house news.

Outside, the young people finished their tennis and then after a short hobnob on the terrace, broke up into pairs and strolled off.

Raynor corralled Lulie.

"Come on, beautiful doll," he said, "let's hop round the Rose garden."

"I'll hop, but I wish you wouldn't call me a doll."

"You don't understand. I don't mean Doll as the vaudeville songs have it. I mean, as Goring said, the line that runs,

"I am a doll, and very beautiful."

"Yes, I know; but I can't see the difference."

"There's a great difference. The doll we mean isn't spelled with a capital."

"How queer you are! I don't understand you."

"You will, though."

"Why?"

"Because I shan't leave you until you do."

"And will you leave me then?"

"That depends on your decision."

"My decision as to what?"

"As to whether you want me to leave you or not. Look here, Lulie, I may as well tell you at once. I'm in love at first sight. Bowled right over. Clean gone."

"On Nan?" and Lulie looked calmly inquiring.

"No." Raynor's calm equalled her own. "On your own beautiful self. Are you in love with any one else?"

"No."

"With me?"

"No."

"No matter. You will be. I suppose I couldn't expect it so soon."

"Is this your regular proceeding with every girl you meet?"

"Nope. Never was in love before in my life."

"But they call you the Jack of Hearts——"

"That's because of my flirting propensities. But here I am, almost thirty years old, a rising young architect, indeed I may say a risen young architect, and I vow I never loved a woman before. Do I get you?"

"How do I know? Certainly not, unless I learn to care more for you than I do now."

"Oh, you will! I'll look out for that. And anyway, I'm still alive! You didn't kill me for my speech!"

"No, I don't make a practice of killing people. It isn't done."

"Yet you could kill, on occasion."

"Why do you say that?" Lulie looked a little curious.

"Well, some old philosopher said, 'We are all capable of crime, even the best of us.' So there you are."

"No, that isn't the reason you said it. Just why did you?"

"I'm glad you ask that. I don't want a wife who accepts everything I say without question. Well, then, I think there's a trace of the killer in you. You're a little of the Lucrezia Borgia type,——"

"Oh, thank you!"

"A little of the Messalina,——"

"With a touch of Jael and Herodias, I suppose!"

"How quick you are, and what a knowledge of the Scriptures."

"Well, I promise if I do marry you, not to kill you."

"Oh, Lord, I don't care what you do with me, if you'll only marry me! That's a sort of promise, isn't it?"

"Oh, no, it isn't meant as one. To tell you the truth your proposal doesn't interest me strangely. You see, you began the wrong way round. You should have made me love you first, and then ask me to marry you."

"But that's the hackneyed way, the old-fashioned way. Oh, Lulie, do say yes,—do be engaged to me. It would be such a lark to be engaged on less than twenty-four hours' acquaintance!"

"Oh, don't be silly! Besides, Carlotta looks on you as her especial property."

"Mrs. Clearman! What nonsense. Why she's a devoted wife."

"I know it, but devoted wives like to have rising young satellites."

"You're wickeder even than I thought. No wonder your Dad scolds you!"

"Oh, that was nothing. You see, Dad and I are more alike than we seem. And when the alike sides of our natures collide, the sparks fly, that's all. But I daren't let him boss me at all, for if I do, he'll boss me all the time. He's by way of being a bit of a tyrant, you see, and neither Carly nor I will stand that."

"Mrs. Clearman adores him."

"So do I adore him. He's a wonderful man——"

"Yes, I know he is."

"But some day he and I will have the big clash, and I'm not sure which one will come off conqueror."

"I know. You will."

"Perhaps not. It will largely depend on the subject of our clash."

"Oh, let me be it! Mr. Clearman isn't a bit fond of me, though he is satisfied with my work on the house. But you let me ask his permission to marry you, and you'll have the materials on your hands for the finest scrap in the world. Will you?"

"But I'm not a bit fond of you, either."

"May I ask you to look me square in the eyes and repeat that?"

Lulie looked at him, but his frank, straightforward eyes, even though they showed a mocking smile, demanded the truth.

And the truth was that Lulie had a suddenly aroused but very persistent interest in the Jack of Hearts, though she was far from ready to acknowledge it.

Calling all her calmness to her aid, she said, in a cold voice:

"This jest has gone quite far enough. Please don't keep it up."

"Admirable!" said Raynor, in a tone of admiration. "I say, I wonder how you'd look with your hair bobbed."

"I'd look like the very old scratch," opined Miss Clearman.

"I'll bet you wouldn't. I'll bet you'd look fine. It would take off that Saint Cecilia edge and give you a little more of the human touch. Try it, won't you?"

"Most certainly not! If you were a landscape gardener instead of an architect, you'd see that it wouldn't suit me at all."

"Oh, dear, you won't do anything I want today. Will you be more amiable tomorrow, do you think?"

"Yes, Jack, dear," and though the smile was more than ever mocking, the voice held such a tender note that Raynor had to clamp down his heart to keep it from bursting.



CHAPTER IV

MORE MYSTERY

It was after dinner Sunday evening, and they all sat on the terrace.

There was no suggestion of repairing to the study, nor had Goring carried out his proposed plan of going there through the day to learn more of the lore of masks and magic.

In fact, the ever effervescent spirits of the waggish Nicky were rather affected by the general atmosphere of unease that seemed to pervade the whole party. Reference was not made to the experience of Miss Phoebe the night before, for Stephen Clearman had made it decidedly evident that the subject was distasteful to him.

Yet there was no gloom, the talk was light and desultory, and Nicky hoped by degrees to raise it to gayety. He always felt he could not breathe among people in a serious or depressed state of mind, and he fully meant to raise their spirit level, as he expressed it to himself.

"Lulie," said Carlotta, suddenly, "come for a little walk with me in the garden. I want to consult you about something. Then we'll come back and see what we can do to entertain our guests."

"Just come back soon and let us look at you,—that is entertainment enough," Nicky called after them, as the two strolled away together.

"Are we as funny as all that!" retorted Lulie, over her shoulder.

"Everybody's funny," remarked Nan, as the two disappeared in the shrubbery. "You're funny, of course, Nicky,—in almost a professional way——"

"Oh, amateur, please!"

"Well, skilled, expert, anyway. Mr. Clearman is awfully funny, with his masks and such things."

Stephen bowed, with a slight ironical smile.

"You, Miss Phoebe, are delightfully funny, with your quaint, humorous outlook on life and your original comments."

"Don't skip me," begged Jack Raynor.

"You?" and Nan looked at him meditatively. "You're the funniest thing in the world—to fall madly in love with a girl you haven't known twenty-four hours."

"But I have," Raynor looked at his watch. "Nearly twenty-six now. Did she tell you?" He looked hopefully at her, as if the idea pleased him.

"Tell me? No. She has nothing to tell. But you spread the news abroad. Your every glance, every look tells your secret to the universe at large."

"It's no secret," said Raynor, calmly.

"Fiddlesticks!" said Nicky, coming to the aid of his friend's possible embarrassment. "I've known old Jack of Hearts to fall quicker'n that! Why, once at Atlantic City——"

"That'll do, Goring. We don't want my life history just now. I say, Miss Loftis, may we think you're funny, too?"

"Of course," said Nan, "but you must tell me why and in what respects."

To the surprise of all, Stephen Clearman responded.

"You're funny," he said, "and by funny I suppose we all mean unusual or paradoxical, as one does when referring to human nature,—because you never get angry. I've been watching you two girls today, and where my Lulie flares up and loses her temper, Miss Nan merely smiles and returns a soft answer. And yet Lulie is noted for her calmness——"

"Oh, Mr. Clearman," Nan cried, "I only ignore those digs you mean, because they're beneath notice. I really can't bother to resent them."

"I know. But they're beneath Lulie's notice, too. Yet she flies off on a tangent. She's far less patient with me than she used to be. Sometimes she flies into such a rage, that she almost frightens me."

"Frightens you how, dear?" said his sister, looking anxious.

"Oh, I don't know. I think she'll throw something at me, or stab me in the dark."

"I told you Mr. Clearman was funny," broke in Nicky, not at all pleased with the trend of the conversation. "Just think, afraid of a terrible curse and afraid of his terrible daughter!"

"I'm not afraid of the curse," said Clearman, but he let the rest of the insinuation stand.

And then Carlotta and Lulie returned. They were laughing softly, as if at some secret joke.

"Come and defend yourself, Lulie," Raynor said, with an inviting gesture toward a seat beside him on the wicker lounge. "They're saying that your father is afraid of you."

"He'd better be!" she returned, laughing, but with a mock ferocious glare at her father. "If a girl of today can't intimidate her own father, how can she expect to keep a husband in order?"

"Oh, so you're just trying a 'prentice hand on me?" and Clearman laughed lightly.

"Something like that," said Lulie, indifferently. "Who wants to go in and dance?"

"I do," said Carlotta, promptly. "What are you going to do, Stephen?"

"I'm going up to the study—to look over some papers."

"The diary?" she said, a little anxiously.

"No; I've become interested in getting into shape my mission plans. I think to start with two or three stations as an experiment——"

And then West, who was never far in the background, came, to assist his master in any way he might.

"There's a funny man, if you like," Nicky said to Nan Loftis, as they passed into the house. "I don't get that West person at all."

"Whatever does he do for Mr. Clearman,—he isn't an invalid."

"Oh, that part's all right. West is quite as much of a secretary as a valet. He fetches the books or papers Mr. Clearman wants, and does his errands and mails his letters and all that, as well as looks after his clothes and belongings. But he's such a queer personage. So solemn and automaton-like."

"Aren't proper servants like that?"

"Yes, but different. The butler, now, he's stolid, and unimaginative, never sees an inch beyond his work. But Galley West is on to everything. I mean, he watches and listens, though he doesn't seem to. He's quiet, but deep. He knows all about the masks, and I suspect he has, on occasion, worn some himself."

"Nicky, your imagination is working over time. And, too, I don't care if West is a Demon in disguise, he is all right in his part, and it's none of our business. Come on, let's dance."

Phoebe Clearman stayed to watch the dancing. She loved the rhythmic motions and the gay music. The music was machine-made, but it served its purpose and as the partners were uneven, there was always one to sit and talk to Phoebe.

"I say, Miss Clearman," Nan said, as she came to sit beside her, "haven't you an extra bed in your dressing room or something? I want to sleep in your part of the house tonight and see if that thing comes again. I'd love to see it, and Lulie simply won't let me look out of my door."

"You don't want to see it, Nan, dear," said the elder lady, gazing kindly into the sparkling eyes raised to her own. "It isn't a pretty sight."

"I know, but it's frightfully interesting. And, you don't really think it portends any—any trouble, do you? Why, those old traditions haunt lots of houses. And, you know, usually the explanation of the ghost is a practical joke by somebody with a distorted sense of humor."

"What I saw last night was no practical joke," Phoebe said, speaking solemnly. "Nobody in this house could contrive to make that fearful head float round, high up in the air. Nearly up to the ceiling, and nothing but the head——"

"Just suppose—just for a minute, Miss Phoebe, dear,—that it was a joke. Couldn't it—I mean, wouldn't it be possible, if

somebody had, say, attached a sort of balloon to the mask, and had held a string——"

"Mercy, no, child! In that case, I should have seen the balloon, the string and the person holding it. No, Nan, there was nothing like that going on. I'm no longer young, but my eyesight is as good as ever it was, except for reading fine print. I saw that face as plainly as I see yours this minute. It glowed with a soft, rather faint light, and that showed up clearly the details of the awful face, and I realized at once that it was the skull mask. You see, I know the different masks and what they mean."

"But why did it appear to you, Miss Phoebe? You've done nothing to incur the curse."

"No, but of course, it was merely by chance that I saw it. Had I not chanced to see it, and give that involuntary cry, it would have gone straight on into my brother's room——"

"Through closed doors?"

Miss Clearman looked at her tolerantly. "Certainly through closed doors. If the thing was demoniac, which it was, of course, it could go through closed doors."

"Ooh! I don't believe I want to see it after all!"

"Of course, you don't. Better not meddle with such things. I'll say good-night now, and let us all pray that all evil spirits be kept away from this house."

The little old lady looked pathetic, as her eyes filled with tears and her voice trembled.

The young people gathered round, and Goring escorted her up to the door of her own suite.

"Good-night, dear Miss Phoebe," he said. "My prayers are not much good, but I'll put 'em up for your peace and safety this night."

"I am not in danger," she returned, "but Stephen is. Oh, Stephen is!" and with these words, almost sobbed out, she left him and closed her door.

"Rum go!" soliloquized Nicky as he went back downstairs. "Wonder what is up with the old dame. Superstition or just nervous fear. Wonder if Clearman's afraid, too. Well, the girls aren't. I think the superstition business is confined to the brother and sister. They're really the only blood relations of the old Dathan terror. Except, of course, Lulie. That girl is afraid of nothing, I believe, not even her august Dad. Queer household, but interesting enough so far. I'm inclined to think that Galley West is the real little joker. Dunno why, but he seems so well fitted for a mysterious *rôle*."

And by that time, Nicky was downstairs, and stepped off the last step to the time of a gay jazz tune, and at the next step caught Lulie, who was waiting, in his arms and they danced away.

It was rather late when Carlotta herded them all to the dining room for a little light supper, and then sent them peremptorily to bed.

"And keep in your rooms," she said. "If the Duk-Duk gets on the rampage he may not prove so harmless as the skull mask Miss Clearman saw."

Her mocking eyes betokened her own lack of faith in Miss Phoebe's weird story, though she had never openly expressed a doubt of it.

But an attempt on Nan's part to revive the subject of the mask bore no result save a further admonition to go at once to bed and stay there.

Carlotta was the last one up, and the house servants were already locking windows and doors and putting out lights below stairs.

"Good night," she said, her voice a little weary, as she trailed away toward the new wing, looking over her shoulder with a smiling nod.

And then bedroom doors closed, and soon Clearman Court was again wrapped in darkness and silence.

Carlotta had been in bed about an hour, when her door softly opened and a hand lightly touched her shoulder.

She knew at once it was Stephen, and sitting up she whispered, "What is it?"

"Come," he said, in a voice barely audible, and she obediently left her bed and stood at his side.

He put an arm round her, and led her noiselessly into the great hall.

There, in the darkness, high in the air, was the Skull Mask, motionless, faintly glowing, sinister.

She trembled in his protecting arm, and whispered, "Oh, Stephen, what does it mean?"

"That's what I'm going to find out!" he said. "You stay here," and with a spring, he rushed toward the mask.

But before he reached it, it had disappeared. Not floating away, not sinking to the floor, but merely ceasing to exist.

When, in three or four strides he reached the place they had seen it, it was gone.

Carlotta began to cry from sheer nervousness.

He went quickly back to her, and reproached himself for frightening her.

"But I had to call you," he explained, "to corroborate my story. No one would have believed it otherwise."

"Will they believe it now!" she asked. "Will they believe me?"

"You saw it, didn't you?"

"Yes—oh, yes!"

"Then why shouldn't they believe you? Carly, perhaps it means I can't propitiate old Duk-Duk after all."

He spoke grimly, as one who after a long hope begins to sense despair.

"Go to bed, dear," he said. "Call Violet,—where is she?"

"In her room, of course. Probably asleep. I don't need Violet."

"Yes, you do," and Clearman himself rang the maid's bell.

In a few moments Violet came, trying to look wide awake and alert as she straightened the coverlets on Carlotta's bed.

"I wouldn't have called you, Violet, but Mr. Clearman——"

"Look after your mistress," Stephen said, curtly, as he went back to his own rooms and shut the communicating door.

"Are you going to say anything about it?" asked Carlotta, as, with her husband, she descended the stairs at breakfast time next morning.

"Say anything about it? Of course I am! Why not? It's no secret. And look here, Carly, I know,—mind you, I know it cannot have been anything like a joke or a trick, done purposely by anybody. Only, when I tell the story, you watch the faces of all listening, and see if you detect even the slightest tremor or sign of self-consciousness. Oh, I know it isn't possible, but"—he added a little lamely,—"but I wish it might be."

And so, for the second time, the breakfast table was enlivened by what Nan called a real, live ghost story.

She listened in silence, her eyes big with interest, until Clearman had finished, then turned to Carlotta for corroboration.

"Yes," she said, "I saw it, too. It was just like that, Nan. Just as Stephen has described it. But it doesn't mean anything. It was hallucination, you see. Don't you know how often when you expect to see a thing, you think you do see it? That's the way all those wonderful East Indian tricks are done."

"Hypnotism?" asked Nicky, dubiously.

"Well, a sort of self-hypnotism. Sub-conscious, I suppose."

"You mean," Raynor said, "as when you will yourself to wake up at a certain time in the morning to catch a train. You always do it, you know. And in this case I suppose you both thought so surely the thing would appear that you both imagined you saw it."

"Yes," said Carlotta, "that's what I mean. But I don't mind confessing it scared the wits out of me!"

"I should think it would!" cried Nan. "But I want to see it! I know it will scare me to death, but I love to be scared. You couldn't have been really scared, Carly, with Mr. Clearman right there by you."

"I was, though," and Carlotta looked a little abashed. "You see, it looked so awful——"

Miss Clearman rose from the table and left the room.

"Poor dear," said her brother, "she can't bear to hear the horrid details repeated. Now, you young people, don't think any more about it. If it is a supernatural appearance, it certainly is a very innocent and harmless one. If it is a warning, well—nothing has happened yet, and I assure you that I, for one, don't think anything untoward will happen. As I have told you all, the way to manage these things is to fight fire with fire. If these manifestations are genuine magic, they can be rendered harmless by other magic,—which I know. And if they are, by any chance, fakes,—then there is surely no cause for alarm."

"I wish Lulie was down here," said Nan. "May I go for her?"

"No," said Clearman, decidedly. "Nothing upsets our Lulie like being called in the morning. And I don't want to bring about any of her tantrums today. I've quite enough demon business on my hands as it is. She'll be along soon, any way. West, get me another custard. I'll indulge a little this morning."

"This visiting ghost is getting to be a habit, isn't it?" said Raynor. "I'm like Nan, I'd like to see it myself. Can't we have an observation party tonight, Mr. Clearman? Say we agree upon a signal, and whoever sees the ghost first, shall call the others."

"It isn't a ghost," said Clearman, pettishly. "That word annoys me almost as much as spook. The appearance of a Skull Mask is a sign of death, but it is in no sense a ghost or apparition."

"A sign of death!" exclaimed Nan, with horror in her eyes.

"Yes, but remember, I can ward off that death. There is no danger to me, because I understand just what to do. I can't explain all this to you in detail, because you haven't enough rudimentary and statistical information to understand it, but I assure you that I am in no more immediate danger of death than any one of you—than *any* one in normal health and condition."

"I'm mighty glad to hear that," said Nicky Goring.

"You may rest assured," Clearman went on, "that I have no fear. A poison is harmless if you have a sure antidote. A shot cannot harm the man who wears a coat of mail. A secret foe cannot overtake you if you are prepared for him."

"And your ritual, or whatever it is, protects you?" Nicky asked, greatly interested.

"Yes. As you are so keen on the subject, Goring, I hope you will take up the study, if not seriously, at least, to a degree. You know masks are not unknown in the world of today. Secret societies usually affect the mask, from the Ku Klux Klan down."

"And there are masquerades," put in Nan.

"Yes," Clearman agreed, "and masquerades on a large scale, like Mardi Gras carnival, and in lesser way, the children on Hallowe'en or Thanksgiving Day. But those are all piffle compared to the real thing. Now, the Duk-Duk——"

"Oh, Stephen," Carlotta begged, "don't give us a dissertation now. Mr. Goring may crave it, but the rest of us don't. Mr. Raynor is bored stiff, and so are Nan and I."

"Bless my soul, so you are!" and Clearman laughed. "When I get on my hobby, I suppose I'm a regular nuisance!"

"Never that," and his wife smiled at him, "but your hobby needs curbing. Now, Nan, I'm going to do some intensive housekeeping for a while, then I'll play tennis with you until Lulie comes down. She'll be along shortly."

"And until the game is called, I'm going, if I may, with Mr. Clearman to stalk the festive mask," said Nicky, with an inquiring glance at Clearman.

"Certainly, glad to have you," was the response, and if it lacked cordiality, Goring failed to notice it.

The two men went off to the study, and Raynor observed, "Nicky oughtn't to push himself in like that. Mr. Clearman doesn't want him. As a matter of fact he wants me this morning. We have to settle up a few matters about the contracts and estimates."

"Give him a half hour with Nicky," suggested Carlotta, "and then take half an hour yourself. It's ten now, and you know Mr. Clearman won't see anybody between eleven and twelve."

"Do you never speak to him during the sacred hour?" asked Nan, wonderingly.

"Oh, yes, if it's really necessary. But it seldom is. West sometimes goes in and out, but only if rung for. You know Steve

wears a mask during that hour."

"Yes, I know," said Nan. "I think the man is a little touched on that subject."

"If you mean his brain is really affected, you're dead wrong," Carlotta defended her husband. "He has a hobby, but it's nothing more than that. As some men have a hobby for sport or for business, or a religious mania."

"That's what it is most like," observed Raynor, "a religious mania. It doesn't matter that it includes heathen religions, instead of the Christian beliefs, it's a mania all the same."

"Yes," Carlotta was forced to agree, "yes, you're right."

She went off to consult with the cook, and Nan and Raynor drifted out to the garden.

"Can't I amuse you until your innamorata puts in an appearance?" the girl said, smiling at the Jack of Hearts.

"Yes, indeed, if you'll let me talk about her. Which is her window?"

"Come, sit in this arbor,—there, now you can see them. The three just above the *porte-cochère*. Perhaps she'll peep out in a minute."

"Does she sleep all the morning, or does she putter about her dressing room?"

Nan laughed. "Aren't you a little intrusive? No? Well, she does both."

"You don't mean she putters in her sleep?"

"Oh, no, not both at the same time. But when she has nothing better to do she fusses about her rooms. All girls do."

"Yes, I know. I have three sisters,—born putterers."

"But usually Lulie is downstairs fairly early when there are guests. Especially, guests she likes. Oh, I have it! She's dawdling on purpose to tease you! That's a good sign, isn't it?"

"I don't care about signs, I'll get that girl signs or no signs. I say, you're awfully good to let me rave on like this——"

The raving was interrupted by Nicky Goring who came strolling toward them.

"Fired," he explained, briefly. "The old chap was pretty much on edge about the warning or whatever it was that appeared last night, and he was in no mood to give First Lessons in Maskology to an inquiring neophyte. And he said to tell you, Jack, that he'd postpone that talk with you until after luncheon."

"All right," Raynor agreed. "Did he don his mask before you left?"

"No, but he was just about to do so. He was looking them over, apparently undecided which one was the proper caper. I say, what a nut he is!"

"I thought you believed in it all—a little," Nan said.

"Oh, not *believe* in it—I'm interested as in a new study, that's all."

"Did he lock himself in?"

"Yes, I heard him turn the key. Mrs. Clearman is writing letters,—why doesn't Lulie come down and play with us?"

"She will soon, I'm sure," said Nan.

"I'm going to throw pebbles at her window," Nicky declared, "it's all foolishness, her neglecting us like this."

"No, don't," Raynor commanded, as Nicky swept up a handful of gravel from the path. "Let her alone, let her sleep."

"A dormouse couldn't sleep like that! I don't believe she is sleeping still," and before Raynor could stop him, the gravel was shot up at Lulie's window. It clattered against the upper pane, some fell in at the open lower sash and more rolled back down the roof below.

But there was no response.

"She's in her bath," and Nan nodded her head, sagaciously. "Or else, sound asleep. Anyway, don't do that again, Nicky, she won't like it."

"Oh, all right, let's go for a little walk in the woods."

CHAPTER V

THE CLEARMAN DOOM

Galley West was a creature of routine.

As methodically as a clock he did the same thing at the same time every day of his monotonous life. He was tall and thin,—almost gaunt—physically, with sparse brown hair and a long, lean face, which might be described as static.

Nicky Goring had once said that West's eyes were "steady by jerks," and he had meant, which was the truth, that ordinarily the orbs in question presented a steady, respectful stare, but that on occasion, they jerked quickly to right or left, only to return to front at once.

In manner West was deferential yet dignified. Stagg, the butler, strove to copy this masterly combination, but only succeeded in achieving a velvety cringe that was remindful of Uriah Heep together with certain qualities of a floorwalker.

At precisely two minutes before twelve, West walked through the great hall, carrying a tray. Carlotta, from the small writing room off the hall, glanced up, saw him pass, and resumed her writing.

On West's tray was a cup of bouillon and two biscuits, with which Stephen Clearman was always regaled at noon.

West allowed himself two minutes for the journey upstairs, as, if he met anyone in the hall, he might be delayed a few seconds.

He reached the closed door of the study with half a minute to spare.

He stood quietly, scrutinizing the appointments of the tray, and at twelve o'clock he tapped at the door.

There was no response and he tapped again.

There was still no sound from within and Galley West gave one of his quick glances to the left and another to the right.

He saw no one and returned at once to the business in hand, which was to effect an entrance to the study.

But continued rappings brought no summons to enter, and as this state of things was unique in his experience, West felt obliged to establish a new order of precedent and he turned the doorknob.

But the door did not open, and the feel of it told him it was locked.

Whereupon, after one more rap, he whispered through the keyhole, his employer's name.

Still no answer, and as one who stoops to a necessary though distasteful indignity, West knelt and looked in at the keyhole.

But he could see nothing of importance, and so he stood up again, for once in his life thoroughly nonplussed.

Not excited, merely bewildered, and with a strange fear tugging at his nerves.

Setting the tray on a hall table outside the study door, Galley West went downstairs again.

He went out of the servants' door and straight to the garage, a portion of which gave housing to such matters as lawn mowers, garden hose and, incidentally, several ladders.

West selected a long one, and without a word to anybody carried it back to the house and placed it against the one great window that lighted Stephen Clearman's study.

This was what is known as a studio window, high and wide, with many sections and panes.

Some of the top sections were open, as ventilators, and two or three of the smaller lower sections, which swung on pivots.

Through one of these, having climbed his ladder, West could see distinctly into the room.

He saw the rather frightful sight of Stephen Clearman sitting at his large table desk, wearing a mask.

West was familiar with the sight of his master in a mask, but in this instance the peculiar effect of the ferocious face and the inert body gave him a shock.

Why was Mr. Clearman sitting like that—as if asleep, or——

West could not get in at the window. The lower panes that opened were narrow, none more than eight inches wide, and their iron frames were immovable.

After another look at the still figure, he descended his ladder, and went into the house.

He found Mrs. Clearman still in the writing room, and asked her if she would tell him where Miss Phoebe might be.

"What do you want of her?" asked Carlotta, for the inquiry was an unusual one.

"I'd like to speak to her, if I may," said West, and so strongly did that peculiar quality of domination show in his manner, that Carlotta only said:

"I think she is in her own apartments,—you may go up if you like."

So West went upstairs again, and, seeing Violet in the hall, asked her to arrange that he should have speech with Miss Clearman at once.

The colored woman gave him an inquiring glance, but did his bidding.

And in a moment, West found himself in Miss Phoebe's sitting room.

"I come to you, Madam," he said, "rather than to Mrs. Clearman. The study door is locked and Mr. Clearman does not answer my knocks. I felt alarmed, and I fetched a ladder and looked in from the outside. Madam, he sits at his desk, strangely quiet,—motionless——"

"He is masked?" Phoebe Clearman spoke quietly, but her small old hands clenched themselves together.

"Yes, Madam."

"He is dead?"

"I think so."

The two speakers could not have seemed more composed if they had been talking of the weather. But both hearts were beating wildly.

"You have not told Mrs. Clearman?"

"No, Madam, I feared——"

"It is all right." She well knew that what he feared was a violent hysterical outburst, and he had, rightly, come to her first.

"The situation must be met," said Miss Phoebe, and with a fugitive gasp, she rose to meet it.

"I—you will tell Mrs. Clearman?" said West.

"Certainly, and at once. She must direct."

They went downstairs, West a careful two steps behind, and found Carlotta still writing.

"What is going on?" she said, looking up with undisguised curiosity.

"A grave matter," Phoebe said, coming into the little room and sitting beside her. "Stephen's door is locked, and West can't get in."

Carlotta stared at her sister-in-law.

"It's always locked in the morning," she began, but Phoebe interrupted:

"That's not all; West has looked in at the window and Stephen sits at his desk—motionless——"

"Asleep?"

"Asleep—or ill—or dead."

Phoebe spoke with a strange effect of callousness, with the air of one who accepts as a fact an expected calamity.

"Nonsense!" Carlotta rose, "he's only thinking. I'll go and get in."

She ran up the broad staircase and straight to the study door.

"Stephen, Stephen dear,—let me in, please. It's after twelve."

But her soft tones called forth no more response than had West's knocking.

She turned a white face to Phoebe.

"What is it?" she whispered, "what does it mean?"

"I don't know," said the older woman, "but we must get into that room."

"Yes, yes, of course." And again Carlotta rapped on the door and called through the keyhole.

"How can you get in?" she said turning to West.

"Only to break in, ma'am."

"Very well, do so then. We must know. You think, don't you, Phoebe, that he is just absorbed in his work,—or maybe a little cranky and doesn't want to be disturbed?"

"He never has acted like this before," Miss Clearman said, troubled as she too called her brother's name.

"No, however angry he might be, he would open the door and tell us so," Carlotta declared. "Break in, West. Will you need help?"

"Yes ma'am. I'll get the mechanician."

In a few moments West had disappeared and returned with Rogers, the mechanician from the garage, who carried a chisel and one or two other tools.

And at the same time the party of three, returning from their walk in the woods, entered the hall from the front door.

"What's the matter?" Nicky sang out. "Lost a trunk key?"

"No sir," and West dropped back, as Rogers went on his way. "There's trouble in the house, sir. Mr. Clearman is locked in his study——"

Then Phoebe called West from upstairs and he hastened away.

"Come on," Nicky said, "if there's trouble we're more likely to be of help than hindrance. Come on."

He was already halfway upstairs and acting on impulse, and spurred by Nicky's words, Raynor and Nan followed.

They saw at once the group in front of the study door, and went straight to them.

"Can I help?" Raynor began but Carlotta motioned him to silence, and just then Rogers deftly removed a panel of the door.

Quickly, West, standing close by thrust his hand inside and turned the key in the lock.

Then in silence he opened the door and held it ajar.

Carlotta started to pass through then, terrified, turned back, and threw herself into Nan's waiting arms.

"Oh,—I can't!" she cried. "Phoebe, you go in first."

"Let me go," and Jack Raynor stepped forward.

Even his strong nerves were shaken at the sight that confronted him. Clearman lay back in his chair, in a not unnatural position, his hands gripped the chair-arms and his body seemed relaxed.

But on his head was a fearsome, ferocious-looking mask.

It was one Jack had never before seen, with great staring eyeholes and an enormous open mouth. The expression was that of a hungry monster, about to devour anything that came his way. It was painted in crude, glaring colors and its leering effect was diabolical.

Raynor made a half motion to take the grisly thing off before the others could see it, but West's voice at his elbow murmured, "Better not touch him, sir."

Then, for the first time, Raynor sensed real tragedy.

Phoebe was already in the room.

"So it came to him," she said, "just as he thought it would."

"I say," exclaimed Nicky Goring, following in, "seems to me you all take a lot for granted. How do you know the poor chap is dead?"

"What do you think?" said Raynor, as they stood looking at the still figure.

"Let's see," and Nicky gently felt for the heart of Stephen Clearman.

"Not beating," he said succinctly, as he withdrew his hand.

"What is there to do?" said Carlotta's voice, plaintively, as she came nearer the desk. "Let me be, Nicky, I am not afraid of a mask. I've seen too many of them."

"That's a war mask," said Phoebe, and Nicky thought, with disdain, how ready she was to display her erudition.

"It is one that works a special and disastrous magic," she went on, but more as if talking to herself than to another. "And there on his desk, is the peace mask,—that one of painted bark cloth,—that he meant to don as soon as this one had done its work. But——"

Phoebe broke off with a sort of wail and sank into an armchair, burying her face in her hands.

"Something must be done," said Raynor, insistently. "Who shall take charge, Mrs. Clearman? You oughtn't to and Miss Phoebe can't. Shall I?"

"Oh, please do," begged Carlotta. "Do everything, anything, that is right and proper. Are you—are you sure——"

"That he is dead? Yes,—there is no doubt about it,—but I'm sure it is right to send for the doctor."

"Oh, yes, do—do that. I—I can't seem to think—Where's Lulie?"

To be sure—where was Lulie? Not up yet.

"I'll call her," volunteered Nan, though she dreaded the errand.

"Yes, do," said Raynor, suddenly thoughtful. "You're the best one to do it. Waken her and help her dress——"

He turned to the telephone and Nan went to Lulie's room.

Having called the doctor Raynor began to get his wits together, and cleared most of the people out of the room.

He begged both Carlotta and Phoebe to go to their rooms and rest, for they would be subjected to difficult ordeals later on. He bade Violet attend them both, and he asked Goring to stand by while the doctor made his inquiries.

But before the doctor arrived, Nan returned to them, wild-eyed and breathless.

"I can't find Lulie anywhere. Her bed isn't made, but she's gone somewhere, and nobody knows where."

"Gone on some errand," said Carlotta, indifferently. "She often gets up and flies off without a word to anybody. But I wish she was here. Of course, she'll be back soon, she won't stay away long with you young people here."

Nan looked relieved, but before they could discuss the matter further, the doctor came.

Doctor Jepson was a young man, alert, talkative, and possessed of what is known as the superiority complex.

He was firmly convinced that what he didn't know about modern therapy wasn't worth worrying over.

Of a positive, even aggressive personality, he took the whole matter into his own charge, even as he stepped across the threshold of the study.

But his poise was jarred a little by the horrifying sight of the mask, with its threatening yet grotesque expression.

"What—what——" he began, stopping short and then backing a little.

Raynor began to explain, for though both Carlotta and Phoebe had left their rooms and were hovering just outside the door, he felt they should not be drawn into it.

"It was Mr. Clearman's habit to wear a mask at certain times,"—he said, but Doctor Jepson had already recovered his equanimity, and strode forward to the desk.

With swift, practised motions he felt the heart and pulse of the dead man, nodded his corroboration that he was dead, and then raised his hands to remove the mask, but paused.

"It's a most unusual condition," he said, speaking rapidly, "most unusual. I've no notion what caused his death,—no notion at all. The coroner must be called—but first, I must call the constable,—yes, the village constable——"

"Oh, come now, Doctor Jepson," Raynor said, "surely that is not necessary. You can discover the cause of death, and if a heart attack or something equally probable, why subject the family to unnecessary publicity?"

Jepson looked at the speaker. He was a man who frequently accepted the advice of other people, but invariably pretended he was acting on his own initiative. He had never before encountered a mysterious death, and he had vague ideas of not touching the body till the Coroner came, and equally vague ideas as to his own proper procedure.

"Take off the mask," ordered Nicky Goring, who was greatly excited. "You must find out what caused his death—if he is dead! Take off that mask and find out. If you don't, I will. He may be merely in a state of coma or unconsciousness——"

"His heart has ceased to beat," said Jepson, oracularly. "But, as I say, it is necessary to remove this strange headgear to learn the facts."

The mask, though it looked like iron, was made of *papier maché*, and was really of very light weight. It was held on by a pair of leather thongs, tied behind the head.

Somewhat gingerly, Doctor Jepson untied the knot and removed the mask.

The dead man looked astonishingly lifelike.

There was no sign of foul play, no hint of violence of any sort. Apparently Clearman had died suddenly, while engaged at his desk.

All eyes were fastened on the dead face, save those of Nicky Goring.

His inquisitive mind was already wondering what it all meant. Was it, could it be, the curse of old Dathan Clearman?

He darted his glance over the desk fittings, the desk itself and the nearby furniture. All was in order, there was nothing out of place, no sign of a struggle—but, the doctor was speaking——

"I find no evidence of any sort of attack by another," he said, for once speaking slowly, and seeming to choose his words carefully. "And as I know Mr. Clearman's physique, constitution and physical condition perfectly, having been his physician ever since his return from his long trip abroad, I can state positively that he had no heart trouble nor any organic disease or affection that could have induced a sudden death. Can any one present throw any light on the matter, or give me any information?"

Nobody volunteered a reply, and there seemed to be a tacit resolve not to mention the subject of the family curse.

"It's too absurd," Raynor thought to himself. "It isn't possible that is the explanation of his death, and, anyway, there's no use discussing it now."

A mere glance passed between Carlotta and Phoebe, but it pledged them both to silence.

"He was in his usual health this morning?" the doctor asked.

"Yes, sir," West said, as no one else replied. "He ate his usual breakfast, and pursued his usual routine, sir."

"And his mask? Will someone please explain it?"

Jepson turned from West, as if ignoring the underling, and looked straight at Raynor, who took up the burden of the tale.

"It will doubtless seem strange to you," he said, "but Mr. Clearman had a habit of wearing a mask for an hour every morning in the privacy of his study."

"Whatever for?" exclaimed Jepson, wide-eyed with astonishment.

"It was part of a rite that for some reason commended itself to him," Raynor returned, trying to make the matter seem dignified rather than absurd. "Anyway, he did, and as you have seen, death overtook him this morning during the time he was masked."

"I see——" Jepson valiantly strove to hide his amazement, and treat the mask habit as not unusual in his experience. "Many of my patients have strange manias—er, that is—customs. I daresay Mr. Clearman indulged in other peculiar habits,

connected—er—with his experiments in mysticism."

"You know of his mysticism, then?" asked Raynor quickly, glad of this support.

"Oh, yes," Jepson proceeded to draw on his imagination, "he has often talked to me about it."

"Ah, you know of the Curse, then?" Raynor felt it must come out, and the sooner the better.

"The Curse?" Jepson dared not prevaricate further. "No," he said, frankly, "what curse?"

"I prefer that subject shall not be brought up," Phoebe Clearman said, stepping forward, and taking the floor. "Doctor Jepson, you must examine my brother's body more thoroughly, and I am sure you will find a natural cause for his death."

There was something in the peremptory manner of the little old lady that quelled Jepson's suddenly roused curiosity, and checked the eager questions that had risen to his lips.

He turned again to the man in the chair, he looked closely into his eyes, made one or two other tests, and finally sniffed at his lips.

"Ah," he cried, wheeling suddenly round, "prussic acid! Mr. Clearman has taken poison,—or," he added quickly, "it has been administered to him! I can smell the unmistakable odor——"

"Pardon me, sir," West's low voice interrupted him. "May I explain that Mr. Clearman always eats for his breakfast custards strongly flavored with Bitter Almond extract? May it not be that which you smell? This morning he ate two."

Jepson glared at him. He resented the blow to his theory.

"Of course that might be," he was forced to admit. "The odor is lingering,—often remains for hours. Moreover, I see no container about,——"

"It's out of the question to imagine my brother killing himself," Miss Phoebe broke in. "He not only had everything to live for, but he was most fond of life and eagerly looking forward to happiness in his home, which he had recently had remodeled and refitted. Was it not a stroke of some sort?"

"There are no indications of a stroke," Jepson rejoined, coldly. "Had there been, I should have said so at first. I cannot explain it, I'm afraid. Though young in years, I have had rather wide experience in sudden deaths, but I have never before been in the presence of what may be called a mysterious death, which this one certainly is. There are no symptoms, no reactions that I can discover, that hint at any known cause. It is as if the man died, by an act of God. I know that phrase is often used to cover ignorance of cause and effect, but I can think of nothing else."

It was clear that the doctor's pomposity and conceit had given way. He had come into the room, prepared to give a striking exhibition of brilliant diagnosis and erudition. He was baffled, and so thoroughly baffled, that he was forced to admit it.

His speech, though received without comment, showed its effect on the faces of several present.

The men preserved, for the most part, immobile expressions, but Phoebe Clearman sank into a chair and gave way to stifled, subdued weeping. Carlotta hurried from the room to her own apartments and Violet followed her closely.

Nan Loftis, stirred beyond all thought of policy or even tact, cried out: "It was! that's just what it was! the act of *some* god! Oh, I never believed in it all, but I do, now!"

"May I inquire exactly what you mean?" said Doctor Jepson, sensing at once that some knowledge had been withheld from him, and deeply resenting it.

"I will tell you," Raynor said, seeing that the truth had to come out, and preferring to tell it himself.

And then, in as few words as possible, he gave to the amazed doctor a straightforward account of the Clearman ancestor, Dathan, his curse and his strange mask of the Duk-Duk. He told, briefly, of Stephen Clearman's foolhardiness in braving this curse, and also of his sojourn in the Far Eastern tropics and the lore he had learned there, and the trophies and masks he had brought back with him in the firm conviction they would preserve his life and safety.

CHAPTER VI

UNITED STATES MAIL

Doctor Jepson listened with an obvious incredulity that turned to scorn as the narrative proceeded.

"You can't mean that you, a sane, sensible man, believe all that stuff," he exclaimed, as Raynor neared the end of his story.

"I'm not quite ready to say I believe it,—in fact, I'm ready to say I don't believe it, if—you can suggest any other explanation of this strange death. It was no suicide;—I know, none better, how keen Mr. Clearman was to live. He had many interests, he was deeply in love with his wife, he was fond of his daughter, and he had a most congenial life work in his antiquarian research and his study of strange religions and cults."

The latter part of this seemed to be above the Doctor's head. He had but a slight notion as to what cults were and he knew practically nothing of antiquarian research.

But the whole idea floored him. That a man of Raynor's obvious good sense and rational mind, could even suggest that death came through the influence of some magic power was almost more than he could believe.

"I don't get it," he said, as Raynor finished. "You think the old curse is responsible for this mysterious taking-off?"

"I don't say so," Raynor hedged, "but I'm not the doctor. What is your opinion?"

"I cannot state any," Jepson said, slowly. "Clearly, it cannot be suicide, as there is no instrument of death anywhere visible, and no sign or hint of the method employed."

Nicky Goring, who had sat silent, for the most part, listening to the conversation, now spoke.

"Might it be," he said, slowly, "that the man died from sheer fright? I mean, suppose he saw an apparition——"

"I don't admit the possibility of an apparition," said the doctor stubbornly, "but I will agree that he may have thought he saw something of the sort, and died from fright at the hallucination. Yet, I know Stephen Clearman, and such a thing is most improbable."

"It's absurd," declared Raynor. "The last thing that would frighten him would be any sort of a supernatural appearance, whether imagined or really seen. Why, when he saw one last night, and his wife saw it, too, the first thing he did was to make a rush for it. He afraid? Never!"

"That's the way I see it," Jepson agreed. "He had no fear in his nature, and yet,—if he saw, or thought he saw a terrible, menacing danger——"

"If he did," Raynor said, quietly, "it was human, not supernatural."

"Murder?" said the doctor, in an awed whisper.

"Ridiculous!" Nicky cried out. "How could that be when the room was locked so securely that we had to break in to reach him?"

"That's so," said the doctor. "Well, there's only one thing for me to do. That's to call the constable. Shall I telephone from here?"

There was a telephone on the dead man's desk, and Doctor Jepson used it to summon Constable Blair.

While waiting for him, the three men were rather silent. Indeed, there seemed to be nothing to say. Stephen Clearman was dead, there was no visible or apparent explanation of his death, and the known circumstances were in the highest degree mysterious.

His wife and sister had gone to their own rooms, but Nan Loftis came back and seated herself by Nicky.

"I'm wondering about Lulie," she whispered to him. "Where do you suppose she can be?"

"Doesn't anybody know where she went? The servants or anyone?"

"Nobody seems to know,—but I've only asked Carlotta's maid and West. They don't know anything about her."

"Oh, well, she'll come back to this horror soon enough. She must have gone to the village on some errand and been

detained."

"It isn't like her," Nan said, musingly.

Constable Blair arrived.

He was a big, burly man with far more brawn than brain.

Nicky looked at him, wondering why constables always looked inefficient.

Moreover, the man was so awed by the strange surroundings in which he found himself that he could scarce collect what wits he had about him.

"W—what are all those things?" he inquired, in a jerky, scared voice, as he stared at the masks all about.

And, indeed, to one who had never before been in Stephen Clearman's study it was an awesome sight.

"Never mind that now," said Jepson, unwilling to take the time to explain. "Here's a mysterious death. What are you going to do about it?"

But this sudden responsibility thrust upon him had the effect of frightening the poor man worse than ever.

"Yes, yes," he murmured, rubbing his hands and trying to pull himself together.

As a matter of fact, Blair had ordinary common sense, though lacking in experience as to procedure in a case like this.

"You see," broke in Nicky, who was sorry for the man, "Mr. Clearman is dead, and we don't know what killed him——"

"Don't Doctor Jepson know?" Blair turned on the medical man in reproach.

"No, I don't," the doctor returned. "It's a mysterious death, I tell you. If I knew what killed him, it wouldn't be mysterious, would it?"

Both men were marking time. Neither knew what to do next, and each wanted to put it up to the other.

"What's the symptoms,—yes, the symptoms?" Blair inquired, feeling he had at least struck the right word.

"That's just it,—there aren't any," and Jepson looked at the dead man with a real resentment.

"What? No symptoms?" Blair hung onto his word.

"No, no more than if he had died by a stroke of lightning. Not so much, for there is no burn or any sign. It must be—it's got to be heart failure,—but I happen to know that his heart was as sound as a dollar."

"Hum—hum—bad business," and Constable Blair, beginning to feel a little more at ease, walked over to the still figure in the chair and examined it more closely.

"Well, well,—" he said, rather meaninglessly, "Stephen Clearman—well, well."

"Well, aren't you going to do anything?" cried Nan, for the scene got on her nerves. "Something ought to be done!"

Her speech startled everybody.

Doctor Jepson looked at her in silent reprimand. Raynor gazed at her thoughtfully, and Nicky nodded approval.

Galley West, who had stood silently near the door, began to move about the room, straightening a book here or a paper there, as if unable to repress his habit of tidying up things.

"Don't touch a thing, you!" Blair thundered at him. "This is a case for the Coroner. It is a mysterious death, as you say, Doctor Jepson, and who knows that it ain't murder? Anyhow, it ain't for us to say. The Coroner must come,—yes, that's what!"

Evidently his slow wits had worked at last and that was his decree. No one gainsaid him for a moment, and then Nan spoke out:

"Absurd! Jack, don't let them get in the Coroner! Whatever it is, it isn't murder! How could a murderer get in and out of locked doors? Who would want to kill Stephen Clearman? A good, a great man! Mr. Constable, don't you disgrace this innocent household like that!"

Her eyes shone with excitement, her bobbed hair shook, and her voice rang out clearly, though not raised to a high pitch.

By a sudden trick of memory, Nicky recollected that Lulie had told him Nan was muffin-minded. He wondered what she meant. Surely, this did not seem like it. Nor was it like Lulie to malign a friend. He concluded it was some momentary tiff between them that had made Lulie throw out the remark, and that she didn't really intend anything mean.

Anyway, Nan was refuting it now.

Constable Blair, disliking to speak sternly to a woman, was debating in his slow mind how he could put it to her that he had to do his duty to the state, and that he now saw clearly what that duty was.

"It will have to come, sooner or later, Nan," Nicky said to her. "May as well make up your mind to it. Isn't that right, Jack?"

Raynor was thoughtful. "Well, Nicky," he said, "it seems right to me, but I'm sure we ought to ask Mrs. Clearman or Miss Phoebe or both. If Lulie were here,—and I wish she'd come,—we could ask her things. Yes, I know Carlotta said for me to take charge of Doctor Jepson's visit and all that, but I don't want to exceed my authority. And I don't like to say send for the Coroner——"

"Lord bless you, man," Blair broke in, "you ain't sending for the Coroner,—I am. It's my bounden duty. Why, I guess I know what a constable is up against. I ain't never had a case like this before, but Lord, man, I know how to take care of it."

Blair had come into his own, it seemed, and Doctor Jepson nodded complete acquiescence.

Then, gaining assurance with each passing moment, Blair ordered everybody out of the room, and followed them out, locking the door himself.

The panel that had been removed, left a gaping hole, but no one could enter without the door key, which Blair put in his pocket.

"I'll stick around here," he said to the doctor. "You can go, but be where I can find you this afternoon, if Bailey wants you. I daresay it'll be sorter hard to locate him, but I'll get him somehow."

Turned out of the study, the household was at loose ends.

Nan, having entirely lost her air of bravado, was trembling on the verge of a nervous burst of tears.

"I want to go to Carlotta,—or I want to see Miss Phoebe,"—she said, "but I don't know that I ought to intrude. Let's try to find Lulie, Jack."

"What shall we do, telephone?"

"Yes,—I suppose so. I can't think of anything else to do."

But just then, Carlotta appeared.

"I'm all right," she said, trying to be brave, while a sad little smile struggled to show itself, "I know all you dear people would say—all you would do, but I'd rather you wouldn't sympathize too much—it—it makes me break down——"

"All right, I understand," said Raynor, with true insight. "Brace up, Carlotta, dear, we'll all help. What are you going to do now?"

For Carlotta, with a steady step and a determined air was going across the hall and toward a side porch. She held a letter in her hand, and Nicky realizing that she meant to put it in the mail box on that porch started up to take it for her.

But Nan drew him back. "Let her alone," she whispered. "Any little thing she can do, she'd better do."

"Yes," said Raynor, "let's all treat her just as we always do. It's better for her than expressed sympathy,—just at first, anyway."

Carlotta didn't return immediately, and four or five minutes had passed, when they heard her voice calling, faintly, "Jack,—oh, please,—Jack!"

Raynor hastened to the side porch, and there, her face drawn with pain and anxiety, he saw Carlotta, her hand partly in through the narrow opening of the iron letter box.

"Oh, Jack," she cried, helplessly, "I can't get my hand out!"

"Why,—what have you done?"

Greatly concerned, Raynor saw Carlotta's right hand firmly caught in the iron grip of the mail box.

"I—you see,—I tried to get my letter out after I put it in—and my ring has caught below the edge——"

That was it. Thrusting her hand in the box in an endeavor to retrieve the letter she had slipped in, she had put her slender, delicate little hand so far through, that a large diamond ring had caught and her hand could not be withdrawn.

"A bad business," Raynor said, gently touching the now red and swollen hand. "Does it hurt?"

"Oh, fearfully! What can we do?"

"Two things," said Raynor, thinking quickly, "get the mechanic to come and break open the box, or wait for the postman. Isn't he about due?"

"Yes, in a few moments,—but—I can't stand it. Do get Rogers,—Oh, do!"

By this time, Nan and Goring had come out on the porch.

"You poor dear!" Nan cried. "Oh, Carly, how did you do it? What were you trying to do? Get a letter back? You ought to know you can't do that!"

"Yes, I can," Carlotta said, "I've done it before. But I forgot I had this big ring on. It's caught—oh, it hurts terribly!"

"I say," Nicky put in, "I hate to have you suffer, but you know it's against the law to break into a letterbox. I don't believe you'd better let Rogers do that. Surely the postman will be here in a minute——"

"Yes, he's due now," said Nan, and she ran out on the lawn to look for him. "I see him," she reported, "he's at the next house but one—wait for him, Carly, dear, he'll get you out all right."

"He can't get me out," moaned Carlotta, "he can only open the little door in the side of the box."

"Well, he'll take charge of the thing," said Nicky. "I'll have Rogers standing by."

Goring went off to the garage, and the others waited impatiently until the postman came.

"Serious matter, ma'am," he said, "you musn't try to get back a letter after it's posted. What did you want of it?"

"Never mind all that now," cried Nan, angrily. "Can't you see the lady is suffering agonies? How can we get her hand out?"

"Have to bust the box," said the stolid postman, with little or no concern on his weatherbeaten face. "Serves her right for interferin' with the United States Mail. It's agin' the law, I tell you."

"There are circumstances above the law," Nan flared up. "There's been a sudden death in this house, we are all in a terrible emergency. She is,—anyone would be excusable for wanting to get back a letter in the circumstances!"

"Which letter is it?" asked the man, who had unlocked the box and taken the letters from the lower part.

"Oh, I don't know," Carlotta cried. "Never mind, Nan, I don't want it now."

"Yes, you do," Nan persisted, "here, this is the one! Isn't it, dear? This is the one I just saw you bring downstairs. I recognize your paper——"

"Oh, I don't know,—take them all——" Carlotta said, faintly.

"No, you don't, ma'am," said the callous postman. "Here, you mark this one, miss, and I'll ask at the post office if it can be returned to the lady. Why do you want it back, ma'am?"

"What a question!" cried Nan. "After a sudden death, any one might want to retract a letter——"

"But she just mailed it——" began the man, perplexedly.

"So you did," Nan said; "what do you want it for, Carlotta?"

"I—I forgot to date it. Oh, never mind, take it along—how am I going to get my hand out of here?"

"Here we are," and Nicky reappeared. "Here's Rogers, he'll take the box apart, and Mr. Postman can stand by and bear witness that it is a necessary procedure."

The box was rapidly demolished, and with a dubious expression the postman watched the performance.

"I believe," Nan said, indignantly, "you'd leave her hand there till the crack of doom, before you'd lift a finger to free her!"

The postman made no reply, but shouldered his bag and went off, apparently in deep thought.

As he went out the gate he passed the Coroner and another man coming in. He gave a start, as if for the first time he had realized that there was a tragedy in the house, but with a satisfied shake of his head, he went on smug in the knowledge that he had done only his duty.

He had the letter in his pocket that the lady had wanted to get back, and at the post office, he would report it all to the higher officials, and his responsibility would be at an end.

He had but one rule to cover such a point.

A letter in the mail box was the exclusive property of the United States Mail and no living human being outside the postal authorities had a right to meddle with it in any way.

In the house, tender hands were ministering to the suffering Carlotta.

Owing to her frantic struggles to disengage her hand from the letterbox, the fingers were badly swollen and the whole palm and back scratched and bruised.

No bones were broken, nor did there seem any sprain, but the lacerations were painful and the aching joints sent a sympathetic misery up through her whole forearm.

"It was silly of me," she conceded, "but I scarcely know what I'm doing this morning. Aren't we going to have any luncheon? I'm not hungry, exactly, but I am faint."

"Yes, it's ready now," Nan said, seeing Stagg hovering in the doorway.

"The Coroner is here," said Raynor, looking thoughtful. "Suppose you people go on and have lunch, and I'll go up and look after things. I hate to have the Coroner's inquiry go on with none of us there."

"Won't West do?" asked Carlotta. "And is it what they call an Inquest?"

"No," Nicky told her, for Raynor had already left them, "not that, just a sort of preliminary inquiry as to the details."

"Oh," and Carlotta shuddered, "all that awful story to be gone over again?"

"Yes, just that. So there's no necessity for any of us to bother about it. Jack will look after everything. Now, you girls try to eat some lunch. You'll need all the physical support you can get."

"Where do you suppose Lulie is?" Nan said, for the twentieth time, as they sat at table. "Where do you think, Carly?"

"She must have gone to town," said Carlotta, her attention all on her wounded hand, which was proving refractory as a means of carrying food.

"You poor child," said Nicky, with his ready sympathy. "Shall I feed you or will you have Violet?"

"Violet, please," and the quiet, well-mannered colored maid came to wait on her mistress.

So apt and deft was she, that Carlotta was fed and waited upon with the most unobtrusive efficiency, and Nan felt relieved, for she had apprehended a lot of inconvenience from the wounded hand.

Upstairs, in the study, the Coroner was holding his inquiry with a briskness quite in contrast to the uncertain attitudes of Constable Blair.

The Coroner, whose name was Bailey, was a small, wiry and very alert person. His eyes were black and little, and they darted quickly about as he talked or listened, seeming to prefer the latter.

When Raynor arrived, he had heard the main facts from Blair, and was questioning Galley West, who, for some reason, was in a contrary frame of mind.

Raynor listened with surprise, for West was usually suave if not genial.

"You often saw Mr. Clearman wearing these masks?" Bailey snapped out.

"Every day," was West's terse answer.

"Could there be anything of a poisonous nature in the mask itself?" Bailey went on.

"No, sir," West replied.

"How do you know?"

"From observation."

"What do you mean? Be more explicit."

"I have seen Mr. Clearman wear nearly all of these masks, and no harm has ever come to him from them."

"But not all?"

"Perhaps not all."

"Have you ever known him to wear this particular one before?" and Bailey pointed to the mask which had been found on Clearman's face.

"No, sir."

"Then may it not be, that there is some poison in the lining of the mask which killed its wearer?"

"That is for you to say, sir."

"That's a new idea," said Raynor, meditatively. "I hadn't thought of that. But it is a matter that can be easily tested, can't it?"

"Surely," Bailey returned, looking sharply at Jack. "You saw the—the remains, with this mask on?"

"Yes, he wore it when he died——"

"You don't know that! You only know it was on his face when his dead body was discovered. How do you know it was on him when he died?"

Raynor stared at the Coroner.

"What do you mean?" he said, slowly, "are you implying——"

"I'm implying nothing. I'm asking you a simple question. Good God, man, this case is baffling enough as it is. Don't put any obstacles in my way, when I'm trying to get a line on it. Don't you see, that if Clearman was killed, the murderer might have put the mask on him afterward in order to fog up the thing! And it is,—it's got to be,—either suicide or murder. I can't see the way clear to deduce suicide——"

"You ignore the supernatural angle, then?"

"Entirely and absolutely. There never was anybody killed in this world by supernatural means and there never will be! Get that out of your head at once."

"That's your opinion, I am sure,—but others may disagree with you."

"But the others are not the Coroner in this instance, and I am. I daren't make a positive statement so soon, but I am most certainly convinced that Stephen Clearman was killed by a human intent, and that the supernatural effect was used to screen the murderer."

Jack Raynor dropped into a chair.

"You may be right," he said, "but that opens up a vista of much unpleasantness in the immediate future."

"It does," Bailey returned, grimly. "Murder is not a pleasant thing at best—if it has a best,—and at its worst, and this is the worst case I ever saw, it opens up vistas for which unpleasantness is too mild a term."

"What are you going to do?" Raynor asked, but his tone was lifeless,—hopeless and despairing.

"Do?" and Bailey's eyes seemed to bore into him with their determined gaze, "do? I'm going to prove it a murder and find the murderer!"

"Whether he exists or not?"

"He exists all right," Bailey declared.

CHAPTER VII

SCOTT'S QUESTIONS

"Isn't this the man they called the King of Clubs?" Bailey asked, suddenly.

"Yes," said Goring, who had come to the study to relieve Raynor, and had sent the latter down to his luncheon.

"And they call his wife the Queen of Diamonds?"

"Yes."

"Why? Are they so fond of cards?"

"Oh, no, it isn't that at all. It's because Clearman was so much of a clubman and because Mrs. Clearman is so fond of diamonds."

"Fond of diamonds, eh?" and Bailey pricked up his mental ears. "Did the deceased leave a will?"

"I don't know, but don't get any bee in your bonnet about Mrs. Clearman. She and her husband were about the most devoted couple I ever saw, and he gave her all the diamonds a woman could wish for and then some! As to the Face Card business, they also call Mr. Raynor the Jack of Hearts——"

"And what do they call you?" Bailey smiled at Nicky, as nearly everybody did.

"Oh, nothing much. I have been called the Joker, because of my natural wit; but oftener, I play the deuce."

Bailey's smile was perfunctory now, he had no time for foolery.

"Here's Scott," he said, curtly, as a man appeared at the door of the study, apparently having found the way upstairs by himself. "He is the police detective and now the investigation can proceed in his presence."

Marvin Scott went rather quickly round the room. He seemed to absorb information about the case without asking many questions. He put some inquiries regarding the masks and curious weapons, but oftener than not cut short the answers.

He examined Stephen Clearman's body with a few rapid, deft touches and some long looks.

"Poisoned? Prussic Acid?" he said, after an inquisitive sniff at the dead man's lips.

"No," returned Bailey, shaking his head. "It seems he was fond of Bitter Almond flavoring and used it continually in his food. Anyway, there's not a chance of poisoning, for there's no container about. You see, it's a most mysterious affair."

"Yes," and Scott sat down near the Coroner. "It's one of those cases you read about, where a man is found dead in a room impossible of access and yet it isn't a suicide."

"That's just it!" and Nicky looked at the detective curiously. "How clearly you put it. For there was no means of entrance, ——"

"Yet somebody got in," interrupted Scott. "Oh, yes, he did, for that man never killed himself,—never, in the world!"

"Accident?" Bailey offered.

"Can't see it," Scott returned. "It might be the mask was—is a poisoned affair. It must be tested, but I've not enough knowledge of those strange Oriental poisons to want to meddle with it myself. I'll take it to a laboratory and find out."

"Could he have died of fright?" asked Nicky, who feared and dreaded a decision of murder.

"Not likely. What would frighten him? He was in his element among these heathenish surroundings, I take it. Now, never mind the locked room. Just for a moment, consider a murderer. Who would it be, Mr. Goring?"

Nicky wasn't often floored but this sudden question was a bit of a facer.

"My lord!" he exclaimed, "I don't know! Why the devil do you ask me such a thing as that? There isn't a person on this green earth, that I know of, who would want to kill Stephen Clearman, and if there had been he couldn't have done it! The man was locked in the room——"

"Once for all, get this straight," said Scott, testily. "We know he was locked in this room. We know he died here. Now, either he killed himself or somebody or something killed him. These are the things we have to find out. But if he was

murdered, the murderer did get in and out, whether the door was locked or not. How about a secret passage,—just what such a man would have, eh?"

"I doubt it," Nicky said, slowly, for this idea had not before occurred to him, "but, I say, you can find out from Mr. Raynor! He's the architect who designed and superintended the construction of this new wing. He'll know."

"Oh, a new wing, is it?" and Scott seemed disappointed. He had hoped for an old building, with secret panels and concealed staircases.

"Yes, and Mr. Clearman wasn't that sort of man at all. He studied old magic stuff, but he, himself, was as practical and as honest as the day is long. No underhanded or mysterious doings about Stephen Clearman. Anybody who ever knew him will tell you that!"

"All right, all right," said Scott, with some impatience. "That was only a suggestion. There are lots of other explanations as to the murderer's entrance and exit. But unless it was a stroke, and the doctor says it was not, the man was surely murdered. I've scrutinized his desk, and there is no implement, no poison which he could have used, that would not leave some trace,—some container or clue to its nature. However, a post mortem will show up the truth if it was a poison that did for him. I'm only here now to get the stories of the people who were in the house at the time."

"Must you bother them?" asked Nicky, anxiously.

"Every last one of them," declared Scott. "And mind this, I am the sort of detective who suspects everybody. Experience has taught me it is the best way to get at the roots of the matter. Also, I want them one by one, and each one alone. That, too, I have proved to be a good plan. So, since you are here on the spot, Mr. Goring, I'll start in with you. Please tell me, as briefly as you can, all you know about Stephen Clearman and his actions today."

"I don't know so very much," Nicky said with a grim expression, "but it may be I know more than most of the others, because, I was doubtless the last, with the exception of your hypothetical murderer, to see Mr. Clearman alive."

"Yes?" said Scott, but he kept his gaze sharply on Nicky's face.

"After breakfast, Mr. Clearman came directly to this room. As I was interested in his antiquarian work, I asked if I might come, too. He permitted me to do so, but after a very short time, I saw that he was not in the mood to talk with me and I concluded to go away."

"What did he say to give you that impression?"

"It wasn't so much what he said, as his manner. He seemed preoccupied, turned his attention to me with an effort when I asked him a question, and I just sensed that he would rather be alone."

"I suggested that we postpone our chat about the masks until tomorrow, and he agreed at once. He also told me as I left the room, to tell Mr. Raynor that he wished to postpone the discussion of some business with him until afternoon."

"Then you left him?"

"Then I left him. He was near the door as I went out, and before I had gone three steps along the hall, I heard him turn the key in the lock."

"You mean you heard the key turned in the lock."

"Yes. Are you implying there was someone hidden in this room—while I was in here?" Nicky looked blank with amazement.

"I'm implying that there might have been. When you have been up against as many problems of a locked room as I have, you'll know that no possibility must be overlooked. Go on; then you went, where?"

"On through the halls, downstairs and out to the gardens where I joined Mr. Raynor and Miss Loftis, two of my fellow guests."

"And Mr. Clearman was alive when you left him?"

"Very much so. As I said, he seemed a little preoccupied and thoughtful, but that was far from being an unusual thing with him. I understand he was almost always like that when up in this room, engaged in his studies. Never so, when he was at leisure or with his family."

"I see. Thank you. Now only one more thing. What did Mr. Clearman talk to you about while you were here for that short

time? Did he talk at all?"

Nicky thought for a moment.

"I will tell you," he said, "for I'm sure it will preclude all idea of suicide. Then, as I feel sure a murder is an impossibility, you'll be forced to a decision of natural death, or—or supernatural."

Scott stared at him, but said only, "Go on."

"He didn't talk much, but what he said was all on the subject of his possible death by reason of the old curse. You know about that?"

Scott nodded, and Nicky went on.

"He said he knew how to circumvent that curse, and that he had used and was still using every precaution——"

"What sort of precautions?"

"I don't know definitely, but I know he meant the wearing of certain masks at certain times, and the performing of certain heathen or magic rites——"

"Don't you know what these rites were?"

"No, I've not the least idea. He always did all these things behind locked doors. He was a little unbalanced, I think, on these subjects, but sound as a dollar every other way. However, he was so intent on using every possible precaution against death, he so dreaded and feared that he might die, that it is absurd to think for a moment he would himself cut short his life. Moreover, he was full of a great scheme that was to improve the morals of these heathen people. He proposed to start stations at certain points, where they could be taught modern and civilized notions of political economy and general efficiency."

"He had started any of these?"

"No, he was just about to do so. He was considering asking Mr. Raynor to help him plan these stations, and he was eager and impatient to get his missions started."

"He called them Missions?"

"Yes, Mission Stations. But he didn't like to have them confounded with religious mission work. He was trying to think up a really expressive name for them."

"You have made a strong point, Mr. Goring. A man with those plans and also with those fears, is not going to kill himself. Now, at what time did you go from the room, leaving Mr. Clearman here behind you?"

Scott watched him closely, for it was one of the detective's pet tricks to gather from the way a witness answered a question as to time, whether he was strictly honest or not.

But Nicky gave him no cause for suspicion.

"I can't say exactly," he returned. "As a matter of fact, I seldom do know the time. But I remember that as we rose from the breakfast table Mrs. Clearman made the remark that it was already ten o'clock. Then we came right up here, and I was here, I should think, about a quarter of an hour. That's the best I can say."

"All right, say you left here about ten-fifteen. Thank you, Mr. Goring, that will be all. Now, it is my habit when a man dies, to question his wife first. Will you ask Mrs. Clearman to come here?"

"Yes," said Nicky, because there seemed to be nothing else to say. He was sorry for Carlotta, sorry that she had to go alone, but it must be done.

He passed Violet in the hall, asked her to send her mistress at once to the study and went on downstairs to talk to the others.

Carlotta Clearman was self-possessed and dignified when she approached the door of the study, but as she entered, her calm gave way. The sight of that still figure in the chair at the desk overcame her self-control, and she turned to run away.

"Come in, Mrs. Clearman," said Scott's peremptory voice and calling all her courage to her aid, she entered and faced the detective.

"Don't be afraid," he said kindly.

"I am not afraid," Carlotta's voice quivered, "but the sight of—my husband unnerves me. Can you not talk to me elsewhere?"

"No, if you please, it must be here. But I shall not detain you long."

Carlotta sat down in a chair which faced the door, and so brought her back toward the desk. For a moment she buried her face in her hands, and then, as suddenly, she raised it, and said, in a steady voice, "I am ready. What can I tell you?"

"Only what were the circumstances in which you last saw Mr. Clearman?"

"I was with him at breakfast," Carlotta said, reminiscently, "then he came up here to his study, and I came with him. I came into the room for a moment, as he was telling me something,——"

"What was he telling you?"

"That he was going to begin on the plans for his new building today, and he wanted me to be present, as he liked to have my advice and opinions."

"Meaning the buildings for his foreign Mission Stations?"

"Yes, do you know about them?" Carlotta looked up brightly. "He was so interested," the tears came again, "and now ——"

"What now? About the stations, I mean?"

"After a time, I shall take up the work and try to have it carried out as he planned. I know a great deal about it, and I am sure I can do it."

"You were interested in the work?"

"Oh, deeply. I have been there, you see, and I know the need for such help."

"Yes, of course. Then you came into this room——"

"Yes, but I stayed only a moment, for I was about to attend to some housekeeping matters, and too, Mr. Goring followed us, and I knew he was anxious to talk to Mr. Clearman. So I went off to my own affairs, and I—never saw my husband alive again."

Carlotta was calmer now, she had forced herself to remember that though she might give way to emotion when alone, or with loving friends, she must preserve her dignity before this official,—this officer of the law.

"You know all about these strange masks, I believe?"

"I can't say I know all about them," she returned, with the shadow of a smile. "That would mean a lifetime of study. But I know much that my husband taught me, and much that I learned while in the Eastern countries."

"And the mask he wore when he was—was found dead,—what did that mask mean?"

"What did it mean?"

"Yes, what mask was it? What does it signify?"

"Oh, yes. We don't usually word it just that way. But that is what is known as a war mask. It is worn in battle by some of the heathen people."

"And why did your husband wear it?"

"It is a little difficult to explain to one not entirely conversant with the subject. But Mr. Clearman's family is under a curse,—ah, I see you know about that——"

"Only in a general way. And I never supposed it was taken seriously by him."

"Well, it was and it wasn't. Anyway, if there was anything in it, my husband was under the ban, for he had done what the curse forbade. And so, he was wearing the war mask, I feel very sure, with the intention of warring against the inimical spirits that would wreak the curse on him."

"But they did?"

"Yes, Mr. Scott, they did. You may do all the detective work you like, you may find clues and get evidence and hear witnesses, but you can never arrive at any true conclusion as to the death of Stephen Clearman, but that he died as a direct result of defying the curse of his fathers and disobeying their command. He was not the first of his family to do so, he may not be the last. But there are the facts. Make the most of them."

Carlotta had a faraway look, a sort of mystic gaze that went far toward affecting Scott's common sense and making him wonder if there could be something in this trumpery, after all.

He pulled himself together, collected his wits and with a smile, said: "You mustn't ask a hard-headed detective to believe in that sort of thing, Mrs. Clearman. I can see how you have been influenced by your husband's beliefs, but as for me and my work, we have to cut out the supernatural. Now for another matter. Why were you so anxious to get back that letter you posted this morning?"

She gave a start of surprise, but the astute eyes watching her saw that it was merely a passing surprise at his knowledge of the incident and not a cause for anxiety.

"Oh, that," and Carlotta smiled; "it was only that I forgot to date the thing, and as it was a regret for a bridge party, I thought it ought to be dated."

"Don't you know it is against the law to tamper with a mailbox?"

She laughed lightly. "Nonsense! It might be if I were doing anything really wrong. But to pull back my poor little letter and write a date on it,—I doubt if the law would deal very harshly with that."

Carlotta's was a wilful nature, chiding always roused her resentment, and invariably made her saucy.

"Have you the letter?"

"No, the silly postman put it in his pocket. But it doesn't matter, I can write another note to my friend. The only thing that matters is my poor hand."

She held up the injured member, which was swathed in bandages, covered by a dainty lace-frilled handkerchief.

"I am sorry," said Scott, with cold politeness, "I trust it will soon be well."

Carlotta pouted a trifle,—she was not accustomed to having men seem uninterested.

"You are the second wife of Stephen Clearman?"

"Yes," said Carlotta, remembering her resolve to be dignified.

"How long have you been married?"

"Two years."

"You spent all that time traveling in the Far East?"

"We were gone about eighteen months. Before that we were here at home."

"How long had his first wife been dead when you were married?"

"I think, about sixteen years, or maybe seventeen."

"He has a daughter."

"Yes."

"Where is she?"

"I am not sure. She is not in the house, she went away this morning. It is most likely she went to New York for a day's shopping, but she did not tell me of her plans."

"You and she are good friends?"

"Oh, yes, we are fond of each other,—far more so than the average step-relations are apt to be."

"I see. Does she often go away without announcing her intentions?"

"Very seldom. I don't quite understand it. Unless she made up her mind suddenly to go, and had to hurry to catch a train."

"Who took her to the station?"

"I don't know. It never occurred to me to ask. The chauffeur, I suppose."

"You think she will soon return?"

"Of course she'll be home by five or six o'clock. I wish to goodness she would come."

"Now, Mrs. Clearman, tell me of these apparitions or whatever you may choose to call them, that have been seen in this house lately."

"I don't mind the term apparitions. My husband objected to it because he held they were not apparitions but appearances of real demons."

"Demons?"

"Yes, but that doesn't mean devils. It is merely the term used by the people who believe in these strange religions, for their gods."

"Oh."

"Yes. You see, it is very hard to make things clear to those who are not familiar with the lore of magic."

"To me it is sheer nonsense,——"

"All knowledge is nonsense to those who don't know it."

Scott reddened a little. He wished to hold up to scorn this magic business and suddenly found himself scorned instead.

"Please keep to the subject in hand," he said, a little unjustly. "Tell me of the spectres."

And Carlotta told him of the first one, which Miss Phoebe saw, floating through the hall, and which Lulie saw also.

Then she related how, on the following night, her husband had awakened her and led her to the hall where together they had seen the same sight, a mask floating unsupported, high in the air.

Scott listened intently.

"What was it like?" he queried.

"It was the skull mask," she returned, in a low voice. "Shall I show it to you?"

"If you please."

She rose, and selecting a dreadful looking one from the collection brought it to him, saying, "This is the one."

It was a skull, not apparently of bone, but showing mosaic work of blue, glistening squares.

"This is a real skull," she explained, "overlaid with turquoise plates and lignite. The eyes are pyrites."

"Interesting, but——" he waved the thing away, "what I want to know is this. Was it this very skull you saw, you and your husband,——or was it another——"

Carlotta pondered. "Why, I don't know," she said. "I never thought of that. I suppose it was a vision, a showing, you know, of this god——"

"Is this a god?"

"Oh, my Heavens! I don't know these things! All I know is the names of the masks, and what they signify, and where they came from and such things as that. I never saw any supernatural manifestations except that one time, and I can't tell you if it was this identical mask or the spirit of the man who once wore this skull for a head!"

She was a little hysterical now, and Scott felt sorry for her. Clearly she knew less of the lore of these strange things than she had pretended to, but as he knew, women often did that.

"You may go, Mrs. Clearman," he said, more kindly than he had before spoken. "I think your knowledge is limited, but I may want to ask you some more about the masks at another time. Had your husband any enemies, that you know of?"

"None. I know they say every worthwhile man has some enemies, but my husband had none, unless you count some of these savage people from whom he contrived to get some of these masks. They were not always pleased with his

methods."

"Would they come over here and kill him because of their anger?"

"They would have no way of getting here. But they could send their magic——"

"They didn't, though. Whatever happened to cause Mr. Clearman's death, it was not a matter of magic nor was it in any way or to the slightest degree supernatural."

As the door opened to let Carlotta go away, Scott caught sight of Violet hovering near, and called her in.

Carlotta came back with her, and the detective made no objection.

"You were with Mrs. Clearman the night she saw the strange spirit?" he asked.

The colored woman looked at him so directly that he felt a bit uncomfortable.

"No suh," she said, in a very low voice. "But I was with her d'reckly afterward."

"Did you see it?"

"Laws, no, suh! I'd let out a screech to raise de dead, ef I had!"

"How did you happen to be about?"

"Aft'wards? Oh, Mr. Clearman, or else Miss Ca'lotta, one of 'em, rang de bell, and o' couhse I come a runnin'."

"And you found your mistress hysterical?"

"No, suh, not to say 'sterical. But bothered, yes, jest bothered. Who wouldn't be? Seein' things, like that!"

"Surely. It was a trying experience. Did Mrs. Clearman go to sleep at once?"

Violet thought. "Sho'tly," she said. "Quite sho'tly. She's a good sleeper,—the lamb!"

"And her husband's idol?"

"You said it, suh! Mr. Clearman, he jest iderlized his wife, and her, him. That they did, oh lawsy, how can that lamb live, 'thouten o' him?"

"You may go," Scott said, a little tired of emotional expressions. "And wait, you,—er,—Violet, send Miss Phoebe Clearman in here, will you?"

"Yes suh. What shall I tell her, suh?"

"Tell her Mr. Scott wants to see her in the study, at once. Ask her to come without delay."

"I say," Bailey whispered as the colored woman disappeared, "I'm beginning to lean toward the spooks, myself."

"I'm not," said Scott.

CHAPTER VIII

WHERE IS LULIE?

Phoebe Clearman presented herself.

As the delicate little figure appeared in the doorway, both Bailey and Scott instinctively rose to their feet.

For the elderly spinster had a dainty, old-time grace of manner, that seemed to call forth what latent chivalry might be in the natures of these careless mannered, indifferent men.

Scott placed a chair for her, with all the courtesy at his command, and Bailey assumed a more respectful and deferential attitude than he had been showing.

Miss Phoebe had a small, thin face and a fragile, slender body. She wore a black gown of lusterless silk, plainly made and with a touch of white net frilling at throat and wrists. Her hair was gray and of silvery sheen, and hung over her ears in little bobbing curls. Both Carlotta and Lulie condemned these curls as old-fashioned, but Phoebe Clearman had a strong though unobtrusive will of her own, and invariably followed it.

Her eyes were blue, and of that penetrating gaze which is so terribly disconcerting when meant to be.

She sat down carefully, as if afraid she might break herself, and this very air of hers seemed to imbue her audience with an added respect and sense of honor due.

Scott was a little at a loss as to how to begin.

"Miss Clearman," he said, "first of all do you attribute the death of your brother to supernatural causes?"

"Most emphatically, yes," she replied, in a low, even voice. "How can I, or anyone, think otherwise? The curse is on the house, it claimed two victims years ago. My brother dared it, and he has suffered the consequences."

She held a tiny, lace-bordered handkerchief to her eyes, and then rolled the blue orbs at Scott with such a glance of woe, that he was more than ever reminded of the ladies in *Cranford* or the pictures in an old *Godey's Lady's Book*, which he had seen.

He tried to shake off his hesitancy to question her, for he knew it must be done.

"But, Miss Clearman, in this day and generation, one can't believe in the powers of spirits or demons——"

"Not spirits, those are the souls of departed human beings. Demons are powers of evil, and who shall say that they cannot kill?"

"I say so," Bailey broke in. He was less susceptible than Scott, and began to think the old lady had more knowledge of the whole matter than she admitted. "You can't believe, Miss Clearman, that your brother was killed without human means or intent."

"I do believe just that, Mr. Bailey; and otherwise,—will you tell me how a human agency could have killed him, when he was alone in a locked room?"

"Never mind that part for the moment. Suppose you tell us what you know, not what you surmise or imagine. When did you last see Mr. Clearman alive?"

"At the breakfast table. He told of having seen the Skull mask the night before. I had seen it myself the night previous to that, and I knew then it was a warning. I knew that my brother was doomed, and that no power on earth could save him."

"You took it philosophically," commented Scott, beginning to recover his equanimity.

"Such is my nature," and Phoebe gave him a cool glance. "And yet, when he began to tell at the breakfast table, of having seen it himself, and his wife, too, I was so overcome I couldn't listen to it, and I left the table and went to my room. I remained there until West came to me and said he couldn't get into my brother's study."

"Why did he go to tell you, instead of telling Mrs. Clearman?"

"I suppose he felt that I could better bear the shock than she could. I am, of course, a most devoted sister, but West probably thought I would not feel such deep grief as a wife must. I know of no other reason for his telling me first. And,

too, I am of a quiet, practical nature, while Mrs. Clearman is excitable and emotional."

"Reasonable enough, surely," and Scott nodded his comprehension. "Now as to these 'Stations,' that Mr. Clearman planned to construct. You approved of them?"

"No, I did not. An utterly absurd project! Only one remove from the religious missionary stations, after all. It is too ridiculous to think one man could make any impression on tribes that have lived for centuries hidebound in their own manners and customs. A great syndicate or nation-wide attempt might produce results, but my brother's plan would have amounted to nothing."

"Your brother left a will?" Bailey asked, suddenly.

"I suppose so," she returned, indifferently. "It is doubtless in his lawyer's keeping."

"Do you know its terms?"

"Not entirely. It divides his estate pretty much among his wife, his daughter and myself. I do not know the proportions."

"You do not know where Miss Lulie Clearman is?"

"No. But it is pretty certain she went to the city. She will surely be home soon."

"Then, you can tell us nothing that might lead to the discovery of a possible murderer of your brother?" Scott watched her closely.

"No, for he was not murdered,—as you mean it. He was put to death by evil spirits,—if otherwise, must there not have been some trace, some clue or evidence of some sort as to the means employed?"

"That is the great mystery. But before this, murders have been committed in a room apparently impossible of access. Miss Clearman, as you say yourself, you are practical minded, suppose for a moment you ignore the magic side of it. Can you think of anyone who would wish to bring about Mr. Clearman's death, or any possible way in which it could have been accomplished?"

The blue eyes looked at him, thoughtfully.

"No," she said, "I can't. The servants are all trustworthy, and I can't see how any intruder from outside could have effected an entrance. As you must admit, there is no theory to fit the case."

"How about the man, West?"

"West? Why, he couldn't have done it! He found him——"

"Yes, I know, but that's no argument."

"How could he have killed him?" the blue eyes were wonderingly fixed on the questioner.

"Well, *I* think Mr. Clearman was poisoned by Prussic acid. Yes, I know about his custards with the bitter almond flavoring. Now suppose somebody put in too much of that flavoring?"

Miss Clearman smiled.

"My good man," she said, in such a patronizing tone that Scott felt a mad desire to denounce her, "a barrel of that flavoring extract wouldn't kill a man! It's the same odor and, I suppose the same ingredient as Prussic acid, but the extract used in the kitchen is harmless, of course. And, too, he ate his custards at the breakfast table——"

"West might have brought him another in this room,—one with poison in it——"

"And then, West went off, and Stephen locked the door after him, and then sat down at his desk, and ate the custard, saucer, spoon and all?"

The sarcastic little face showed the contempt she felt for the suggestion.

Scott was chagrined and distinctly annoyed. But of one thing he was certain—that Phoebe Clearman would be of no help to him. If she knew anything at all about the matter, and he still thought she did, she didn't propose to tell it, and he realized that she was the sort of person who could not be coerced or threatened.

"It is easy enough to jeer at a theory, Miss Clearman, it is not easy to get at the truth. And once for all, I reject any idea of supernatural forces, and I propose to discover and expose the human force that is responsible."

Scott was goaded at last to direct speech, and he watched its effect.

But Phoebe Clearman shrugged her aristocratic old shoulders.

"Very well," she said. "But have a care that you do not accuse an innocent person. And remember, too, that a mask is not a god or a demon. But the donning of a mask makes a god or a demon of the wearer."

"Stuff and twaddle!" Bailey broke in, he was really vexed now at the insistence on the mask business. "Miss Clearman, you saw a—er—manifestation yourself, night before last, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Aren't there supposed to be three by way of warning?"

"Yes," and she spoke eagerly now. "I saw the first one, Mr. Clearman and his wife saw the second, and there is no doubt in my mind that the third and last appeared to Mr. Clearman this morning and the fatality occurred then."

"Oh, I see. Now, as to this appearance you saw, will you describe it, briefly?"

"It was merely a mask, the Skull mask, floating along, high in the air."

"It was luminous, I am told."

"Yes, faintly so."

"Did it float along evenly, or, rather, by jerks?"

"Why—I don't know. Evenly, I should say, yet, it may have paused and then proceeded, I didn't notice that."

"No matter. Are you on good terms with all the family——"

"Certainly. I'd scorn any other attitude."

"Yet you do not love your brother's second wife."

"That is only a natural resentment in having his first wife, who was my darling, supplanted. But the present Mrs. Clearman is a fine woman, and she and I are most certainly friendly. As you may imagine it was a little hard for me to hand over the reins of government after keeping house for my brother many years. But all this is a personal and family matter and entirely outside your jurisdiction."

The pale face now showed indignation and the blue eyes shone with resentment, but Phoebe's voice was still low and even.

Scott, however, had ceased to notice her mental attitudes, and stuck strictly to his inquiries.

"What is this diary that has been found——"

"That is a diary of a Clearman ancestor, the one who laid the original curse on the family. It is in tatters,—and occasionally a stray leaf is found in some old book or chest. Mrs. Clearman has it, I think, in her possession, or it may be in my brother's desk. Read it, Mr. Scott, it will show you why the Clearmans have reason to believe in such matters."

"Thank you, I shall most certainly read it. You may go, Miss Clearman, and please ask Miss Loftis to come to me next."

Phoebe departed and Nan came.

The girl was scared and ill at ease, and seeing this, Scott tried to be casual in his manner.

"Not much from you, Miss Loftis," he said, easily. "Just a few questions in a general way. First, where do you think Miss Clearman is,—or do you know?"

"No, I don't know, and I think it's exceedingly queer. I can't imagine Lulie going off to New York for the day, without telling me she was going. It would have been different if I hadn't been staying here, but why should she run off for a whole day when we had planned lots of things to do——"

"What sort of things?"

"A golf game for this morning, and we were to go to a garden party this afternoon. Of course, we couldn't have gone as things are,—but Lulie didn't know that."

"You don't think her unexplained absence has anything to do with her father's death?"

Nan stared. "What do you mean? How could it have?"

"I don't know. That's just it. Miss Loftis, I don't know anything. How can I when there's no evidence of importance from anybody? Do you think Mr. Clearman died from supernatural influences?"

Nan gazed at him. "I don't know," she said, "do you?"

"No, I don't. But I can't find any other way to look."

"It's too ridiculous to think he was done to death by a magic thing!" she exclaimed. "And yet, what else is there to think? Nobody could get in this room, you know."

"Couldn't West?"

"Not unless Mr. Clearman let him in. And if he killed his master, and he certainly looks as if he could have done so, how did he get out and lock the door after himself?"

"Could the mask be poisoned inside?"

"Of course it *could* be! But surely you can find out such a thing as that! Haven't you made tests?"

"Not yet. I want to get the reaction from the various members of the household first."

"Oh, I see. Well, if the mask is poisonous inside, that explains the whole mystery, doesn't it? And if it isn't,—I suppose you're as much at sea as ever."

"Were Miss Clearman and her father on good terms?"

"Always scrapping,—sometimes had real rows,—but at heart devoted to one another. Don't go off on a notion that Lulie Clearman killed her Dad and then ran away,—'cause she never did that—never!"

"How do you know?"

"Oh, so that is your theory, is it?" Nan grew very serious. "Well, Mr. Scott, you couldn't trump up anything more asinine, more utterly and absurdly nonsensical than such a thought as that!"

"Did Miss Lulie favor the idea of the foreign Stations her father was planning?"

"No, she hated it—" and suddenly Nan realized the trend of the question. "That is," she amended, "she thought the plan a good one but not very feasible."

But she did not fool the astute Scott. He saw at once that she had tried to obliterate the effect of her first statement by the second.

"In fact, Miss Loftis, the erection and outfitting of those stations would have used up a very large portion of Stephen Clearman's fortune, and his heirs would therefore receive at his death, far less inheritance than if the Stations were not built."

Nan was horrified. "Do you mean," she stormed at him, "that because of a fear of losing money, some one of his heirs, some one of his family, murdered him to prevent it?"

"It might be so," Scott said, with apparent nonchalance, but watching closely her play of expression.

"It couldn't be so! Perhaps one of the servants—but no, they are all faithful, and, too, how could anybody have got in?"

"How, indeed?" repeated Scott, urbanely. "You say the servants are all above suspicion?"

"Why, yes, I say that, from my knowledge of them. But of course, I am only a guest. The chauffeur is a strange sort of person—so is the man they call Galley West—" She broke off, realizing that she was thinking aloud.

"You don't really know anything against either of those men?"

"No, of course not. Now, look here, Mr. Scott, I wish you'd turn part of your attention, at least, to finding Miss Clearman. Lulie, I mean. Where do you think she could be, if not on a simple shopping tour in the city. And *I* don't think that's where she is at all."

"I don't, either," said Nicky Goring, who was in and out of the room, and had been in during all of Nan's conversation. "That girl was too full of plans for today, to run off for the whole day, without a word. Something has happened to her."

"She may have run down to New York on a sudden small errand," said Nan, "and met with some accident, been run over or something, and she may be badly hurt. I say, let's call up the hospitals."

"Wait a little longer," Nicky advised. "Carlotta is sure she'll come on the five o'clock train. She seems curious about her absence but not alarmed."

"Well, I am alarmed," Nan declared. "You know, Nicky, how keen she was about the garden party this afternoon——"

"Maybe she went to get a new hat or something, to wear to that," Goring suggested.

"It's barely possible," Nan agreed thoughtfully, "but that wouldn't take her all day! I'm awfully afraid there's been an accident."

"Can't you find out if she went to the train, and who drove her down to the station?"

"Of course. Just ask the chauffeur——"

"I tried to, but he was off somewhere. I'll tackle him again." And Goring went off to find the man.

Then Scott called the various servants, and put them all through a catechism, one by one.

The results were slight. He learned no new facts from most of them, but found out that they had nearly all of them been in service a long time, and were nearly all aware that Mr. Clearman had remembered them generously in his will.

"But I can't see any one of them coming up here and killing the master in order to get a legacy, however generous," Scott said, gloomily.

"It's easier to see than to see a member of the family doing it for the same mercenary reason," Bailey observed.

"Yes, I suppose so, and then, there's always the outside intruder to fall back on. Some secret enemy or some disgruntled acquaintance——"

"Don't speculate, get on with the inquiries, it's after four o'clock, now."

Toward the last, the cook came.

"Your name?" asked Scott, wearily.

"Jinny Stagg."

"Related to the butler, Stagg?"

"His wife, sir."

"I see. Well, Jinny, do you know anything about this sad affair?"

"That I don't," her eyes turned toward Clearman's body and quickly away again. "Nothing at all, sir, exceptin' what West told us all."

"Well, I don't suppose you do. Now do you know anything about Miss Lulie Clearman?"

Jinny moved uneasily. "Anythin' about her, sir?"

"Yes, anything about her. About where she is,—where she went today. I see you do know something, so out with it."

"She—she told me not to tell, sir——"

"That's all right in ordinary circumstances. Always obey orders. But when the law steps in, other orders are cancelled. So tell it out, Mrs. Stagg. Where is she?"

Jinny sighed. She adored Miss Lulie, but clearly the law's requirements must be met.

"I don't know, sir, but this I do know. She came down to the kitchen this morning, by the servants' stairway, secret-like, you know, and asked me for a cup of coffee and a bit of toast. She eat 'em, right there in my kitchen, and she told me to get Leonard, the chauffeur, to take her to the station in the little car. And he did, and that's all I know about it. She said to tell nobody at all."

"Did she say why you were to tell nobody?"

"She said she was on a secret errand and I must say I hadn't seen her at all."

"Did she tell Leonard the same?"

"She did, sir. Leonard took her to the train, and was back before anyone missed him. All day, sir, Leonard and me, we've been uncertain what to do, but we decided to wait till the five o'clock train came in anyway."

"Did she tell Leonard to meet the five o'clock train?"

"No sir. And I think she expected to come home sooner than that. But she said she'd come up in a hired car from the station."

"Did she seem gay and merry, as if her errand to New York was to be a happy surprise for somebody?"

"That she didn't, sir. She was queer-like. Thinkin' all the time, and sort of hesitatin' about goin'. I never knew Miss Lulie to act like she did this mornin', sir."

"Peculiar. And you know no more about it all?"

"No, sir."

"How was she dressed?"

"In a dark blue silk frock, with a sports coat. And a little hat with a small feathery thing at the side. Just as she'd be always dressed to go in the train."

"And she seemed worried?"

"Nervous, more. Jerky, like, she was. Once she laid down her piece of toast, and said, sudden, 'I won't go!' and then in a minute, she said, 'Yes, I will!' and just then the car came—to the kitchen door, sir,—and Miss Lulie jumps in, and that's the last I see of her."

Jinny was of a quiet, respectful demeanor, and folded her hands on her large white apron as she awaited further questions.

But Scott only dismissed her and told her to send Leonard to him.

But just then, Nicky Goring came, bringing Leonard.

The man, as Nan Loftis had said, was a strange looking person, but Scott had long since learned not to judge by looks.

He allowed Leonard to sit down, and though Goring, Raynor and Nan were all in the room, he didn't ask them to leave.

Leonard was ill at ease, his long, light brown eyes rolled about, ever and again turning toward Clearman, still in the desk chair, and then away again.

"You know anything about the murder?" asked Scott with a suddenness intended to startle.

It did, and Leonard jumped as he replied, "N—no, sir."

"Aren't you the one who helped break in the door?"

"No, sir, that was Rogers, sir; he's a mechanic and handy man for the house. I'm only a chauffeur."

"I see. And you drove Miss Clearman to the station this morning?"

"Yes, sir,—but she said——"

"I know, she told you not to tell. But now things are different, you see."

"Yes, sir."

"Tell me anything you can about her. Did she speak to you?"

"No, sir,—except when we were about half way, she told me to turn back, she'd changed her mind about going. Then, I had no more'n turned around, when she changed her mind again, and told me to turn and hurry to the train. I did, and she was just in time to catch it."

"Did she seem worried—or bothered?"

"She did, sir. She was all on edge. I could see, though she said nothing to me only what I've told you. But at the very last minute, as she was about to step on the car steps, she half turned back. Then the conductor kinda gave her a boost, him

not thinkin' she meant to turn back, and in a minute the train pulled out."

"She didn't tell you to come to meet her on her return?"

"No, sir, said she'd come up in Briggs's car. He runs a hack car."

"I see. That will be all, Leonard."

CHAPTER IX

THE ACCUSATION

On Friday evening the members of the household sat grouped on the terrace.

The funeral of Stephen Clearman had taken place the day before, and now the King of Clubs was merely a memory, a name.

The Inquest, too, was over, finished that very afternoon, with the obvious verdict of "Death resulting from mysterious and unknown causes."

For an autopsy had brought forth no knowledge of what had caused the strange death of Stephen Clearman.

The doctors admitted themselves baffled. For a man with a sound heart, no organic affection of any sort, and no sign of a wound, to die apparently suddenly was inexplicable and they could not explain it.

Had he been poisoned by Prussic acid, or any other volatile toxine, the symptoms would have been much as they were, which, however, meant practically no symptoms at all.

In vain they looked for a tiny inconspicuous wound, even that of a hypodermic needle, but found none. Found nothing,—nothing whatever to indicate the means that had brought death to the King of Clubs.

Some of the doctors insisted on the poison theory, because of the odor that had clung to the dead man's lips. They held that the flavoring extract was not strong enough to remain perceptible so long.

But the absence of any container, the circumstance of the locked room and the quiet, peaceful attitude and appearance of the dead man seemed to preclude any theory of administration of poison by another as well as the taking of it with suicidal intent.

The Coroner had questioned the family, guests and servants at the inquest, but nothing had been learned other than what he had discovered in his first inquiry.

Yet there was unrest in the air. Grave suspicions were felt by people who could suggest no way in which murder might have been done, yet who were unwilling to consider any supernatural influence.

For of course, that side of it had been stressed. The strange masks had been shown and the curse exploited, but, though some nodded wisely, and were sure it was demoniacal work, the majority scoffed at such notions.

The mask Clearman had worn when his body was found was subjected to all known tests for poison, but showed no proof of it. Except that there was a mere trace of that same bitter odor about the mouth of the mask.

This the conservatives claimed might have been transmitted from the man's lips which retained the odor from his custard food.

Others flouted the idea of a simple flavoring extract having such strength and persistence and many people in Valley Falls began to eat similar custards until the village grocer was forced to renew his stock of flavoring essences.

The will had been read, and proved to be about what had been expected.

Clearman had left a large bequest to his sister, smaller ones to various relatives and to his servants, and the rest of his estate was to be divided between his wife and his daughter, Lulie.

The whole residuary fortune was left to Carlotta, with the direction that she should give Lulie such amounts and at such times as she deemed wise, until the girl should marry, upon which occasion she was to receive a full half of his residuary estate.

He left the matter thus, it was explained in the document, because he considered his daughter too young to have charge of a fortune, and he had implicit confidence in his wife's judgment and wisdom.

Yet the mild surprise at this arrangement and the greater mystery of Clearman's death were, for the moment, overshadowed by the wonder as to the whereabouts of Lulie Clearman.

Not a word had been heard from the girl or of her, since Leonard, the chauffeur, saw her get on the train to New York.

Had she ever reached New York? Had she left the train *en route*? Had she met with some accident? Or run away voluntarily? Or been kidnapped and held for ransom?

Though no communications had been received from the hypothetical kidnapper, many felt this was the explanation of Lulie's absence.

The group on the terrace were discussing it.

"It seems to me I shall go mad," Carlotta said, "if we don't hear from that child soon! I am now her legal guardian as well as her nearest and dearest friend. I must find her! Jack, do suggest something!"

"I wish I could," Raynor said, hopelessly. The Jack of Hearts had entirely lost his gay, debonair poise. He looked worn and harassed, and had a nervous, distracted manner that depressed them all.

"You can't feel any worse about it than I do, Carlotta," he went on. "But I shall begin a search in earnest now. I've been hampered by the inquest and other matters, but now I shall turn my whole attention to the matter of finding that girl, dead or alive!"

"Oh, don't put it like that!" and Carlotta began to cry.

"No, don't Jack," Nan said, soothing Carlotta. "We must think Lulie alive, at least, or we'll all go crazy."

"Lulie's alive, all right," Phoebe Clearman said, nodding her silvery curls; "she is held prisoner by some villains who are waiting for the right time before making their demands. I know, because the cards told me."

They were all aware of Miss Phoebe's penchant for fortune telling by cards, and made no comment, though her words bore no weight with any of them.

"I wonder if anyone ever was in such trouble as I am," said Carlotta, sorrowfully. She did not speak complainingly or as if bidding for sympathy, but more as if thinking aloud.

"My husband mysteriously dead, and my daughter mysteriously missing. I call her my daughter for she was his child and she loved him deeply, even though they did quarrel now and then."

"Let's do a little detective work on our own," suggested Nicky. "Every one try to think of anything Lulie said, during the last day or two she was here, that might give a hint, however vague, as to where she was going that morning."

"She said nothing to me," Nan declared, promptly, that could possibly hint at her going away. "We had planned for the whole day Monday, and whatever made her go off like that, was some unexpected, some sudden call of real importance."

"How could Lulie get a call like that?" Carlotta asked. "I know the child so well. Her life was an open book. Never has she gone to New York without telling me she was going. Never anywhere, without our knowing all about it. Lulie is not of a sly or secretive nature, she's as open as the day, and as honest. I have never known her to practise the slightest deception. She has gone to places some times that her father and I didn't want her to go. But it was always openly, and in defiance of our wishes."

"What sort of places?" asked Nicky.

"To parties at the homes of people we didn't care for, or for motor trips with a crowd we thought a little too rapid. I'm not telling tales, but I'm saying how frank and outspoken Lulie always is. And that's why it's so queer she should go off to New York without a word."

"Not only without a word to us," Phoebe said, "but she told cook and Leonard not to tell that she had gone. That's what I can't understand."

"Nor I," said Jack. "I've tried to construct a theory, but I can only get as far as that she was planning some sort of surprise for us, something that necessitated a sudden, flying trip to town."

"And that she met with some accident?" murmured Nan.

"Yes, I think that. I don't believe in the kidnapping theory."

"But we've inquired at all the hospitals, and all that," Phoebe said, wiping the tears from her blue eyes. "And we have the police searching. You know, a well dressed young lady like Lulie, can't be injured or killed without its being known. She always carried address cards in her purse, didn't she, Carlotta?"

"Yes, always. Stephen made it a point that we both should do so. He said it was a most necessary precaution."

"And that's all the good it did," Nicky exclaimed, bitterly. "Now, look here; I say, let's get a detective, a real detective, a private one, you know——"

"What could he do more than Mr. Scott is doing?" Raynor demanded. "It's all above and beyond detective work. The mystery of Mr. Clearman's death is strange enough, but that is not a living tragedy, like Lulie's disappearance."

"Certainly Scott can solve neither of them," Nicky went on. "Now, a big detective might be, probably would be, very expensive, so I've no right even to suggest it. But if I had the money to pay him, I'd engage him pretty quick!"

"Who?" said Raynor, "have you anybody in mind?"

"Yes. There's a man I know——"

"I agree with Nicky," Carlotta said, in her decided way. "But I think we ought to give Mr. Scott his chance first. He is working hard and faithfully. And he ought at least to be consulted, before we put some one in his place. Of course, if he approves the plan, it would be all right. And as to the expense, don't think about that. I would put all Mr. Clearman's fortune into it if it could bring back Lulie, and solve the problem of his death."

"Good for you, Carlotta!" Nicky cried. "And you're right about Scott, he deserves consideration, and after his next report, we can better judge what we ought to do. Another thing, Carly, do you want us all to stay on? I've stood by this week, because I thought I might be of help, but now, there's nothing I can do——"

"Oh, stay for a while, anyway," Carlotta said, quickly. "All of you. I dread to think of Phoebe and myself here alone, without any man in the house. And you, Nan, and Mr. Raynor,—of course, I want you to stay—for the present. I haven't been able to think things out yet, but—of course we must find Lulie. Of course we *will* find her,—but, if we shouldn't— all possibilities must be faced, you know, if we shouldn't, I want to go away from here. I can't stand it! It's terribly on my nerves already."

"Small wonder, considering what you've been through, what you're going through," said Nicky, his voice full of commiseration.

"Well," said Phoebe, "nobody could love a brother more than I loved Stephen. Or a niece more than I loved Lulie. But I'm practical, as you all know. Stephen is gone beyond recall. To me, it doesn't matter a snipjack what killed him. Why should it? No amount of knowledge can restore him to us. As to Lulie, we must use every effort to find her. But nothing can be gained by hysterics or by brooding over our grief."

"You cold-blooded creature! What are you getting at?" Carlotta's eyes blazed with indignation. "I may be hysterical, but I do my best to control that. But as to brooding over my grief,—who wouldn't? Can one lose a husband and his daughter at one blow, and not brood over it?"

"No; now, Carly, don't take it like that!" Miss Phoebe was deeply grieved. "I only meant it would be better for you——"

"I know, Phoebe,—I know, dear,—you meant it all right. Forgive me," and with a kiss the sisters-in-law restored their peace.

"Here comes Scott," Nicky announced, hearing a voice inside the house. "Do you want to see him, Carly?"

"Yes, indeed. I want to know if he has discovered anything."

"I don't want to see him," Phoebe declared. "I'll go to my room."

She passed Scott with a slight nod and went upstairs.

The detective came out to the terrace and joined the group there.

"Any news?" asked Raynor, in a hopeless tone.

"News, but no good news," Scott returned, dropping into a chair, and accepting a cigarette Nicky offered.

"You see," he went on, slowly, "the police are very busy. They're investigating and poking and snooping around——"

"You're the police, aren't you?" Carlotta asked.

"Yes, but I mean the other fellows. I'm doing my best to solve the mystery, but they're going about it from a different angle. They're trying to find a criminal——"

"A criminal!" repeated Jack.

"Yes, they hold that Mr. Clearman was murdered, and that somebody close to him was the murderer."

"Meaning anybody in particular?" Raynor asked, but his hand shook as he struck a match.

"Yes," and Scott's voice was grave, "yes. Meaning Miss Clearman."

"Phoebe?" cried Carlotta, aghast.

"No; Miss Lulie Clearman."

He waited for a storm of protest, but the shock felt was too deep for words and no one spoke.

"Yes, they've got hold of a report that she and her father quarrelled continually, that he wouldn't let her do as she wanted to, and that, in order to get her freedom and possession of a fortune, she cleverly arranged some secret way of poisoning him, and then, perhaps too frightened to stay here, she went away."

Carlotta was the first to break the heavy silence that followed.

"I never heard of anything so utterly ridiculous," she declared.

"Nor I," cried Nan, her tongue loosed at last. "Why, Lulie and her father were devoted pals! Those little tiffs didn't amount to anything! And, too, how could she poison him, when she had gone to New York?"

"That's just it," Scott went on. "They've checked up the time, and it seems Miss Clearman must have left her room and gone down the servants' stairway to the kitchen at about quarter to eleven. For she had some coffee and toast there, and then Leonard drove her to the eleven-thirty train. Well, anyway, they've doped it out that from ten-fifteen, when Mr. Goring left Mr. Clearman's study, until ten-forty-five, there was no one about that part of the house and that Miss Clearman had ample time to go into the study, poison her father in some mysterious way, and get away, unseen, and downstairs and off to New York. Don't ask me how she did it, or how she locked the door behind her—I don't know. I'm only telling you the police theory, and they're moving heaven and earth to get the facts to fit it."

Jack Raynor said, slowly: "It's fiendish, diabolical,—but it has just enough semblance of possibility to make a lot of trouble for all concerned."

"Yes," Scott continued, "the story Leonard told bears the ring of truth. Then, since Miss Clearman was so undecided about going away, so nervous and worried in her manner, and so secret as to her departure, it gives a ground for their suspicions."

"An utterly untenable ground!" Raynor said, angrily. "But there's one good thing about it! Is there a warrant out for her arrest?"

"Yes."

"Then it may be the means of finding her! She no more killed her father than I did, but if she can be found, she can refute these rotten charges, and tell why she did go to New York."

"Of course," Nan chimed in. "Lulie guilty? Never in this world! But can they find her?"

"I don't know."

"Anyway, it's certain to make them use every effort to do so," Carlotta said, "and that, as Mr. Raynor says, is the best thing that could happen."

"I'm glad you take it like this," Scott said, much relieved. "I feared you'd resent it——"

"We do resent it," Raynor interrupted, "don't make any mistake about that! But we see ahead, and see that it may be all a help to finding Miss Clearman, and we have no fear that when she is found she can't prove her complete innocence."

"But I'm not at all sure they'll find her," Scott demurred. "How can they? What can they do more than they've already done? And every day that passes after a strange disappearance, makes it more and more difficult to find the missing person."

"Why?" demanded Nan.

"Oh, because each day makes the case less and less in the eyes of the public. You know how quickly a great story fades. And it is the public who must find her. Take the possibilities. If she met with a serious accident, say she even suffered amnesia, as she is not in any hospital she must be in the home of some kind-hearted citizen, who either cannot or will not

reveal it."

"Wait a minute," Goring said, "why 'will not'?"

Scott looked at him frankly.

"Suppose," he said, "just for a moment, suppose, Miss Clearman did kill her father. Suppose an accident or other reason has caused her to seek refuge in the house of some friend—or some stranger. If she does not reveal her identity, he cannot tell of her presence there. But if she asks him not to, and he agrees, he will not. Am I clear?"

"Too damned clear!" Raynor said, "and for another such speech I'd knock you down——"

"Now, Jack," Carlotta said, a little sternly, "that sort of talk is unworthy of you, and it can do no possible good. Let me get this straight. Mr. Scott, are you suggesting that Miss Clearman is guilty of crime, and that she is or may be hiding in the home of somebody, whether stranger or friend?"

"I am trying to convey, Mrs. Clearman, that that is the present theory of the police. They hold that by the process of elimination, that is the only theory to work upon."

"And as to manner or method——"

"That is still pretty much a mystery, but they claim that murders have been accomplished in locked rooms before this. They hold that there may be a secret passage——"

"There isn't!" Raynor growled. "I planned the new wing myself. I know every inch of the building, I can swear there is nothing like a secret passage, nor any possible means of entrance or exit from Stephen Clearman's study except by that one hall door. The window was purposely arranged so that no intruder could get in. Whatever they say or don't say, quash at once all thought, hint or suggestion of a secret passage."

"They say that Mr. Clearman might have had one built in, even without the knowledge of the architect," Scott said.

"He didn't! He couldn't!" Raynor was thoroughly angry. "Send the silly things up here, and I'll prove to them that there can't possibly be anything of the sort! There isn't one cubic foot of space unaccounted for. The plans are simple in the extreme. There is no room or place for anything of the sort."

"Well, I'm only telling you what they think," Scott said, mildly, but with a wary eye on Raynor's face.

Yet nobody could doubt the truth and sincerity of Jack's statements. It rang in every word, in every sentence. As he said, whatever else might be trumped up, the secret passage idea was not the right one.

"Go on," Carlotta said, as there was a pause. "These clever police—how do they assume the poisoning was accomplished?"

"They hold that in some way it was given to him directly, and in his mouth. They claim that whoever did it, took away the container, and left by a secret way, or, failing that, contrived in some way to lock the door from the hall side."

"Leaving the key on the inside!" exclaimed Carlotta, sarcastically. "That would be a more wonderful feat than the demons could accomplish!"

"I say, Scott," Nicky said, "you seem to be on our side,—by which I mean you seem fair-minded, and not too ready to suspect an innocent girl who isn't here to defend herself. Do you think you can find out the truth, after all?"

Scott drew a long breath.

"I'm hampered by my superiors," he said, after a moment. "I don't want you to repeat this, but I'm not allowed full swing ____"

"What would you swing to, if you were?" Nan asked.

"I'm not sure, but I'd pursue different methods,—begin from a different starting point."

"As how?" asked Nicky.

"Well, I'd do more searching. Do you realize we haven't a single clue—not what can rightly be called a clue?"

"How about the curse, and the previous two deaths in the family?" Carlotta said, determined to get his views on this subject.

"That's just it. I'd like to know more about those two deaths. Were they really supernatural?"

"I don't know," she returned, wearily. "We have the old diary of a long-ago Clearman, and he says they were. If my husband died because of having broken the law of his family, and invoking their curse, I should hate to have his daughter suspected of crime."

"I should say so!" declared Scott, with emphasis. "But there we are, round the circle again. Either it was a death from human malice or from demoniacal power. The former seems impossible, if there is no secret way in or out of the room. The latter is—impossible, anyway."

"Ah, Mr. Scott," Carlotta said, "you are not willing to consider the magic side of it, then?"

"To consider it, yes. To admit its possibility, no."

"Well, I believe it," said Carlotta, slowly. "I felt uncertain, myself, at first, but since your investigation can point to no other way,—except Lulie Clearman, and that way I refuse to think of for a minute,—then, I say, I believe it was the curse that overtook him, and the reason therefor, was his disobeying the edict of old Dathan Clearman."

Carlotta looked very serious, and very beautiful as she spoke. Her attitude might have been that of the Goddess of Justice and if she had held a pair of scales she could have posed as a model for her.

Her voice was low and yet strong. It was as if she had set herself to work to prove Lulie's innocence and was beginning by trying to turn the trend of suspicion into the channels of supernaturalism.

"You do not know," she went on, "how definite are the accounts of the curse as it descended on the other two Clearmans who had broken the law of the house. My husband claimed he had the knowledge and power to circumvent the curse, to balk the power of the demons,—but, it would seem he had not. If you will read that old diary, Mr. Scott, I am sure you would be influenced by what it says. Anyway, it is only just and right that you should read it, to get a clear understanding of the case."

"I shall be glad to read it, Mrs. Clearman. If you will give it to me, I will take it home and read it tonight."

"I will gladly do so, but you must read it thoughtfully and with an unprejudiced mind."

"And another thing, Scott," Nicky said, obeying a sudden impulse, "if you don't get any forrader soon, you'll have to agree to let us get another detective to work with you or instead of you."

"You may," said Scott, humbly. "I think I'll have to admit that this case is too big a one for me. Get anyone you choose."

And with the old diary under his arm, he went away.

CHAPTER X

PAINTING STONES

"We're up against it," Raynor said, gloomily. "Those police, when they get a notion in their pig-headed brains, stick right to it. They heard somehow that Lulie and her father had tiffs now and then and they jumped to the conclusion that they were mortal combats."

"Well," rejoined Goring, "they think she's in hiding and they're going to smoke her out—is that what you gathered?"

"Of course that's what I gathered,—that's what Scott said."

"Then it will be a race," declared Raynor. "For I'm going to hunt her myself and I'll bet I'll find her first."

"Oh, do, Jack," said Carlotta, earnestly. "You'll be a lot more clever about it than the police, and you'll find her——"

"You'll never find her," Phoebe said, oracularly. "The same powers that killed the father also took away the daughter."

"Then I'll find those powers! I'll move Heaven and earth and the Infernal regions if it's necessary, but I'll get Lulie back."

"I don't think we've half looked," put in Nan.

"You don't understand, Nan," Goring said. "We agreed, you know, to keep it out of the papers, and we did. Public report has it that she is away on a short motor trip but can't be reached by messages. Now, they won't swallow that much longer,—wouldn't have as long as this, except for the nine days' wonder of Mr. Clearman's death. Now that the police are on her trail as a possible suspect, we can't avoid publicity. We needn't advertize for her,—the papers will be full enough of her mysterious disappearance. We can't send a detective, there are enough of them now. It seems to me there's almost nothing we can do——"

"Well, we can write or telephone to more of her friends——"

"What's the use? Now, see here," Nicky spoke plainly, "Lulie is away by her own volition or that of another. We know she went away of her own will. She's been gone four full days. At this minute, she's either staying away because she wishes to, or because she can't help it. Now, how many reasons can you think of that would keep her away because she wants to stay away?"

"None," said Nan promptly.

"Well, wait," Carlotta demurred. "You know how wilful Lulie is, and she might have had a serious quarrel with her father, and gone off in deep rage, determined to give him a scare."

"But of course, when she read of his death in the papers, she'd come right home," Raynor objected.

"No, it might be,—I'm only surmising, of course, just thinking aloud,—but it might be that she went up to the Formans' camp in the Adirondacks or some such place, where they don't get the papers."

"Really?" cried Nan. "Don't they have them at all?"

"They don't. They like to get away from all civilization,—back to nature, and all that."

"Have they a telephone?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Gosh, what a way to live!" Nicky exploded.

"They love it. I'll write them at once, but it will take a letter a long time to get there. Guides take it out to the woods, or something like that."

"It's a crime to get beyond reach of communication!" Goring stormed on. "But I haven't much hope she's there. That whole theory would be all right if she hadn't had us people here. She just simply couldn't go off and leave Nan without a word, even if she could leave us chaps."

"I know it," Carlotta nodded her head, "but we're trying to think of some reason that could keep her away willingly."

"I say there isn't any," declared Nan. "Listen to reason. For Lulie to go off and leave her home and her guests, willingly, would argue she is having a good time. Now, where can she be having a good time,—of course I mean a gay time,

socially? It's too absurd!"

"Yes, that's absurd, Nan," Goring agreed. "If she's keeping away on purpose, it's because she's spunky at her father——"

"Don't say that before the police!" and Raynor's eyes blazed. "Now, I don't think she's staying away willingly at all. I think either she's hurt and unconscious in some hospital, or perhaps somebody's home, or else she is held as a prisoner ——"

"But if she is ill anywhere, they would let us know. Lulie always carried her address with her——"

"That's just it. Kidnapped, is my theory. You know they do kidnap rich men's daughters. And, then, when Mr. Clearman died so strangely, the kidnapers' plans were all upset, and they're playing a waiting game."

"That's the most reasonable yet," Goring murmured, but Carlotta cried, "Not reasonable at all. Lulie is particularly well able to take care of herself. I think she went off in a huff, and as she went, she got madder and madder until she just thought she'd run up to the Formans' for a day or two. Maybe she thought she'd send for you young people to come up there and join her. Lulie's forever going on unexpected visits."

"Without invitation?" asked Nan.

"Oh, she has standing invitations at dozens of places. I feel sure she is at one of them, planning to have you go there, too."

"But they're not all beyond the reach of the daily papers."

"It doesn't matter what you think," Phoebe Clearman said, in her solemn way, "Lulie is not with friends. She was lured away in some manner by the black magic that killed her father."

"Supernatural!" cried Nan.

"Black magic, whether supernatural or through human agencies. The masks and gods of evil have powers we cannot fathom, ways we cannot understand. Perhaps through human intervention, perhaps not; but by, through and because of the Clearman curse, our Lulie has been taken away."

"But she didn't do any wrong!" Raynor exclaimed in astonishment. "Why wreak evil on her?"

"It is the Clearman curse," Miss Phoebe said, and her eyes peered at the rest, in an uncanny fashion, while her gray curls shook at either side.

Cartotta looked at her like one under a spell.

"Will it take me too, Phoebe? I asked Stephen once, and he said—he said, he hoped so!"

"No, you're not a Clearman. You're in no danger. I may come under the curse, I don't know. We Clearmans have murder in our hearts sometimes."

Suddenly, with a terrible shock, there returned to Jack Raynor's memory, the night he had walked in the garden with Lulie, and had told her she had something of the Lucrezia Borgia type in her makeup! He had referred to Messalina; and she had quickly responded with Jael and Herodias! How came those names so glibly to her tongue? Bah! What was he thinking of?

With unlistening ears he sat through the rest of the conversation and was greatly relieved when the dismal evening was over.

All night he was wakeful and restless. He could not sleep, and several times he opened his door softly and looked down the hall, in a vague wonder if he should see any uncanny sight.

But the halls and corridors were black, or shadowy where a small night light might be seen.

He sat at an opened window for a few moments. He was about to light a cigarette, when his attention was caught by a slow moving, slender figure.

He looked more intently and decided it was Carlotta, in a black robe and a black scarf over her head.

He watched her idly, assuming that she too was unable to sleep, and sought solace in a walk in the garden.

There was dim moonlight, though not enough for Raynor to see clearly the actions of the woman in the garden. But he saw her kneel on the ground.

She seemed to be beside a fairly large stone or rock, and it almost seemed to him she prayed to it, and then he smiled at his foolish fancies.

She produced a small object and then another. Then she began to make what were to him meaningless motions, and he watched, breathlessly. Had she lost her mind? For she was painting! Yes, that's what she was doing,—painting the stone! There was no chance for mistake now.

Well, if one is sleepless, one often tries some light or foolish task to while away the hours, but painting in the garden at two o'clock in the morning!

Apparently finishing her task, Carlotta rose and with a long look at her handiwork, walked slowly back to the house.

"I'll be damned!" Jack said, with deep earnestness, "if that isn't the queerest yet! She seems so quiet and self-possessed about it, just as if it were the regulation thing to do."

And then his thoughts flew to Lulie,—to Lulie, who, the police said, was a murderer. To Lulie, to whom he had said, "You have a trace of the killer in you. Why had he said that? Why? Why? Why? And why had he quoted, 'We are all capable of crime, even the best of us'?"

Well, Lulie Clearman was no criminal—yet how did he know this? He knew next to nothing of the girl, and what he knew of her family and family connections, gave him cause to think almost anything.

For surely, Stephen Clearman, with his masks and his magic, and the old ancestors, with their curses and mysterious deaths, were anything but a law-abiding, peace-loving crowd!

And yet, Lulie Clearman was his life's love. His one chosen woman. And he believed in her innocence and purity. He believed,—he *knew*, whatever the reason of her absence from home, it was nothing that would reflect wrong or shame on her.

Yet, he had himself implied she could kill—could murder! Why had he said that?

Who or what had killed Clearman, anyway?

And then, he made up his mind. Let who would seek the solution of the mystery of that strange death, he would devote his time to the greater mystery of Lulie's disappearance. His time. His life, if necessary. He would never rest until he had found her wherever she might be and why.

He wouldn't plan his actions now,—he was feeling sleepy at last,—but tomorrow morning he would begin in earnest, and he would find that girl.

It was not long after breakfast when Scott appeared, with the old diary carefully wrapped in paper.

"Let's go out on the terrace," said Carlotta as she greeted him, "it's pleasant out there. Anyone come who likes. If you're tired and sick of hearing about masks and magic, don't come."

But there must have been a fascination for them in the subject, for they all went.

Phoebe, with a grim look on her soft little face; Nan, in quiet despair; Goring, eager to learn all he could of these weird subjects; and Raynor, feeling that he might as well listen in, for there might be something of value to be learned.

"I don't want to say, Mrs. Clearman," Scott began, a little excitedly, "that I have been converted to heathen religions, or anything like that. But I do say, that I understand how, after a deep study of these things, some could be deeply influenced by them."

"Yes, indeed," it was Phoebe who spoke, "but you'll never go very deeply into them. It takes a life of leisure, a love of close application and—perhaps most of all,—an inherited tendency to believe and to fear these dark sayings. You read Dathan Clearman's diary?"

"And the others?" put in Carlotta, who didn't like to be set aside.

"Yes, I think it was the others that impressed me most."

"But it is Dathan's that explains the whole story of the Curse."

"Yes, of course. Now, have you read these, yourself, Mrs. Clearman?"

"I? Oh, Lord, no! Why, I wouldn't bother reading those old papers, yellowed with age and dropping to bits. No, they

don't interest me."

"Have you read them Miss Clearman?"

"No, Mr. Scott. But I am interested, and would love to read them only my eyesight won't permit it."

"They are difficult to read,——"

"I'd like to read them," Goring interrupted. "Mr. Clearman said I might. I'm keen on all this whole business. Perhaps you'll let me look 'em over?"

He turned to Carlotta, who nodded assent, and the detective went on.

"I sat up nearly all night with them, they are so hard to decipher. And I didn't read all. You see, Dathan's is by far the longest, and except for the part about the Curse, the least interesting. Two later Clearmans are more to the point, so far as we are concerned. Well, this Dathan lived and traveled 'long about 1750. You all know the main lines of his story. He came home from a long trip in foreign lands, and found his son had built additions to the house."

"What was the great harm in that?" Nan asked, curiously.

"I reckon it was only that Dathan was a bossy sort, and as he had forbidden any additions, he just ran amuck—lost his temper. Anyway, he cursed his son, disowned him and sent him away."

"Dear Miss Phoebe, did you have such a terrible man as that for a progenitor?" and Nan smiled at the pale little face.

"I s'pose I did,—but I think I must have favored his wife."

"Then, you know," Scott went on, "he put up that fierce old fright on the hall mantelpiece, or wherever it is, and that was to maintain and carry out the curse, if called on."

"I've heard all this, I think I'll be excused for a while," Raynor said.

"Just wait a minute," Scott advised him. "I'm going to lay aside Dathan's records for the present, and ask your attention to some other papers that Mr. Clearman had, done up in the same packet. Here is a diary of Adam Clearman more'n a half century later'n that first one. He seems to be a nephew or grandnephew of old Dathan, and he inherited the property. There's only a few pages of this one but it goes on to say that Adam is going to brave the curse and build some additions to the house. Says he isn't afraid of the old mask or of the curse. Well, he built 'em, and there's a lot missing after that. But some odd leaves, in the same handwriting, gave away the fact that he's pretty well frightened, and,—the writing breaks off suddenly, and in another hand is written:

"Adam Clearman died while writing the above. Mysteriously stricken by the curse of the house."

His hearers sat spellbound.

"I didn't know about that one," said Carlotta, and Phoebe promptly added, "Neither did I."

"Do you suppose our Mr. Clearman knew?" Nicky said, in a low voice.

"And that ain't all," Scott proceeded. "Listen to this. It's a sort of a diary of a still later Clearman,—Frederick, this one is. See, the leaves are ragged, they're so old.

"Well, he declares he's going to build a bay window, 'cause his wife wants it, and they're neither of them a mite afraid. He seems a bumptious sort, but he tries to smooth out matters by saying that if nothing happens to him, the family can feel the curse is removed, and that the old terror is exorcised.

"But,—and this is the fearful thing,—he adds, if he should die by unnatural means, then the curse remains and is even accentuated by his anger and wrath, and moreover, he says that if the house law is ever broken by a Clearman whose name is Stephen, then the curse shall be doubled,—because Stephen was the name of Dathan's son, who made all the trouble in the first place, and he warned anyone who bore a son of the house of Clearman not to give the infant the name of Stephen."

Carlotta dropped her face in her hands and her slender shoulders shook with sobs.

Phoebe sat bolt upright, looking as if she were trying hard to understand and take in this story she had just heard. The others showed interest and amazement, but said no word until Scott himself broke the silence.

"Now, as I say, I can't admit these old writings have made me believe in anything supernatural, 'cause I don't. But I do

say, that if there was anything at all in the idea of that curse being doubled, some people might say it explained the strange disappearance of Miss Clearman."

"Meaning that Lulie's dead?" Nan cried out, hysterically.

"Not necessarily that——"

"No, Nan," Phoebe interrupted, "but taken from us by the power of that old curse, acting through the Black Magic of the heathen gods."

"Or heathen men," Carlotta said, sadly. "Phoebe, could Stephen have made any enemies in those terrible places? Not the time I went with him, but on some of his earlier trips?"

"No human powers were at work that night here, Carlotta. What happened was foreshadowed by the Skull mask, and carried out by evil powers."

"You hadn't heard of these last bits, Mrs. Clearman?" Scott asked.

"No. I've only glimpsed the bit of Dathan's diary about the curse. It may be Mr. Clearman hadn't read them himself. I found a few leaves a day or two before he died. I don't know that these were the ones, but perhaps they were and perhaps he hadn't begun on them. His eyes were not any too strong, and he had abused them, working over his old letters and documents."

"Well, there it is. I came to show it to you before I let the Headquarters people see it. But mind you they won't pay a bit of attention to it. If Stephen Clearman rose from the dead and told them the Duk-Duk came and killed him, they wouldn't believe it."

"What is their opinion?"

Scott hesitated. Then having no choice, he said, "I think you know, ma'am,—it is their opinion that somebody murdered Mr. Clearman by giving him Prussic acid, on purpose. They say those custards wouldn't kill him. And—only because of his daughter's peculiar absence just now, do they look in that direction."

"And as to getting in and out of the study?" Carlotta said, suddenly.

"Well, you see, ma'am, there's ways. S'pose the young lady had a duplicate key——"

"But the regular door key," Raynor said, "was on the inside of the door."

"Well, s'pose she had one of those little steel instruments that turn a key from the other side——"

"I thought of those instruments," Goring said, "but one wouldn't work on that study door. There doesn't enough of the key stick through to catch hold of."

Scott shrugged his shoulders. "Anyway, those are their opinions."

Jack Raynor rose and went down the terrace steps to the garden. He wanted to be by himself to think over these queer things.

Could that double curse story mean anything—anything at all? Why, under the Heavens, would any Clearman mother name her baby Stephen, then?

And could the double curse have included Lulie in its fell swoop?

Oh, it was all too ridiculous, too absurd! He must get away, where he could think clearly, and keep his brain from getting addled. Moreover, he was going to hunt Lulie. That was positive, and he decided to start that very afternoon. He must go, or go crazy.

He turned his steps toward the house, and by chance looked toward the part of the garden where he saw Carlotta the night before.

Idly, he turned his footsteps that way, and examined the place where she had stood. He saw the stone, about as big as a large watermelon, and stooping, he saw the marks of fresh paint on it,—red paint.

He marvelled, and concluded that it was a house of lunatics in which he was visiting.

Acting on an impulse that he couldn't have explained, he stooped and daubed off some of the paint on his handkerchief.

Then he went into the house.

Carlotta was in her room, Scott was down in the servants' quarters, doing some detective work, and Nan and Goring sat listlessly in a swing hammock.

"I'm going away," Raynor said. "I'm going to hunt Lulie."

They stared, and he proceeded, "Yes, I know you may say it's a wild goose chase, and a hunt for a needle in a haystack, and all that. But I'm going."

"Yes, do," Nan said, tears in her eyes. "If anybody can find her, you can. Did you ever hear anything like that stuff in the old diaries?"

"That doesn't bother me," Jack said, slowly, "at least, I don't think it does."

"That's what we were just saying," Nicky said. "We don't think it bothers us,—but, you can't help thinking about it."

"But why would any woman in the Clearman family name her son Stephen,—after that double curse?"

"Oh, we've puzzled that out," Nan cried. "You see, it probably wasn't known outside the family of the man who doubled up the curse, and maybe no one in his household knew it but himself. Then, naturally the old diary got lost and the matter never was spoken of, so the mother of our Mr. Clearman didn't know anything about it."

"And Carlotta found the diary?"

"It may have been among those bundles of old papers she found, and maybe not. She doesn't know herself."

"Where did she find the old papers?"

"In some old chests and secretaries in the attic and towers. Every once in a while Mr. Clearman would beg her to ransack and find him some more. Then he'd go at them, and a bundle would last him a long time. He couldn't go himself for it made his back ache to stoop over the chests."

"Nan, tell me anything you can think of,—*anything* that might shed the least light or give me the least hint of where Lulie can be."

"I don't know one single thing, Jack, I only wish I did."

"Nor I," said Goring, "but here's something that may cheer your heart a little. I had a few words with Leonard, the man who took her to the train, and he said she murmured, 'I wonder what Jack will say,'—just sort of thought it out loud, you know."

"Glad you told me, old chap. It helps a little—I say, do you believe Carlotta will mind my going?"

"Goodness, no," Nan said, "but here she comes, ask her?"

Carlotta neared them, her dull black gown quite as becoming as the lustrous robes she used to wear. Naturally, she wore no diamonds, and that made it almost seem that the Diamond Queen was gone along with the others.

"I'm going this afternoon to hunt for Lulie," he said simply.

"You blessed boy!" Carlotta cried, "how good of you! Where are you going?"

"I don't know. New York first, of course, Carly. Do you know the least mite of anything that might give me a steer? Can't you think of anything Lulie said or did that might be a hint?"

"No—though of course she talked now and then of things she meant to buy——"

"What? Hats? Gowns?"

"No, I can't think of a thing but a diamond wrist watch. She said she wanted a nicer one than she has."

"It isn't much to go on—but I'll try the jewelry shops."

CHAPTER XI

GALLEY WEST

Scott came over Sunday morning. He looked both weary and perplexed.

"You people have got me guessing," he said, slowly, as he drew a hand across his troubled brow. "I was awake all night, most, mulling over those old papers I read, about the curse and all that."

"Then you begin to think there's something in it," Phoebe commented, with the air of an expert talking to a novice.

"Think? I don't know what to think. But I'm not allowed to think of magic and such things as a factor in this case. They've sent young Tyndall, a wide-awake chap, to track down Miss Clearman——"

"How can he? What do you mean?" Carlotta asked.

"Why, he picks up the trail at the last place she was seen,—the railroad station, you know, and he goes along to New York, asking everybody who may have seen her—and all that. What he does depends on how much brains he's got, and how much ingenuity."

"He won't find her," said Miss Phoebe, with her curls nodding.

"You're strong for the curse, then?" and Scott looked at her curiously.

"Of course I am. My family has lived in the shadow of that curse for many long years. From this window you can see the tower, one of the very things that brought the curse to us. From that time, every Clearman has feared it, and some have felt it. Stephen is gone, Lulie is gone, I am the last of the Clearman family. When I go, they will call it a mysterious death. Mysterious, ha!" Her laugh was cackling, almost uncanny. Carlotta rose and left the room, but Nan and Goring lingered, fascinated by the strange old lady.

She looked like a sibyl now, and her eyes glinted and her gray ringlets shook as she went on.

"You have all seen it. You have all known of Stephen's death, of Lulie's disappearance. To doubt the malignity back of those tragedies is to doubt your own senses. Carlotta need not run away,—she need not fear it, only a Clearman born comes under the ban! I await my time."

Her manner changed. She became quiet, and folding her hands in her lap, she sat, like some pale martyr awaiting her doom.

"Well, well, this won't do for me," Scott said a little gruffly. "I was sent here to overhaul that West. What about him, anyway? I mean, are you keeping him on?"

"Only for the present," Phoebe said, in her usual calm way. "Soon, I shall dismiss him, with first class references. He will have no trouble in getting a good position."

"Well, I don't know, ma'am. The Chief has a notion that he's the cat's whiskers, himself. Beg pardon, ma'am, I mean, they sent me to put him through a small course of sprouts."

When Scott became embarrassed, he fell into a slang diction, which he had been ordered to suppress in the company of gentlefolk.

But Nicky Goring was not startled by allusions to feline characteristics; such were in vogue at the time, and he said:

"Come on, I'll go with you. Or will you have him here?"

"No, I'll tackle him where he is. Want to come along, Miss Clearman?"

Phoebe did, and as Nan declined, the trio went in search of Galley West. They found him in the pleasant room devoted to the servants' use, sitting moodily idle.

His long, lack-luster eyes greeted them without interest as he rose and stood at attention.

"Sit down, West," said Miss Phoebe kindly, as they took the chairs he handed, "Mr. Scott wants to ask you some questions."

A wary look passed over the man's face, as he gave a nod of assent. It was clear Galley West, his master gone, had

abandoned his super-servile attitude.

"I know all the main facts of the case," Scott began, "but I'm interested in some sidelights on the matter. Tell me exactly when and where you last saw Mr. Clearman."

"Alive?"

"Certainly, alive."

"At breakfast, on the Monday morning."

"Did he seem about as usual?"

"Yes."

"Appetite good?"

"Yes."

"Unusually so?"

"No."

"Well," Nicky broke in, "he ate two of those custard things——"

"Who fixed those custards, West? You or the cook?" said Scott.

"Sometimes Jinny, and sometimes myself; if she was busy I did it."

"Has he always been so fond of that flavoring?"

"Not so long, sir. A few months, maybe."

"Then you saw him leave the breakfast table and go up to his study?"

"I saw him leave the dining room, that's all I can say."

"I can tell you that," Nicky said. "He went straight to his study and I went with him. We were there about fifteen or twenty minutes——"

"Did West come into the room?"

"I don't remember seeing him. I think not."

"Did you, West?"

"No, I never went in unless Mr. Clearman rang for me."

"Well, go on,—what did you do all the morning?"

"My usual duties. I look after Mr. Clearman's clothes, and I made some lists of things he wanted or matters I wanted to consult him about, but mostly I sat in the servants' room and waited. That was my duty, to be on the jump the minute his bell rang."

"I see. And it didn't ring?"

"No, sir." West had fallen into a more respectful attitude. "So, when it was time, I prepared the soup and crackers he always had at twelve o'clock, and took the tray up to his room. But I couldn't get in."

"Did you call to him, West?" Miss Phoebe looked anxious.

"Yes, ma'am,—after I had rapped three times. And I then ventured to look in at the keyhole, but I could see nothing."

"So, you got a ladder and looked in the window—" Scott drew him on.

"Yes, and I saw he was dead——"

"Wait, there you are! How did you know he was dead, so quickly?"

"He—he looked so—so stiff and quiet——"

"A man can't look stiff—and with that mask on, you couldn't see his face. I tell you, Mr. West, you were a little too swift at that conclusion!"

"What conclusion?"

"That the man was dead."

"But I didn't know it, I only felt that I must get in to him."

"Oh, well; I know all about the happenings right after that. Now, when you saw him, you went and told Miss Clearman?"

"Yes."

"And did she think he was dead?"

"I—I think she did, sir."

"I can speak for myself," Phoebe said, a little sharply. "Yes, I did think my brother was dead,—I knew he was, for I knew the curse was working."

"Well, then, West, when Rogers came and cut the panel out of the door, who put in a hand and turned the key?"

"I did."

"Yes, and you did it mighty quickly! Shall I tell you why? Because you had that key in your own pocket all the time! They call it a mystery,—that locked door. But it's no mystery to me. Mr. Goring left that room at quarter past ten. Some time between that and twelve, you were in there with Mr. Clearman. You killed him, with Prussic acid,—not the flavoring extract, but the real thing. Then, you left the room, locking the door on the outside, and putting the key in your pocket. Then, when the time came to stage your discovery, you went about it, carried it through, and when the door panel was cut out, you slipped in your hand,—key and all,—and turned the key in the lock. Who went into the room first?"

"I did," Nicky said; "what's all this mean, Scott? West guilty?"

"No, no," cried Phoebe, piteously, "no, he isn't, he can't be a murderer! Tell them you're not, West!"

"Of c-course, I'm not—" but West looked like a cornered rabbit. His eyes darted here and there, and he trembled all over.

"What was his motive?" asked Goring.

"His bequest, of course. In a hurry to get the thirty thousand dollars left him in Clearman's will, and—also afraid that the new will Mr. Clearman was planning would do him out of it."

"I didn't know there was any question of a new will."

"Yes, we got that knowledge from the lawyer. Now, come on, West, you may as well own up. What did you do? Just feed it to him plain, or put it in the custard? Clever idea, that! Thought the odor on his lips would be taken for the Bitter Almond extract. But that stuff won't kill. It takes the real Prussic acid for the deed. Then, you see, you tied his mask on and like those chaps the poet tells of, you silently slipped away."

Galley West stared. His queer eyes darted from one to another but came to rest on the bewildered countenance of Miss Phoebe. It almost seemed as if some glint of understanding passed between them.

"I didn't do that," he said, but his denial was addressed to her rather than to the men present. "Did I?" he begged for corroboration.

"Of course not," she said, staring at him.

"Then tell us how anybody could get in and out of a locked room?" cried Scott, triumphantly. "You can talk all the magic folderol you like, and I'll own I was almost ready to fall for it, when I doped out the truth. You see, this isn't the first time a murder has been done in a locked room, and there are several ways of explanation. There's the secret passage,—well, there's nothing of that sort in this house, not in the new part, anyhow. Then, there's the sliding panel and concealed trap door,—none of those things here. Then, there's the chap who bursts open the door, jumps into the room first, and does the fatal deed right then and there. That game wouldn't work, because West wasn't first in the room."

"I was," said Nicky, ruefully, "but I never supposed it might make me a suspect."

"And it hasn't. We've got our suspect and we've got our criminal. Going to own up, West?"

"No, for I didn't do it."

"Leave the confession lay for a minute, then. When you went into the room, after Mr. Goring, what did you do?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing at all? Just twiddled your thumbs?"

"I stood about with the rest. I wanted to tidy up a bit but I thought the Coroner wouldn't want anything touched."

"Oho, already certain the Coroner was coming! I bet nobody else in the room was sure of that so quick!"

West paid little attention to these jeers, but said, as if thinking, "Yes, I did do one thing; there were three letters on Mr. Clearman's desk, and I mailed them."

"Why?"

"Only because it is second nature to me to take the letters as I leave the room, and mail them at once."

"You're trying to distract my attention. What did you do of importance?"

"Nothing."

"Don't torture the man," Phoebe said, pleadingly. "You can't be right in this accusation, Mr. Scott. I can't believe it."

"I'm afraid you'll have to, ma'am. I've been trying out several theories and this is the only one that fits. I dessay you people don't know how many possible ways I had to consider."

"I know," Nicky said, "I read detective stories, and I always like those that present the problem of an insoluble crime in an inaccessible room. But I don't at all like being in the midst of one."

"Yes, another fine solution," Scott warmed to his subject, "is to have your precious murderer concealed in the room all the time, and then when the door is broken in, he makes a getaway right through the crowd, or just mingles with them and stays there. But I take it, Mr. Goring, that when you went in that room no lurking villain slipped out past you, did he?"

"No, that he didn't! I should have seen any such."

"And you, Miss Clearman, were you present?"

"Yes, I went into the room right after Mr. Goring. As soon as I saw my brother, I knew the whole story. No amount of detective work will find out anything more about it. The curse fell on him and he was gone."

Her face was white, and her small hands were clenched together. Her thin old voice trembled, but she went on.

"And then, when Lulie disappeared, I knew that again the curse had fallen, and the next time,—the next time it will fall on me."

She lifted her hands, palms upward, with a gesture, as if almost inviting the Clearman curse.

"As I was saying," Scott proceeded, "there's more solutions to that problem yet. There's people that say you can turn a key in a door with a little steel contraption that works from the other side, but such a thing wouldn't grip that study key. And then, I heard once that you could turn a key in the other side of a lock, with a powerful magnet. But that, I've proved myself, can't be done. Leastways, with no magnet I've ever been able to hunt up. So, you see, the theory,—and it's no mere theory,—the assumption, the certainty, that the deed was done just as I've explained to you, is impossible of doubt. And no one could have done it but West, here, for he's the man who put his hand in and turned that key—the key just taken from his own pocket."

"I didn't do it," said Galley West, and it seemed that every time he repeated that simple negative declaration, he used a different tone.

This time it was a little belligerent. Resentful of the accusation, and ready to fight the man who made it.

"Then who did?" Scott flung at him. "I'm ready to hear you, West, if you have anything to say. Who else could have done it and how?"

"He can't tell you that," flashed Phoebe, angrily. "But you shan't accuse West. He's as innocent as I am."

"Yes, just about." And then Scott flung his bomb-shell. "Are you entirely innocent, Miss Clearman?"

"How dare you!" cried Goring, as he sprang to Phoebe's side. "What do you mean?"

"I am here to investigate a crime," Scott said, gravely. "I have a right to ask what I choose. Miss Clearman, I put it to you, are you entirely innocent of any hand in your brother's death?"

Phoebe Clearman looked at him, and tried to speak. But her vocal cords refused to work, her facial muscles twitched, and she fell forward in a convulsive spasm.

Goring lifted the frail little form, and carried her from the room.

"You shouldn't have done that," and West glared at the detective.

"I did it to make you talk," said Scott, calmly. "Now, will you make your own confession, and save her more trouble?"

"I didn't do it," said West, this time speaking quietly, but stubbornly. "Why would I do it? Mr. Clearman was a good master,—a kind one—most of the time——"

"Not all the time?" Scott sensed further motive. "Did you quarrel? Did he storm at you? Find fault with you?"

"Sometimes."

"Did he ballyrag his sister? Was he ever unkind to her? Look here, West, I've got to put this thing through. You've got to tell me all you know——"

"Mr. Scott," Goring returned to the room. "Didn't you overstep all bounds of propriety and decorum when you spoke to Miss Clearman like that?"

"Well, Mr. Goring, propriety and decorum don't figure very big in a detective's work. I'm here to find out who killed Stephen Clearman. I've proved to my own satisfaction that he *was* killed, and I don't want to hear any more about this mask business. We've learned there was more of the poison found in the dead man's body than was at first diagnosed. We know he was killed by a small but fatal dose of it, that he did not administer to himself. We're going to find out who gave it to him. I don't like to speak out so plain before the widow or that visiting young lady, but the old one gets on my nerves with her magic and her curse!"

"But you can't think for a moment that she would want her brother dead!"

"Why not? She'd have the reasons that West here would. She knew she was in for a big slice of his property, and she knew that this notion of his about stations or whatever they are, would cut down the inheritance of everybody, except the wife. Now, beside that, I know how dead set she was against those stations, and too, I think the old dame is a bit off her nut."

"Hush, Scott! I won't listen to such talk about a fine old lady!"

"Did you see her when I was a quizzin' West?" the detective began to get angry. "No, but I was watchin' her! All the time she was lookin' at him queer like, and wringing her hands, for fear he'd say what he shouldn't."

"I think you mistake her intent," Nicky said, amazed at the turn things had taken. "She was alarmed for West's safety, and of course it made her very nervous. Also, she thoroughly believes her brother died from supernatural causes. She is as much in fear of the curse as he ever was——"

"I tell you I don't want to hear any more of that curse. Lots of families have 'em—in their mind—but when it comes to feeding a man enough Prussic acid to kill him, then I say it's time that 'curse' was looked into. Who did all that spooky business, paradin' the halls at night? Who did, West? You or Miss Clearman? Or both? If you two are working in cahoots, you'd better own up. It'll help you a lot. Which of you killed Clearman?"

"I didn't do it," West said, his lean gaunt frame trembling, his lips twitching and his eyes darting wildly.

"Lord! I believe I've got two nuts on my hands! Well, the nuttier they are, the easier to handle,—in some respects. Now, look here, I'd arrest you in a minute, but I think I'll get more out of you right here on the spot. Maybe I haven't sufficient proof for an arrest, but I'm going to get it, and you're going to help me. Come along, up to Mr. Clearman's study."

"Oh, no—not that——"

"Yes, just that. Come, now, I want to ask you a few things. If you're going along, Mr. Goring, I must ask you not to butt in on my work. I'm carrying out orders and I hate to be interfered with. I'm on the right trail at last and I'm going to follow it while the following's good."

"May I ask one thing?" Nicky sounded sarcastic. "Does your great theory hint that West carried off Miss Lulie, too? Or

that her aunt did?"

"I'm not tackling that end of the job. Tyndall is on that, and so I don't take notice whether it hits against my work or not. I've got my dander up and I'm going straight ahead to do my duty, the way I see it."

Though shocked at the situation and angry with Scott, and sorry for West, Nicky still gave the detective credit for sincerity and honesty. He had thought up that idea of the key in West's pocket, and it certainly was plausible. Goring hadn't the least belief that Phoebe was mixed up in the affair, but he felt that Scott was using her as a hold over West.

He wasn't anxious to go to the study if there he would have to witness a scene of third degree. But he felt that the family ought to be represented at every possible discovery and he concluded to go.

The three men went quietly up to the room, and Scott unlocked the door. The missing panel had been replaced with a temporary one.

"Now," Scott locked the door on the inside, "I'll sit in Mr. Clearman's chair. You tie on me the mask he wore that last morning. Go ahead, I'm not afraid of the things."

Scott sat in the desk chair, and with trembling fingers West adjusted the mask in place and tied the leather thongs behind his head.

"Not so cumbersome as I thought," the detective said, turning his head from side to side, as if he rather fancied himself in the heathen decoration. "Now, pretend I'm Mr. Clearman. Go about the room, and do the things you always did for him."

"What things?"

"How do I know? Whatever your duties were. Did you light his cigarettes?"

"Cigars, sir." Quite unconsciously, West fell into the manner of a servant. He brought a cigar box, held it out, and the hideous face looked down as Scott took one.

"The eyeholes are big," he said, almost as if to himself, "and I believe the mouth is quite large enough to smoke comfortably."

He thrust the cigar into the grinning lips of the mask, and found that it was quite easy to manage.

West silently presented a lighted match and Scott used it. Then West set an ash-receiver, a standard one, at his side, and Scott drew one or two whiffs.

He turned to Nicky.

"Was Mr. Clearman smoking when you were here with him that morning?" he asked.

"No, I asked him to, and he refused. Said he was nervous and tobacco made it worse."

"H'm. Now, look here, Mr. Goring, or, no, wait a few moments longer."

Nicky waited, wonderingly, and Scott smoked on.

West stepped about the room, straightening some desk things, dusting the telephone, and such trifles, and the eyes behind the horrid mask followed all his movements.

"Now," Scott said, after a short length only of the cigar was left, "now, West, take off this damned thing."

Obediently West removed the mask, and Scott took it from him.

He smelled carefully at the inside of the mask, where the mouth was.

Then he nodded his head with satisfaction.

"Come here, please, Mr. Goring," he said, "sniff at it, right there."

Nicky did so, and remarked that he smelled only tobacco.

"That's just it," cried Scott. "This thing is made of *papier maché* which catches and holds odors. I smoked just now, and the tobacco smell remains. Mr. Clearman took the Prussic acid, and the odor of it remained on the mask's lips."

"Well?"

"Well, that proves it was not the pudding he ate for breakfast! It was pure Prussic acid. The odor was faint but sure!"

CHAPTER XII

TWO INVESTIGATORS

In Carlotta's pretty boudoir, she was having a confab with her sister-in-law.

The young widow looked very lovely in a negligee gown of black chiffon, whose long, pointed sleeves fell away from her soft white arms, and a string of black beads circled her throat.

"You see, Phoebe," she was saying, "it's all very well for you to want to stay here in your lifelong home, where you were born and raised, but for me, now that Stephen is gone, the house has no attraction and is full of sad memories and associations."

"I understand, Carlotta," Phoebe Clearman responded, shaking her little gray curls, "and I wouldn't keep you against your will. You are your own mistress now,——"

"That's another thing," Carlotta interrupted, "I am my own mistress, but that's nothing to wish for. A widow is an undesirable person in a social set like ours. I should never be invited to dinners and dances, because as everybody says, it's so hard to get extra men. No, Phoebe, my life,—my social life, I mean, is over. Now, this is what I have planned. I want to make it my life work to carry out Stephen's wishes regarding the Stations. I want to go over there to do it, because that is the only way it can be properly done. Of course I know just how and where to go. Not every woman could travel in the Far East, but I was so thoroughly in Stephen's confidence that I know all about his relations with the great men over there, and I know all about the wicked ones. I am sure I can attend to everything as my husband would wish it done."

"But you can't go all alone."

"No, I shall have to have a secretary, of course, and a maid, and I'd like a woman companion. Would you like to go?"

"Mercy, no!"

"Oh, well, as to that, I can find a companion, I daresay, or I might get along with only Violet. That is a minor detail."

"What about Lulie?"

"I'm sure I don't know. But I can do nothing in regard to Lulie that you can't do. I love the girl, and I can't help thinking she'll turn up safe and sound. As you know, I don't share your idea that the curse is responsible for her disappearance,—and yet——"

"And yet, what?" asked Miss Clearman, with a little asperity.

"And yet, I can't help remembering how thoroughly Stephen believed in all those things. That's another reason for my wanting to go back there. I hope to find out some things that puzzle me in those matters."

"Well, as you know, Carlotta, I have never approved of the Stations, but if you go 'way off there, what about Lulie's part of her father's money?"

"Oh, I'll do right in that matter. I'll settle a proper sum on her before I go, and then, if she never comes back, we can see about that when I come back. What is the substance of your own will?"

"Everything to Lulie, of course, if she is here to get it. If not,—I haven't decided as yet what I shall do."

"No, I suppose not. I shall sell my diamonds and use the proceeds toward the work. I want it all to be a sort of memorial to Stephen, who was always so good to me."

"Well, I loved my brother, but I shall give no part of my money toward what I consider a foolish scheme. I shall remain in this home, and spend the rest of my days in being as comfortable and happy as I can. I want to make several changes——"

"In the house?"

"Oh, mercy, no! not in the house! The curse may get me because I'm a Clearman, but never because I build or add to the building!"

"Phoebe, where is Lulie? Tell me your real opinion."

There was a challenge in the tone, which Phoebe resented, and she said sharply:

"I don't know. I can only make guesses."

"What are your guesses?"

"What are yours?"

"Do you really want to know?"

"Yes, I do."

"Then I think,—mind you, it's only surmise,—I think there's a young man in the case."

"Oh, do you? I never thought of that. Who?"

"Lord, I don't know who. But I do think that nothing short of a love affair would have made her run off like that. I don't for a minute think anything has happened to her. I believe she went voluntarily and will soon return."

"No, Carlotta, no. It is the Clearman curse."

"May I come in?" said Nan's voice at the door. "Mr. Tyndall is here."

"Who is Mr. Tyndall?" asked Phoebe.

"The detective who went on trail of Lulie. Apparently, he hasn't found her, but I thought you two might want to come down and hear his story."

Tyndall proved to be a pleasant-looking, rather self-satisfied young man with an off-hand manner and a nice voice.

His story might have been soon told, but he elaborated it all he possibly could, in order to play a prominent part himself.

"I wish I might have followed the trail before it grew so old," he said, with a deprecating cough, "but the quest was not assigned to me until yesterday. Monday! A whole week after the young lady's disappearance! But I set to work to do the best I could. I took the train yesterday morning that Miss Clearman took the week before. The eleven-thirty. I asked the people at the station here, if anyone remembered seeing Miss Clearman take that train, and both the station master and the baggage agent said they remembered it perfectly. One of them said he saw the conductor help her on. Well, I made for that conductor and he seemed a bit hazy. Said he helped so many people on and off every day, he couldn't state positively anything about it. A very conservative sort of person indeed. But he had a hazy glimmer of having seen her, though he said he has been so pestered by people asking him about it, that he can't say any more than that. A most unsatisfactory chap."

"Did you learn anything further?" asked Nicky, trying to speed up the narrator.

"Yes, and no," the young man enunciated clearly. "Yes,—and no."

Now if there was one thing that irritated Phoebe Clearman it was the use of that particular phrase, and she said, crisply:

"Never mind the no part, tell us the yes."

He looked at her with a grieved air, and resumed:

"Well, I left no stone unturned. I asked the brake-man if he remembered seeing her, and——"

"And did he?" cried Nan, exasperated at his slowness.

"No, not that he recollected. There's no parlor car on that train, you see, so she must have sat in a plain coach. Well, I went on to New York, and I questioned everybody in the Grand Central Station,—I mean every official or employe,—without the least result,—I say, without the least result! Now, what do you think of that?"

Tyndall paused, and sat back, as if he had announced triumph instead of failure.

But, as Nicky Goring reflected, what more could the man do?

Miss Phoebe allowed herself a small "Hmph," of disappointment, Carlotta sat gazing at the young detective, and Nan looked frankly distressed and began to cry softly.

"Well," Scott observed, having listened attentively, "you sure didn't pull off much, Tyn, but I can't blame you. I don't see, myself, what more you could have done. Didn't the conductor have her ticket?"

"Now, how could he tell that?"

"Anyway, she uses a mileage book," put in Phoebe.

"Then that would show her name and address, in case of need," observed Scott.

"Why did you wait so long before letting me at it?" Tyndall grumbled to his superior.

"'Twasn't my fault," Scott retorted. "The family didn't want it made public——"

"Because we thought every day she'd come home!" Nan defended.

"She'll never come home," groaned Phoebe.

"Why not?" and Tyndall turned quickly to her.

"Oh, Lord," Scott said, "don't begin on the spooks! Now, look here, Tynney, you did all you could, but it doesn't amount to a hill of beans. Fade away, son. I've a man's work to do on this case."

With elaborate farewells to each one present, the dapper chap took himself off.

"I'm afraid you hurt his feelings," Nan said, with a slight smile.

"Not him, ma'am," Scott declared. "That's one of the impossibilities. He thinks he pulled off a big job at sleuthing. That he did nothing doesn't worry him a bit."

"He couldn't do any more than he did," said Carlotta, wearily. "What are we going to do next?"

That question was partly answered shortly, when the Jack of Hearts walked in. Though not wearing his heart on his sleeve this time, it was none the less at promptings of that organ that Raynor had pushed his investigation rather farther than Tyndall had done, and had brought home at least a few vague results.

"I can't make it out," Raynor said, yet his declaration of ignorance was far from sounding as hopeless as Tyndall's had.

"I started here at the station by asking the railroad people what they remembered about Lulie's getting on the train. They said only what we knew already, but it's sure that she did take that train."

"Yes, we can bank on that," said Nicky, "go on."

"Well, I chased up the conductor, he wasn't on the train I took, but I got at him, and he remembered nothing at all about Lulie. So, I made him think back to see if he could remember anyone who was on the train. Pretty hard job, after nearly a week. He couldn't, but after I made allusions to a certain monetary unit, he put his wits to work, and raked out the information that Miss Booth must have been on the train, because she always takes it on Mondays. Also Mr. Street, because he gives him a *douceur* every month and that was the day. Also Mrs. Frelinghuysen, because he had the devil's own time to raise a window for her, and she told him what she thought of him."

"Well, old chap, I'll say that was some clever work!" exclaimed Nicky, in admiration. "Hasten on."

"I did," and Raynor smiled a little; "first, I tried to get more names, but a promise of the whole Bank of England couldn't bring forth any more memories. I got the addresses of these three people, and I've been to see them."

Scott gazed at the speaker in unbounded admiration.

"Ought to be on the Force," he said to himself.

"Of course none of them lives in Valley Falls. The first one I tackled, Miss Booth, is a stenographer, from somewhere above here, who goes down Mondays and comes back Fridays. Well, she seemed to remember dimly that she saw Lulie, but it made such a slight impression, that she could tell me nothing. Mrs. Frelinghuysen, a stately dame, said that she saw Lulie get on the train. She didn't know her, but recognized the photograph I had with me, and she said Lulie got off at a way station, she didn't go through to New York. But what station she didn't know, as she was engrossed in her set-to with the conductor and the car window."

"At a way station," said Nan, wonderingly. "What on earth would she do that for?"

"Go on," said Scott, annoyed at any interruption.

"And then," Raynor said, with a gleam of satisfaction at one small element of success, "then I hunted out Mr. Street. And that very observing man had seen Lulie, and, I'm afraid, had looked upon her with the eye of admiration. He didn't know

her, but recognized the picture at a glance. 'Yes,' he told me, 'I saw that girl get on at Valley Falls. She sat in front of me, and she got off again at the next station, Hamilton.' I kept as cool as I could and tried to learn more. 'Did the conductor take her ticket?' I asked him. 'Didn't have time,' was his answer. 'He was fiddling with a window across the aisle, and we reached Hamilton before he made his round. I remember all about the young lady, because she was so beautiful.' He spoke in a most respectful, courteous way, and I liked him a lot. Well, of course, I asked him about Lulie's demeanor, or attitude, or anything he could tell me, but there was nothing. She sat in front of him, so he only caught her profile now and then, and after all, it's only a few minutes' ride to Hamilton. And there you are."

"I congratulate you, Mr. Raynor," Scott said, heartily. "You have accomplished more than the police have been able to do."

"But what does it amount to?" said Raynor, gloomily. "I've been to Hamilton, I've visited every house in the place,—there's only a handful,—and nobody,—man, woman or child,—knew Lulie or recognized her picture."

"She got off there to go somewhere else," said Scott, sagaciously.

"Yes, I thought that out," Raynor agreed. "But where did she go, and where is she now?"

Carlotta gave Phoebe a significant glance, which the latter readily understood to mean a reference to the hypothetical love affair, which the widow had hinted at. But Miss Clearman tossed her curls and set her lips together in a stern refusal to mention the subject aloud.

So Carlotta shrugged her lovely shoulders a mite, and neither of them knew that the same thought was making life a misery for the Jack of Hearts.

He tried to down it, but it thrust up its ugly head, reminding him of Lulie's speech that Leonard had overheard, "I wonder what Jack will say."

Yet his whole attitude was one of clenched hands and gritted teeth, and find that girl he would, if it was within the bounds of human possibilities!

"From here, we must take it up," Scott said, not realizing how pompous he sounded. "You have done wonderfully, Mr. Raynor—"

"I should say he had!" exclaimed Nicky, jealous for Jack's applause. "I can't see how you thought of all that cleverness. Why, that tin-eared person got exactly nowhere!"

"Nor did I get very far," Raynor said, ruefully.

"Now," Scott said, "I must insist on doing what should have been done long ago. I must search Miss Clearman's room. The facts that Mr. Raynor has set up, put this in the class of mysterious disappearances, and it is rightly in the hands of the police."

"I shall allow no such intrusion—" Phoebe began, but Scott said, quietly, "I'm afraid, Miss Clearman, we are not asking permission."

"May I be present?" asked Carlotta. "I think Lulie would prefer it so."

"Yes," said Scott, "and Miss Loftis, if she likes."

Apparently he was tacitly excluding the men, so the trio went upstairs.

Violet met her mistress in the hall, and seemed shocked at what was to be done.

"Foh de Lo'd!" she cried, "su'ch Miss Lulie's room! What goin's on!"

"Be quiet, Violet," Carlotta said. "You may come in, you may be of help."

Scott made no objection to this.

A methodical and careful search ensued.

Whatever Scott's other failings, he was a model room searcher. When he opened Lulie's writing desk and read letters, he did it with a deprecating air that was apology itself; when he examined her bureau drawers, his regretful face showed his distress at the inevitable. But nothing appeared to assist them in their quest. The letters, on which Scott had banked the most, were from girl friends, or correct male acquaintances. If Lulie received any more missives or had any clandestine correspondence, it was, so far, securely hidden from the prying eyes.

And it was this that mystified Scott.

Surely, he thought, every girl has some love letters. Since there are none about, they are hidden. So he increased his efforts; he tapped walls for secret panels, prodded chair cushions, looked behind pictures, felt under piles of *lingerie*, and even looked between the mattresses.

Nan watched him with scornful, but helpless disdain. Carlotta looked on with sad eyes, wondering what would come to light. Violet, standing by, showed a stolid, servile face, but her eyes followed the detective's moves with such persistence and intensity, that it finally got on his nerves.

"Put that woman out!" he said, irritably, and at a nod of dismissal from Carlotta, Violet left the room.

Lulie's bathroom and small dressing room were given a like careful scrutiny, with the final result that not one scrap of paper, not one iota of evidence of any sort was found that pointed to her having gone away from home on any secret errand. If she had, she had been most scrupulously careful to leave behind no hint of it.

Nan could note but one thing missing. That was a photograph of Jean Hayden, a friend of both girls.

She mentioned this to Scott, who showed a little interest.

"Who is she?" he asked.

"A girl we knew at school," Nan replied. "Did you ever know her, Carly?"

"No, I never saw her; I've seen that picture here among Lulie's friends and asked who she was, but I took no special interest. Why on earth should she take that with her? I don't believe she did. She more likely threw it away."

"No," Nan insisted, "it was here Sunday night, before she left. We were talking about Jean. She lives in New York, now. We both liked her, but not especially. It's the queerest thing!"

"What did Miss Clearman say about the young lady?" Scott asked.

"Why, nothing much. Asked me if I thought she was pretty, and if I liked the way she did her hair, and if I thought she was intellectual-looking. But she didn't stress these things, and as we drifted to other matters, she never even glanced at the picture again. I'm sure she had little interest in Jean, personally."

"Well, it doesn't seem to mean anything to me," Scott decided, after hearing Nan's tale. "And I can't find anything here that does tell me anything. Let's leave it."

He went downstairs, and Nan and Carlotta sat a few moments in Lulie's room wondering about Jean's picture.

"She simply grew tired of it," Carlotta opined, "and took it out of the frame, meaning to put some other picture in. She often changes them about like that. I don't believe she threw it away."

"Then where is it? We've been over all her things with a fine tooth comb. What became of Jean's picture?"

"Gracious, Nan, I don't know. She may have taken it with her. I can't imagine why, but of course she may have done so."

"Of course," said Nan, absently, and they went downstairs.

In the servants' room, Scott was hammering at West again.

"I tell you man," the detective said, sternly, "this matter of Miss Clearman's disappearance is one thing, and it will be looked after, but there is also the matter of Mr. Clearman's murder, and that's where you come in. I'm not arresting you, because I want to use you here, but don't try any getaway business. You're under the strictest surveillance,—if you know what that means. Now, listen here. You were Mr. Clearman's secretary, in a small way,—as to some things, I mean."

"Yes, sir. Mr. Clearman didn't want a regular secretary around him, though he often had expert stenographers and cataloguers and such to work for him."

"I see. And just what did you do?"

"I looked after his stationery,—he was very particular. And I kept his books, some of them. And I drew checks for him,—I mean, he signed them but I wrote them."

"Yes, yes, I understand."

"I looked after all his money matters,—he trusted me."

West said this last with an air of quiet pride.

"Yes, of course; now, West, a few days before he died, he drew ten thousand dollars from the bank in cash."

"Yes, sir. He often did that, sir. I mean, he always had ready money by him, and he drew it in large sums."

"Where is that ten thousand dollars?"

"In Mr. Clearman's safe. I saw him put it there."

"You did! And as soon as the breath was out of his body, you took it out! As soon as you had killed your master, with your damnable poison, you robbed his safe!"

"I didn't do it, sir."

That peculiar phrase of West's always made Scott ireful, and he glared at the man, as he said, "Yes, you did. If not, where is it? It isn't in the safe."

"Maybe Miss Lulie took it, sir."

"What!" roared Scott, "how dare you use that lady's name?"

"I only thought she might have done so, because she was in the study that morning, after I was."

Scott grew quiet.

"What are you saying, West?" he asked, in a low tone; "be careful, man."

"I will, sir," West's voice was steady. "I know Miss Lulie was in the study after I cleaned it up——"

"Wait a minute, when did you clean it up?"

"I clean it mostly before Mr. Clearman gets up. Then as soon as he is through his breakfast, I go there and cast about to see if there are any odds and ends to be attended to. Windows, ash-trays or anything. And, I left that place in perfect order. When I went in again, after—after Mr. Clearman was dead, there was one cigarette end on a tray. It was one of Miss Lulie's, sir."

"How do you know?"

"Hers have her initials on them."

"Go slow, now. What did you do with it?"

"I—I threw it away."

"Why?" Scott fairly shot the word at him.

"Because," West looked him squarely in the eye, "because I was afraid some addlepated detective might mix her up in the trouble, sir. And, if she was in there and if she took that money, her father gave it to her."

"Don't mention this to anybody, West," Scott said, and rising quickly, he left the room.

He went straight to Jack Raynor and told him the whole story exactly as he had had it from West.

Somehow, he felt, since Raynor's work on the train matter, he deserved to come first in every way.

"Scott," said the Jack of Hearts, after he had listened, "here's where we get the big Detective."

"Yes, sir," said Detective Scott.

CHAPTER XIII

TONY BARRON

They did get the big detective. He was the man Nicky had said he knew or knew of, and his name was Tony Barron. He had been christened Anthony, but now he used that name only when signing checks.

Scott had expressed himself willing to work in harmony with the private investigator, and Barron was glad to undertake the unusual and remarkable case.

Carlotta, who was the one to pay the bill, wanted him to come as soon as possible, both because it would be better for his work and also because she wanted to get away herself.

"I want to go to New York, Phoebe," she said to her sister-in-law. "I want to go there and stay in some small hotel, while I make my plans for my foreign trip and settle up the estate. Of course, Stephen's lawyers are there; and all his securities and that sort of thing are in the bank there."

"I see, Carlotta," Phoebe returned, thoughtfully, "and I don't blame you. As you say, Clearman Court holds nothing for you but sad associations. You will be near enough for us to see each other often, and so, my dear, go as soon as you can manage it. I shall stay right here."

Carlotta was secretly a little amused at the ease with which the older woman appropriated the house. The whole residuary estate of the dead man was Carlotta's very own, Phoebe's bequest being definitely stated.

But the widow was glad that the sister wanted to stay on in the home she loved so well and too, it saved a lot of trouble in disposing of the place otherwise.

"Do, Phoebe, and then if Lulie returns, you will be here to welcome her. I shall make all settlements and arrangements with the lawyers, and everything of that sort will be all right. Now this new detective is coming, and I hope to goodness he'll be expeditious. I want the thing settled, whether they find a murderer or not."

"They'll find no murderer,—and, look here, Carlotta, I don't want that new nuisance questioning me all the time. I'm sick of being questioned!"

"Why, of course he'll question you, he'll question all of us. How can he find out things otherwise?"

"We've been questioned by forty-'leven men already, and what good has it done?"

"Well, don't be uppish, Phoebe. It won't get you anywhere, and it may turn suspicion toward you."

Carlotta saw a grimace overspread the fine old face.

"Let 'em suspect me!" she retorted, and marched off in haughty indignation.

Tony Barron came.

As was usual, introductions were made on the Terrace at tea time. This was always one of the pleasant episodes of the day. The broad, picturesque terrace, the extended view of lakes and rolling hills, the formal gardens in the foreground and the setting sun casting shadows on the lawns, made a charming setting for the group at the tea table.

Barron proved to be a rather athletic, rather good-looking young man, of brownish blond effect. His hair narrowly escaped being golden, and his eyes were of a penetrating blue that seemed to see right to the very heart of things. He was tanned and wholesome-looking, muscular yet graceful of movement.

And he was a little courtly of address, with a frequent whimsical smile that was decidedly ingratiating.

Clearly, the man had on his company manners, for this fine gentleman could never strike terror to a depraved criminal.

"Now, out with it," he said, as he accepted his cup of tea, "tell me I don't look one bit like a detective,—tell me you thought I'd be quite different,—ask me how I go about my work and how I came to be a detective."

Carlotta ventured a smile.

"Just exactly what I was going to say," she exclaimed. "Are you a mind reader as well as a detective, Mr. Barron?"

"Is there any difference?" he parried, looking at her quizzically. "A detective, to be worth his salt, must be a mind

reader. That is my strong card. That, and perseverance."

"Those are your main lines of procedure, then?" Raynor said, quietly.

"I've one more," Barron returned, looking off over the hills, "that's a strong mental bias in favor of anything I hear repeated a great many times. For instance, in connection with this case, and of course, I know quite a lot about it, I've been impressed with the continual cropping up of reference to masks and magic. Therefore, I'm prepared to take those into account."

He beamed on them all impartially and only Jack Raynor noted the intentness and appraising acuteness of his glance.

"You well may be," Phoebe broke in, quickly, "for they are at the root of the matter. If you like, Mr. Barron, I will undertake to show you the masks and explain them."

"Thank you. I shall accept your offer. Now, if you'll pardon my talking so much of myself, I just want to make a few stipulations. I am a very busy man. I take a case and I put it through as expeditiously as I can. I may not indulge in social chat, or even allow myself time for sympathy," he gave a gravely smiling glance at Carlotta and Phoebe. "I must have complete freedom of the house and permission to talk to the family, guests or servants at my own convenience. All this may sound peremptory and even autocratic, but that's the way I work. Also, I play. A certain portion of each day I shall put in at tennis or golf,—if available,—or walking. The rest I shall devote to the business in hand, and I hope to make the results speedy."

His charming smile spread itself abroad again, and took from his speech all effect of asperity or curtness.

"That's exactly the way I should choose to have you work," Carlotta said, leaning back in her low porch chair, and looking at him from under her long eye-lashes. She was rewarded by a flickering smile of interest from the new man.

"And we all want to work with you," said the impulsive Nicky, "just in so far as you want to have us do so."

"That's the kind of an offer I like," Barron said, heartily. "And now, for I'm going to waste no time at all, the amenities are over, and we may begin work. I want the history of the case. Please, Miss Clearman, begin and tell me your version of it. And I warn you, I'll call a halt if you get too prolix."

The man was fascinating, there was no doubt of that. His frank, almost boyish face, his gleaming blue eyes, his recurring but short-lived smile, and his wizard-like perception made the interview interesting even to those who were tired of the whole subject.

He led Phoebe on to tell of her brother, of the masks, of the curse and of the Clearman family. When she waxed diffuse, he gently checked her up and set her off on another track. Then he turned to Carlotta and from her learned much of her married life and her husband, incidentally of her own temperament and disposition.

"I love that Face Card business," he exclaimed, as he heard of it. "I'd like to see you, Mrs. Clearman, as the Queen of Diamonds. Perhaps you'll wear some, just for me. And the King of Clubs," he added, musingly. "Poor chap, he must have been a Court Card. And you're the Jack of Hearts," he turned to Raynor.

"I have that honor," laughed Raynor. "A Jack is an honor, isn't it?"

"Sure. And Miss Lulie Clearman, what is she?"

"She's the Queen of Hearts," replied Raynor, quickly, "and I hope you can find her." Only Tony Barron noted the little pout on Carlotta's scarlet lips.

"Well, I am Big Casino," the detective stated, gravely, "and I shall take anything that comes my way."

After tea, Barron and Phoebe Clearman went to the study, where he was deeply interested in the masks. Some of the others drifted in, but, without saying so, Barron gave them to understand that they were not really needed, and they drifted out again.

Rapidly but surely the detective made himself familiar with the meaning and use of the masks, and Phoebe's fairly comprehensive knowledge taught him enough to grasp the subject so far as he needed it.

Moreover, he took in all the details of furnishing and appointments, and devoted special attention to the desk and chair which marked the scene of Stephen Clearman's last moments.

"I've trained myself," he said, smiling, "to see, absorb and assimilate the contents of an ordinary room in just about two

minutes. This study will take a bit longer, I daresay."

His gaze wandered round again, noting the windows, the door, the walls.

"No," he murmured, "no secret passage, no sliding panels, positively no ingress but that one door and that impossible window."

He stepped to the big window, and opened one of the long, narrow panes, which swung on a vertical axis. When open, the orifice was not more than six or eight inches across.

"Nothing doing," he said. "I say, Miss Clearman, what's your honest opinion?"

She looked at him queerly.

"You're a man who commands truth, Mr. Barron."

"I am," he returned, rather gravely. "Everybody should be, but not everybody is. Tell it, then, won't you?"

"First, do you believe in the supernatural?"

"I do not."

She sighed. "Well, then, Mr. Barron, I'm going to ask you to read Dathan Clearman's diary, before you and I talk any further on this subject."

"Then here endeth this lesson. Will you be good enough to put the diary on my bedside table, and I'll read it in the night, when I can't be doing other search work."

"Yes, you will find it in your room."

During dinner, Barron was a pleasant guest, told a few stories, made a few good jokes, and listened to the others, but always his eyes were studying unobtrusively the countenances that surrounded the table.

Nan was interested in him, but a little afraid of him. As Lulie had said, Nan was muffin-minded, but it was only evident when she came in contact with a really superior intellect. So she was shy, when she found herself seated next to Barron, and quickly perceiving it, he tried to put her at her ease.

"I'm particularly sorry for you, Miss Loftis," he said, looking kindly at her, "for you've not only found yourself in a house of tragedy, but you're worried to death about your dear friend."

"Yes, Mr. Barron," and the ready tears came to Nan's eyes. "I'm sorry enough about Mr. Clearman, but in some ways, a certainty of death is easier to bear than the awful suspense of not knowing——"

"But we shall know—we will know," and he gave her a cheering smile. "And you're going to help. Let's talk about her. Every bit of conversation helps me picture things out, and I've no time for dinner talk. Tell me, Miss Loftis, anything you know about Miss Clearman's affairs, I mean not exactly secrets, but little personal things."

"I can't think of anything to tell," Nan said, perplexedly, and Carlotta interposed:

"Perhaps, Mr. Barron, you mean sidelights on Lulie's character. Well, she was——"

"Don't say *was*," Raynor cried out, "I can't bear it!"

Again Barron noted a tiny pout, and Carlotta corrected herself, "All right,—is, then. Lulie is of a strong, capable nature, quite able to take care of herself in any ordinary emergency. So that, if anything has happened to her it is something of a serious sort. I mean, an accident——"

"We should have heard of that," Barron said, quietly.

"Or a kidnapping."

"Not likely, with a capable young woman, in broad daylight."

"Then, what is left," Carlotta hesitated, "but—that she went away of her own accord and for her own reasons?"

"I think that is exactly what she did do," Barron said, so decidedly that they all looked at him.

"But we know that," Nan said.

"Yes, we know she left this house voluntarily, and now it is for us to find out the reasons. Tell me anything you can,

anybody. How was she dressed? What did she take with her? Was she what we may call 'dressed up'?"

"No," Nan said; "that is, she wore a simple sports outfit. And we can't discover that she took anything with her, unless it was a picture of a friend."

"Man?"

"No, just a girl. A school friend."

"Does the friend live in New York?"

"Yes," put in Carlotta, "but she would scarcely need a picture of her if she meant to go there."

"Scarcely," agreed Tony Barron. "Now, this picture. Describe it, will you?"

"Well," said Nan, "it is a picture of Jean Hayden. She's a rather pretty girl, very blonde and with a nice, sweet face. She's small and saucy, with bobbed hair that curls of itself."

She shook her own bobbed pate, ruefully, for the wave was in need of renewal.

"She looked much like the average flapper, but a little more intellectual," Carlotta volunteered.

"Thanks," Tony said, drily, "I've got Miss Hayden down fine. Now a little more about Miss Clearman. Does no one know anything of a man friend? Don't," he smiled pleadingly, "think I'm trying to insinuate anything, but you must know that that avenue of thought has to be traversed."

He said this so straightforwardly, that even Raynor's resentment faded.

Miss Phoebe took it up.

"I understand," she said. "But, Mr. Barron, I think I know our Lulie better than anyone else here, and while, of course, she has had many admirers, neither her father nor I ever could detect her slightest preference for one above another. Indeed, we have wished the child would incline toward some one of the pleasant young men who have paid her addresses."

For some reason Raynor's heart bounded. He had feared "some pleasant young man" but this speech of Miss Phoebe's helped banish that fear.

"That makes it harder," said Barron. "A man would give us at least a way to look."

Then Raynor told of his investigations of the train people and his visit to Hamilton.

Barron listened in silence, seeming to attach little importance to the recital.

"That got you just about nowhere," he said, as Jack finished.

"Yes. Did I miss a trick in my efforts?"

"Oh, I guess not. Now, as I told you people in the beginning, I've got to search this house from one end to the other. If anybody objects he must tell me why."

"I object," said Phoebe, firmly, "because I won't have a man going through my belongings! You don't think I killed my brother, do you? Or kidnapped Lulie? Then why search my apartments?"

"Miss Clearman," Barron did not smile now, "there are many reasons, but I'll just give you one. Supposing a murderer had something to hide. Suppose he was clever enough to hide it in your room, feeling certain it would not be searched. Then—I may as well have stayed at home. See?"

The smile was dazzling now, so much so that Phoebe said no more, only reiterating her disapproval by a sort of disagreeable sniff.

But all the searching that was done that evening was in a few downstairs rooms and then Barron gravitated back to the study.

"It's a gruesome place," he said, "for more reasons than one. But the secret lies in this room."

It was the first definite statement he had made, and Raynor grasped at it eagerly. "You've found out something!" he cried.

"Heaps of things!" and Barron lighted a cigarette and then sat down, in Clearman's desk chair, one of his long legs

hanging over the arm of it.

The men were there alone, and West was running true to form.

He hovered about, the perfect servant, as always, and seemingly unaware of the keen eyes that followed his every movement.

"West," said Barron, suddenly, "when you had that key in your pocket, and Rogers came up to break in the door, how did you know he'd cut out that upper panel? If he'd cut out a lower one, it would have been much more difficult to fit your key in the lock."

"I told him to remove the upper one, sir."

"Oh, you did. Then you had things all your own way. How did you come to think of that trick, West?"

"What trick, sir?"

"To have the key in your pocket——"

"It wasn't in my pocket, sir, it was in the keyhole, inside the door."

"Then who killed your master?"

"I didn't do it, sir."

"I know you didn't, West," and Tony Barron smoked on in silence.

"Tell me something about Miss Clearman," he said, "oh, Jack of Hearts."

Perhaps Raynor had had more pleasing requests in his life, but it is doubtful. Anyway, he rushed into speech and in ten minutes the detective had a verbal picture given him of a being half goddess, half queen.

He leaned back, smoking placidly, and at last, he interrupted:

"Ash blonde hair, you say? Unusual but beautiful. Does she wear it bobbed?"

"No," Jack smiled. "I asked her once how she'd look with bobbed hair, and she said, 'Like the very old scratch!' Of course she couldn't look like that in any case."

Raynor's serious speech upset Nicky, who roared at it.

But Tony said, gravely, "No, of course not. Will you call that West back again? Delightful name, Galley West."

West answered the bell with his usual promptness and Barron said, "Close the door, West." Then turning to the others, he proceeded. "I'm going to let you two into a secret, but you must keep it secret. West, here, is innocent of any crime, and I'm going to prove it. I'm doing this because I want to use West, but I don't want any one outside ourselves to know I have done so."

The two men agreed and Barron said, pleasantly; "To whom were those three letters addressed, that you took away and posted, as soon as Mr. Clearman's death was discovered?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Excuse me, Galley West, you know perfectly, and if you don't tell at once, I'll hold back the proof I have of your innocence."

"Well, sir, I did look at the addresses, for Mr. Clearman always wished me to do so."

"He did?"

"Yes, sir—he was a bit absent-minded at times, and he might forget part of the address, sir. He trusted me."

West seemed to pride himself on that trust.

"I'm sure he did," said Barron, genially. "Now, for the names, stay,—I'll jot them down."

As the man gave them, Barron wrote them down: two business men in New York and a fellow club member in Valley Falls.

"Thank you. Now, I'll prove your innocence, West. You took these from the desk and carried them down to the mail box

on the porch from mere force of habit, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Almost unconsciously?"

"Yes, you see, I always——"

"I know. I know. Well, they were not here, not written, when you tidied up the room the last time?"

"No, sir."

"Then, gentlemen, if West had come in here at the time specified by the police, between ten-fifteen and twelve o'clock, and killed his master, and the letters had been here, I hold that he would have unconsciously taken them away. But as he did not do that, and as a dead man couldn't write them, they were written after West's departure, and that lets West out."

"Pretty fine reasoning," said Nicky, struggling with this sequence.

"But true," Barron said, quietly. "Had West been guilty, all the more would his subconscious mind have made him take the letters."

"All right," Jack said, "and we'll keep it dark, as you ask. Now what about hunting for Lulie?"

West was again dismissed and Barron turned to the eager questioner.

"Of course all the regular ways to hunt for a missing person have been tried," he said, "so we must resort to our own ingenuity. But there is one cardinal rule. Begin your search where the missing one was last known to be."

"But that's the railroad station, and we've done that."

"No, my boy, that is far from being the last place. She was seen on the train after that, and later at Hamilton."

"She wasn't seen at Hamilton."

"She was seen to get off there, so that is the place to begin our search. I said the last place she was known to be. We have no reason to doubt Mr. Street's statement about her getting off there."

"But I've been to Hamilton," Jack complained, disappointed.

"You have, but I haven't. But look here, you two, if you want me to find Miss Lulie, if you want me to find Mr. Clearman's murderer, you must breathe no word of what I say to you. I do say it to you because it is helpful to me to do so. I shall accomplish both these ends,—that is—" he added, gravely, "I shall find out what became of Miss Clearman."

"You think harm has befallen her?" Raynor's eyes blazed.

"I don't know yet. I know a few things,—many things, about the case, but, you see," with a deprecating smile, "I've been here only a few hours."

"I know—forgive me," and Raynor looked like a culprit.

"Oh, that's all right. Now I'm going to bed, for I have to read that old diary tonight. It may finish my work for me, except some polishing off."

"Good gracious, man! You are a wizard!" Nicky exclaimed.

"Oh, that's only my brag. Really, I've done nothing at all as yet."

"You seemed terribly interested in Miss Phoebe's explanation of the masks," observed Jack.

"Not interested a bit. They weren't masks. They were red herrings for Miss Phoebe. And what a dear she is."

Tony Barron went to his room, his brain full of teeming thoughts to be sorted and classified.

The diary was not on his table. Stepping back to the hall, he encountered Phoebe and asked her for it.

"I put it on your table myself," she said, with wondering eyes....

"Is this the book? Here it is, sir. I didn't do it."

Galley West handed it to Barron and Barron smiled.

CHAPTER XIV

HAMILTON CHILDREN

Tony Barron devoted the hours of what should have been his beauty sleep to the reading of the diary. Had he been challenged, he probably would have said, "Well, I'm good-looking enough as I am, and the diary is exceedingly interesting."

But he would also have said, had he spoken truthfully, that to him the chief interest lay in the concluding pages.

Although spoken of collectively as the diary, the affair was really a portfolio, containing what was left in compact form of old Dathan's daily journal and also dozens of loose leaves, tattered fragments, old documents and other memoranda. Barron sitting up in his bed, read and examined and scrutinized until the wee small hours.

Next morning, before he went downstairs, he summoned West, who by now was his devoted slave, and asked him where he retrieved the diary, which, Miss Clearman said, she had herself put in the detective's room.

"Well, sir," said West, "I got it off of Violet."

"Violet! The colored woman! What on earth did she want of it?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Send her to me."

It was some time before Violet appeared, but Barron waited patiently. He had lots of patience.

"Yo' want me, suh?"

"Oh,—er,—yes. Why did you take this book from my room last night?"

Violet peered at the volume in question as if she had never seen it before.

"No, suh, I didn', suh."

"Hush your nonsense! You did. Why did you?"

"Scuse, suh, I'm deaf," and she cupped her hand behind her ear.

"I have a dollar for you, but I don't give money to deaf people!"

"Suh?" again the cupped hand. The game didn't work.

"Violet, I know you took this book, for you gave it back to West. Now, why?"

Barron had drawn nearer and spoken more clearly.

"Oh, dat," she said, beaming like a cherub. "Yes, suh, I was jes' a clarin' up de room, yo' see. An' dat ornery, disgracious ole book—co'se I tuk it out."

"Of course you did, and you got yourself in trouble by doing so. Now, go, but remember you're in dire danger!"

Barron had no notion why he said this, but he glared at the woman with a ferocity that ought to have frightened her, but didn't.

Her great eyes rolled about, but on her large mouth was the flicker of a suppressed smile that enraged Tony.

So, she was laughing at him,—and his dollar,—was she?

Well, she'd find out—after he had!

To find out things, that was all he was bent on at present. They could be collated and correlated afterwards.

So he went down to a busy day.

As soon as possible he started on his search of the house.

He was no less affable and courteous than the night before, but he was obviously preoccupied, and deeply engrossed in his work.

Methodically he visited every bedroom—in each case merely stepping inside the door, and standing a few minutes, while his eyes quickly moving, scanned every stick of furniture and every bit of decoration. A perfunctory examination, Nicky secretly thought, for what could a man learn that way?

Nicky followed him, with Barron's permission. Indeed, all were at liberty to follow him if they chose, but for most of them the game had lost interest.

West was within call, Miss Phoebe was popping in and out, Carlotta trailed along now and then, but for the most part Tony Barron worked alone and silently.

When at last he came to Lulie's room, he made a more prolonged search.

As Scott had discovered, there were no incriminating or even evidential letters, and nothing that could serve as a clue.

He seemed attracted by a small picture of a girl, clipped from a newspaper which was stuck in a letter rack.

"Who is this?" he asked, casually.

Both Carlotta and Nan, who were present now, declared they had no idea. It was a pretty picture, but more the type of a Film Queen than a girl of Lulie's class. The enormous eyes, the coquettish smile, the bobbed hair, the soft, weak chin, all bespoke the screen or the stage.

"My Heavens!" Nan said, gasping at her sudden thought, "do you suppose Lulie ran away to join the movies?"

The combination of the absurd notion and Nan's horrified face brought a vague smile to Carlotta's lips.

"Excuse me, Mr. Barron," she said, "but if you had ever seen Lulie Clearman, you would know how funny that idea is!"

"It's an impossibility, then?" Barron lost no chance for information.

"The movies, yes! The stage,—of course, utterly improbable, and nothing like that!" pointing scornfully to the impudent face in the picture. "But a tragedy queen, now, or even a Juliet or Ophelia. Lulie could do those—oh, how silly we are! If the girl had had any such thoughts, we should have heard of it."

"I don't know," Phoebe said, coming along in time to hear the discussion; "Lulie was a great one for keeping her own counsel——"

Nan whirled on her. "Miss Phoebe," she cried, "I believe you know where Lulie is! I believe you connived at her getting away, and you know where she went!"

"No, dear," Phoebe said, softly, "no, I don't know where she is."

But somehow her gentle words failed to satisfy the impulsive Nan, who looked away indignantly.

Barron paid no evident attention to the incident. He laid the little picture back where he had found it and after a little further looking around, he left the room.

"Have you eliminated any of us from suspicion as yet?" Carlotta asked, following him, her lovely eyes smiling at him, in half raillery.

Barron looked at her indulgently.

"I eliminate nobody," he said, "until I have found the criminal, beyond all possible doubt. That is time for elimination to begin."

Carlotta pouted.

"I wish you'd eliminate me," she said, "I want to go to New York to stay. I have so much to attend to there."

"Oh, is that the way of it?" Barron said, kindly. "Well, I don't see why you can't go. Do you mean right away?"

"Yes, in two or three days,—or as soon as I can get packed."

"You go ahead with your packing. I reckon there won't be any trouble about the elimination," and with one of his best smiles, Barron went on to his next task.

"Do give us a hint, Mr. Barron!" begged Nan. "You go around the house smiling like a Chessy cat, and as silent as a Sphinx. Please tell us if you've discovered anything, won't you?"

"I've discovered enough to fill a book, Miss Loftis. But, as you may imagine, I haven't time to sit down and reel it off to you. Besides, you all seem to forget the possibility of the savages. Might not some heathen enemy of Mr. Clearman have followed him over here and in some secret way—not magical way—have come here and poisoned him?"

"Oh," said Nan, and turned her thoughts to this fearful possibility.

"Red herring," said Nicky, under his breath, but Barron flashed him a glance of reproof.

As the detective passed Raynor's door, Jack called him in.

"Here's something I forgot to tell you," he said, as he closed the door behind him. Then he told of the strange episode which he had witnessed from his window at night, when Carlotta,—or somebody who resembled her,—walked in the garden and painted the stone out there with red paint. He showed his paint-daubed handkerchief in proof of his story.

Barron looked frankly puzzled.

"I don't get it at all," he said, perplexedly, "what can it mean?"

"I've no idea. Whatever Mrs. Clearman is, she's sane. What do you think of her, anyway?"

"I think she's beautiful and charming, but—well, to be strictly honest,—I do hate a woman who's always making eyes at a fellow."

"Yes, I know. Carly's a born vamp. I nearly fell for her, until Lulie appeared on the scene. Barron, do find that girl! I've had flirtations and romances and silly little affairs, but this is the big love of my life! Never mind old Clearman, he's dead. Look after his daughter,—do, Barron!"

Raynor's voice was agonized, and Barron replied, in all sincerity, "I shall do my very best. But I thought you only met her for the first time last week."

"That's true. It was love at first sight. But none the less real and lasting for that reason. Go to it, Barron. When are you going to Hamilton?"

"This afternoon, I think. See here, Raynor, spring that story of the red paint at the luncheon table. I don't think there's anything in it, but I'd like to get the reactions. Just tell it in a light way, and ask Mrs. Clearman right out if she did it. See?"

The Jack of Hearts saw.

At luncheon, when a chance remark of Barron's seemed to give a lead, Raynor told of the black draped figure who prayed to the stone,—apparently,—and then daubed it with streaks of red paint.

"I say, Carly, was it you, and if so what the devil were you up to?"

Carlotta laughed,—a nervous chuckle.

"Yes," she said, "it was I." Then she grew serious, and said: "I'm not exactly ashamed of it, though perhaps I ought to be. But I was over there with Stephen so long, amid those heathen customs and rites, that I think I absorbed some of it into my system and can never get it out."

"Really?" cried Nan, agog for a new thrill. "Tell us about it, Carly."

"Oh, it's only that they believe,—and Stephen believed,—that a stone, under certain conditions, is a god, and can be worshipped and propitiated. He thought if you prayed to a certain stone,—one which he himself set up in the garden, it would respond with the answer you wished. And—" here she hung her head a little, "and to paint the stone with red paint, is part of the ritual."

"Well, I'll be—'most anything!" exclaimed Nicky. "Did Mr. Clearman really carry his bughouse as far as that?"

Carlotta frowned at him.

"Don't speak like that, Nicky. Have a little respect for the dead,—if you haven't for me."

"I beg your pardon," cried the contrite Goring, "but I say, Carly, this is too much."

"It may be too much," said Carlotta, wearily, "but it's the true explanation of the scene that caught Jack's attention."

Tony Barron, scrutinizing the face of the speaker, with his all-seeing blue eyes, decided there was no important evidence

concealed in the stone-painting incident.

"And what were you praying for, Mrs. Clearman," he said, gently, "that required that ritual?"

"I was beseeching," she said, "that the curse of the Clearmans might end with its descent on my husband, and not continue to be hanging over the family."

"Thank you," said Phoebe, with a new, a disagreeable note in her voice, "but we Clearmans can look out for ourselves."

Every one was surprised and uncomfortable at this caustic speech from the usually placid old lady, and Barron turned a frankly inquisitive glance her way.

He began to wonder if she did know all about Lulie, or—what had come over the spinster, anyway?

"All right, Phoebe," Carlotta said, with an air of finality. "It's your affair."

"But I don't see how a savage tribe or even a single savage could get into this house," Nicky Goring said, going back to the past remark. "It's built like an impregnable fortress."

"Stone walls do not a curse keep out, nor iron bars a fate," said Barron, with a half smile at his own feeble jest. "Well, I'm starting for the village and then for a long tramp across country. Who wants to go along? Only one."

"Me," sang out Raynor, before anyone else could speak. "Let me go, please."

"All righty," agreed Barron, "hop it, old man."

Carlotta was the only one disappointed, for she had rather craved an afternoon with the new man, and she was a good walker.

She did not press her wishes, and soon the two men started off.

"First," Barron said, growing very serious as soon as they had left the house, "for the man in Valley Falls, who received one of those three letters. Pray God he didn't throw it away!"

"You're on a trail, Barron?"

"A hot trail, my boy. And as it grows plainer, I see such a moil, such a deep laid, cleverly constructed plot, that I am aghast at it."

"The Orientals, I suppose. Nothing like that could happen in the family."

"Little old Phoebe's a deep one, isn't she?" said Barron, stalking along and gazing appreciatively at the ever changing scenes before and around him.

"Yes; is she in it?"

"Not ripe for picking yet, Raynor, but the fruits of my search are maturing."

In the village they sought and found Mr. Masters, the clubman to whom one of the letters had been sent.

"Why, yes," he said, genially, "I received that letter. Yes. I think I still have it. But I want to keep it, it's a letter that can't be duplicated now its writer is gone."

"I don't want it, Mr. Masters," Barron told him, "but I do want the envelope. Will you give me that?"

"Surely, willingly," and in a short time with the precious paper in his pocketbook, Barron jubilantly went on his way.

"What—" Raynor began, but the detective almost sharply choked him off.

"Don't ask questions," he besought him, "it's so big, and things are coming on so wonderfully,—don't butt in, I beg of you!"

And the Jack of Hearts had sense enough not to be offended.

Almost in silence they took the train for the short distance to Hamilton. It was a tiny hamlet, one street, a few houses, and a Four Corners of small business places, that dignified themselves by the titles of Clothing Emporium, Beauty Parlor, Palace Theater, and the more prosaic Butcher and Grocer.

Barron strode along the wide, tree-bordered street, glared at the signs and paused before a group of rollicking children playing on the sidewalk.

"Listen," he cried, with his friendliest smile, "a dime to anyone who will listen to my question and a quarter to anyone who can answer it!"

Seven boys and girls let this drift through their noddles and then gathered eagerly round him.

"Say a week or ten days ago," he said, watching their faces, "who saw a big splendid motor car here in Hamilton and didn't know whose it was?"

Blank looks of disappointment.

"Think hard now. As you were playing around, didn't you notice a fine car——?"

"I did," and one little girl spoke primly, "but it comes every day,——"

"Then that isn't the one I mean. I mean a stranger's car——"

"Oh, I saw that one!" cried a freckled boy.

"Er—who were in the car?"

Barron tried to speak calmly, but his heart was thumping and Raynor's was, too.

"Why, a shuffer, and two ladies back."

"Old ladies?"

"Naw. One was a red-haired dame, 'bout like my mother,——"

"And the other?"

"Oh, a girl, I guess,—I didn't notice much."

"I see. A girl with light hair——"

"Naw,—red hair like her mother's. I shouldn't noticed 'em at all, but I thought first off it was my aunt and cousin from Pittsfield."

"H'm. Your aunt has a fine car, then?"

"Yep. A peach. And she and Minnie both has red hair."

Barron sighed.

"You get the quarter, son," he said, "and you each get your dime. But can't any of you remember another car——"

Nobody seemed to; and apparently all had lost power of speech.

"Which way did the car go?" Barron inquired with a half interest.

"Off that way," with a wave in the general direction of Valley Falls.

"Describe the girl," he added, as an after-thought.

"Like all the rest. Skinny, white face and red lips, red hair, bobbed, o' course, and new looking clothes."

"Did she look like this lady?" and Raynor a little diffidently showed Lulie's picture.

"Nixy," the boy declared. "Not in a million years. The girl I saw was a highflyer."

Raynor put away the photograph and looked at Barron.

"Anything more?" he said, despondently.

"Yes, this. Will you take a run down to New York, yourself, and do an errand for me? You can go from here and be back this evening. I don't want to trust it to any one else. Get these two envelopes, if you can. They're the other two of those three letters Clearman wrote just before he died. And Jack, be careful of 'em—in every way. As soon as you get them—and pray heaven you do get them,—seal them up in a large envelope and bring them home. Tell the men, here are their addresses,—that we want only the envelopes. If they object tell them it's for murder evidence. They may keep the letters themselves. The fear is that they've filed the letters and destroyed the envelopes."

"I'll go, of course. But tell me, for God's sake, have you found out anything,—anything at all in Hamilton?"

"Yes,—yes, I have. If you ask me what, I'll jail you!"

Raynor didn't ask what.

After they separated Tony Barron went slowly back to the Four Corners.

He looked at the posters in front of the Picture Palace, stared at the enormous one of a Film Queen who looked exactly like all the other film queens of Filmdom, and went slowly on, with downcast eyes.

He stared in at the windows of the Beauty Parlor and was about to enter when he discovered the door was locked.

"Nobody home," he said to himself. The window held the usual assortment of cheap cosmetics, perfumes and hair ornaments.

Tony gave another long comprehensive look about, which seemed to embrace all Hamilton, and then with a deep sigh, as of unfulfilled expectation, he went to the station and so back to Clearman Court.

By the time he reached there he had somehow ironed out his countenance so that he was his own smiling self.

It was tea time, and all were on the terrace and gave the traveler a warm welcome.

"Sit here by me," Carlotta begged. "Don't even go to wash up, sit down just as you are——"

"But I'm travel-stained and weary," he smiled.

"No matter, a cup of tea will refresh you, and you can clean up afterward. Where's Jack?"

"He started with me, and then flew off to New York on a wild goose chase or fool's errand or something of the sort."

"Connected with Lulie?"

"Probably. He has about the worst case of Love's Young Dream I've ever seen."

"He has," agreed Nan. "Where does he think she is?"

"He didn't confide in me that far, but he may have a maggot in his brain that she's gone in for the movies. I'm suspicious he's starting for Hollywood."

Though Barron spoke seriously, his eyes twinkled.

Then his mood changed.

"Thank you lots for the tea," he said; "I'm now going to look deeper into Miss Clearman's room for traces of her longing for screen fame or for love-letters or—something. There *must* be something there."

"But you have searched there!" Nan cried.

"That's why I search again. I always fear I may miss a trick. I only tell you, so you may know where I am."

His gaze, like a fluttering bird lighted on each in turn, and as it paused at Miss Clearman's face, he seemed satisfied, and, rising, he went upstairs, whistling softly.

Not more than ten or fifteen minutes later, Carlotta and Nan, going up together, went to Lulie's room.

Their first glance showed them only the legs of the detective, as he stood on a high step ladder.

He was feeling around on top of the tester, which was over Lulie's elaborate mahogany bed.

"Awful dusty up here," he said, "but I'm still hunting those letters. Hello, here's something,——"

He came down the steps; carrying the something in his hand.

It was a small bottle, empty, and smelling unmistakably and indubitably of Prussic acid.

CHAPTER XV

THE RED-HAIRED GIRL

To go back a few days, it was on Monday morning, a week after the day Stephen Clearman had come to his tragic end, that a girl sat on a large flat rock on a bank that looked down into the deep water of a great river. The scene spread out before her eyes was one of Nature's finest masterpieces, but the girl had no thought for it.

A slender, graceful person she was, with Titian red hair, bobbed in the newest fashion and curling prettily over her ears. Her eyes were stormy and her whole attitude was remindful of a caged tigress, ready, yet unable to spring.

She wore a simple one-piece frock, of good cut and material, and the toe of her tan shoe dug into the ground in a very frenzy of despair and desolation.

She gazed out across the water, with unseeing eyes, and then great sobs rose in her throat, her shoulders shook, and she gave way to a storm of blinding tears.

They were tears of anger rather than sorrow, her hands clenched into fists which she shook in impotent rage, and her face went white as her sobs grew less from sheer exhaustion.

"I *will* find a way out!" she said, half aloud. "I will!"

She rose and walked up and down the river bank, now pausing to stare down into the deep water, and wonder if that were the only way,—and then, walking on with a steadier stride, as she made new resolutions.

She looked up at the clouds sailing across the blue, and half involuntarily held out her hands in supplication.

Then there came to her mind one of her favorite stanzas from The Rubaiyat, and she murmured:

"And that inverted Bowl they call the Sky,
Whereunder crawling coop'd we live and die,
Lift not your hands to It for help—for It
As impotently moves as you or I."

"Cooped," she repeated, bitterly, "yes, cooped! And there is no help. Sun, moon nor stars can help me. What shall I do? What *can* I do?"

At the sound of a footstep behind her, she turned, angrily, to face a handsome, middle-aged woman, who came, smiling.

"Now, now, dearie, don't take on so. You know it doesn't do one mite of good."

"That doesn't matter!" the girl cried out. "Tell me! tell me *why* I am here! Whose doing is it? Who is your master? Tell me! Sometimes I think I shall strike you if you don't tell me!"

"In one of your tantrums, are you?" the woman's voice was less friendly. "Well, you'll find that doesn't pay."

"But I've been here a week—a week! And I know no more why or for what reason than I did the day I came!"

"And you won't know, until the order is given. As I have told you, we're not the principals, we're merely paid to obey orders. And the orders will be obeyed."

There was something almost sinister in these last words. At any rate, it was a sinister look that accompanied them.

The woman was, ordinarily, of a pleasant aspect, rather stout, but well groomed and expensively dressed.

She wore a modish sport skirt and gay-colored silk blouse, and save for some superfluous jewelry, was garbed in good taste. Her face was free from wrinkles, but had the look of being sternly kept so. It was as if wrinkles were straining at their leash, but had so far been kept back.

Her hair was red, of exactly the same shade as the girl's. A deep lustrous auburn, plentiful and well arranged. Her eyes were dark and though often tranquil, had the alert readiness of the feline tribe.

Watchful eyes they were; cruel eyes they could be.

And they were cruel now.

"It's useless to protest," the woman said, "useless to struggle against the inevitable. You may as well give up your fight and settle down and be as happy as you can."

"Happy!" and the girl's voice sounded like the reverberation of a hollow tomb.

"Yes, why not? You have a lovely home here, you have everything heart can wish. Whatever you want to eat, to wear, to read, to amuse you—you've only to name it and it is brought to you as soon as possible. You know that."

"I know that. Look here, Madame Murray,—do listen to reason. I know you're being well paid for this job,—I know you are loyal to your employers, but whoever they are,—they must be in the wrong. They are wicked people. Savage or civilized, they are doing wrong,—and you know it. Now, come over on my side, and I promise you twice as much money as they offer, immunity from all prosecution or punishment,—which you will certainly get sooner or later from this,—and the love and gratitude of several influential people. Please, Madame Murray,—please listen to me."

The woman had turned away with a bored air, as one who hears again an oft-told tale.

"Then would you like to go for a little motor-boat ride, Jessica?" the woman asked, turning back, and showing only pleasantness on her placid face.

"Don't call me Jessica, it isn't my name!"

"It is for the present. And you'll be called nothing else here. So make up your mind to that, miss!"

As always, a change of mental attitude changed the woman's face, and she scowled unbecomingly.

"Oh, well, it doesn't matter," the girl said, wearily, "nothing matters."

"That's right," Madame Murray spoke briskly now. "That's the way to look at it. Now, brace up, and take things a mite easier. Come on, let's go for a little ride, Tad will take us."

A shudder passed through the girl's frame, which was not lost upon the older woman.

"Look here, Jessie," she said, not unkindly, "take it from me you'd better treat Tad a little differently. Your scorn of him only makes him admire you more. Can't you seem indifferent like?"

"Ugh! I hate the sight of him. I hate to have him anywhere near me!"

"But can't you see,—heavens, girl! where are your eyes? Can't you see he's just the sort of man that is piqued by your attitude, and it makes him bound to break you!"

"Break me! Me? Lulie Clearman? I rather think not!"

"You don't know—oh, you sheltered girls, you don't know what a bad man is! But you'll find out, my lady, if you continue to treat him like the dirt under your feet. He won't stand it forever."

"I won't, either," Lulie said, despairingly. "There's always the river."

"But you can't always get to the river. It's none of my business, but I'm warning you. Tadousac is a bad man. I'm the best friend you've got in this house."

"I know you are, Madame Murray, and that's why I'm appealing to you. Do help me,—do let me get away—and get home,—and you'll never regret it."

"Except all my life," the woman said, with a hard laugh. "Well, going on the river?"

"No,—I don't believe I want to."

"All right, sit around and mope, then. But it won't get you anywhere."

"Nothing will get me anywhere, apparently," the girl flung out, as her companion left her and went back toward the house.

Just a week,—Lulie reflected, as left alone, she resumed her seat on the rock and stared down at the water. A week ago today she had left Clearman Court, and taken the train to Hamilton.

"Oh, why did I do it? she mused; why did I give way to that foolish, silly, idiotic notion of having my hair bobbed to surprise them all? Of course I never meant to have the henna dye,—those wretched people did that—but—oh, I wish I understood it all. Madame Murray said she would take me home in her motor, said she was a friend of Aunt Phoebe's,—

so of course, I got in—and—here I am."

It all seemed like a vague dream,—the swift motor ride for miles and miles. The strange sleepiness that overcame her shortly after they started, the lunch in the car, the unintelligible chatter of the man and woman who were in charge of it all.

Then the blurred, uncertain memory of a night in a sort of farmhouse, where the people seemed to be foreigners, and though the food was wholesome and the rooms clean, she could remember no distinct or vivid impression of them.

Then on again next day, in the big, swift car, and at night as they neared the lights of some big place, a sinking into deep oblivion that only ended when she wakened in a pleasant room of the house where she was now.

A good enough house,—large, airy, comfortable. But situated on an island, on which, so far as she could see, there was no other house. Trees, shrubs, rocks, even a few flowers, but no sign of other habitation.

The occupants, beside herself and Madame Murray, were Tadousac, a French Canadian and a general servant who was most capable and efficient, and who was, or pretended to be, deaf and dumb.

Tadousac, much younger than Madame Murray, was glum and morose, as a rule. For the first few days, he had not noticed Lulie, or talked to her. Then he began to notice her in a way she did not like. His eyes seemed to devour her, and while he was outwardly respectful, he seemed filled with a slumbering warmth which sometimes threatened to break out in a flame.

Still, he said little, but when she edged away as he drew near, or looked scornfully at him when he was flattering of speech, a deeper glow shone in his eyes, and he set his red lips in a hard line.

He was a handsome chap, about thirty, and though not tall, he was well shaped and always well groomed.

It was he who had bobbed Lulie's hair, when she went to the little Beauty Parlor in Hamilton to have it done, in pursuance of a mad freak of wilfulness.

It was he who had added the henna dye, when she didn't know it, he having duly apologized for the lack of a mirror, saying it was being reframed.

Her amazement at the first sight of her red, curled short locks, was only equalled by her fierce anger.

He had been profuse in his apologies, had said he spoke English only slightly and had misunderstood her, but assured her that in a short time the dye would wear off, and the new hair grow out, and all would be well.

And then, the pleasant lady, who was there having a Marcel wave, had told her that she was Madame Murray, a friend of Phoebe Clearman's and that she would drive her home in her car, and call herself on her old friend.

Lulie had gladly accepted the offer. The train service was not too frequent. She had not noticed that the French barber had quickly locked the beauty parlor and, in cap and Norfolk, had become Madame Murray's chauffeur.

Then had come the mad, swift ride, the drugged conditions,—not always sleep, but dullness,—and then, this place!

A week,—a week today since she had left home and kin and—and Jack Raynor. For Lulie's affections had gone out to the Jack of Hearts as swiftly as his had flown to her, and though she might not have admitted this to herself had she been at home and had all been well, yet here in this exile, she knew he was the love of her life, and she wondered when she would see him again.

The week had given her much time for thought, and the more she thought the less she could fathom the mystery.

She had been kidnapped, that was the one thing of which she could be sure.

Doubtless, of course, for ransom; but who her kidnappers were, or what steps they were taking in the matter, she had not the faintest idea.

She was allowed to see no newspapers whatever.

Almost everything else she desired was given her. If she wanted new clothes or toilet appointments or books or magazines they were ordered at once and reached her quickly. There seemed to be no lack of money. Though there was but one servant the food was good, well cooked and well served.

The house, though not immaculate, was decently clean, and the air and scenery were superb.

She had no idea where she was, nor would her captors tell her.

Whenever she asked questions, they said frankly they were acting under orders which they dared not disobey and had no intention of disobeying.

Nor could threats, cajolery, tears or hysterical rages move them in the slightest degree.

Aside from all her anger, fear and despair, Lulie was puzzled.

She could think of no one who could have done this thing other than some organized band of clever kidnappers, who had carefully worked up the whole plan from the beginning.

For the little Beauty Parlor at Hamilton was a recent institution, and though it did a thriving business in the matters of bobbed hair and permanent waving, it was a temporary seeming affair, and she began to think it had been started for some nefarious purpose.

Then at night she would think of all sorts of other strange and bizarre explanations of her capture, and at last, her brain whirling, she would sink into troubled slumber.

Madame Murray was uniformly kind and even chummy, except when Lulie tried to worm an explanation out of her, and then she could grow very ugly.

It occurred to Lulie many times that some of the savages, as they called the Far Eastern natives, might have had such an enmity toward her father that they used this means of torturing him. For much of her own agony was because of the thought of her father's grief at her mysterious disappearance.

And yet, it didn't seem like the work of the Oriental mind. They would surely have chosen some more characteristic plan.

But, to be sure, if cunning foreigners had planned to kidnap her, they might well have placed the matter in the hands of some American scoundrels, with the present discomfiting results.

Her long vigils of thought had brought her decision down to a question of only two solutions. One, that the Orientals had done this thing, the other that a band of professional kidnappers of her own race had done it.

And it mattered little which. Here she was, here she had to stay.

The first few days she had spent all her efforts trying to find a way out. She had tried to watch for a passing steamer or motor boat or yacht, and signal distress. But no opportunity offered, and once or twice she detected her keepers laughing at her efforts.

They had newspapers, they had mail. Where they came from she did not know. Nearly every morning either Tadousac or Fred, the servant, took the motor boat and went away somewhere, returning with mail and supplies.

And this was Lulie's one secret hope, that some day she could escape in the motor boat. She knew, with the knowledge of much experience, how to run one.

Moreover, she had been quick-witted enough to pretend she understood nothing of them and even was afraid of them.

Occasionally, taken for a ride, she stepped in timidly and sat down gingerly, as if fearing an upset.

Stealthily she watched the method of securing the boat to the little dock, observed where keys were kept, and noted everything she could, though with an air of hopeless abandon to her fate.

Nor was this air entirely assumed.

Her most careful scrutiny and her cleverest planning could compass no way of escape.

The island was not large, yet large enough for ample exercise and even games, had she wished them.

Yet, though she could see other land, it was so isolated and out of the way that rarely did any craft pass, and never near enough to signal.

Truly, the kidnappers had chosen an ideal spot for their captive in more senses than one.

Madame Murray herself looked after Lulie's comfort capably and even solicitously. She consulted her tastes in food and was always ready to read to her or chat with her or entertain her in any way she wished.

The girl seldom availed herself of these privileges, for her time was spent brooding over her fate or striving to find a

way out.

Sometimes she read, but she could scarcely keep her attention long enough sustained for a book. She read magazine stories, and the chatter in weekly papers and longed for the forbidden newspapers. Her appeals for newspapers were invariably met with the stereotyped phrase, "It is against our orders."

The week had gone by and she knew no more than at the beginning what was to be her eventual fate.

She pictured her father receiving demands for her ransom. Well she knew he would accede to them, but even then, such things do not always work out as planned. Perhaps the police had intervened and that had delayed matters.

Often she thought of Jack Raynor. He had wondered how she would look with bobbed hair and in a spirit of mischief she had decided to show him.

She had meant to go to Hamilton, have her hair cut and curled,—not dyed,—and be back home by mid-afternoon.

All the way there she had hesitated, wondering if he would really like it. He had said it would take off the St. Cecilia edge and she didn't want to look Puritanic. And, too, she had reasoned,—it would soon grow out again if it proved unbecoming.

Then she began to see the long arm of premeditation. The man who had bobbed her hair was the one who had driven the car that kidnapped her, and the woman, who, she supposed, was a casual customer getting a Marcel wave, was one of the gang herself.

The last few days had been the worst, for the man, Tadousac, had begun to look at her evilly, and she was frightened.

He came along now, as she still sat on the flat rock.

"Not going for a boat ride?" he asked.

"No, I'm afraid," she said, with a little shrug of her shoulders.

"Afraid? Surely not when I'm at the wheel. Do come."

"No, thank you, I'd rather not."

He came nearer. His voice was soft and suave, his manner ingratiating.

Lulie thought she could have stood it better if he had been rough or uncouth.

His small black moustache was silky-looking and his red lips and white teeth gleamed beneath it in a smile that was both sly and cruel.

"Do you know, I'll be greatly surprised if you don't go," he said, and the smile widened.

"Why?" she returned, striving not to show the sudden terror she felt.

"Because,—" and still smiling, he came nearer still.

She rose, and with a desperate endeavor to be calm, she said, "I'll go some other day, thanks, I don't care to, today."

"But I care to have you,—so much, that if you—if you still refuse, I shall kiss you."

She turned on him like a tigress, and then, just in time, remembered Mrs. Murray's assertion that the more she fought him, the more it intrigued him.

Commanding her voice by her utmost effort, she said, "Oh, very well, then, I prefer the alternative of going in the boat. But, Mr. Tadousac, I had thought you at least a gentleman."

He flushed deeply, but only said, unsteadily, "I had thought so, too,—but you——"

He broke off, turned round and went swiftly down toward the boat house.

Madame Murray met Lulie with a little comprehending smile and the trio went for a sail.

The day was perfect, the water lovely and the scenery among the finest in the country, but Lulie's heart was lead in her breast. Surely she had had enough to cope with before, without a complication of this sort.

There was always the river,—but as Madame Murray had truly said, she was not always allowed to reach the river.

She was allowed to do many things, to please herself in many ways, but when a restriction was imposed, when an order was laid down, they were as if made of iron.

There was little talk on the sail, and Lulie planned that if ever the situation became absolutely unbearable, she would ask to be taken out in the boat and then jump overboard. Surely in that deep water she could drown before he could rescue her.

Tadousac molested her no more that day.

Mrs. Murray was sympathetic, Lulie could see that, and when she went to her room that night, she asked the older woman to go with her for a chat.

They sat at the window, the soft air stirring the light curtains and the pretty room pleasant with the glow of candles, which Lulie preferred to kerosene, that being the alternative.

"Madame Murray," the girl began, "I don't ask you to betray your employers, I don't ask you to neglect what you hold to be your duty, but can't you save me from that man?"

"I don't know what to do, my dear," was the reply, and Lulie was astonished at the hint of tears in the tone. "No, I can't save you from him. He is a beast! I have tried before this to save a woman from him, but I was—and am powerless."

Lulie was aghast. This frankness was like a knell to her soul.

What should she do? What *could* she do?

"Then," she said, "then Madame Murray, I am going to drown myself and at once. I cannot live in the fear of that man. It is worse than the awfulness of the rest of my fate. Oh, can't you have pity! Can't you help me! Suppose it were your daughter in these terrible straits——"

"Hush! No, I cannot help you."

With a sudden gesture the woman brushed Lulie's hand from her arm, and quickly left the room. Soon after Lulie heard the gate locked.

The girl was free to lock her own room door as she chose, but at the head of the stairs was a tall secure gate. This was always locked at night and prevented Lulie from going downstairs should she try to do so.

It did not interfere with the others doing so, for Lulie's room was on a slightly higher floor level, and a turn of the staircase and three extra steps led up to it.

She heard the key click in the lock with a new feeling of terror and went to bed to pass a sleepless night.

CHAPTER XVI

BOBBED HAIR

"Well," said Tony Barron as he sniffed at the empty bottle that had so positively been the recent container of the deadly poison, "that eliminates one more."

"Who?" cried Nan, breathlessly.

"Miss Lulie, of course. Do you suppose anybody would do such an asinine thing as to kill her father, pitch the bottle up on this high place over her bed and then light out?"

"I don't," said Nicky Goring, who had followed the procession, "but I can tell you, old man, the police are going to think just that very thing."

"Yes,—they would," agreed Barron. "So s'pose we don't tell them tonight. We don't have to tell every little thing we know, and tomorrow is another day."

Everybody said yes to this plan, and seeming to forget his great desire to hunt for love letters Barron went off to his own room to stay till dinner time.

Dinner was a quiet meal. Raynor had not returned from New York; Nan, notwithstanding Barron's remarks, was distressed about the vial found in Lulie's room; Carlotta and Miss Phoebe both seemed thoughtful and silent. And even the ebullient Nicky was taciturn, and his mind was bothered by the deductions the police might wrongfully make from that empty vial.

After dinner Barron proposed bridge, saying he deserved some recreation and they ought to indulge him.

He and Carlotta played Nicky and Nan.

They began half-heartedly, but all were good players and interest grew stronger as they went on. They were still playing when Raynor came home.

"Hello, Jack of Hearts," Barron called out. "Since you've come, I bid a heart."

"Go out to the dining room, Jack," Carlotta said, hospitably. "Stagg will fix you up."

"All right; don't stop your game," he returned, and went his way. He came back later and took Barron's place, that worthy declaring himself sufficiently refreshed to return to his work.

His work seemed to be with Miss Clearman, for he invited her to a session in the study and they were still talking there when the others came upstairs to go to bed.

Raynor went along with Barron and behind locked doors the two eagerly began to compare notes.

"First, as to the letters," Tony said, and Jack gave him one envelope, stating the other one had been destroyed.

"And this is no good," Barron said, surveying it with disappointment, "it has a stamp printed on it."

"Does that spoil it for you?" laughed Jack.

"It does indeed. Now listen, for I want you to hear this from me. An empty poison bottle has been found on top of that thing over Miss Lulie's bed, tester, I believe they call it."

The Jack of Hearts looked as if he had suddenly received his death sentence.

"Oh, pshaw, have a little sand," chided Barron. "Don't you see, somebody else put it there,—she didn't do it."

Raynor's face beamed like sunshine after rain.

"You're the biggest kid!" laughed Tony. "But I haven't time to chatter. Listen here. Now, I've told you, though you've probably forgotten it, that I depend a whole lot on a repeated impression. No, not a hunch—I won't have that word used in my presence. But ever since I began this investigation I've been confronted with one suggestion after another of—bobbed hair."

"What do you mean?"

"Just this. And it may amount to nothing at all. You asked Miss Lulie how she'd look with her hair bobbed, didn't you?"

"Yes, and she said, 'like old scratch.'"

"I know. Didn't you then advise it—a little?"

Raynor thought. "Why, I believe I did tell her it would take off that saintly edge,—you know she's like the Blessed Damozel pictures, so——"

"Yes, yes, I know. Now, soon after that, she discussed with Miss Loftis the picture of that Hayden girl, and—asked Miss Nan how she liked the way Jean had her hair. And, you see, the Hayden picture girl had bobbed hair."

"Yes." Raynor stared.

"Yes. Then we found in her room a newspaper clipping showing a girl,—a moving picture star, with her hair bobbed in particularly pretty fashion. Can't you see the trend of Miss Clearman's mind? Can't you see she was considering bobbing her hair, because Miss Loftis had, and Miss Hayden had, and you had spoken of it,—and well, just supposing that she went to Hamilton for that purpose,—just supposing. Wouldn't she take Jean's picture with her as a guide to the barber,—there's a Beauty Parlor in Hamilton, you know,—and wouldn't she feel such hesitancy about it that she might turn back two or three times, and wouldn't she murmur in her uncertainty, 'I wonder what Jack will say.' Wouldn't she?"

Raynor thought deeply, his eyes fixed on Barron's.

"Why go so secretly?"

"To surprise you all."

"Then, where is she now?"

"Kidnapped by those people in the big car. She was the girl with bobbed, red hair."

"But her hair isn't red."

"Henna dye. Lots of 'em do it."

"Never. Never, on your life! Lulie might have had her hair bobbed, she might do it to surprise us, but dye it! Never!"

"Well, that's my notion. Anyway, whether she was the girl in the car or not, don't you subscribe to the bob business?"

"I'll grant you that, but I think it's your imagination with no sort of proof back of it."

"Then, if she had it duly bobbed, why didn't she come home again?"

"I don't know, Tony." Jack was humble now. "What do you think?"

"I think, that the evidence points to her having gone to the barber's. What else could she have gone to Hamilton for? And since she didn't come home I think she was forcibly prevented. Assume she was kidnapped, and I can't think of any other forcible prevention; then, why not the big car, with two women and a man, on the very day she was there and did not come home?"

"I see," Jack said, slowly. "How are you going about it?"

"I suppose I'll have to go back to Hamilton tomorrow and chase up the records of that barber shop. They called it a Beauty Parlor, but during this bobbed-haired epidemic, the girls pay more attention to their heads than to their faces. I hate to take the time——"

"Telephone."

"By Jove, you're right! To whom? The Parlor is shut up."

"The Post Office, I should say."

"Yes, but I wish we could telephone tonight. Telegraph office?"

"None in that tiny village, of course. Minister?"

"It isn't very late—only a little after ten. We all came upstairs early. But it's pretty late to call up a poor old dominie,—I assume he's old and I'm sure he's poor."

"Doctor."

"The very thing!"

Going softly downstairs to the servants' quarters, Barron used the pantry telephone which was out of hearing of those upstairs.

Telephone central willingly connected him with the one doctor that Hamilton boasted, and as might have been expected, he knew all about everybody, whether they had ever been ill or not.

The information finally gleaned was to the effect that a foreign-looking young man and a handsome middle-aged woman had opened the Beauty Parlor and Ladies' Barber Shop about a month ago. That they had left very suddenly something less than a fortnight ago, and it was the village wonder what had become of them.

They owed no bills, rent was paid in advance and apparently they had just turned the key and walked off. No one had noticed their departure or knew how or where they went. They had left all their stock and fixtures and the assumption was, that they had been called away by the death of a relative or something of that sort and would soon return.

That was all the physician could tell them.

"And their names?" asked Barron.

"Madame Martigny and Monsieur De Vries."

"And that's that!" commented Tony as he hung up the receiver. "It's a deep plot, Jack, a ver-y deep plot. Those two people are the agents of the kidnappers, and they took that shop and fixed it all up to catch the trade round here—there's no other ladies' barber that I know of,—and hoped sooner or later to get Lulie—or, maybe some other rich girl. It may have been a general trap and they merely took the first daughter of a millionaire that came along."

"Then where's Lulie now?"

"Your naïveté is touching, boy. I don't know where she is, but we do know what to look for. A car with three people of whom we have the description."

"You haven't the description of those two villains."

"We can get it from anybody in Hamilton. What surprises me is that there has as yet been no ransom demand. But of course that is because of Mr. Clearman's sudden death. That must have knocked their plans into a cocked hat!"

Barron didn't say that it also boded ill for Lulie's safety, but he felt it none the less.

"And here's another thing, laddie," he said; "if the police get hold of the discovery of that empty bottle, and of course they must, let them think it points to Miss Clearman's guilt. It can't hurt her, and it leaves the way clearer for my work."

"You're asking a great deal of me—" Jack began.

"Shut up! You make me tired. I tell you it is a help—a help toward establishing the girl's innocence, and just because in your dazed preoccupation you can't quite see through that, you begin to whine. I've got a whole lot on my shoulders, and I'm afraid to move for fear I'll joggle some off. Now don't you hinder me by running counter to my advices. If you do, I'll throw up the case and go home."

When Barron got very deeply involved in a tangle of evidence it always made him a little irritable until he could straighten it out. And so Jack accepted the stinging reproof, that was perhaps a bit harsher than he deserved.

He took it in good part, for he thoroughly believed in Barron, and had faith he'd pull through somehow.

"You see, Jack," the detective added, "whether the villain in this play is a white man or a wicked Oriental heathen,—whether it is one man or an organized band of evildoers, in any case, whoever put that empty bottle on top of Lulie's bed, also put her half-burned cigarette in the study and probably took the ten thousand dollars,—and, possibly, poisoned Stephen Clearman, too."

Lest he should make an inapposite remark, Raynor made none, and after a hearty good night, he went off to bed.

Left alone, Tony Barron got very busy. He sniffed scornfully at the envelope Jack had brought and after a careful scrutiny, tore it up and threw it away.

He had a wonderful theory, if he could only prove it.

Barron was not one of those detectives who conceive a theory and then try to make the facts fit it, but in the present

instance they did fit it, and he wanted others to see that they did.

It was much later, about midnight, in fact, when Miss Phoebe Clearman softly tapped at his door, and when he opened it as softly, she handed him, without a word, a large bandbox.

Without opening this, he put it on a high shelf in his closet and locked the door.

Tony felt he had his work cut out for him to trace Lulie. Even if he were entirely right in his assumptions, how could he ever find her? Or how could the police, either. The Hamilton urchin might give up more information about the big car, but how trace a car of which neither make nor number was known, of which nothing was known save that it carried a man and two women?

That was surely a needle in a haystack problem. However, if the police could do anything at all, that was the sort of thing they might do. Anyway, he proposed to put that part of the work in their hands; he had troubles of his own.

He pulled out the old diary from a table drawer and began afresh on that.

He had some magnifying glasses, and some testing acids and quite a bit of paraphernalia besides some books on ancient documents and kindred subjects.

His work on these things took a long time, but at last he raised his weary head, stretched his arms and shook his shoulders. A light of success gleamed in his blue eyes as he exclaimed, under his breath, "Clever! the cleverest I ever saw!"

The next day being Saturday, Nan begged the detective to take a holiday and go over to the country club for golf.

"Oh, do," Carlotta cried. "I wish I could go with you. It seems a shame," she pouted a little, "that just because I am in mourning I can't go anywhere. It doesn't help Stephen any for me to mope about here——"

"In my day," said Phoebe, severely, "a widow wasn't supposed to want to go into society for a few years."

"I don't want the society," Carlotta said, with a gentle pathos in her voice, "but I want some outdoor life; some exercise, besides walking or motoring. That's all I'm allowed to do. I tell you frankly, Phoebe, when I get to New York I'm not going to stay mewed up in the house. I'm going about wherever I like."

Phoebe's face registered silent disapproval, and Carlotta went on.

"Will you come to see me, Mr. Barron? I don't propose to entertain largely, but I must see some friends now and then, or I shall die of loneliness."

"I'll go to see you, Carly," said Nan, kindly. She was truly sorry for the excitement-loving young woman, who though she had been a devoted wife was so much younger and more pleasure-loving than her old and staid sister-in-law.

Barron casually accepted the casual invitation for the future, but declined to take the proposed holiday.

"It's Saturday," he said, "and I have a number of errands to attend to that can't be done tomorrow and can't wait until Monday. So, we'll play golf tomorrow, if you like, and I'll work today."

His first errand took him down to the village, where he spent most of the morning with the town clerk, going over musty old records and learning a few meager facts about some of the dead and gone Clearmans. As is usual in such cases, and such places, many of the records had been destroyed by fire, but Barron succeeded in finding much of interest and, he hoped, of value.

Returning for luncheon, he went to his room, and chanced upon Violet in the hall.

It seemed to him that she hovered about a great deal, and on a sudden impulse, he told her to follow him into his room.

She demurred at first, but a peremptory command brought obedience.

"Violet," he began pleasantly, "will you stay with Mrs. Clearman after she leaves here, or remain in this house?"

"Oh, I'se gwine stay with Miss Carly, dat I sho' is," and a decided nod emphasized her words.

"Why do you call her that? Did you know her when she was a girl?"

"Well,—yo' see,—" the woman seemed to give the question more consideration than it deserved, "I'se knowed her a long time, suh."

"Did you travel abroad with her and Mr. Clearman?"

"No, suh," and now she began to look sulky.

"Then she left you home here when she went?" Barron had no notion why the woman resented these questions but he determined to find out.

"Well,—yes, suh."

"Where were you then? With Miss Carly's people?"

"No, suh—not 'zackly,——"

"Well, where, then? What the dickens is the matter with you? Can't you talk?"

"Yo' see, suh—I'se deaf."

"Deef, nothing! That's all a pretence. I've watched you, and you're no more deaf than I am!"

"Oh, golly, molly, polly, how yo' does prosecute a po' good fo' nuffin niggah! Am' yo' shamed of yo' self, suh, to pester an' tease me cos I'se deaf?"

"Hush that talk. How long have you lived with Mrs. Clearman as her maid?"

The vacant-looking eyes rolled about as if in a mad effort of memory.

"Now, dat's jest 'zackly what I dunno,—no, suh, I dunno. I ain' no good a reckonin' time, dat I ain't. Yo' ask Miss Carly, —she'll tell you' all dem fac's yo'se a askin'. Yessuh, yo' ask her."

"All right, Violet, I'll ask her. Now see here. Is Mrs. Clearman in her room now?"

"No, suh, she's done gone down to lunch."

"Well, I'm going in her room for a minute, and I want you to go along so you can tell your mistress I didn't disturb anything. I am privileged to do this at will, as you know."

Looking doubtful, but not daring to object, Violet followed the detective.

He went through the main hall and into the smaller private hall that led to the new wing. He went into Carlotta's beautiful boudoir, and after a comprehensive though swift glance around, he turned and left the room.

"That's all," he said over his shoulder. "As you see, I didn't touch anything."

He went down to luncheon, seemingly a care-free young man, a guest at a delightful country home.

They all seemed to possess the power of throwing off the horrors of the situation at meal times, and the dining room usually saw a pleasant, conversational crowd.

Stagg preserved exactly the same demeanor he had always shown, but West, who acted as second man now, was nervous and uncertain of manner.

"Can't we forget it all, over Sunday, and have a pleasant week-end?" Carlotta said: "This awfulness is getting on my nerves. The rest of you never seem to realize that I have my own grief to bear as well as all these horrors of police investigations and Lulie's absence and everything. None of you others has lost a dear one—or, forgive me, Phoebe, I know you loved Stephen, too."

"Yes, let's follow Mrs. Clearman's suggestion," Barron said, smiling impartially about him. "I'll do my best, Fair Lady, to give you a quiet peaceful Sunday tomorrow, if I can't promise you happiness."

She gave him a grateful look, and was about to reply, when West came in with a telegram.

During these exigent days messages were delivered whenever they arrived,—heedless of conventions.

The address was that of Miss Phoebe, but as she attempted to open it her hands trembled so, she handed it over to Carlotta.

As the graceful white hands unfolded the paper, a look of amazed horror came over her face. She turned white, her hands clutched at the paper, and as she tried to read it aloud, her voice failed her, and the paper fell to the floor.

Nicky Goring sprang to pick it up, and then to end the suspense of all he read it aloud:

"I cannot come home and face exposure and disgrace. I know you can never forgive but you can forget.

"LULIE."

A dreadful silence fell, broken only by Miss Phoebe's stifled sobs.

"Where is it dated from?" Carlotta asked, suddenly.

"From New York,—the Ritzmont Hotel," Nicky replied. "Of course that doesn't mean she's there."

"But a message would reach her there, wouldn't it?" Carlotta cried. "Can't we send for her to come? Of course we forgive her—surely if I can, the rest of you can. Dear Lulie,—at least we must hear her explanations."

They looked at her with varying expressions.

Nan with complete agreement. Raynor with such a bewildered, stunned face, that his thoughts could not be read.

Tony Barron was non-committal. It was his job to deduce, not to advise.

But Phoebe Clearman was outspoken.

"No," she said, in clear, high tones, "no; if that wicked girl killed her father, I for one, refuse her admittance to this house."

The kindly old face was transformed by righteous wrath until she looked more like an avenging goddess than a gentle woman.

"Oh, Phoebe," begged Carlotta, "don't be too hard on her—remember how young she is——"

"Not so terribly young," was the cold response.

"Remember we know nothing of her provocation,—they both had such tempers."

"No!" and Phoebe's voice cut like ice, "the law is a life for a life. If Lulie Clearman killed her own father, she deserves to suffer the just penalty. Therefore, anyone who loves her must prefer that she stay away."

And then the strong-willed and frail-bodied little creature rose with dignity and left the room.

A dead silence followed, and as no one could eat any more, they all left the luncheon unfinished and went their various ways.

Barron, going upstairs, saw Violet meet her mistress and assist her to her room.

It was some hours later, that a few of them chanced to be together on the terrace.

Carlotta, approaching, said, "I'm going to the village, anybody want to go? I have the big car."

Raynor was not visible, so Nan and Goring said they'd go and Barron echoed acceptance.

Drawing Nan aside a moment before they started, Barron whispered to her.

"Now, I'm going to brag of my mind reading. In the village, Mrs. Clearman will stop at the post office. She will go in and get one of those little stamp books, that hold a dollar's worth of stamps. After she comes out if it is not in evidence, you jump out and go in, and ask if she did this. You must obey me, it is imperative,—if we would save Lulie."

"I will, but tell me this one thing. Is that telegram from Lulie?"

"No, it is a fake. Hush."

They joined the others and the big car rolled smoothly down the slopes to the village, and—to the Post Office.

CHAPTER XVII

A PERILOUS DESCENT

Lulie, on her beautiful island, was growing each day more terrified of Tadousac. True, he had not as yet actually touched her, but his every word, his every glance, proved to her that he was only biding his time.

It was Saturday afternoon of the same day that the telegram purporting to be from her was received at Clearman Court, that she sat on her favorite rock,—looking out over the water. Often she had begged to know where she was, but information was not accorded.

However, by dint of continuous and alert listening she had picked up a few tiny bits of useful knowledge.

And by piecing them together she had a glimmer of an idea that she was somewhere near Canada, Tadousac was a French Canadian and Fred, the servant, also seemed to be.

Though said to be deaf and dumb, she had noticed a look of intelligence in his eyes at some things said by the others, and she concluded that she had been told the lie to prevent her plying him with undesirable questions.

Also, many of the magazines and weeklies they let her have were English publications, and cumulative evidence gave her a feeling of certainty she was in or near Canada.

Had she known more about that part of the map she would have realized at once that she was confined on one of the Thousand Islands.

But that was a region she had never before visited, her life having been spent largely abroad. Nor had she chanced to hear much about the beautiful St. Lawrence and the charms of the Islands.

Yet she kept on listening, until she had developed a real faculty for hearing and registering, while seemingly paying no attention whatever.

And what she had learned, though piecemeal, made when put together such a tissue of horror and unbelievable crime, that she shuddered to think about it.

One thing she had proved to her satisfaction—the relationship between her two keepers.

At first she had noticed that Tadousac, when in formal mood called the woman Mrs. Murray, or simply Murray. If more genial, he called her Molly. And on several occasions, when he was intensely interested, or affectionately mellow by reason of wine, he had distinctly said, "Mother."

Lulie was sure she was not the man's mother, but, she deduced, mother-in-law. Watching carefully she could see signs of a woman and her son-in-law banded together in some terrible scheme, who while having no real affection for one another yet bowed to the so called honor that is said to exist among thieves.

Yet Lulie was also sure they were not principals in the wrong being done. They were at the orders of and under complete subjection to someone whom they called The Boss. No other name had they ever used in Lulie's hearing, and she had no means of knowing when or whether this terrible Boss might appear.

Their talk betokened that the present arrangement was temporary, and of late Mrs. Murray had been restless, and seemed to be now inciting Tadousac to do his duty, and next urging him not to.

It fell out that Lulie learned what this mysterious duty was.

After luncheon, Tadousac, who had partaken rather freely of his favorite wine, had been especially obnoxious in his leering attentions to the girl.

As he sobered a little, his manner became no less amorous, but it showed a deeper intent, a more desperately alarming seriousness.

At last, unable to stand it, Lulie had run out to her rock, and sat down there in despair.

A shadow approached and she saw Mrs. Murray coming.

"It's the end," Lulie said, with determination. "Mrs. Murray, as you are a decent woman, can't you feel a little pity for me when you see how that man acts?"

The older woman's eyes showed a real compassion, but what she said was:

"You little fool, you owe your life to his infatuation for you! If you care to live, humor him—if you—if you don't—" she snapped her fingers, as if there was no more to be said.

Lulie thought quickly. If she turned on the speaker and demanded to know what she meant, she would get no reply, and Mrs. Murray would probably leave her.

The girl was beginning to know how to deal with her. If she murmured some inoffensive remark, the woman might babble on, but a definite question would stop her tongue at once.

"Oh, I don't know," she said, watching the other covertly; "everybody wants to live, I suppose,—but—what do you mean—humor him?"

"What I say. If you want it more bluntly, I'll put it. If you understand,—act on it." She rose.

"Oh, sit down," Lulie said, speaking in an indifferent voice, but with a wildly beating heart. "Do you know, for a minute you had me scared. I thought you meant Tadousac was going to murder me."

The woman stepped closer, they were both standing now, and looking deep in the girl's eyes, said, "That's what he's here for."

Though she had herself well in hand, Lulie started at this, then she recovered herself quickly, laughed lightly and said, "Nonsense! We're not back in the Dark Ages."

"You laugh!" cried the woman, stung by ridicule, as Lulie meant her to be, "but you'll see. Anyway, as I told you, it's his infatuation for you that has saved you thus far."

She turned with an air of decision, and Lulie made no attempt to hold her back.

She sat down on the rock again. Well, she had wanted to die, now she had a choice between drowning or—or whatever mode pleased the black-hearted man who had her at his mercy.

And then her determination rose. She was often at her best in an emergency.

She didn't know what she would do, but she did know she was up against it.

Every ounce of fighting blood in her body rose to the fray. Every instinct of the old fighting Clearmans came to her aid. Dathan himself could not have been more firm and inexorable of will.

But—what could she do?

She could die,—yes. She could even drown herself right now, perhaps she'd not have a better chance before—The mere thought of Tadousac roused her anger to white heat.

She'd evade him yet. She'd outwit him——

In the back of her brain was the germ of a pitiful little plan for escape.

Dozens of times she had thought it over only to conclude it was impossible. Now, she was going to try it. If it failed, she'd be no worse off than she already was. Intuition told her it would not be long before that dreadful man would make violent love to her. She knew he purposed to, and she readily believed Mrs. Murray that it was his infatuation that had spared her life this long.

So the man had been hired to kill her! And had fallen in love with her instead! Well, death was far preferable to the merest touch of his hand, but she vowed she'd put up a fight before she submitted to either.

It was Saturday, and usually on Wednesday and Saturday nights Mrs. Murray and Tadousac indulged in the one amusement they cared for. A game of cards with two other people who came in a motor boat to play with them.

Lulie had never seen these people; when they were to come she was sent to her room early, and she preferred it so.

The visitors came about half past eight or nine and played until ten or thereabouts, when there was a rather elaborate supper, and after that the four returned to their game and played till nearly morning.

Lulie knew all this from Mrs. Murray's tales and too, she often heard the rather noisy good nights as the guests departed.

At the supper table, she preserved a polite and even merry demeanor. She had learned that when she was depressed or

rebellious, Tadousac was more attracted than in her lighter moods.

A strange man he was, full of the smouldering fires of passion, and then suddenly, cold, cruel and even brutal.

During supper she learned, without seeming to, that it was uncertain whether the guests would come that evening or not.

The doubt struck a chill to her heart, for her plans were made, and if the card game did not take place, she could not proceed.

But she said nothing.

Only one more speech gave her cause for thought.

As they rose from the table, she heard Mrs. Murray whisper, "You'll hear from The Boss if you don't write that letter soon."

An ugly scowl was his only reply, and yet Lulie somehow knew that the letter was the one to "The Boss" to tell that her own doom had been forever sealed.

It wasn't what these two said, it was the expressive looks that accompanied their speech, and Lulie had learned to translate them only too accurately.

"If you care to go to your room early tonight, dearie, you may," was Mrs. Murray's way of wording what was in reality a command.

"All right, I will," Lulie replied. "I've a new book to read, and I think I'll turn in early."

Careful not to overdo this blithe, careless manner, Lulie found it worked well, when they wanted to be rid of her.

She went to her room, and sat down to read.

The letters danced before her eyes, but she forced herself to turn pages at proper intervals and appear engrossed in the story, for she never knew when Mrs. Murray might come in unannounced.

Perhaps those hours then were the longest she ever experienced.

Fear lest the other card players might not come nearly paralyzed her heart and when at last she heard the faint sound of their motor boat, for the dock was a rather long walk from the house, she drew a long, long breath of relief.

Then, after a time, she heard the unmistakable sound of the four legs of a card table being jerked down, one by one.

So sensitive was she to every phase of her captors' temper, that she knew the way he opened the table that Tadousac was in good humor. Otherwise he would have slammed it open.

A hush fell over the house as the play began, and again Lulie needed all her patience to sit still while the time crept slowly by.

As it neared ten o'clock, Fred shuffled up to her room, with a plate of the good things that made up the feast.

He found Lulie quietly reading, left the tray on the table and departed. If inquired of he could report, "All serene."

Then waiting about fifteen minutes longer, and hearing the hilarity well under way in the dining room, Lulie made her start.

Her plan was simple enough, if she could work it, and if she were not heard by anyone in the house.

Her room door opened on a small square platform, the width of the door. This square platform was bounded on one side by another door, into a closet.

Opposite her own door was the balustrade that guarded the well of the staircase, and on the fourth side were the three steps that led down to the lower floor level on which the rest of the second story rooms were situated.

The gate across the top of Lulie's three steps was like the ones used to keep children from falling downstairs save that it was higher and much heavier and stronger. Also it projected over the banister rail in a way that made it impossible to get around it. This gate was locked at night, and when Fred brought her tray, he unlocked and relocked it with meticulous care.

Her windows were barred, and she was as securely imprisoned as human ingenuity could devise means.

But Lulie had a plan. A dangerous, a desperate plan, but if it should work it meant freedom, and if not,—she was no worse off than now.

Her preparations consisted in securing what little money she had inside her blouse, and donning a small, close hat.

She wore rubber soled shoes and fastened a small bag with a handkerchief and her few jewels round her waist under her skirt.

Then, with infinite slowness and care she opened her room door.

She leaned over the banister and, though the dining room door below was closed, she could hear the shouts of laughter that meant the party was at its height.

Now came her perilous stunt.

She had read of it in a magazine story, and had hoped that with some adjustment it might fit her case.

At the lowest of the three steps a short platform or landing ran for about eight feet and then from that the rest of the staircase descended in opposite direction from the three higher steps.

Therefore, from the balustrade on Lulie's square platform to the banister rail of the stairs there was a space of three feet or so.

Had this space been narrower an agile girl could have swung herself across somehow, but it was out of the question.

So the trick was to let herself over the rail on her own platform and make the journey along the landing and down the staircase by hanging on to the posts of the banister, her feet dangling.

Her mind was made up and her will was strong, but as she climbed over a qualm of fear struck to her very heart.

Pushing aside all thought of failure, she devoted her entire attention to keeping absolutely silent, for one of the chief dangers was to rouse alarm.

Over the banister, then, went the slight figure, and stepped calmly off into nothingness as the slender uprights bore the weight of Lulie's body.

Only her desperate determination and her level head kept her from dropping to the floor below as her arrested weight almost wrenched her arms from their sockets.

But this was the crucial moment, and Lulie Clearman was right there.

Praying that the apparently secure uprights would hold her, and that none would squeak or crack, she went on, hand over hand along the platform and down the staircase.

An instant's pause, now and then, to assure herself of the continued noise from the dining room, and she went on as swiftly as possible. She felt her endurance giving out, and if she fainted or let go,—what then?

Half-way down the stairs she felt she must let go, the strain was too great, then the realization that she was half way, and a boisterous shout of laughter from Tadousac's throat, gave her new courage and she went on,—on,—until at last the tips of her toes touched the hall floor.

Nor did she relax then. With greatest care she put her feet down, one after the other, still clinging to the rails.

At last she dared let go, and swayed so dizzily she almost fell over.

Not quite, though, and after a moment to get her breath, she made silent haste to the front door.

As she had hoped and expected, it stood ajar, and in a moment she had slipped through and was free—so far.

She assured herself the worst was over, but she had no time for self-gratulation. They might discover her absence at any minute, so she sped, swiftly now, to the boathouse.

She found the key, all her plans were working smoothly, and bringing into play her knowledge of motor boats so carefully concealed from her jailers, she was soon chugging out across the water.

The merry-makers would hear nothing, or if they did they would think it merely some passing motor boat, and she flew on.

Where she was going she had no idea, but she made for the nearest and brightest lights.

It was a long sail, but there were few craft about at that hour of the night, and shortly before eleven o'clock she drew up beside a dock and sprang out.

A stolid sort of person took care of her boat as a matter of course.

She told him she'd be back in half an hour, and paid him enough to satisfy him but not rouse his suspicions.

Then wary enough not to ask where she was, though she thought it one of the strangest places she had ever seen, she went along the streets until she found a policeman.

"Please direct me to the best lawyer you know of," she demanded and so imperious was Lulie's manner, and so great her charm, that the man met her request at once.

"It's pretty late," he grumbled, as he showed her a nearby house, and paused at the front steps.

"All the more reason to consult a lawyer," she said, skipping up the steps and ringing the bell before he could raise further objection.

A sleepy-eyed maid admitted her, and she asked for Mr. Everson.

"I think he's going to bed, Miss," came the response. "Won't it keep till morning?"

"No, please, it must be tonight. Tell him it's Miss Clearman."

"Yes, miss," and at last Lulie sat down in a chair in a house, where she felt no reason for fear of any sort.

It was a pleasant, comfortable sort of home, and when Mr. Everson appeared he was a pleasant sort of man.

Lulie had planned just how much and how little of her story she would tell, but as soon as she began she saw the incredulity on the lawyer's face.

"But I saw Miss Clearman's picture in many papers," he said, "and she isn't a bit like you."

"Oh, I see," and Lulie threw off her hat, and pushed back her bobbed curls and drew her hair as nearly as she could into a semblance of the way she used to wear it. Then rapidly she told him of the bobbing process and of the dye that was forced on her, indubitably for the purpose of disguise.

Lawyer Everson stared at her. He believed her story, no one could help it, and yet—the papers, many of them, declared this girl committed the murder.

In a quandary, he excused himself a moment, and called his wife.

Mrs. Everson was a darling. She read Lulie through and through at once, and grasped her hand in sympathy and affection.

"Wait a minute, Tom," she said. "When did you leave your home, Miss Clearman?"

"Two weeks ago next Monday. On the eleven-thirty."

"Then—did you know, when you left of—er—of your father's condition——"

"What do you mean? Has he had a stroke?"

"You see," and Mrs. Everson turned to her husband. Clearly this girl knew nothing of the murder, no actress could compass that look of blank apprehension.

But the lawyer gave her another test.

"He is dead," he said with purposeful suddenness.

"Father! Dead!" For a moment she looked straight ahead of her, as thoughts rushed through her brain.

"Yes, dead. Murdered." Everson had no wish to be brutal, but he deemed it his duty to get her reactions.

The last word though, affected her like an electric shock.

"Murdered! Then those people did it! Those brutes are at the bottom of it."

Clearly here was no hysterical girl, but a strong character to deal with. An avenging angel could not have shown more deadly intent of retribution than shone then in Lulie Clearman's eyes.

"It's too long a story. I can't tell it you now," she said, with swift, sure decision. "Where am I? Tell me, please."

"You are in Clayton," Mrs. Everson said, gently. "Clayton, New York, near the Thousand Islands."

"Oh! Thousand Islands! I see. I've never been to them before. Well, I hate to seem so decided, but I didn't know Dad was dead—dead—" her voice broke. "Do they know who killed him?"

"Some think that you did—" Everson began, but Lulie interrupted.

"Yes,—that would be the way of it! Well, I know who killed him. I know all about it, and I must get home the very minute I can. Is there a train tonight? Oh, don't be afraid to let me out of your sight. Send a policeman with me if you like,—I wish you would,—if he's a good one. Or come yourselves, come with me to Clearman Court, be my lawyer and help me get things straightened out. If my father is dead, I'm a rich woman. I'll pay you. Come, Mr. Everson, Mrs. Everson, do. How shall we go? Train or motor car?"

"There, there, dear," Mrs. Everson said, "you're getting hysterical, and I don't wonder. You stay here all night and tomorrow we'll see about it."

"Is there a train tonight?" Lulie asked, more quietly.

"No, not till ten in the morning. But you may take that if you wish——"

"Well, may I stay here until then? May I telephone home—no, I don't want to do that—oh, I don't know what to do."

"Let us advise you," said Mrs. Everson. "First, are you hungry?"

"No, indeed!" and Lulie gave a shiver of disgust at recollection of the tray Fred had brought her but which she didn't touch.

"Well, you shall have a glass of hot milk and a biscuit, and then you can do just as you prefer,—tuck into bed, or get into one of my nice, comfy dressing gowns and tell us the whole story."

"That's the thing!" and Lulie's eyes glistened as she remembered one terrible incident after another, that she had to tell.

"And then, Mr. Everson, will you be my lawyer? For I don't trust anybody if Dad is gone. His lawyers were none too—too—oh, you know, they wound him round their fingers. And the estate must be looked after—don't think me mercenary, but I shall most surely be done out of my rights. So you be my lawyer, and I'll tell you everything tonight, and tomorrow we three will go to Valley Falls, and—oh, my goodness, these people who have been holding me, mustn't escape—they must be punished,—the man, anyhow!"

And then, Mrs. Everson carried the girl off and made her comfortable, and the two women had a little heart-to-heart talk before the great history of the case was begun.

And after it was told, Thomas Everson, with a great sense of responsibility, took up the case with intent to see justice done in full.

As a first step, he called up the Police and asked the Chief to come round at once.

Lulie was spared this interview, and after kind, motherly Mrs. Everson tucked her in bed, she slept the calm and deep sleep that comes after relief from great and grievous troubles.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE QUEEN OF HEARTS

When the Clearman car reached the village, Carlotta asked the chauffeur to stop at the Post Office.

"I won't be a minute," she said, as she sprang out before Nicky could offer to do her errand.

Barron gave a blank sort of glance at Nan, who understood. Before Carlotta returned, Nan said, "My gracious, I want to get a money order,—I forgot all about it. Wait for me, please." And, passing Carlotta on the steps Nan entered the Post Office.

Once inside she went to the stamp window, and said, "Please give me a book of stamps,—the same as that other lady just bought."

The attendant handed out a book of fifty stamps, and Nan paid for it, asked for a money order blank and went back to the car, the stamps safely hidden in her bag and the order fluttering in her fingers.

She had no idea what it all meant, but she was obeying orders, and she marveled at Barron's knowledge of what Carlotta would do.

Though, to be sure, she said to herself, "There's certainly nothing wrong about buying a book of postage stamps!"

The ride proved a pleasant one, for Barron exerted himself to be entertaining, Carlotta seemed in the best of spirits and the others followed the cue.

They reached home for dinner and the evening passed without incident.

Rather early Carlotta excused herself, saying she had begun some preliminary packing and wished to continue it.

"When are you going, Carly?" asked Nan, interested.

"I want to get off early in the week, if I can," Carlotta returned. "Of course, I shall be in New York, so, if the local authorities here want to see me they can easily do so."

"What would they want to see you about?" asked Phoebe, a little crisply.

"I don't know, dear," Carlotta replied, in a gentle voice; "but I think they resent my leaving before their work is finished. Yet, there seems small chance of their work ever being finished. What is your opinion, Mr. Barron? Who do you think is responsible for my husband's death?"

Carlotta looked pathetically weary, not so much physically, as worn out mentally and emotionally.

Barron returned:

"I hope I am not too deliberate in coming to a decision, but, I really haven't yet formed a positive opinion. There are loose ends yet to be gathered up before I can feel that I have spun my web of theory correctly."

"Do you suspect West at all?" Carlotta asked, in a low voice, lest the man might be hovering about.

"No, he is eliminated."

"I'm glad of that," she said, thoughtfully, "he is a good man."

And very soon, Carlotta went off upstairs, and after a few moments Nan and Miss Phoebe followed, leaving the three men alone for a good night smoke and chat.

But the chat was perfunctory, and there was a restraint over them all.

"I can't stand it much longer," said Raynor finally, "if I don't learn something about Lulie, I shall go crazy."

"No, old chap," said Tony, kindly, "you won't go crazy, but I'm sorry for you. However, I think I shall settle up the murder business tomorrow or Monday at latest, and then we'll tackle the disappearance problem. They're pretty closely connected, you know."

"I'm banking on you, Barron," Jack returned, "but do push things all you can."

"I will. Now, look here, you fellows, if you hear any disturbance or noise in the halls tonight, don't pay any attention to

it. Don't come out of your rooms. It will be the working out of an important experiment in which you can't help, but may hinder. And that's that. Cheer up, Raynor, I know you're in doleful depths, but all I can say for your comfort is, that I hope Miss Clearman is all right. She is in danger, there's no use blinking that fact, but I hope tomorrow to find out at least where she is——"

"Only find that out," Raynor burst forth, "and I'll go and get her, if——"

"Yes, I know,—if it's at the ends of the earth, and all that! You're a typical Romeo, old top, and afraid of nothing. Well, it's quite on the cards that by Monday you may be starting to get Miss Lulie and bring her back home——"

He had nearly added, alive or dead, but stopped himself just in time.

Raynor's eager look of delight wrung his heart-strings, for he had grave fears as to Lulie Clearman's fate.

The men went upstairs together, and with whispered good nights separated in the hall, and went to their own rooms.

Tony Barron sat for a couple of hours, almost without moving. He tested his theory from every possible point of objection and it came through unscathed.

"Clever! clever!" he assured himself, over and over. "Now if the letter comes tomorrow,—a Special Delivery will bring it on Sunday,—and if tonight's experiment works out, I've got the goods!"

It was about one o'clock when he rose and took from his closet shelf the big bandbox. Opening it, he took out a mask,—one of the masks from Stephen Clearman's study, and a particularly frightful one.

With utmost care he took it from the box, and with an efficient arrangement of adhesive plaster and strong string, he fastened it to the end of a stout hickory walking stick. Then he arranged inside it a tiny flashlight which had an adjustable spring.

As pleased as a child with a new toy, he gazed admiringly at his completed work, and brandished the fearful thing aloft in triumph.

Extinguishing his room lights, he stepped softly out into the dark hall, and holding the dimly illuminated mask high above his head, he went noiselessly along the corridors, straight toward the new wing.

He paused outside Carlotta's bedroom door and listened. He thought he heard her restlessly moving about in her bed, but was not quite sure.

With his hickory stick firmly grasped in his right hand, he silently turned the knob with his left and opened the door part way.

Then he slowly thrust the mask through, still holding it high. The effect was as of the head floating in at the door.

He waited a moment, and then heard a calm voice say, in low but clear tones, "I am not at all frightened, Mr. Barron, you may take it away."

Unable to suppress a chuckle, Tony withdrew the mask, gently closed the door and returned to his own room.

"Perfect success," he said, to himself, still broadly smiling. "She is certainly one wonder!" He put the mask carefully back in the bandbox, and then the self-satisfied detective made ready for bed, and gave himself up to a well-earned rest.

Sunday morning neither he nor his hostess made any reference to the strange performance of the previous night.

Carlotta looked a little pale, and her manner showed a trace of nervousness, but she was in gentle mood and declared that her packing and the thought of leaving Clearman Court had made her a trifle homesick.

"Why go, then?" asked Barron, looking at her.

"Because I want to," she returned with some spirit. "I feel a touch of regret at leaving some things here, that I have loved,—my beautiful rooms, and the gardens—but, on the whole I am very unhappy here and I prefer fresh scenes, where I am not continually reminded of happy days with my lost husband."

"I understand," Nan said, sympathetically. "Have you decided on your hotel, Carly?"

"Not quite, I've written to three and I'm awaiting the last answer. Then I'll decide. I want a good hotel, but not one of the very large ones."

Sunday afternoon Carlotta asked Barron to go for a walk with her. This did not surprise the others, for Carlotta always

appreciated a man to herself if she could, but it greatly surprised Tony Barron himself.

He accepted the invitation with avowed pleasure, and the pair sauntered away down the garden path and toward the nearby woods.

For a time they walked in silence and then Carlotta said,

"Why did you cut up that absurd trick last night, Mr. Barron?"

"To see if you would be frightened," he returned, speaking as straightforwardly as she had done.

"And I wasn't," she gave him a look that would have turned the head of many a man, but Tony was unimpressed.

"No," he said, and then he gave her a meaning glance.

But she ignored the implication and said, plaintively:

"Why do you hate me so, Mr. Barron?"

"I don't hate you," he declared, a little taken aback.

"Yes, you do. You're trying your best to prove I have done something wrong."

"And haven't you?"

"No," she said, earnestly, and now she stopped in the path, turned to face him, and clasped her hands in appeal. "Please, *please*, Tony, tell me what you are holding over my head,—tell me what you are trying to prove against me. I haven't done anything wrong—you know I haven't——"

Tears welled up in her beautiful eyes, her scarlet lips quivered, and her white hands, like fluttering doves, hovered about and came to rest on his hands.

Her clear eyes looked up into his own, her lovely brow was drawn with anguish and her whole attitude was full of pathetic appeal; through her thin black gown he could see her white shoulders shaking with stifled sobs and the elusive fragrance of her person came to him like a breath of Araby the Blest.

It was this that brought his wits back to him.

For Tony Barron could withstand the temptations of a beautiful face, or a beautiful voice, but when a certain kind of scent assailed his senses, he knew he was in danger. And at such times he brought himself up with a round turn.

"I haven't accused you of doing anything wrong, have I?" he said, and if his voice was unnecessarily harsh, it was because he was struggling against the wonderful charm of this wonderful woman.

"I am so very alone," she went on, ignoring his question. "I hoped you would be my friend——"

"Do you need a friend?"

The question was so sharp she looked up quickly. Then, seeing his enforced severity, she made one more attempt to break it down.

"I have always needed a friend," she said, in a sad, sweet voice, "except for the short time my husband was with me. Now, I have lost him, I have lost all that made life worth living."

"Yet he was much older than you are——"

"Love is not measured by years. How little you know, if you think that! Have you never been in love—Tony?"

The inflection of this speech left no room for doubt as to its intent, and the irreverent detective said to himself, "Look out for follow-up literature!"

But he only replied, and mendaciously at that, "Oh, yes, I am engaged to the dearest girl in the world."

Her disappointment at this turn of affairs but slightly exceeded his own, for the intrepid young man had a secret regret that he hadn't time to continue this promising little affair.

"And now," he went on as they resumed their walk by tacit mutual consent, "tell me why you weren't frightened at my silly prank with the floating mask."

"Because I've seen just such before," she returned, serenely.

"You mean the recent appearances,—just before your husband died?"

"Yes."

"And were they brought about in practically the same way I managed it?"

"I think so,—it must have been in some such fashion."

"You never believed they were real spooks, then?"

"Certainly not."

"Didn't Mr. Clearman think they were?"

"Yes,—perhaps. You see, his inherent belief in magic and his common sense were always at odds."

"And Miss Phoebe,—she believed the appearances supernatural, didn't she?"

Carlotta turned on him. "Phoebe!" she cried, "why she did it!"

"Oho, so it was Phoebe who boosted the ghosts around!"

"Of course it was, and you must know it if you're the clever detective you think you are!"

"How do you explain her actions, then?" Barron spoke gravely now.

"You must know that, too," Carlotta said, with equal seriousness. "Phoebe is—mad. At least, on that subject. All the Clearmans are, a little. My husband was, Phoebe is, and as you've read the Diary, you know that many of the Clearman ancestors were."

"Ah, yes, the Diary. That's what I want to talk about."

Barron was lighting a cigarette as he spoke, and it proved refractory.

When, after a successful ignition, he looked up, he found himself alone.

"Well,—I'll be damned!" he remarked not loud but emphatically, as he caught sight of Carlotta's black gown disappearing among the trees.

At dinner that evening, Carlotta was in charming mood. As she had once promised Barron, she put on a few of her beautiful jewels. With her exquisitely *chic* gown of dull black silk, she was a lovely and pathetic Queen of Diamonds.

Tony had received the Special Delivery letter he had been waiting for and had a satisfied look as he read it and put it in his pocket.

Of course no reference was made by either to the walk in the woods, and the detective marvelled anew at the poise and self-control of the capricious young widow.

After dinner, as it was damp outside, they elected to sit in the library. They were having their coffee there, when suddenly there appeared in the doorway a girlish figure, fairly quivering with excitement.

"Lulie!" Raynor exclaimed, and was the first to spring to her side.

The revelation dazed, awed, the others.

"Yes," she replied, putting her hand in his, and seeming thereby to regain her natural calm. "And here are," she presented her companions, "Mr. and Mrs. Everson,—my friends, and the friends of us all. This is Aunt Phoebe," and Phoebe Clearman rose with her pretty old-fashioned air to greet the guests.

Carlotta, too, took her share of the general introductions, but Lulie was so set upon by Nan, and Nicky, to say nothing of the joyful Jack of Hearts, that the occasion seemed to be a rapturous welcome of a returned prodigal.

"First, there are some matters to be settled," Lulie said, as she extricated herself from Nan's embrace.

"Excuse me a moment," murmured Carlotta, "and I will see about your rooms and some supper for you——"

"No, you won't," said Lulie, sternly, "you'll stay right straight here! Oh, I can't go through with it, Mr. Everson,—you tell them."

Lulie sank down on a sofa beside Jack, and Thomas Everson took up the tale.

All day in the train, Lulie had told him added details, until he was entirely conversant with her side of the tragic story. The rest he had yet to hear.

So the lawyer gave, in his clear, concise way, a full account of Lulie's abduction, of her life in the house on one of the Thousand Islands, of her escape from her jailers there, of her appeal to him and his willingness to take the case in charge.

As the recital went on, Barron narrowly watched Carlotta. He knew her so well by this time that he could read her changing views, her quickly made plans, her sudden realization of obstacles, her consequent remade plans—all these things he saw, as the brilliant brain conceived them.

He felt sorry for her, and he was fascinated by her pluck and courage. When would she give in?

Mr. Everson having finished the story, to which Lulie gave her continuous assent and verification, paused as if his work were at an end.

"And who was The Boss, of whom these two villains were so afraid?" was the first question asked, and it was put by Tony Barron.

Lulie answered it.

"There she sits," she said, and her finger, pointed at Carlotta, was as the sword of an avenging goddess. The simple gesture was more eloquent, more dramatic, than any show of wrath could have been.

"What do you mean?" Carlotta's face was white, but she bore herself proudly.

"Never mind the denials, Carlotta," Lulie said. "They won't do a bit of good. I hate to tell it all, but I must. I overheard enough while I was there to get the whole truth at last. The woman, Mrs. Murray, Carlotta, is your mother, and the man,—Tadousac,—is," she paused, and then went on, with a break in her voice, "is your husband. My father was never your husband."

There was a silence as everyone present thought over this stunning revelation.

Phoebe Clearman went over and sat by Lulie.

"You're sure, dear?" was all she said.

"Sure, Aunt Phoebe," the girl replied, with a solemn distinctness.

"Then," Phoebe said, facing Carlotta, "answer for your crimes. Did you kill my brother?"

"No!" Carlotta screamed, but Barron interposed.

"She did," he said, and his voice, though quiet, hushed all the others, Carlotta's included. "She did, and in the most diabolically clever way I have ever heard of. Sit still, Mrs. Clearman. It must be told, and it shall be told now."

"I refuse to listen! You can't compel me to. You can't keep me here."

"Yes, we can," and Everson's voice had a ring of command. "Stay where you are, Madame—Tadousac."

With a scared face, Carlotta sank back in her chair, and out of sheer humanity, Goring went and sat by her side. Be she ever so guilty, she was a woman alone and friendless, and Nicky couldn't stand everything!

"The appearances of the floating masks were brought about by Madame Tadousac," Barron began, accepting the new name at once. "She abstracted the masks from the study and either she or her colored maid, carried them through the hall on the occasions when they were seen, fastened to the end of a long pole. I proved this by trying the same experiment, and instead of being scared, the lady said, calmly, 'I am not frightened, Mr. Barron. Take it away.' Had she not done this very thing herself, she would have been alarmed at the sight. I charge this woman, also, with the murder of Stephen Clearman. The means used was poison, but the method, as I said, diabolic in its ingenuity, was this:

"Mr. Clearman was in the habit of writing letters in the morning. For some he used post-office envelopes with the stamps printed on them, and on some he placed stamps, moistening them with his tongue. Knowing this, his wife,—as he supposed her to be,—prepared certain stamps with a strong solution of Prussic acid, one taste of which means instant death. Mr. Clearman used one of the prepared stamps and died instantly. I speak assuredly, for I retrieved the letter with the stamp in question and had it analyzed. I received the report today by special mail. The poison was easily discernible on the stamp."

"Ridiculous!" cried Carlotta, who was recovering her bravado, and sat wide-eyed and scornful-faced, listening. "How could any one tell what stamp a man would use?"

"That was all part of the cleverness," said Barron, with a half sad smile. "I looked into the matter pretty thoroughly, and I found that the stamps were from a stamp book. I traced in the village two or three letters that Mr. Clearman had written in the last few days of his life. They were all stamped from the same stamp book. You may not know it, Mr. Everson, but seldom do those books show exactly the same sized margins. Some are wider at one side, some at one end,—I'd have to show you, to make it clear. However, it proved that the stamp book which I found on Mr. Clearman's desk was not the one he had been last using. I deduced a change of books and as there were none in the house save one on Mrs. Clearman's boudoir desk, I confiscated that, and replaced it by another. Not knowing this, but being alarmed, the lady herself exchanged it yesterday for a new one. A guilty conscience and so forth. Today I received the envelope that carried the poison stamp, and it exactly fits the book I confiscated from the boudoir desk.

"Wherefore, I justifiably conclude that Mrs.—Tadousac poisoned the stamps, compassed the death of Stephen Clearman, who died in the locked room alone,—and then, unnoticed, changed the little stamp books and, of course, destroyed the unused stamps that were touched with poison.

"Also, fearing some such revelation as I have managed to bring about, she endeavored to get those letters back from the letter box, making a flimsy excuse about an undated letter of her own. Had she retrieved those letters of Mr. Clearman's our case would have been weakened. As it is, it is complete."

"You're talking in riddles, Mr. Barron," Carlotta said, lightly, "I fail to understand you."

"And yet I have never accused you of stupidity," Barron returned, paying no further attention to this speech.

"It is difficult to conceive," he went on, "of such a brilliant mind lending itself to such despicable and deplorable work. In order to achieve the fortune she wanted, the diamonds she craved, this woman has committed the gravest of crimes, and——"

"And has attempted to repeat it," Lulie broke in, with a sorrowful look at Carlotta, for whom the hardest-hearted agent of justice must now feel pity. "For, what she really sent me up to that house for,—that lonely, isolated house, was to have me murdered."

"No!" cried Raynor, clasping Lulie to him.

"Yes," she said, putting away his arm. "As you say, Mr. Barron, it must be told,—and told now. The man Tadousac was under orders to abduct me and—kill me."

"Why didn't he?" sneered Carlotta, consumed by her own curiosity, and breaking through all bounds of discretion to gratify it.

"Because——" Lulie hesitated and then went doggedly on, "because he did me the honor to fall in love with me instead."

Carlotta's face was a study. She saw at once that this was the truth, and she realized that it was a contingency she ought to have anticipated and planned for.

"That seems to be the only trick you missed," Barron put in. "Your forgeries of the leaves of the old diary are masterpieces of art. Had I not discovered in the annals of the town registry clerk, that the two Clearmans in question died natural deaths I might never have suspected it. How did you learn to make that paper and ink look old and timeworn? Yet they would never have deceived experts. Mr. Clearman was so wrapped up in his studies and so trustful of his—wife,—that he never suspected a fake."

"Did you telegraph us yesterday?" Carlotta suddenly asked of Lulie.

"No," said the girl, wonderingly; and Barron confessed, "That was my fake, mine and Miss Phoebe's. I thought it would keep you quiet a few days longer. Did you think you were going to get away to New York, really?"

"How could you do it, Carly?" Lulie had only just begun to realize the heinousness of the woman's sin.

"Realize, Miss Clearman, that what seems impossible normally sometimes can be done on great provocation," Barron put in. "A criminal, after all, is only an ordinary person whose morals are obliterated by some stupendous passion—some monstrous motive——"

Nicky lost the end of this speech for he suddenly recollected how the first time he had met Carlotta, speaking of

diamonds, she had said she could kill for them. And she had.

Now that quick thinking brain of hers had leaped to the conclusion that the game was up, and that her only hope, her slim chance of leniency, lay in confession.

Well, she would make it a good one.

"It is all true," she said, in a low voice that commanded and held attention. "I did do it all just as you have heard. But I claim a little consideration. I was brought up poor, in squalid poverty. I was taught only evil all my life. I was married as a mere child to that brute of a man, who treated me brutally always. It was at his instigation, at his command, that I married Stephen Clearman and so had a short period of the only happiness I have ever known. At the behest of Tadousac, and in fear of my life, if I deviated one iota from his orders, I did—all I have done. I forged the odd pages of the Diary, I forged the bit that doubled the curse on any one named Stephen. I proposed to Lulie, when we walked in the garden that Sunday evening, that she have her hair bobbed as a jesting surprise. But Tadousac arranged for the henna dye, for the abduction and for the—the fate of Lulie."

"That is not true," rang out Lulie's clear voice. "I overheard enough up there to know that you were the leading spirit. That Tadousac, brute beast though he is, was entirely at your orders. And save for your mother's hint to me—they might have been carried out."

"Yes," Phoebe added to the count. "I learned some time ago, that it was Carlotta who taught Stephen to love the custards with the Bitter Almond flavoring. This, I see now, was to provide a reason for the odor of the poison when the time came."

"So you see through that, do you?" said Carlotta, with a sarcastic sneer. "Quite true, and it was I who put the poison bottle up over Lulie's bed, and put Lulie's cigarette end in the study, and took the ten thousand dollars. But for all of your smartness, none of you have guessed why I did it,—or rather why I struck when I did. It was because Stephen had had reason to suspect I was not his wife—that Tadousac lived and was really my husband. I had to get rid of Stephen then,—Tadousac ordered it. He was the one who had told Stephen,—written to him to ask me about my former life—Stephen never questioned it himself—so I had to bring about his 'going-away.' And unless Lulie too was out of the way, I'd have trouble—so—well," she returned for a moment to her one time gayety, "it was really too easy. Once get a man to believe in anything supernatural, and he's ready to swallow any and all things that are told him. As for me,—there's only one thing left for me to swallow,—and—here goes!"

With a swift and unmistakable gesture her hand flew to her mouth, and in another moment beautiful Carlotta had received her "going-away" by the same means that had taken Stephen Clearman from the world.

It was not a surprise to Tony Barron, for his never failing eyes had watched all her motions, and though he could not have reached her in time to stop her, yet he did not care, for as he afterward said, "Wasn't it the best way out for her?"

As the others gathered round the stricken woman, Raynor whispered to Lulie, "Come with me, dear; you shan't see any more horrors that I can save you from. Come out on the terrace,—come, my Queen of Hearts."

And Lulie went gladly.

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