THE CASUAL MURDERER

HULBERT FOOTNER

Title: The Casual Murderer and other stories
Date of first publication: 1932
Author: Hulbert Footner (1879-1944)
Date first posted: Dec. 27, 2020
Date last updated: Aug. 1, 2021
Faded Page eBook #20201267

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines, Jen Haines & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at https://www.pgdpcanada.net

This is the Story

MADAME STOREY is one of the most interesting as well as one of the most original characters in detective fiction. Her profession, as she would prefer to put it, is solving other people's problems. She is a friend to every troubled soul. She works through her knowledge of the human heart and her feminine intuition is seldom at fault. In her latest adventures she is at her unsurpassable best, using her woman's wits to solve the strange disappearance of Aline Elder, the mysterious death of Commodore Varick, the multi-millionaire, and other extraordinary occurrences.

By the Same Author

THE SUBSTITUTE MILLIONAIRE

THE OWL TAXI

THE DEAVES AFFAIR

RAMSHACKLE HOUSE

OFFICER

THE UNDER DOGS

MADAME STOREY

A SELF-MADE THIEF

QUEEN OF CLUBS

THE VELVET HAND

THE DOCTOR WHO HELD HANDS

THE VIPER

THE FOLDED PAPER MYSTERY

EASY TO KILL

THE CASUAL MURDERER AND OTHER STORIES

HULBERT FOOTNER

Published for
THE CRIME CLUB
by
W. COLLINS SONS & CO LTD
LONDON

Printed in Great Britain

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THE CASUAL MURDERER

1

I WAS crossing Union Square on my way to the office thinking about nothing at all, when I received one of those curious psychical shocks that the sight of an unknown face will sometimes give one. This was a young man sitting on a bench with his long legs stretched before him, and his hands thrust deep into his overcoat pockets. He was out of luck—well, all the benchers in November are out of luck; this one bore it with a difference. His chin was not sunk on his breast, but held level, and his gentian-blue eyes were staring straight before him with an expression of complete despair.

My impulse was to speak to him. I suppressed it, of course, and kept on. How quickly one learns to suppress ones natural impulses in town! But this one was not going to be so easily suppressed. It set up a painful agitation in my breast. Coward! Coward! a still small voice whispered to me. How about the Good Samaritan? Here is a fellow-creature suffering some wound infinitely more dreadful than wounds of the flesh, and you pass by on the other side!

Before I got to the Seventeenth street corner I was forced to turn around and go back again. A new terror attacked me. What was I to say to a strange man? I was so flustered I walked right past him again. Shame! the voice whispered to me; you're nearly thirty years old and red-haired and your own mistress! What is there to be afraid off? Don't think about what you're going to say; but say the natural thing that springs to your lips.

So I turned around, and marched up to him and said:

"What is the matter?"

He raised the blue eyes to my face, hard with scorn; his tight lips writhed with pain and rage. "That's my affair," he said.

Well! I flew. My face was crimson, I expect. Never again! Never again! Never again! I said to myself. The worldly sense which teaches us to restrain our impulses is *right*!

But before I got back to the Seventeenth Street corner I heard rapid steps coming after me—I would have died sooner than look around; and the resonant, pain-sharp voice at my ear saying quickly:

"I'm sorry. What must you think of me? I didn't want to hurt you. The fact is I'm nearly out of my mind, and I lashed out blindly . . ."

I could look at him then. The blue eyes had become human and appealing, and of course, I was instantly melted.

"I understand," I said. "It was quite natural. I was too abrupt. That was because I was embarrassed."

"No," he insisted. "I am a fool. If there was ever anybody who needed a friend in this city it is I and yet I . . . Why, at the moment you spoke to me, I was thinking what a God-forsaken, soulless city this is, and yet when you offered me a kindness . . ."

We were then abreast of the last bench in the Square. "Let us sit down a moment," I said.

We did so.

"I suppose you live here," he said with a painful eagerness; "Do you know the city well?"

"Pretty well," I said.

"Then tell me, how do you set about finding a person who has disappeared?"

"The police?" I suggested.

An inexpressibly painful smile twisted his lips. "Yes, I've been to police headquarters," he said. "They advised me to go home and forget about it."

"If you cared to tell me the circumstances . . ." I suggested.

"Yes, indeed," he said—he was humble enough now; "if you'll only listen. How thankful I am to have somebody to talk to! I should have gone clean out of my senses otherwise!"

His name was Edward Swanley. He was the public librarian of Ancaster, a small town up-state. He had one assistant in the library, a girl Aline Elder. They had fallen in love among the book-shelves, and were engaged to be married. He, Swanley, had gone to Ancaster from college to take the job, but Aline had lived there all her life. Her father and mother were dead and she lived with a large family of cousins. He described her as an old-fashioned sort of girl; that is to say, simple, unaffected and *good*. She was very pretty. It was clear that he loved her better than his life.

"If I don't find her," he said simply, "well . . . that is the end, for me."

Six days before Aline had said that she must go to New York for a day's shopping. The announcement, while unexpected, was not an unnatural one, because all the women in Ancaster allowed themselves a day in New York once or twice a year. But they usually went in parties, or at least in couples, whereas Aline departed alone. Swanley couldn't accompany her, because they couldn't both leave the library at the same time. She left Ancaster at noon on the following day, Wednesday, meaning to spend the night in New York, and the whole of Thursday, getting home on the last train Thursday night.

Swanley had met the train, and she was not on it. He was surprised but not greatly put about, expecting a telegram in the morning. There was no telegram, and he began to get anxious. He telegraphed to Aline at her hotel, and got no reply. Later in the day his landlady came to him, saying that she felt it her duty to inform him what they were saying about town, and that was that Aline had received a letter from New York the day before she went, in a man's handwriting. It had come from an assistant in the post office.

Swanley was enraged, but to doubt Aline was the last thing that occurred to him. Why, her simplicity and goodness of heart were proverbial in Ancaster; her life had been as open as the day; Swanley felt that he knew her heart better than his own. He visited the post office, but the terrified girl stuck to her story; Aline Elder *had* received a letter with the New York post-mark and addressed in a man's hand, the day before she went away. The envelope had no lettering on it, but there was a little picture raised in the paper of the flap.

After a night of torment, Swanley set off for town on Saturday morning. He went to a certain woman's hotel, where Aline had said she would stop, and was informed that she had not been there. He then told his story to the police. When the Inspector was told of the letter Aline had received, he smiled sympathetically at Swanley, and advised him to go back to Ancaster and forget her. That brought the unfortunate young man to the end of his resources. Since then he had been wandering blindly about the streets. It was Monday morning when I found him.

Now I had no right to speak for my busy, famous mistress, but I knew her kind heart, and I took a chance. "Did you ever hear of Madame Rosika Storey?" I asked Swanley.

He shook his head.

"Everybody in New York knows her," I said. "She's a famous psychologist. I'm her secretary, Bella Brickley."

“What do you mean by psychologist?” he asked.

“Her profession is solving human problems,” I said. “She works through her knowledge of the human heart.”

“Crimes?” he said.

“Crimes and other problems. When there is more time I will tell you of the wonderful things she has done. Come along with me now, and talk to her.”

“I have no money,” he said dejectedly.

“Never mind that,” I said. “She will listen to you. If you succeed in interesting her, the money will not matter.”

“Ah,” he said, “she will just think like everybody else that Aline has gone with some man.”

“Madame Storey *never* thinks like everybody else,” I said. “She is unique.”

2

Our offices face Gramercy Park, that delightful and still aristocratic little back-water of the town. We are on the second floor of a magnificent old residence which has been sub-divided. My room, the outer office, was I suppose, originally a library or music-room. Through it you enter Mme. Storey's own room, which was the drawing-room. We have a third room to the rear of that, which we call the middle room, and which Mme. Storey uses as a dressing-room, or for any miscellaneous purposes that may be required.

Swanley had accompanied me, but it was clear he had no great hopes of Mme. Storey. Having told me his story, he had relapsed into himself. While we waited for my mistress, he sat in my room stony with despair.

The door from the hall opened, and Mme. Storey came in. Swanley looked at her in astonishment, and involuntarily rose to his feet. Have I mentioned that he was very tall and well-proportioned? His expression of amazement was almost comical. What he had expected to see I don't know; some beetle-browed, bespectacled old wise-woman, I suppose. Certainly not this glorious apparition of loveliness. She was wearing a little red hat, I remember—she is the one woman in a thousand who is pretty enough to wear a red hat; and a coat of chipmunk fur with its delicate black stripes; great fluffy collar and cuffs of fox. She had walked down, for her cheeks were as red as her hat, her dark eyes sparkling, and her lips parted to reveal gleaming teeth.

She gave Swanley a comprehensive glance, and I began to be assured that I had made no mistake in bringing him to her. With her insight she must see at once that he was neither a trifler nor a fool. She bowed to him slightly, smiled at me, and went into her room. Swanley stood looking after her with his mouth open.

"But why . . . why didn't you tell me . . .?" he stammered.

"I did tell you she was unique," I said, and went after Mme. Storey.

"Who is he, Bella?" she asked.

"I picked him up in Union Square," I said breathlessly. "He's in trouble. Oh, I know you have a hundred important things to do this morning; but give him ten minutes. Let him talk for himself. He's terribly eloquent."

“Bring him in,” she said.

There is a whole row of casement windows along the front of Mme. Storey’s room. (For the house has been modernised). She sits with her back to them, at an immense and beautiful Italian table, black with age. The long room stretches before her into the shadows; and all her beautiful things are revealed to her in the horizontal light from the windows at her back. Priceless things, yet the effect of the room on the whole is simple, because there is not too much in it.

Swanley sat partly to the right of her desk facing her, and I at my little desk over in the corner. He repeated his story as I have already given it to you.

When he came to the end Mme. Storey said at once: “Well, I agree with you, there can be no question of a vulgar love affair here.”

The young man betrayed his first sign of weakness. He hung his head; his face broke up. “Oh, Madame! Oh, Madame!” he murmured brokenly. “Thank you! . . . I hardly expected . . . Nobody else . . .” He was unable to go on.

Mme. Storey made haste to help him over the difficult place. “Oh, people don’t change their natures over night,” she said briskly. “You have described Miss Elder so that I see her quite clearly. . . . Now, let’s see what we have to start on. The letter. We may assume that there was a letter. Nothing discreditable in that. But Miss Elder was hardly the person to have responded to a summons out of the blue, so to speak. There must have been something in her life to prepare her to receive such a letter, or she wouldn’t have gone.”

“Why didn’t she tell me?” groaned the poor young fellow.

“I don’t know,” said Mme. Storey. “The psychology text-books attempt to classify human motives, but there are mixed motives that defy classification. We’ll find out before we’re through. . . . What was there in her life . . .”

“Nothing! Nothing!” he cried. “I have told you all.”

“That can hardly be true,” said Mme. Storey. “Let’s go into it. Take her parents, for instance; you said they were both dead. How long?”

“The mother, only two years,” he said. “I knew her. I was strongly attached to her. She was the librarian at Ancaster and I went there as

assistant. When she died they promoted me to be librarian, and gave me Aline as assistant."

"What sort of woman was Mrs. Elder?"

"She had a noble nature, Madame. She was universally respected and loved. Her people have been known in Ancaster since the village was settled."

"And the father?"

"He did not belong to Ancaster. He died when Aline was a baby. I know very little about him, but I know all that Aline knew. Aline told me that the mention of her father's name was the only thing that could make her mother's face harden. Once when Aline was a child, she put it up to her mother frankly: 'Tell me about my father.' All her mother would say was that he had treated them both very badly, and the best thing they could do was to put him out of their minds."

"He was not buried in Ancaster," said Mme. Storey. "You would have known, I suppose, if his grave was there."

"It was not there, Madame. He died in Chicago, where the Elders lived during their brief married life. Aline was born in Chicago. After her husband died, Mrs. Elder returned to her native village with the baby."

"Ha!" said Mme. Storey. "I suspect that Elder did not die at all."

The young man's eyes opened wide. "What reason have you to suppose that?" he asked.

"A woman like Mrs. Elder does not cherish rancour beyond the grave," said Mme. Storey. "Particularly not in speaking to a child. It was likely the knowledge that he was alive and misbehaving himself that kept her bitter. Why the very form of the words she used—if you have correctly repeated them, 'put him out of our minds' suggests that he was still a person to be reckoned with."

"Why, of course!" said Swanley.

"Did Aline share her mother's feelings towards the father?" asked Mme. Storey.

"Not exactly, Madame. Much as she loved her mother, the mere fact that everything had been kept from her, inclined Aline to think that her mother might have been a little unjust."

"Naturally. Well, there we have the beginning of a clue already."

"You think that letter was from Aline's father!" he said excitedly.

"Oh, not so fast!" said Mme. Storey. "I said a beginning."

"Wait!" cried Swanley. "Here is something. Aline had a little photograph of her father. After her mother's death she had it framed, and hung it on the wall of her room. I visited her room on Friday; to see if there was any clue. The picture was gone; my attention was called to it by the faded spot on the wallpaper."

"Well, let us say that her visit to New York had something to do with her father. That's that. . . . Now, the fact that she never turned up at her hotel, and has never sent you a line suggests that she has met with an accident of some sort."

The young man turned pale.

"Do not lose heart!" said Mme. Storey. "All accidents are not fatal. . . . One feels somehow, that she has an enemy."

"How could she?"

"That is for us to find out. Suppose there is somebody who wishes her ill; who was plotting against her; that person would be likely to spy on her first. Now, Ancaster is a small place; any stranger whose business could not be accounted for would be conspicuous there. Has there been any such person there lately?"

The young man looked blank, and at first he slowly shook his head. Then a recollection arrested him. "There *has* been somebody," he said, "just lately, too, but no one would ever suppose . . ."

"What are the particulars?" asked Mme. Storey.

"This man turned up late Monday night. Touring in a big car; handsome imported car."

"Alone?" asked Mme. Storey.

"Well, he had his chauffeur. He put up at the local hotel, and stayed on. Said he was attracted by the beauty of the village."

"In November!" remarked Mme. Storey.

"Well, nobody thought anything about that. An agreeable sort of man; willing to talk to anybody."

"What name did he give?"

“I never heard. He was always referred to as the rich man, or the city man.”

“What did he look like?”

“Quite the fine gentleman; elegant clothes. A man nearing fifty—well-preserved. Striking-looking face; high cheek bones; prominent nose; jetty black eyes. You’d remember him by his nose.” Swanley made a mark in the air over his own straight nose. “What do you call that shaped nose?”

“Aquiline?” suggested Mme. Storey.

“Yes; or Roman. He had a Roman nose.”

“It did not occur to you that there might be some connection between this man’s coming, and Aline’s going?”

“Why, no; how could there be? He came late Monday night. Aline left Wednesday. But he stayed on. In fact, he was on the train with me on Saturday.”

“Ha!” said Mme. Storey. “And did it not seem strange to you, that he should leave the luxurious car and undertake a tedious railway journey?”

“I was not thinking about him,” said Swanley painfully. “What about it?”

“Well, he might, for instance, have been following you. You were Aline’s natural protector. You started off to look for her.”

Swanley stared at her in amazement.

Mme. Storey half turned in her chair, and thoughtfully looked out of the window. “An elegant gentleman of near fifty,” she murmured; “high cheek bones; jetty black eyes; Roman nose. . . . Keep back from the window, but look across the street. Is that, by any chance, he who is now passing in front of the Park railings?”

“Good God! yes!” gasped Swanley.

“He has passed by twice since you have been here,” said Mme. Storey quietly.

3

WHEN every possible detail had been elicited from young Swanley, and he had been sent away in a little less desperate frame of mind, with strict injunctions from Mme. Storey to take food and rest, she said to me with a glint in her eye:

"Bella, I fancy we're going to have a call from the gentleman with the Roman nose."

"What makes you think so?" I asked.

"A certain look in his eye the last time he glanced up at our windows."

"Well, if he's a crook he'd be venturing into the lioness' den," I said.

"Thanks," she drawled.

"What possible excuse could he give for coming here?"

"I don't know. We'll see. He had an original eye."

"I think it was pretty clumsy work," I said. "His exhibiting himself openly before our windows like that."

"Perhaps he doesn't care whether we're on to him or not," she dryly suggested. ". . . An extraordinary quality in his glance!" she mused. "I think this case is going to be interesting."

You will observe that the question of Mme. Storey's taking this case had never been raised. The honesty and the despair of the young man had won her, and she went ahead with it as a matter of course.

On the telephone she got in touch with Sampson, a man who has done good work for us. "Sampson," she said, "I am asked to find a young woman who has disappeared. Her name is Aline Elder, of Ancaster, New York. At noon last Wednesday she boarded a train for New York at Ancaster, and she has not been seen by her friends since. That train arrives at Grand Central about three. I wish you'd get in touch with the conductor of it, and find out if he remembers her. She may have asked the conductor a question; or he may have seen her in talk with somebody on the train.

"Take down her description: an unusually pretty girl, twenty-two years old; height, five feet four; weight about 125; a soft round face with a healthy pallor; large brown eyes with unusually long lashes; chestnut brown hair.

She wore a dress of blue Georgette, and a brown coat of three-quarters length, trimmed with a collar of nutria fur; a block felt hat formed of several pieces drawn up to a little felt bow on the crown. She is a girl of especial sweetness and gentleness of character, and this is evident in her expression. Her face customarily wears a half-smile."

Mme. Storey also telephoned to an agency that makes a speciality of tracing missing persons. She took other measures to find the girl which I need not go into, since nothing resulted from them.

A while later I was working in my own room when the door from the hall was softly opened, and upon looking up, I seemed to receive a little current of electricity up and down my spine. It was the man with the Roman nose. A very elegant figure indeed; more Continental in effect than American. I have already described his physical characteristics; how can I convey to you the extraordinary glance of his piercing black eyes—eyes set just a little too close to the imposing bridge of his nose; insolent, quizzical and cruel. I can only say that every time he looked at me a shudder seized my vitals.

His voice was all suavity. "Madame Storey," he said; "I wonder if she will be good enough to see me?"

"What name, please?"

"George Rawlings."

I went in to my mistress. Before I had time to open my mouth she said with a delightful smile:

"So he's come!"

I repeated the name he had given.

"Well, we mustn't appear to be too anxious to see him," said Mme. Storey. "Say this to him: 'Mme. Storey is very busy. Since she has not the pleasure of Mr. Rawlings' acquaintance, she begs that he will outline the nature of his business to her secretary.'"

I went out and delivered my message.

"Might I beg a scrap of paper?" he asked, with that over-courteous air of his, in which there was something subtly insulting.

I handed him a pad and he wrote upon it with a gold pencil:

"Could you use $100,000 in your business?"

When I showed this to Mme. Storey a note of astonished laughter escaped her. “Well, he has a cheek!” she said. “Still, we may let him assume that he has aroused our curiosity. Show him in, Bella.”

Within the door of Mme. Storey’s room Rawlings bowed with his heels together; wholly at his ease; pre-eminently the man of the world.

Mme. Storey had put on a slightly affronted air. She glanced with distaste at the pad on her desk. “I don’t know what this means,” she said, “but I am curious enough to ask. If it is just a trick, I must warn you that I am a busy woman, and have no time to spend in mere talk.”

“It means exactly what it says,” said Rawlings; suave, deferential, but not servile.

“Why should I need $100,000 in my business?” asked Mme. Storey. “My plant and fixtures are all in my head.”

“Do not cases sometimes come to your attention,” he said, “interesting cases, that you are nevertheless obliged to refuse because there is no one to pay you for your work?”

“Yes, occasionally,” said Mme. Storey. “I have to make my living.”

“I ask to be allowed to pay you for such cases,” he said bowing; “when the cause is worthy, and the client has no money.”

“Well!” said Mme. Storey. “This is an astonishing offer. You must let me catch my breath. . . . Sit down.”

He sat in the chair that Edward Swanley had occupied earlier. I had gone inconspicuously to my desk in the corner. He glanced at me, and Mme. Storey observing it, said carelessly:

“Miss Brickley is present at all interviews.”

He bowed.

“What conditions do you attach to your offer?” asked Mme. Storey.

“None, Madame—or, I should say, only one minor condition.”

“And that is?”

“That I be kept informed of the progress of any case I may be paying for. In other words allowed to share in the interest of the work.”

“What sum do you propose devoting to it?” asked Mme. Storey dryly. “You say $100,000. Do you mean the interest on that sum annually?”

"No! No!" he said, waving his hands. "I put that down because I had to put something. If I had named a larger sum you might have thought I was crazy, and sent for the doorman. No, I place no limits on the expenditures, except of course, the limits of my income, which fluctuates at present between $500,000 and $600,000 a year."

There was a silence. Mme. Storey lit a cigarette, and regarded him quizzically through the smoke.

"You may be mad, you know," she said.

He shrugged in the Continental style. "They say money talks. Try it. You have only to mention a sum, and it will be delivered here within an hour in cash."

"Why in cash?" asked Mme. Storey raising her eyebrows. "Why not through the regular channels?"

"Because I do not want anybody to know about it," he said smoothly; "not my bankers; not my attorneys. I am no philanthropist. I detest the word. I am merely a man without any family, without any definite interest, and with a great deal more money than I can spend. My dear lady, you do not know it, but I have followed your career almost from the beginning with the keenest interest. I know all about the Ashcomb Poor case, the strange case of Teresa de Guion, and the tragic Starr murder. I suspect that there are still stranger cases going on, that do not get into the newspapers."

"There are," said Mme. Storey.

"Well, I will be quite frank with you—how foolish for me to seek to be otherwise with a woman like you! I am trying to *buy* my way into your confidence to a limited extent. It would give me the greatest pleasure if I might be in on some interesting and extraordinary case from its very inception, and follow it step by step through the medium of your extraordinary insight, to its triumphant conclusion. Then too, I am only human, I suppose; I might be doing a little good with my money, if we came to the assistance of some poor soul who was up against a devilish combination of circumstances, and lacked the wherewithal to extricate himself. You see it is very simple."

"Oh, very!" said Mme. Storey.

"But it would spoil all my pleasure if anybody on my side knew what I was doing."

"Then you decline to identify yourself to me to furnish references."

“I must, my dear lady.”

“Your name may not be George Rawlings at all.”

“It may not be,” he said smiling.

“You may not have come by this money honestly.”

“I may not,” he said without turning a hair. “What do you care?”

“I don’t care particularly,” said Mme. Storey. “But I must have time to think it over, you understand.”

He immediately arose. “I quite understand. May I come to see you again?”

“Any time,” said Mme. Storey carelessly. “Such a munificent offer deserves consideration.”

“Thank you,” he said bowing. “You will find that I shall not trespass on your good nature. Should any occasion arise, my telephone number is Plaza 5771. Good-morning, Madame Storey. Good-morning, Miss Brickley.”

I saw him through the outer door. When I returned, Mme. Storey, helping herself to a fresh cigarette, said airily:

“Grand flow of language, Bella!”

“The cheek of it!” I said with some heat; “trying to *buy* us!”

“Oh, he didn’t seriously expect to buy us,” said Mme. Storey. “His object in coming here was more subtle. He wanted to find out if I had interested myself in Aline Elder, and confound him! he *did* find out. Observe his cleverness. With his damned offer he put me in a position where there was no line I could take that might put him off.”

“Unless you had taken his money,” I suggested.

“I ought to have taken his money,” she said ruefully, “but I couldn’t quite bring myself to it. . . . On the other hand, Bella, the offer might have been *bona fide*.”

“Never!” I said. “Not with that face!”

“Well, I don’t think so myself,” said Mme. Storey, “but one must keep an open mind.”

“At any rate,” I said, “he’ll never trouble us again.”

“Oh, but he will!” said Mme. Storey. “He enjoyed hearing himself talk. He’ll give us more of it.”

“What do you suppose his real game is?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” said Mme. Storey. “But before I’m through with him, I will know!”

4

LATE that afternoon we received a report from Sampson. He had interviewed the conductor of the railway train. The man remembered Aline Elder very well, having been particularly struck by the girl's charm. She had not addressed any questions to him. He could only testify that she had gone through to New York on his train. He had noticed her in conversation with a woman passenger. He frequently saw this woman on his train and had a bowing acquaintance with her; didn't know her name. He promised to let Sampson know the next time he saw her.

On the following day we had another report from the conductor, *via* Sampson. The woman's name was Mrs. Brownell. She was the travelling representative of a New York concern that operated a chain of stores in Hudson River towns. She remembered Aline Elder. Their conversation, she reported, was entirely insignificant; just the sort of thing chance travellers might say to each other. With one exception. The girl, learning that she was a New York business woman, had asked Mrs. Brownell if she had ever heard of a lawyer named Schuyler Orr. Mrs. Brownell had never heard of him, and the talk went no further along that line. But the odd name had stuck in Mrs. Brownell's memory.

Hearing this, Mme. Storey called for a telephone book. There was the name: Orr, Schuyler, lawyer; 140 Nassau Street.

"I think this is important enough to warrant a call," said Mme. Storey. "Call a taxi-cab. You come, too. This is your case."

Locking up the office, we set out.

140 Nassau Street is an immense office building. Mr. Schuyler Orr occupied a one-man office on an upper floor with a glorious panorama of the East River and its bridges. There was nobody in the office but a smallish, untidy girl who looked as if she had been weeping. She was rather overpowered by the spectacle of Mme. Storey.

"Mr. Orr," said my mistress, "I see he is out. When will he be in?"

The question started the tears flowing again. "I don't know, ma'am," the girl said between sniffs. "I ain't seen-m in more'n a week. He never told me he was going away. I don't know where he is."

"Have you communicated with his family?"

“He ain’t got no family. I been to his house. He ain’t been seen around there. I ain’t been paid for last week at all. I don’t know if I got a job or not.”

“Cheer up!” said Mme. Storey. “Let’s find him. When did you see him last?”

“A week ago Monday.”

“He worked here that day?”

“Yes’m. He went away early to play golf.”

“Where does he play golf?”

“The Ahkanasi Club, near Peguannock.”

Further questioning elicited the fact that Mr. Orr frequently remained away from the office for a day or two at a time, but that he had heretofore always kept his stenographer informed of his movements. He lived at 147 East 18th Street, where he had a small flat. He kept no servant. He ate his meals at the Thespian’s Club on Gramercy Park. The girl didn’t know who his most intimate friends were. He had a cousin, a Mr. Francis Orr, who, several times during the past week had inquired for him over the telephone, and had asked to be notified as soon as any word was received. Mr. Francis Orr’s office was in John Street, not a great way off.

Mme. Storey had the girl telephone to Mr. Francis Orr to ask him if he would come to his cousin’s office to meet Madame Rosika Storey.

She remarked to me *sotto voce*: “We have two to find now. This case is like one of those nests of Japanese boxes. Whenever you open a box, there is a smaller one inside.”

The girl reported that Mr. Orr would be right over, and Mme. Storey, taking the telephone, called up Canby, an operative who happened to be in Mount Vernon that afternoon. She ordered Canby to hire a car and proceed as quickly as possible to the Ahkanasi Club. If he could get there before dark he would catch the members before they dispersed after their games. He was to find out, if possible, who had played with Mr. Schuyler Orr on Monday, eight days before. He was to interview these persons, and obtain an exact account of the game, and was to trace, so far as possible, Mr. Orr’s movements after the game.

Mme. Storey asked the little stenographer if Mr. Orr had ever given her a letter to Miss Aline Elder, Ancaster, N.Y. The girl shook her head. She was sure of it.

“I suppose there are copies of all his letters,” said Mme. Storey. “Will you please look among them. He may have written it himself.”

From the filing cabinet the girl brought us the folder which contained all the E’s. There was no Elder among them.

Mr. Francis Orr arrived; a good-looking well-dressed young business man, with a correct and artificial manner that bespoke a shallow nature. He evidently knew who Mme. Storey was, for he was all agog at finding her there. But his first thought was of himself.

Scowling, he said: “I hope my cousin hasn’t . . .”

“I hope not,” said Mme. Storey dryly. “His name came incidentally into a case in which I am interested. Whatever the situation may be, I think he ought to be looked for. I am a little surprised that no one has started looking for him before.”

“It’s true I’m his cousin,” the young man said, on the defensive, “but I don’t know him very well. You know how it is with families. Our ways ran in different directions.”

“Well, let’s start now,” said Mme. Storey. “His desk ought to be searched. That’s properly your job.”

I need only say that this search produced nothing that was of any service to us.

The three of us then set off for Mr. Schuyler Orr’s flat.

The young man was very uncomfortable. His conventional nature revolted at the idea of being dragged into anything unpleasant. “What do you suspect?” he asked in the cab.

“There may be nothing in it. There is just a possibility that your cousin may have got involved with a man whom I regard as highly dangerous.” Further than that she refused to be drawn.

She questioned Orr about his cousin’s circumstances.

“There’s really very little to tell,” he said. “A bachelor thirty-seven years old with a small law practice; just enough to keep him from being a complete idler. He was always talking about getting to work seriously, but he never made any real effort to increase his practice. He was well-connected—the Orrs are an old New York family, you know; and he had a private income just sufficient to keep him in a small way. He was a dry stick; if he ever had a love affair, I didn’t know of it. He didn’t even have

any intimate friends; didn't seem to require it. But plenty of club acquaintances. Bridge and golf were his only real interests. To tell you the truth, he was a bit of a bore; always so stiff and proper. If he really has got himself mixed up in anything queer, he's the very last man in town you'd suspect it of."

The apartment house was one of those flimsy affairs of brick and terra-cotta that were run up in such numbers twenty years ago. It had not much the look of a gentleman's residence; however, anything below Twenty-Third Street is in such demand, that such places command disproportionately high rents.

There was a negro elevator boy on duty, who told us that Mr. Schuyler Orr had come home on Monday, a week ago, about seven in the evening. He had dressed and gone out again to dinner at his club. He went off duty at eight o'clock, so he had not seen Mr. Orr come in after dinner. He had not seen Mr. Orr since. But as Mr. Orr often went out of town for a few days at a time, there was nothing strange in that.

Pressed by further questions from Mme. Storey, the boy recollected an incident. When he returned to the ground floor after having delivered Mr. Orr at his door, he said he found a man waiting in the lobby. He described this man as being "dark-complected," neatly dressed, and about forty years old. He spoke with an English accent, and his upper lip was blue from shaving. The man asked him who it was he had taken up in the elevator, and the boy told him Mr. Orr's name. "Oh," said the man; "I thought I recognised an old friend; but I was mistaken," and went away. The boy had not considered the incident of sufficient importance to mention it to Mr. Orr.

The superintendent was sent for. In such a building, "superintendent" is merely an euphemism for janitor. He appeared in jumper and overalls. Mme. Storey set forth the situation briefly, and expressed a wish to have the door of Mr. Orr's apartment forced. The superintendent demurred, scratching his head, but finally consented. We were all carried up in the elevator. It was a top floor rear. There were four apartments on a floor.

"This is it," said the superintendent.

At the door Mme. Storey sniffed, and her face became very grave. "Gas," she said.

The faint, stale odour reached my nostrils. Very faint.

The superintendent's eyes goggled. "We must have a policeman," he said.

Francis Orr was instantly seized with panic. “Oh, my God!” he said. “This is nonsense! There can’t be anything the matter. In a house like this the gas always leaks.”

“The man is right,” said Mme. Storey. “We must have a policeman.”

We stood there in silence on the landing while the policeman was fetched. I was filled with a sick apprehension of what was before us. Mme. Storey seemed quite unperturbed. You would think from the exquisite finish of her that her experience of life was limited to dances and teas, but I knew that no sight, however dreadful, could make her quail.

The policeman arrived, and the door was forced. Inside, the smell of gas was much stronger, but not at all overpowering. The policeman went into the nearest room, a bedroom, and flung up the window. There was a short hall with doors opening from it; first the bedroom; then a bathroom; then a closed door. The hall ended in the dining-room and one could look through into a living-room. That was all. It had the look of a man’s place, comfortable, but not in any way elegant. There was no disorder.

The policeman opened the closed door. The smell was very strong, but stale; inert. A narrow kitchen; dresser; stationary wash-tubs; sink. On the other side a deal table and a gas stove with the oven door open. In the narrow space between, lay the body of a man sprawling on his back. The policeman broke the silence.

“Suicide,” he said, matter-of-fact. “It’s a slot meter, so the gas soon stopped flowing.”

“Oh, my God!” muttered Francis Orr, sick with disgust. “To think that this should have happened in *our* family!”

It was a sordid sight. The poor wretch, robbed of his correct bearing, had nothing left. He was no longer a “gentleman,” he was just clay. He was neither young, nor comely, nor well-formed. His relaxed face had fallen into the lines of weakness and vacuity, and stiffened so. His thin, blonde hair had become disarranged, revealing grotesque bald spots. He had been dead more than a week.

I turned away, and waited just inside the entrance door of the flat. There was nothing in particular for me to do. I could hear everything that was said.

Mme. Storey made a brief examination of the body, and went into the living-room for a moment. When she came back she said, in her cool voice:

“Not suicide, officer, but murder.”

“How do *you* know, ma’am?” the surprised voice answered.

“The body was dragged in here from the dining-room. More dust has fallen within the week, but you can still see the marks in the uncarpeted hall. And the dust is ground into his back. When he was dragged over the door-sill, one of his pumps came off, and was hurriedly shoved on his foot again. The edge is turned under at the heel. Nobody could wear a shoe like that without its hurting.”

“That’s the truth, ma’am!”

“He has money in his pockets, and his watch,” Mme. Storey went on. “So the motive was otherwise than robbery. The crystal of his watch is broken, and the hands stopped at seven minutes past eleven. That is the hour he was attacked on Monday night, one must suppose.”

“Killed *here*!” the superintendent exclaimed.

“Oh, my God!” groaned Francis Orr.

“There is a bump on the top of his head,” said Mme. Storey, “and a bruise on his forehead. I take it he was stunned by a blow from some blunt instrument, and fell forward on his face. That would account for the broken crystal. This happened just within the dining-room door. It is most likely that he had just let in a visitor, and was leading the way into the living-room.”

“But his skull isn’t broken, ma’am,” said the policeman. “That blow wouldn’t have killed him.”

“Certainly not,” said Mme. Storey. “He was turned over on his back, and suffocated with a cushion off the couch in there. He came to in the process, and struggled. You can see where the cover of the cushion has been torn by teeth.”

“Who are you, ma’am, anyhow?” the amazed voice demanded.

“Rosika Storey,” said my mistress.

“Oh-h!” breathed the voice. “That accounts for it, then . . . Would you shake hands with me, ma’am.”

“Surely.”

“I am proud of this chance, ma’am. I’ll never forget this day.”

5

On our way back to the office an hour later, Mme. Storey had the cab stop at the club-house of the Thespians on Gramercy Park, only half a dozen doors from us. Francis Orr having left us, still calling on Heaven to explain why it had thus afflicted the Orrs, she sent in our chauffeur to ask the doorman to come to her. He was a delightful old club servant of a type rare nowadays. Through him she got in touch with Mr. Henry Stanford, the famous actor, an officer of the club. They introduced themselves to each other amidst mutual felicitations and Mme. Storey said:

"I am sorry to have to tell you that your member, Mr. Schuyler Orr, has been found dead in his flat."

"Orr! Poor fellow! How shocking!" murmured the other. "I didn't know him."

"Apparently he was murdered on his return from the club on Monday night of last week. I am very anxious to find any one who may have talked with him in the club that night."

Mr. Stanford promised to make immediate inquiries.

"My office is only six doors from here," said Mme. Storey. "It is past office hours, but I will wait there until I hear from you."

At the office we found that Canby had returned from Mamaroneck. He reported that on Monday afternoon of the previous week, at the Ahkanasi Club, Mr. Schuyler Orr had played a round of golf with Major Ingoldsby. Canby had interviewed Major Ingoldsby, who preserved a lively recollection of that particular round. It had been like any other round until Orr lost his ball in a patch of woods at the easterly side of the course. He searched for it a few minutes, but came back without it. The incident seemed to put him strangely out of temper. Thereafter he was quite unable to keep his mind on the game, and finally with the most cursory of apologies, he left the Major on the course to finish alone.

The Major was still indignant over it. When he got back to the club-house he said he found Orr sitting gloomily before the fire. They did not speak. Later the Major, Orr, and the other members rode together in the club bus to the Mamaroneck station where they took the 5.50 for town. Orr, quite contrary to his usual custom, sat alone in the smoker, and spoke to no one. No one had seen him after the train had arrived at Grand Central.

We knew though, that he had gone straight home.

After Canby we had Mr. Jennings Morrissey, one of the editors on the staff of the *Adelphi*, and a member of the Thespians, a very delightful fellow, and obviously pleased to the death at the opportunity of meeting Mme. Storey.

"Poor Schuyler Orr!" he said. "What a horrible affair! I was not exactly a friend of his, but as it happens I had a brief chat with him on Monday night of last week. In fact, we left the club together. Stanford said you would like me to come and tell you about it."

"If you'll be so good," said Mme. Storey. She offered him a cigarette.

"None of Orr's regular pals are in the club house now," Mr. Morrissey went on. "If they don't dine there, they'll turn up later. They may be able to tell you more than me, but I doubt it. For Orr was not on what you'd call intimate terms with anybody. A pleasant enough fellow, but not exactly expansive.

"He was one of the four men who played bridge every night in the small card-room upstairs. On the night in question—the last night Orr was seen at the club, they sent down to the lounge for another player, as Orr wanted to retire from the game. This would be a little before ten. Orr came downstairs and passed through the lounge, where I was sitting, reading, and I noticed he looked a little queer. 'Off your game?' I said.

"He jumped when I spoke to him, and gave me a queer, excited sort of smile. 'Yes,' he said, 'so it seems.' He went on into the writing-room which is in a sort of alcove off the lounge, and up a few steps. I could see him from where I sat. Ordinarily, he was such a dry, self-contained, formal sort of fellow that it aroused my curiosity to see him disturbed. But when I say disturbed, I don't mean that he was in trouble; on the contrary he seemed to be filled with some sort of fearful but pleasurable excitement.

"He wrote a letter. It gave him a lot of trouble, because he tore up several sheets. By the time he got it done to his satisfaction it was getting on for eleven, and I was preparing to move. So we started out together. He had the letter in his hand. When I was getting my things on at the coat room, he went down to the office, which is a few steps lower, and got a stamp. He came back, and dropped his letter in the box right there in the club entry. After he had put it in, he stood staring at the box in a way you couldn't help noticing. When he turned around and caught me looking at him, he said with an excited laugh:

“ ‘That letter means a lot to me, Morrissey.’

“ ‘That so?’ said I, grinning.

“ ‘Oh, it’s not what you’re thinking,’ he said. ‘Not a love affair. That sort of thing would never get me going. My God! something bigger than that. Success in my profession, Morrissey, and a pot of money beside, a whole pot of money!’

“ ‘Legal business,’ said I.

“ ‘Amazing! Amazing!’ he said, looking quite wild. “ ‘Something that has just dropped into my lap, Morrissey. In the most astounding way. It’s like a story. But you’d never dare print such a story in your magazine. Of course, I keep telling myself it may be all moonshine; mere raving. Still, you read of such things in the newspapers. But the *magnitude* of it! It’s enough to sweep a man off his feet. Oh, well, I’ll know in a few days.’ All this in jerky, breathless sentences.

“The boy came with his coat, so I wished him good luck of his windfall, and went on home. This was quarter to eleven, because it was ten minutes to, when I passed the Metropolitan tower.”

“He was killed at seven minutes past,” said Mme. Storey.

“Good Heavens! then I was perhaps the last man to speak to him alive!”

“Except his murderer,” said Mme. Storey.

Such was the gist of Mr. Morrissey’s information. He was quite willing to go on and enlarge upon it to any extent, so long, in fact, as the beautiful Mme. Storey would listen. We got rid of him by leaving the office ourselves. At the street door he bowed, and returned to his club.

Mme. Storey and I paused at the Fourth Avenue corner, while we waited for a taxi to carry her uptown.

“That letter he wrote,” I said, “do you think . . .?”

“I am certain that is the letter received by Aline Elder on Tuesday. Have you ever received a letter on the stationery of the Thespians?”

I shook my head.

“Well, it has the device of the club embossed without colour on the flap of the envelope. That would be ‘the little picture raised in the paper.’ It was posted inside the club, you notice. He would no doubt have been prevented from posting it outside. The case begins to take shape, Bella.”

“But if Orr was murdered merely for writing to the girl, how about the girl herself?” I said aghast. “Poor Swanley!”

“That is why I am trying to keep the girl’s name out of the Orr case,” said Mme. Storey gravely.

“You have a theory?” I said eagerly.

“A sort of one.”

I did not like to ask her point blank what it was, but I suppose I looked my question.

She said: “It’s only a guess so far, Bella; and you know I never speak of my guesses. As a theory it has several large holes in it. For instance: if it is the correct theory, I don’t understand why he should have waited until now to strike at the girl.”

“Who?” I said involuntarily.

The cab had driven up to the curb. With her foot on the step, she looked at me and with her forefinger made the sign of a hook over her own straight nose.

I shivered.

6

NEXT morning the papers were full of the Orr case. Being so complete a mystery, it made a good-size sensation, but not so great as if the victim had been young and interesting. It was pathetic what a little difference to anybody the taking off of Schuyler Orr seemed to make. Yet he appeared to have been a blameless creature.

The police undertook their investigation, and we pursued ours, and they only touched at occasional points. From the testimony of the night elevator boy at the apartment it appeared that Orr had come straight home from the club, and had been taken up in the elevator a few minutes before eleven. The boy swore that neither before nor after that had he taken anybody up except residents of the house who were familiar to him. But it was pointed out that the murderer could easily have gone up the stairs. It was the custom in that house to turn out the hall lights on every alternate floor at 10.30. A simple matter after that hour for the man, by watching the movements of the elevator, to have crept upstairs undetected, and later come down again. The murderer had left no traces of his own personality in the Orr flat; not a fingerprint.

At the office we found an interesting but disappointing report from Crider. Crider is our very best man, and together with his younger brother whom he is training up, he had been detailed to keep our sinister friend under surveillance. By means of the telephone number we had quickly found out that the man with the Roman nose did indeed pass under the name of George Rawlings, and that he occupied an expensive apartment on Central Park South where he lived alone, but for an elderly woman servant.

Crider had picked him up at two o'clock on Monday afternoon. He had attended a sale at the American Art Galleries, where he purchased several rare pieces of Persian faience and Alexandrine glass. The sum of his purchases had amounted to many thousands of dollars. In the evening he took Miss Peggy Forrester, the star of *April Days* to dinner at a fashionable restaurant on Park Avenue, and afterwards sat through her show at the Casino. A very gay party including a number of people followed at the Palais Rouge. Towards three in the morning Rawlings left this party alone, and was driven home where he presumably went to bed. Young Crider watched the house throughout the night, but he did not come out again.

He did not appear until noon next day. He drove to Sherry's where he met another beautiful young lady, name unknown to Crider, and lunched (or breakfasted) with her. Afterwards they visited together a number of the most prominent art dealers on Fifth Avenue, and Rawlings presumably made purchases, but Crider could not follow him inside the shops.

Meanwhile young Crider had called at the service door of the apartment upon the pretext of selling the servant some laces. His youth and good looks had evidently recommended him, for the woman had taken him in and they had quite a talk. She had been engaged six months before through an employment agency, and she knew nothing about her master's affairs. It was clear she had no suspicion that he was otherwise from what he seemed. She described him as being liberal and not difficult to please. His principal interest was in collecting rare objects of art.

Upon young Crider's expressing a curiosity about such things, she showed him through the apartment. He described it as a perfect museum. The only thing out of the way that he had observed was an expensive radio receiving set which had a bell on it something like a telephone. The woman said that one of Mr. Rawlings' friends had a transmitting set, and was able to call him by means of this bell. She did not know how to use the apparatus herself. You listened with ear phones, so that she never heard what came over it. Young Crider reported that he had established himself on a good footing with the woman, and could make other visits if it should be required.

At four o'clock Rawlings had dropped his pretty friend at the Ritz, and had returned home. But only for a few minutes. His car waited in front of the door. This car by the way, a magnificent dark blue brougham with red wheels, could not have been the same he took to Ancaster, for it was of the most expensive American make. Crider was following it in a speedy roadster with a driver.

Rawlings set off again, and Crider followed him to the flying field at Arcola, Long Island. There Rawlings engaged a plane for an hour's flight. All his movements were careless and unhurried. Crider followed him into the air in another 'plane. Other 'planes were rising and descending at the time. Crider had instructed his pilot to keep above the first 'plane. After apparently purposeless circling for half an hour Rawlings' 'plane set off in a northerly direction with Crider following.

The first plane unexpectedly dived, and made a landing in a field alongside a deserted road in mid-Westchester County. There was a car waiting in the road; a black limousine. Rawlings entered it, and was driven

away. Before Crider could even land, the car was out of sight, and it was useless for him to land. Instead, he returned to Arcola where he interviewed the pilot who had taken up Rawlings. The pilot looked upon Rawlings merely as a rich eccentric. Three times, he said, he had carried him to some designated field in the country where a car would be waiting for him. He gave handsome tips.

Rawlings returned home shortly before eight o'clock, and Crider picked him up again. He dined alone, rather hastily, at a famous chop-house on Broadway, and afterwards witnessed the final acts of *La Bohème* at the Metropolitan Opera House. He occupied a parquet seat. After the opera he went home.

Reading this report made me feel very blue. Crider was the best man we had. I was appalled by the cool resourcefulness, the devilish effrontery of our adversary. Apparently he was able to fool us whenever he wished. There was something uncanny about him. Heavens! I had dreamed of him on Monday night, and awoke gasping and sweating.

For a while this morning we had Swanley on our hands. He looked like a ghost. We took care not to let him know that there was any connection between the Orr murder and his case. I could scarcely face his tragic blue eyes. I was well assured that Mme. Storey would never stop until she had learned what had become of Aline Elder, but I had little hope that she would ever find the girl alive.

Each morning Swanley implored Mme. Storey to give him some work to do in connection with the case. In the state he was in, he was incapable of doing any serious work; he would have given himself away to a year-old child; so we had to invent work for him; anything to make him feel that he was helping. To-day Mme. Storey sent him out to Paterson on the train, to sit in the public library and watch for an imaginary red-haired man wearing black-rimmed glasses.

He stooped in the door and said—poor fellow! trying to keep a stiff upper lip—"Have you made any real progress? Isn't there anything you can tell me?"

Mme. Storey said frankly: "I am making progress, but I can't tell you anything, because it may all turn out to be wrong. You are a man, and entitled to hear the truth; the situation is dangerous but everything that can be done, is being done."

He went out with his head down.

Mme. Storey gave me one of my rare glimpses into her heart: “I wish I had that damned wretch on the rack, Bella,” she said low. “That’s the only way to deal with such a one; torture.”

I knew who she meant, of course.

As for me, I could have put my head down and bawled like a child. In our business we generally manage to harden our hearts; we have to: but this case had *got* us—both Mme. Storey and myself. That fine young fellow with his look of despair, and the gentle girl he had described to us. It was too much. We knew their enemy, yet we could not, so far, touch him!

It was a black half-hour. I was sitting in my own room feeling jaded and flat, when the door opened, and I beheld a charming figure. A girl with an open eager face; she was lovely.

“Is this Madame Storey’s office?” she asked.

“Yes,” said I, wondering greatly who she might be.

She blushed prettily. “Is . . . is Mr. Edward Swanley here?” she asked.

I jumped up. I could feel my eyes popping. All the blood seemed to leave my heart; then it rushed back so fast I felt as if it would burst in my breast. “You . . . you . . . you . . .” I stammered; “you are Aline Elder!”

“Why, yes,” she said, a little scared by my excitement.

I sprang at her like a crazy woman. She recoiled, but I snatched up her hand, and dragged her pell-mell towards Mme. Storey’s room. I banged open the door, Mme. Storey looked up in comical astonishment.

“Well, Bella . . .!” she began.

I shouted her down. “Here she is! Here she is! And all safe and sound!” I involuntarily began to feel of the girl to make sure she was intact.

Mme. Storey was scarcely less moved than I was. Jumping up, she flung her arms around the dazed girl.

“Thank God!” she cried.

Then Mme. Storey and I burst out laughing weakly and foolishly, and we could not stop. The tears ran down my cheeks.

“She . . . she thinks we’re crazy!” I stuttered.

7

WHEN we had quieted down a little, some hasty explanations were exchanged. Aline explained that she had been released at the Yonkers railway station about eight o'clock the night before. She had got the last train for Ancaster. Arriving home, she found that Swanley was in New York looking for her, and she had taken the first train in the morning. Swanley had sent the name of his hotel to his landlady. Aline had gone there to find that he had left word he was to be found at Mme. Storey's office. That explained her presence. On our part we assured her that Swanley was safe and well, and would be back in the afternoon.

The girl quickly realised that she was among friends—hers was the sort of nature that expects to find friends, and the strained look in her big brown eyes relaxed somewhat. It was clear that she had been through a harrowing experience of some kind, but her physical condition was good.

"Where have you been?" Mme. Storey asked.

She shook her head. "I don't know," she said blankly. "The strangest experience! Like a nightmare, now that it is over. I can scarcely believe that it happened. I can't see any *reason* for it. I was locked up for awhile, and then I was allowed to go."

"Tell us everything from the beginning," Mme. Storey bid her.

"On Tuesday of last week I got a letter," she began slowly.

"That we know," said Mme. Storey. "Have you the letter?"

She shook her head. "The writer asked me to destroy it, and I did so. But I think I can repeat it to you word for word. I read it twenty times.

" 'DEAR MISS ELDER:

" 'In a roundabout way a piece of information has come to me which, if it be true, may turn out to be greatly to your advantage. Not wishing to raise false hopes, I will not specify the nature of it until I have had a chance to talk to you. A few minutes conversation would tell me if there was anything in it or not.

" 'Will you come to see me at my office upon the earliest possible day? Bring with you any information you may have, documentary or otherwise, relating to your father. I must beg of

you not to mention this matter to any one until after you have talked with me. And please destroy this letter. But be sure to make a note of my address first.

" 'Awaiting your reply,

" 'Yours sincerely,

" 'SCHUYLER ORR.' "

"It was unfortunate that he was so mysterious," I remarked.

"Lawyers are," said Mme. Storey. "He was afraid Miss Elder might consult some other lawyer."

"But he wasn't a real lawyer," said the girl. "He was . . ."

Mme. Storey interrupted her with a smile. "We will tell you what we know later. Let us have your story first. . . . Why didn't you tell Edward Swanley about the letter? Was it because Orr asked you not to."

"No," she said. "It is because Edward is so sensible, so careful of me, I was afraid he would stop me from going. He would have said it was a swindle of some sort. I thought myself it might be, but I wished to find out. If it turned out to be a sell, I wasn't going to tell anybody. If there *was* anything in it, I meant to surprise Edward. It never occurred to me to suspect harm to myself. Why, nobody had ever harmed me in all my life.

"I took the train on Wednesday at noon. I hadn't written the man to say I was coming, because I thought I would feel so cheap if there was nothing in it. I meant to say to him that I happened to be coming to New York anyway, so I just dropped in. On the journey nothing happened. But as I came through the train gates in New York I was greatly astonished when a man stepped up and asked me if I was Miss Elder. . . ."

"Describe him," said Mme. Storey.

"Well . . . an ordinary sort of man. Neither handsome nor ugly. He was unusually dark; his face colourless. He wore a blue suit which looked like a uniform, but it was not a uniform. Where he shaved the hair showed through his skin; bluish; particularly his upper lip . . ."

Mme. Storey and I exchanged a glance.

". . . He was very polite and respectful. I took him for a lawyer's clerk, but it turned out he was only a servant. It was he afterwards who . . ."

"Wait!" warned Mme. Storey. "We're still in the railway station."

“He said that Mr. Orr had sent him to meet me, and he took my bag from me. This way, he said. . . . Well, you know how it is. Mr. Orr was in my mind, and for a second it seemed natural enough; I followed him through the station. But the questions soon began to rise inside me.

“ ‘How did you know me?’ I asked him.

“ ‘Mr. Orr described you to me,’ he said at once.

“That kept me quiet for a moment. The whole thing was so mysterious, I didn’t know but what this man Orr might have seen me at some time or another. Then I thought of something else.

“ ‘But Mr. Orr didn’t know that I was coming to New York.’

“ ‘He told me he wasn’t sure of it,’ the man said, ‘but he had looked up the trains from Ancaster, and he hoped you might be on this one.’

“If I had been a strong-minded person I would have stopped right there. But the man was so plausible and ready with his answers that it confused me. He was hurrying me along faster than I could think. He was so perfectly sure that I was coming, it was hard for me to make a stand against him. We went out of the side door of the station to the covered driveway, where there was a handsome car waiting with a correct chauffeur in livery. Before I knew what was happening, I was inside and we were moving off.

“I know very little about New York, but I could see that we were heading uptown, not in the direction of offices.

“ ‘Where are we going?’ I asked.

“ ‘To Mr. Orr’s home,’ he said. ‘Mr. Orr was slightly indisposed to-day, and remained at home. That was why he sent me to meet the train. He was so anxious to see you.’

“ ‘Has Mr. Orr a family?’ I asked.

“ ‘Oh, yes,’ he said at once, ‘A large family. Mrs. Orr is expecting you.’

“I was silenced again. It was silly of me, but there was something reassuring in the thought of a large family. All made up, of course. The man was perfectly respectful; he never addressed me except when I asked a question. We drove on and on and on. I was uneasy in my mind, and I kept getting uneasier. Finally we crossed a narrow river . . .”

“The Harlem river,” murmured Mme. Storey.

“ ‘Where does Mr. Orr live?’ I asked.

" 'In the country,' the man replied. 'Dobb's Ferry.'

"When the houses began to thin out I became very frightened. It suddenly struck me as very strange that, if the man was a servant, he should be riding inside with me. I made a break for freedom. I rapped on the glass that separated us from the chauffeur. To the man beside me, I said:

" 'I want to get out. I am going to my hotel. If Mr. Orr wants to see me, he can communicate with me there.'

"The chauffeur paid not the slightest attention to my rap. As for the man beside me, his manner changed like lightning."

" 'Be quiet!' he said. 'I don't want to hurt you, but if you cry out . . .' He showed a pistol he had in his pocket.

"I fell back in my corner, half-sick with terror. I thought then of all the newspaper stories I had read of horrible things happening in New York. I thought it was all up with me. I was incapable of making any resistance. The sight of that pistol paralysed my arms and legs. The man leaned over and pulled down the shades over the rear windows, so nobody could see in. He never offered to touch me. Hard and ugly as he had turned, he was still in a way, respectful. But I had the hideous thought that he was taking me to *some other man*.

"The hours that followed are just a blank of horror . . ."

"Hours?" said Mme. Storey surprised.

"Yes. For nearly three hours we drove at a good rate of speed. I had my wrist watch. But I think we were not going direct to any place. For it seemed to me that I had glimpses through the front window of bits of road I had seen before. I think we were just driving around until it became dark, so that I should not be able to see the place where I was taken."

"Ah, very likely," said Mme. Storey. "Go on."

"It was dark when we got to the place. I had an impression that we had turned into a private driveway; a short driveway. I was hustled into the house so quickly that I got no impression of the outside of it. Inside, it was a very nice sort of house; modern and beautifully furnished; not a very large house. There was a woman waiting for us in the hall; she was dressed as a trained nurse. I was taken right upstairs to a bedroom.

"It was a very pretty bedroom with pink walls, a rose colour rug, bright cretonne hangings, and softly shaded lights. There was an open fire burning. I had no eyes for its prettiness, because I immediately perceived through the

cracks of the cretonne hangings that both of the windows were boarded up on the inside. Like a sort of madhouse. And the nurse, too. I could have screamed only my throat was too constricted.

"I had been left alone with her. She helped me off with my hat and coat. I suppose I was like a frozen woman. She undertook to soothe me, and make me relax.

" 'It's all right; it's all right,' she kept saying. 'You'll only have to stay here a little while until *he* comes, then everything will be explained.' "

"Describe her as well as you can," said Mme. Storey.

"She was like the man who had brought me. I don't mean in the way that brother and sister are alike, but the same manner, the same class, the same smooth English voice. Later on I got the impression from their matter-of-fact air towards each other, that they were man and wife. She was spotlessly neat; she was rather a good-looking woman, but her face was closed. You never could tell what lay behind that composed mask.

"She went on to tell me that she had nothing to do but wait on me, and make me comfortable, and that I was to have no hesitation in asking for anything in the world I might want.

" 'What am I here for?' I demanded.

" 'I don't know,' she said with a meaningless smile, 'And I mustn't guess. Don't ask me that, because it will only make it hard for us to get along. But anything else . . . I have a broiled chicken and some fresh peas for your dinner. I hope it will please you. And will you take a glass of champagne?' "

Aline broke off, and passed a hand across her face. "It was all so strange! so strange!" she murmured.

"What do you mean exactly, by strange?" asked Mme. Storey.

"Well, there I was a prisoner without knowing why, and nearly out of my mind with terror and apprehension, and then to be waited on like that—the woman was prepared to be masseuse, lady's maid, hairdresser; besides cook and companion. I have never been waited on before. It was as unreal as a dream."

"Oh, he always does things in the grand manner," said Mme. Storey grimly.

"Whom do you mean; Orr?" Aline asked.

Mme. Storey shook her head. “Poor Orr! Go on. We’ll tell our story later.”

“The thought of food revolted me,” Aline continued. “But she went away to fetch it, locking the door behind her. I took the occasion to examine my prison. As I have said, close boards had been nailed across the window frames. I scratched at the edges in vain. The smaller window in the bathroom adjoining was similarly closed. Throughout both rooms I searched for something that might serve to pry one of the boards but there was nothing. Even the fire-irons had been removed. When the fire was to be made up, they were brought in from the hall.”

“You might have tried setting the house on fire,” suggested Mme. Storey.

“I never thought of that,” said Aline, in her serious way.

“Go on, my dear.”

“There was nothing to break out with,” Aline resumed, “but everything else I might be supposed to wish for; expensive writing paper; a whole armful of the latest books; a phonograph with all kinds of records. There was even a pack of cards and some jigsaw puzzles.

“The woman came back with my dinner, and it was just as she had promised; even to the little bottle of champagne in a bucket of ice. I wouldn’t let her open that. The service was of the most beautiful silver and china, and the food no doubt delicious. But I couldn’t touch it.

“ ‘Perhaps the chicken will appeal to you cold, later,’ she said. ‘I will save it.’

“She asked me if I would like her to sit with me or read to me, or if I preferred to be alone. I asked her what all the writing-paper was for, and she said I was free to write to my friends if I wished. I sent her away. She pointed to a push button alongside the fireplace, and said that it would fetch her at any hour.

“As soon as she was gone, I sat down and started a letter to Edward; pages and pages. But it suddenly occurred to me, it would never be allowed to go out of the house, of course. One of that hard-eyed pair would read it. So I tore it up, and threw it in the fire. I walked up and down. Every five minutes was like an hour. Finally, I had to send for the woman again. It brought the horrors too close to be alone.

“She brought her knitting with her. She was knitting of all things! a pair of grey men’s socks, ending in pointed toes with a thread sticking out. For

the man, I suppose. She was wearing spectacles now, and while she knitted, she rocked back and forth, and talked in a droning comfortable voice. Principally of English village life. . . . How strange it seemed! She must have been a wicked, wicked woman, but to have seen her then . . .!"

"That's what people are like," murmured Mme. Storey.

"She offered to make up a bed on the couch, and remain with me through the night. But, of course, I would not let her! She was so strange to me . . . But I was worse off without her. Not knowing at what moment the door of my room might open swiftly! Ugh!" The girl shuddered with closed eyes. "I would not undress, but lay down on the outside of the bed. I did not sleep a wink. The night was ten thousand years long . . . But nothing happened.

"Well, that is the way things went in that house. From Wednesday night until Tuesday night. Looking back now, I can scarcely distinguish one day from another. As the time passed, in spite of myself, my sharpest fears passed. I began to eat the delicious meals that were brought me, and I slept at night. My conscience reproached me when I thought of poor Edward, and what he must be suffering. Oh! I had my bad hours; but I couldn't keep up the pitch of agony the whole time. No matter how I fought against it, that comfortable, attentive woman lulled me.

"I soon gave up trying to question her. One might as well have addressed a plaster wall. All I gathered was, in a general way, that the mysterious 'he' of whom they spoke with such respect, was detained out of town, and nothing could be done until he returned.

"A curious relation developed between that woman and I. Not exactly friendship, of course, because I couldn't trust her. But we had plenty to say to each other. There was the appearance of friendship. She taught me clever ways of doing my hair. She made some alterations in my old blue Georgette, that made it look quite smart and up-to-date. She volunteered to make me a new evening dress.

" 'But who will pay for the materials?' said I.

" 'Oh, our expense accounts are never questioned,' she said.

"However, I refused to hear of the evening dress.

"The man I saw but seldom. He evidently helped with the work about the house. He came in to my room, to sweep up the ashes, and lay a new fire.

“I couldn’t fix my mind on a book, but I had one absorbing occupation when I was alone, that they never suspected. That was loosening one of the boards over the window. One day when ‘Nurse’ (as I called her) went down to the kitchen to fetch me something, I started it ever so little with a table knife. But as she always remained in the room while I ate, and carried the tray away with her, I could never get hold of the knife again.

“So I had only my fingers. For hours at a time I patiently wiggled that board. Without making the slightest impression on it. I gave it up a dozen times, but was always drawn back to it again. I always had warning of nurse’s entrance, because she had to turn the key in the door. It took me four days in all to get that board up. It was not until yesterday morning that the nails finally yielded and I was able to peep through the gap.”

“And what did you see?” Mme. Storey asked.

“It was very disappointing,” said Aline, “for though I had only been brought up one flight of stairs, the ground was at least forty feet below my window. I looked right over the tops of good sized trees. Any thought of dropping from the sill or lowering myself by a rope of bedding was out of the question.”

“The house must have been built on the side of a hill, with a retaining wall at the back,” suggested Mme. Storey.

“That is what I supposed,” said Aline. “Its airy perch gave me a fine view, but that was no consolation.”

“But tell us what you saw.”

“I looked over the tops of trees on gradually descending ground, with the roof of a house showing here and there. It must have been a fine neighbourhood, for the houses were all extensive, and at a considerable distance from each other. At the end of this gradual declivity, a mile away perhaps, there was water: a broad sheet of water, with a curious humpy island offshore, perfectly bare, and far away the misty opposite shore.”

“Long Island Sound at a guess,” said Mme. Storey. “Can you draw?”

“A little.”

“Can you draw me an exact diagram of the view from that window?”

“I’ll try.”

“But finish your story first.”

“That brings me to yesterday,” said Aline. “As soon as I saw nurse—how I watched her face! I guessed that there was something in the air, and sure enough she presently remarked that ‘he’ would be there at six that afternoon, ‘and everything would be decided.’

“He?” I said, trying to make my voice sound contemptuous.

“ ‘The master,’ she said softly.

“They spoke of him as if he were a God whose acts might not be questioned. I tried to laugh at it, but I began to be terribly frightened again. Even the sort of prop I had in the woman was knocked away, because I could see that she was prepared to abase herself utterly before this mysterious ‘master.’ What sort of man was it, I asked myself, who could command such devotion?

“It appeared that the house had to have a special cleaning in his honour; consequently I was left much to myself during the day. I struggled hard to keep up my courage, but to have to wait hour after hour like that for my fate to be decided, and not even to know what the choice was—it was terribly demoralising. By nightfall I was as much unstrung as I had been on the evening of my arrival. It was the same hour.

“Sure enough at six o’clock, listening with my ear at the crack of the door, I heard the sounds of an arrival below. There was a long wait then, while I walked up and down the room, digging my nails into my palms, and trying desperately to find some talisman within myself that would enable me to keep up my courage. ‘He cannot harm me if I am not afraid of him,’ I told myself. But alas! I knew I was becoming more and more afraid every minute.

“Finally nurse came in wearing a sort of exalted expression as if she had just come from the Presence. ‘He will speak with you now,’ she said impressively. ‘You are to sit just inside the door which will be open a little way.’

“So I was not to see him! I don’t know if I can make it clear, but this was the most dreadful part of all. He was to remain an Unseen Presence; just a Voice out of the void. My teeth were chattering when I sat down in the chair she had placed. She sat down facing me, her knees touching mine. The crack of the door was between us. She could see through it, but I could not.”

Aline faltered; her sensitive lips trembled; she flung the back of her hand across her eyes. “I can scarcely tell you what happened after that,” she murmured. “It is all confused in my mind, I suppose I became hysterical.

That voice coming through the door without any body was too dreadful! A low, measured voice without any human tones in it. It had a catlike quality; you thought of an animal licking its lips. I got to such a point I couldn't stand it; I snatched at the door to pull it open, to *see* what was there. The woman tried to stop me, but she wasn't quick enough. But the door was on a chain; it wouldn't open but six inches. I saw nothing."

"Try to remember what he said," urged Mme. Storey.

The girl pressed her knuckles to her temples. She said: "The first thing he asked me was: what proofs had I that I was really Aline Elder. This simply confused me. 'Proofs? Proofs?' I said: 'Everybody in Ancaster knows me.'

" 'But they are not here to testify, unfortunately.' Hateful, hateful, soft and sarcastic voice.

" 'What do you want of me?' I cried.

" 'Did you get a letter from me?'

" 'Yes.'

" 'Where is it?'

" 'I destroyed it, as you asked me to.'

"He was silent for a moment after this."

"You had him," remarked Mme. Storey. "You understand, of course, that this was not Orr who was behind the door?"

"Well I knew that Orr was just a name," said Aline. "But I thought it was the man who had written to me."

"No," said Mme. Storey, "this man was trying to find out what Orr had written you."

"If that is so, he did find out," said Aline. "He asked me to repeat the letter to him, and I did so. He said he wished to make sure that I was really the person he had written to. If I had known . . .!"

"You did well to repeat the letter," said Mme. Storey. "It was probably that which saved your life."

"Saved my life!" echoed Aline, amazed. "Why? How?"

"Because," said Mme. Storey, "in his letter Orr had not divulged the information which was dangerous for you to know. Go on."

“So many questions!” said Aline wearily. “What did I think when I read the letter, and so on. I told him I didn’t think anything; I was waiting to find out. I can’t remember all the questions he asked me, because at the time I couldn’t see what he was driving at. Some of them didn’t seem to have any sense.”

“Doubtless they had not,” said Mme. Storey dryly. “He is past master of the art of covering his tracks.”

“Then he came to my father,” said Aline. “I told him what little I know, but he kept coming back to it again and again, from every possible angle. Up to that moment it had never occurred to me that my father might not have died in my babyhood, but his persistence gave me the idea he might still be alive. But I thought I had better keep this suspicion to myself, so I insisted that my father died twenty years ago, as if nothing could shake me in that belief.”

“You were wise,” said Mme. Storey.

“Finally,” Aline resumed, “he said as if by accident: ‘By the way, your father’s name was Silas B. Elder, was it not?’

“ ‘No,’ I replied, ‘his name was John G. Elder.’ He appeared to be astonished by this.”

“A bit of camouflage,” remarked Mme. Storey, “the important things had been said.”

“So I suppose,” said Aline. “Well, that was the end. He said he found that he was mistaken in me. It was quite another person that he was looking for. He begged my pardon for the inconvenience he had caused me. . . . Inconvenience! And promised that I should immediately be set on my way home.

“He left the door. The woman went out. I listened at the door, and presently I heard him leave the house. Shortly afterwards the woman came with my supper. I was in an agony of suspense.

“ ‘Did he mean it? Did he mean it?’ I cried.

“ ‘Certainly,’ she said. ‘He never says anything he doesn’t mean.’

“And sure enough, as soon as I had eaten, she brought me my outdoor things. I was in a perfect fever of excitement then. The same limousine was waiting at the door. I was hustled into it, and whisked out of the driveway. After an hour’s ride, I was put out at a railway station which I discovered was Yonkers. The train for Ancaster came by in twenty minutes or so.”

“They returned your bag to you?” said Mme. Storey.

“Yes?”

“Intact?”

“Nothing was missing except a little photograph of my father that I took with me to show to the lawyer.”

“Ah!” said Mme. Storey. “I expect you have been thinking over this matter a good deal. Has any explanation of it occurred to you?”

The tears started into Aline’s lovely eyes, and she lowered her head. “Yes,” she murmured, “I can’t help but think from his anxiety to hide himself from me, from his taking the photograph, from the questions he asked . . . I can’t help but think it was my father himself. For some reason he is ashamed of me; he does not want to acknowledge me; he was trying to find out if I suspected that I had any claim on him. . . . Oh, he needn’t have gone to all that trouble! For if he doesn’t want me, I would die sooner than force myself on him!”

“Not badly thought out,” said Mme. Storey. “But I think you are wrong. You fail to take into account what a charming daughter you would make. What possible reason could any man have for not wanting to acknowledge you?”

“I don’t know,” said Aline miserably.

“Tell me,” said Mme. Storey, “from that photograph which is now missing; what sort of nose had your father?”

Aline looked up in surprise. “A rather insignificant nose,” she said; “short and rather broad at the base.”

“Then I can assure you that this man was not your father,” said Mme. Storey.

8

MME. STOREY asked Aline: "Do you think you can draw me an exact diagram of the view from the window of your prison?"

"I think so," said Aline. "I spent most of the day yesterday peeping out."

We furnished her with pencil and paper.

She acquitted herself very well. There, in a few strokes, the tops of the trees were indicated, with water at the foot of the hill, and the curiously-shaped island off shore; far in the distance the opposite shore.

Mme. Storey smoked, and for a considerable time studied the little sketch through half-closed eyes.

"That distant shore," she said, "was it a flat shore not very far away, or high ground at a considerable distance?"

"High ground; five miles or more away," Aline answered unhesitatingly.

"Good!" said Mme. Storey. "Then this body of water can be no other but Long Island Sound. We know that it was within an hour's drive of Yonkers. . . . Bella, take a taxi to the largest stationers in town, and buy a copy of each section of the ordnance map that deals with the shores of the Sound near New York. They show you a diagram, and from it you pick out by number the sections you want."

In twenty minutes or so I was back with the desired large-scale maps.

Mme. Storey spread them out on her big table. "First, the bare island with the hump in the middle," she said. "That ought not to be hard to find. At the distance indicated, this island must have been a mile or so long."

"Fully that," said Aline.

"Here's David's Island, off New Rochelle," said Mme. Storey. "That can't be it, because Aline would have seen the close-packed roofs of the town between. We must go further out. Here's Burchall's Island, that's more than a mile long and, according to the map, bare of trees. Now look at the contour lines: twenty feet, forty feet there in the middle. That's the hump, and that's your island."

"Now let's go back to the farther shore. You have broken the line twice, Aline. What does that mean?"

"Well, as near as I can explain it," said Aline, "there was an island in the middle; or a point with a bay on each side."

"The map bears you out," said Mme. Storey. "Here's Mann's Point with Natassett Bay on one side, and Ringstead Harbour on the other. . . . Observe that, as you looked from the window, Mann's Point appears directly over the hump on Hershell's Island. . . . A ruler, Bella. . . . Let us draw a line from Mann's Point through the hump on the island and on through the mainland. Where that line strikes the first sharp rise, will be found the elegant little house with the retaining wall at the back. Now for the contour lines again. Here's the sharp rise. About a mile and a quarter from the Sound shore. The house where Aline was confined is on the spot where I have my pencil point. . . . What's this open space alongside?" She looked up at us with a smile. "The Ahkanasi Golf Club. We are getting warm, my dears."

Aline was staring wide-eyed at my mistress like a child at a magician. I, of course, was accustomed to these proofs of Mme. Storey's acumen.

Mme. Storey had taken a cigarette, and was thinking hard. "I want Crider," she said.

"He is still trailing Rawlings," I reminded her.

"A waste of time," said Mme. Storey. "We will never get anything out of Rawlings by direct measures. Let us try to take him on the flank. The first time Crider calls up tell him to come in. He must have plenty of help, too. Get in touch with Sampson, Canby and Everitt. Let the young brother continue to watch Rawlings' movements."

The buzzer which announces the entrance of someone from the hall sounded, and I went into my room to see who it was. Fortunately I have been trained by Mme. Storey *always* to close a door behind me. I got a nasty turn. It was Rawlings, sleek and elegant as a black leopard, a carnation in his buttonhole, and on his face that unchanging, hateful smile. The man *knew* that the mere sight of him caused something within me to turn over with horror, and he enjoyed it.

"Have I the good fortune to find Mme. Storey disengaged?" he purred.

I had the wit to say "Yes," without any hesitation. "Be good enough to wait a minute."

Mme. Storey saw by my face who it was, without my saying anything. Her eye lighted up with the joy of conflict. "How *apropos*!" she drawled. To Aline she said: "I have a visitor, my dear. Will you please wait in the middle

room? The door is to be left open a crack behind the curtain, and you are to listen."

The girl disappeared within the middle room as quietly as a shadow. I went to the window, and, as I expected, saw Crider across the street. I made him a sign that he was wanted. He could be trusted not to show himself indiscreetly. Meanwhile, Mme. Storey had shuffled the maps together, and dropped them in a drawer.

"Show him in," she said.

I followed him into the room.

Mr. Rawlings came forward, beaming sardonically. "My dear lady," he said, "I trust I am not intruding."

"Not in the least," said Mme. Storey. "As it happened, I was thinking about you that very minute."

Their smiling glances were like crossed rapiers.

"How charming of you!" he said. "And what were you thinking?"

"Ah, you're a very romantic figure, you know," said Mme. Storey. "Appearing out of nowhere with half a million a year and tempting a poor woman with as much as she wants to ask for."

"You are laughing at me!" said Mr. Rawlings reproachfully. "If I could only persuade you that I was in earnest!"

He had not seated himself, and those strange eyes of his, like orbs of onyx, were travelling keenly about the room. He had the excuse, of course, that he was looking at all the beautiful things it contained, but I noticed that his glance flickered suspiciously at the curtained doorway in the rear.

"Ah! you have a genuine Della Robbia!" he cried, hastening to the mantelpiece, and gazing rapturously at the plaque which hung above. "And I thought I knew every one in America."

Mme. Storey joined him, "A gift from a grateful client," she said. "I could never afford anything like that."

They discussed the work of art in the terms of connoisseurs.

"And a Ghirlandajo!" cried Mr. Rawlings, moving on, "and an original Gobelin! Marvellous! What a rare and exquisite taste!"

Meanwhile, he was edging nearer and nearer to the doorway. My heart beat apprehensively.

“I, too, have enthusiasms,” he said. “Sometime I hope to have the pleasure of showing you my treasures.”

He reached the doorway.

“That portiere is a fifteenth-century Flemish piece, isn’t it?”

“Early sixteenth,” said Mme. Storey.

“Well, it’s beautiful! . . . Brr! Don’t you feel a draught?” He peeped behind the curtain. “Why, the door is open. May I?”

Without waiting for any answer, he put his hand on the knob. Before he pulled it to him, he took a look in. I stood up with a sort of gasp. I didn’t know what would happen then. But the composed attitude of my mistress arrested me. She was looking positively amused.

When Rawlings turned around, extraordinary as was his self-control, the sardonic grin was a little tight over his teeth. As if something in the inner room had unexpectedly stung him. It was gone in a minute.

“Ah, what a charming face!” he said instantly. “I’m afraid I frightened her.”

Mme. Storey exhaled a puff of smoke. “Perhaps she was eavesdropping,” she drawled.

I think my mistress went him one better.

They returned towards the front of the room.

“You know why I am here,” said Mr. Rawlings. “Am I to be permitted to share in your work?”

Mme. Storey pressed out the light in her cigarette. “Unfortunately, there has been no opportunity,” she said. “All the work I am doing now is disgustingly well paid. There was the beginning of a case, but . . .”

“Well?” he asked eagerly.

“It petered out.”

“Do tell me about it.”

“Oh, a very ordinary sort of case,” said Mme. Storey. “Bella picked up a young man who was at the point of despair because his girl had disappeared.”

“You found her?”

“No, she came back.”

"Where had she been?"

"She told a wild tale of being carried off in a black limousine, and being kept prisoner for a week."

"Should it not be investigated?" he asked with an air of concern.

"Fancy!" laughed Mme. Storey. "Waited upon like a captive princess; interviewed by a mysterious personage behind a door, and then set free! Preposterous!"

"Then you think this was just invented as a cover for more discreditable adventures?"

Mme. Storey shrugged. "She is anxious to return to her young man, now, and he wants her. I think it had much better be dropped."

"Perhaps you are right."

It was impossible to tell from his face if Mme. Storey had deceived him. Probably not; because he was a man who disbelieved on principle. It was a fascinating duel to watch. To-day I think the advantage lay with my mistress.

"I say," he said, "is it by any chance the girl in there?"

"Yes," said Mme. Storey; "she's waiting for her young man."

"Really! What dramas this room must witness!"

"Comedies also," remarked Mme. Storey.

As he was going out of the door, he said with his most winning manner: "Have you satisfied yourself that I am acting in good faith towards you?"

"I am satisfied," said Mme. Storey.

"Then do call off your bloodhound," he said, laughing. "Not that *I* mind. I have nothing to conceal. But it disturbs the ladies of my acquaintance. Perhaps their consciences are not always quite easy."

He got no change out of Madame Storey, of course. "I have called him off," she said coolly. "He's somewhere about the building. Would you like to shake hands with him?"

"No," said Rawlings, "but do give him this, with my compliments, and say that I commend his assiduity."

"This" was a twenty-dollar gold piece. Mme. Storey made me a sign to take it. When I gave it to Crider later, he flipped it in the air with a laugh,

and said he'd buy his girl a new hat with it.

Thus, amidst the airiest persiflage, with gleaming smiles, and low bows, Mr. Rawlings took his leave.

Mme. Storey called to Aline. The girl came in with an awe-struck air.

"That was he!" she said. "How did he happen to be *here*! . . . That voice from behind the door in just the same way. I nearly fainted. I cannot be mistaken. That was he!"

"You saw him," said Mme. Storey.

Aline closed her eyes. "Heavens! what an evil face!"

"Not your father, eh?"

"No, thank God! Not the slightest resemblance. . . . But I have seen him before, some place. I can't remember. . . ."

"I could tell you," said Mme. Storey, "but I want you to remember."

Aline said slowly: "It was at Ancaster. I paid no particular attention to him. He was the rich man the village was talking about; stopping at the hotel."

"Good!" said Mme. Storey. "There are two links to add to our chain, Bella. Our clever friend o'erreached himself a little. I'm afraid he won't come back again."

I need not dwell on the reunion of the lovers that afternoon. You can picture it for yourself. The young man came into my office, worn and dispirited. I said nothing, but led him to the door of Mme. Storey's room, and opened it. Inside, the black head and the chestnut one were bent over the maps on Mme. Storey's desk. I shall never forget the sound of the cry that burst from his heart:

"Aline!"

He rushed into the room. I turned my back, and went to my desk. In an instant Mme. Storey had joined me, closing the door after her. She was more moved than she cared to show.

"Bella, we are neglecting our business horribly," she said. "Let us see if we can't pick up the threads of the Caybourn case while we wait for news from Crider."

But when I brought her the portfolio containing the papers in that case, her gaze had strayed away to the closed door.

“Ah, the dears! the *dears*!” she murmured.

9

CRIDER and the other three had been sent up to Pequannock before noon, and next morning their reports began to come in.

Sampson reported that he had found the house described by Mme. Storey just where she had said he would find it. It was a gentleman's small residence, very expensively appointed, and standing in a highly fashionable neighbourhood. Though the grounds were not extensive, the house was hidden from the view of passers-by by a screen of shrubbery. It was built overhanging the edge of a spur of the hill; there was a retaining wall at the back, and at one side the ground went steeply down. This slope was terraced and laid out as an old-fashioned garden. At the bottom of it was a narrow border of woods, with the course of the Ahkanasi Golf Club on the other side.

The house was for rent, furnished. Upon inquiring of the agent, Sampson learned that the last tenants had given up the keys but three hours before. It had been taken the previous spring by a wealthy gentleman of the name of Mannering as a retreat for his mother, who was a confirmed invalid. The agent had never seen Mr. Mannering, all his business having been transacted by his man-servant, Wilton. This was the man with the blue upper-lip whom we had met so often. A very superior servant.

No one in the neighbourhood had met Mr. Mannering, but he was known to make frequent visits to his mother. An admirable son, he spared nothing that might contribute to the old lady's comfort. Obliged to travel a great deal, he had even gone to the expense of installing a radio transmitting set, that he might be kept informed of his mother's condition at all times. The old lady was in the care of a trained nurse, who was Mrs. Wilton, wife to the man-servant. These three constituted the household. The old lady herself was a familiar sight in her wheel chair. She was very feeble. The devotion of her nurse to her charge had been much spoken of.

On Monday of the preceding week the old lady had finally passed away in the night. Though it had been long expected, at the last the end had come suddenly. She was dead when the doctor got there. Dr. Richardson had been attending her. Nothing particular the matter with her, the agent supposed, but just old age. She was buried privately on Wednesday in the local cemetery, and a handsome monument had been ordered. The house had then been

given up, of course. It was rented by the month. The month was not up for a fortnight to come, but the keys had just been handed in.

Sampson had then called on the doctor, but got very little there. An advanced case of senility, the doctor said; very little he could do for the patient except to order restoratives. She was weak in her wits. She received admirable care from her nurse. Such cases often went suddenly in the end. Generally heart failure. Nothing for him to do except sign the certificate. In response to a question, he said he had never seen the old lady without her nurse being present. He dismissed as absurd the suggestion that she might have been terrorised by the nurse. Asked if the lingering illness and death might not have been induced by outside means, he became angry, and demanded to know if he was not supposed to know his own business.

An interview with the undertaker followed. He said that the body had been carried privately to the cemetery, and buried in the presence of Mr. and Mrs. Wilton. He understood that Mr. Mannering was in the house at the time, but was secluded in his grief. Asked if the excessive privacy of the burial was not unusual, he said no indeed, that many persons nowadays desired it. Old customs were passing. Certainly not from a desire to save expense in this case, he said, and went on to describe the magnificence of the casket, etc.

The patient Sampson was rewarded when he finally got hold of one John Meigs, who worked as furnace-man and outside man at the house of "Mr. Mannering." On Monday afternoon a week ago, he said, he was raking the gravel, when the old lady was brought out of the house in her wheel chair and placed in the sun on the westerly side of the house for her airing. She was a familiar sight to Meigs. She was supposed to be crazy, he said, but sometimes she'd look at you as if she had plenty of sense. She looked as if she'd seen trouble in her life. She never spoke to him. The nurse was always with her.

On this particular afternoon the nurse was obliged to go into the house for something, leaving the old woman alone. Meigs was on the other side of the grounds from her; fifty yards away, maybe. A moment or two later he looked over, he said, and it gave him a turn to see that she was gone. The chair was empty. He had never seen her take so much as a step alone before that. He ran over to the chair, and for a moment he couldn't see her anywhere. Then down at the foot of the slope he saw her, beside a low stone wall that separated the garden from the woods. There was a man there. Meigs shouted for the nurse, and ran down after her.

The man was a golf player looking for a lost ball. There was a caddy there, too, looking, but he was a little way off, looking in another place. The old woman had called the man to her, and was talking to him very excitedly across the wall. He was looking at her in a funny way, dazed-like. Meigs was soon beside them, but he didn't hear anything the old woman said. The nurse ran so fast she got there about as soon as Meigs did. The old woman laughed like a child caught out in mischief. The nurse was all excited. "What's she been saying?" she demanded of the man. He shook his head. "I could make nothing of it," he said. "She's mad!" the nurse said. "Mad nothing!" the old woman said, laughing again.

Meigs carried the old woman back up the hill. Weighed nothing, he said. The golf-player still looked funny, as well he might. As Meigs went up the hill, he looked back and saw him walking away through the trees, striking matches. Meigs put the old woman in her chair, and the nurse wheeled her into the house.

Right after that Wilton left in a hurry. Meigs supposed he went to town, but he couldn't have taken the first train, because an hour later, when Meigs passed the station on the way home, he saw him still waiting on the down platform. That night the old woman died. It was supposed that the exposure and the over-exertion had done it. Meigs had never seen "Mr. Mannering," though he had heard of his being there, generally at night or Sundays. Meigs had never seen the inside of the house beyond the kitchen and the cellar.

Crider subsequently viewed the house with the agent, and gave us a careful description of it from cellar to garret. I need not go into this. The only significant part was Crider's noticing that there were many nail-holes in the window-frame of one of the back bedrooms. These had been filled with putty, and the window-frames painted. The paint was not yet perfectly dry.

This report was like a ray of light breaking through the fog that enveloped the case. We began to be able to see our way. The scattered clues fell into the form of a pattern. However, it propounded almost as many new questions as those it answered.

"Another murder!" I said aghast.

"This one would have happened anyway," said Mme. Storey. "It was just a little hastened."

"Who could the old woman have been? Not his mother, really!"

"Probably not," said Mme. Storey. "Because nothing was as it was represented to be. . . . Obviously, she passed along the dangerous piece of

information to Orr, and it cost her her life, as it cost Orr his. . . . If it was so important, Orr, the methodical one, must certainly have made some memorandum of it."

"If he did, they got it from him later," I suggested.

"Oh, no doubt. Or a copy of it. A man does not ordinarily carry pencil and paper in his golf sweater, Bella."

"Don't they keep score?"

"The caddie carries it. . . ." Mme. Storey paced up and down, knitting her brows. "Striking matches! Why on earth should he have been striking matches. . . .?" Suddenly she turned to me with her eyes lighted up. "By Heaven! I have a notion, Bella! I must take the first train to Pequannock."

Before one o'clock she was back, bringing Crider. Crider was carrying, with the greatest care, a small, soft bundle wrapped in paper.

"What did you get?" I asked eagerly.

"That depends on you," said Mme. Storey, smiling.

On me! I opened my eyes at that.

The parcel, unwrapped with care on her desk, revealed a man's white Oxford outing shirt, crumpled from having been worn.

"We got it out of Orr's locker in the club," she said.

Lifting one of the cuffs with care to keep it from rubbing, she showed me some blurred, grimy lines upon it. "Evidently made with a burnt match," she said. "Is it shorthand? We could make nothing of it."

Well! Charcoal lines upon a rough material like Oxford cloth; it was a difficult job to decipher them. But with the aid of a big reading glass, the original shape of the marks gradually suggested itself.

"The top marks read, 'Aline Elder, Ancaster, N.Y.' " I said.

"Splendid!" cried Mme. Storey. "Then we know that is what the old woman told him. . . . Now the rest, Bella. That is the crux of the whole case!"

"First there are three numbers, as you can see," I said. "Two, three, two; then Division Street. It is an address; 232 Division Street. And under that: 4b."

“But what city?” asked Crider anxiously. “Almost every large city in the country has a Division Street.”

“No city is indicated,” I said.

“Chicago,” Mme. Storey said coolly. “Orr was planning to go there. . . . I can’t go to Chicago,” she went on, frowning. “It would take two days, maybe a week; and the murder of Orr is not yet proved against our man. I shall depend on you for this, Crider. Everything indicates that the answer to the riddle is to be found at that address.”

“But will not Rawlings have already been there?” I suggested.

“We know practically all of Rawlings’ movements since the fatal Monday,” said Mme. Storey. “We know he has not been to Chicago. I doubt if he suspects there’s anything to be had at that address. Orr may not have copied it. The fact of putting it down once would for ever fix it in his mind. At any rate, all of Rawlings’ actions suggest that with the death of the old woman and of Orr, he believes himself secure. Otherwise, he would not have freed Aline.

“Take the Twentieth Century, Crider,” she went on. “I don’t know what you’re going to find. I don’t know what 4b refers to—the number of an apartment, possibly. Better call me up on the long distance as soon as you look over the ground. I fancy this may refer to events which happened a good many years ago, so you must dig up the history of this house as far as you are able—if it is a house.”

“I’ll do my best, Madam,” said Crider.

“Good luck to you!”

He departed.

10

MME. STOREY took off her hat and coat, and lit a cigarette. "Let us see where we have got to, Bella," she said thoughtfully. "In the beginning we have this discreet household in the elegant little residence at Pequannock. They had been established there for six months, the old woman and her two devoted servants, and the neighbours had come to take them quite for granted. Let us say that the old woman was a prisoner—just as Aline was, later, in the same house, and this precious pair were feeding her with arsenic or some other poison in quantities just sufficient to gradually wreck her health. In order to establish this, we'll have the body exhumed directly. The intention was, of course, to have her gradually fade out in such a manner that no suspicion could ever be aroused."

"But the doctor," I said.

"Ah, my dear, even Crider's brief reference to him is sufficient to show how easy it is to deceive a certain kind of doctor. These people were so rich, you see, nobody would think of questioning them. To resume; she may really have been mad; it hardly signifies. Or she may have been mad part of the time. One afternoon she was left alone for a moment, and by a trick of fate at that very moment a man was thrown in her path; a man of intelligence, one who might be expected to comprehend the strange secret she wished to deliver herself of.

"She gathered up the last remnant of her failing strength and ran to him. She passed on her secret. What she said to him exactly will never be known, for both of them are dead. We must reconstruct it as best we can. When her attendant reached her she laughed; she probably knew she was doomed anyway, but she had dealt them a blow before she died.

"The man Wilton immediately ran out of the house. I suppose he went after Orr to fix his face in mind. Later he was seen at the Pequannock Station, waiting no doubt for Orr to take a train to New York. We know that he followed Orr to his apartment, where he learned Orr's name and the location of his apartment. He must then have communicated with his master. Orr's murder must have instantly been resolved upon. Orr was doubtless followed back to his club; the club was watched while he was inside; and he was followed back to his apartment. A few minutes later he was killed in the manner that I have already described.

“Rawlings could not have done both murders that same night. There wasn’t time. I believe that Wilton was sent back to Pequannock with orders to give the old lady her quietus. But I am certain that it was Rawlings who killed Orr. He couldn’t know, you see, exactly what had passed between him and the old woman; he had to search to make sure there was no memorandum. That was something he couldn’t possibly have entrusted to a servant, however close. Rawlings had bought the Wiltons, body and soul, but I do not for a moment suppose that he ever confided his affairs to them —or to anybody. Step by step I can reconstruct the crime, but I could not, with what we have so far, prove it to the satisfaction of a jury. The mere fact that Rawlings’ servant inquired about Orr on Monday evening is not sufficient to hang Rawlings. There’s the rub.”

“What do you suppose they talked about?” I murmured.

“Nothing,” said Mme. Storey coolly. “Under the circumstances, there was nothing to be said. A crack over the skull, and the suffocating pressure of a sofa pillow. That was all that passed between them. Rawlings is a realist.

“Immediately after the murder, Rawlings motored up to Ancaster. You see, the letter to Aline had been posted inside the club, and he couldn’t know whether or not there had been a letter. It was vital to him to learn if there was a letter, and if so, what was in it. Aline kept her letter very secret; but when she started off for New York on Wednesday, Rawlings knew, of course, that there had been a letter. He telegraphed or telephoned to Wilton to meet her. We know what happened after that. Rawlings did not immediately start off after Aline, because he had been marked in the village, and he knew that his immediate departure would establish a connection between them. He did something far cleverer. He waited on, and watched to see what measures would be taken to find the girl.

“Well, there’s our case as it stands, my Bella. It’s fairly complete, but it won’t do. I’ve got to bring the murder of Orr home to Rawlings. If that assassin escapes me, I’ll give up my profession. Get Inspector Rumsey on the wire for me.”

Rumsey was in charge of the investigation of the Orr murder. With him there had been no important developments within the past two days. As far as the police were aware, the case was wrapped in a complete mystery.

Mme. Storey said: “I have evidence which tends to show that the crime was conceived in a hurry. If I am right, the murderer must have snatched up the first available weapon. If we could find that; I mean the blunt instrument

with which Orr was struck over the head, I believe I can put my hand on the man. It must have been necessary for the murderer to have disposed of the weapon immediately afterwards; not just to throw it away, but to *dispose* of it. I suggest that you have all the catch basins of the sewers adjacent to Orr's apartment searched, beginning with the nearest to the house. If anything is found, please let me know at once."

Nothing further happened that day. Shortly before noon of the following day, Crider called up from Chicago. I only heard half of the conversation, but Mme. Storey subsequently gave me the gist of it.

Crider reported that he had just visited the house at 232 Division Street. It had once been a high-class dwelling, but was now somewhat reduced. A store had been cut in at the street level, and the rest of the house was rented out in floors. None of the present tenants had been there long. Crider had talked with them casually, and there was nothing, so far, to suggest any connection with Rawlings. There was nothing about the house that he could see that suggested any explanation of the cryptic 4b. According to the neighbouring gossip, the house had once been the residence of John G. Joplin, a very wealthy man who had died some ten years ago. ("John G.?" Mme. Storey had remarked over the 'phone. "That's an interesting coincidence.")

In response to questions from Mme. Storey, Crider said that except for the parlour floor, the house did not seem to have been much altered. He thought the stairway was the original stairway. It looked old. Mme. Storey then suggested that they assumed 4b referred to the fourth step from the bottom, and that he look under that step.

Shortly after this, Inspector Rumsey called at our office. Rumsey is a nice man, and an old friend of ours; a great admirer of Mme. Storey. An ordinary-looking, fattish little man with a shiny face, he has carefully cultivated the effect of an absolute nonentity. You'd never be able to pick him out in a crowd. Yet he's one of the cleverest detectives in the country. He came in with his lips pursed up in a certain way that suggested there was something in the wind. I followed him into Mme. Storey's room.

He too, had his little paper parcel. He drew it out of his overcoat pocket.

"Ah!" said Mme. Storey expectantly.

The Inspector said: “We found it in the mud at the bottom of the catch basin on the north-eastern corner of Eighteenth Street and Irving Place.”

“The nearest sewer opening to Orr’s apartment,” said Mme. Storey.

Two objects were revealed; a man’s silk sock, and a dull leaden ball about an inch and a quarter in diameter.

“The ball was in the sock,” said the Inspector, “and a knot tied in it. It was saturated with mud. I had to wash it.”

Mme. Storey gave first attention to the sock.

“Size ten,” said the Inspector.

“Superfine quality,” said Mme. Storey. “None but a rich man would sacrifice such an article. No distinguishing marks. Very little use as evidence. Its mate has been burned long ago.” She picked up the leaden ball.

“You said you thought he had picked up the first available object,” said the Inspector, “but that article is so perfectly adapted to his need—he didn’t want to kill the man with it but only to put him to sleep; surely he must have had that ready.”

Mme. Storey shook her head, smiling. “Wrong, Inspector! That is something that is available to every one of us. Suppose I had a sudden need to crack somebody over the head, that is just what I would choose. Don’t you know what it is?”

He shook his head.

“Then you’ve never had any trouble with your bathroom plumbing,” said Mme. Storey. “That is the ball that closes the trap in the waste outlet of a modern bathtub. You hear it dancing in its socket when the water runs out.”

“Of course!” he said. “It’s under the circular nickel disk in the bathroom floor.”

“To be sure! To get it out all you need is a wrench. See! although it has been wiped off, there are still traces of soap clinging to it. I see you have had it marked for identification.”

“Yes, Madam; in the presence of witnesses.”

“The next thing is to find out if this ball is missing out of any of the bathrooms in an apartment that I have in mind.”

“Would it not have been replaced?” suggested the Inspector.

“I don’t think so. The man would know that we could quickly find out through circularising the plumbers, who had bought such an object within the past few days. I fancy the balls are not often sold except to the trade. On the other hand, the bath functions perfectly without it, and it might be years before its loss was discovered. We have an exceptionally astute mind to deal with, Inspector. He would tell himself that even though the ball was found, we couldn’t possibly search all the bathrooms in town. As it happens, I already know where to look. My chain of evidence requires but a single link to complete it, and I hope this may be it.”

“You already know where to look!” the Inspector echoed, opening his eyes.

Mme. Storey reached for the telephone. “Am I connected, Bella?”

I nodded.

She took down the receiver. “Plaza 5771,” she said with a peculiar smile.

We presently heard this conversation:

“Is Mr. Rawlings at home? . . .

“Madame Storey . . .”

(A pause.)

(Very sweetly.) “How do you do. This is Rosika Storey. You said I was to call you up. And so here I am. . . .

“No, I haven’t got a case to tell you about, but I have a picture to show you. I have been offered a little wooden panel that I am assured is a genuine Domenichino. You know about such things. Won’t you come and look at it, and advise me? . . .

“As soon as you’ve had your breakfast? Sybarite! I’ve been at work for hours! . . .

“You’ll make it lunch if I’ll share it? Alas! I have a conference at one . . .

“Splendid! Good-bye.

“He says he’ll swallow a cup of coffee, and fly to me,” said Mme. Storey, pushing away the telephone.

“Are you not afraid he may take alarm, and fly in another direction?” suggested the Inspector anxiously.

"He's a bold man," said Mme. Storey, "and he has no reason as yet to suspect that he is in danger. If he *should* try it, I have an assistant trailing him. But I fully expect him to come.

"Bella," she went on to me, "send down to John the engineer, and borrow a monkey wrench. When Rawlings comes, show him in. As this is a personal call, there is no excuse to remain in the room. But you can listen on the dictaphone if you are curious. As soon as you have closed the door on Rawlings, signal to young Crider, and fetch him in. Give him the lead ball and the monkey wrench, and tell him to go as quickly as a cab can take him to Rawlings' apartment. Let him gain admittance through his friend the housekeeper there. He must examine the trap of every bath tub in the apartment. If she makes a row, let him lock her in a closet. If he finds a trap minus its lead ball, let him measure to see if this one fits it. And hurry back here. I will undertake to keep the gentleman in talk.

"As for you, Inspector, I suggest you take a little constitutional in the Park across the way. Bella will give you the key, and you may breathe the exclusive air of the last remaining private park in New York. If young Crider is successful in his errand, Bella will make you a sign from her window, and you can come over and get your man. . . . By the way, are you alone?"

He said he was.

"I would recommend that you have a man or two in reserve. Not but what I believe you to be perfectly capable of handling this man by yourself, but a mere display of force might avert a troublesome scene. They can wait in the street."

The Inspector promised to do so.

When Rawlings arrived I was trembling as if with an ague. How heartily I wished that Mme. Storey had staged this scene elsewhere but in our office! When I am actually cornered, I can bear myself with at least as much courage as the average woman, but the prospect of trouble somewhere ahead always demoralises me. I die a thousand deaths, before it actually comes to pass. This man's eyes terrified me. Under all their fleeting, derisive, deceitful expressions there remained a strange, fixed, animal hardness. How would such a one behave when he was finally brought to bay? Who could tell?

He was his usual highly-finished self. He was wearing, I remember, a marvellously-cut double-breasted blue suit—the blue just a shade different from any other man's blue suit: grey spats, grey derby, grey gloves. In short,

just the sort of mature exquisite you would expect to find in the Champs Elysees, but scarcely in New York. He was carrying a great bunch of pink sweet peas, which he had the effrontery to offer me with a bow.

"Do me the honour of accepting them for your desk, Miss Brickley. The florists is under my apartment. When I passed his window they made me think of you!"

I smiled, knowing very well what a hideous grimace it must be. What could I do? It would have been still more ridiculous to fling them in his face. He only did it to put me in a hole. He knew that I detested him, and that the thought of accepting anything from him made me writhe inside; and he enjoyed the spectacle of my discomfiture.

I shoved him into Mme. Storey's room, and closed the door.

I quickly despatched young Crider according to instructions. Afterwards it so happened that I had a couple of telephone calls to answer, and a caller to get rid of, so several minutes elapsed before I was able to switch on the dictaphone. I expected to cut in on an art discussion, and I was therefore a good deal astonished by the first words I heard.

". . . the most beautiful woman I have ever beheld!"

"A stock phrase!" drawled my mistress' voice. "One wearies of it!"

"A stock phrase to you, yes," he said melodiously, "because it must spring to every man's lips at the sight of you. But the shock of joy that it gives each man is none the less fresh and strong."

"Let's not be lyrical," said Mme. Storey. "I can't make the altitude. Consider my little Domenichino, now . . ."

"Don't ask me to look at a three-hundred-year-old picture when I have you before my eyes!"

The man actually had the temerity to make love to my mistress! A cold-hearted *murderer*! Figuratively speaking, I flew up and hit the ceiling. Yet I could not deny that the situation had its piquancy.

"What must men think women are, when they talk in that strain!" said my mistress good-humouredly—there was nothing in the situation to put *her* about. "Or perhaps it's because I'm different. Tell me, frankly, do women seem to enjoy that sort of thing?"

"I do not know," he said, "I speak at the prompting of my heart, without thinking. You have laid a spell upon me!"

Any woman not a congenital idiot would have known that the man with that voice was as false as Hell, just the same the purring voice had a hypnotic quality, the same quality perhaps that a snake's gaze has for a bird. But my mistress was blessed with a sense of humour.

"There now, I knew we would come to the spell directly," she said.

He abruptly changed his tactics. I heard his soft laugh. "You are right," he said, "it's just a sort of ritual. That's only the beginning. One must make a beginning somewhere. I only await a look, a word from you to be my true self."

"If the early Italians had only made a practice of signing their work!" said Mme. Storey.

"No, you cannot put me off like that," he said. "I can smile and still be no less deadly in earnest. I adore you!"

"Mercy!" said Mme. Storey. "I've only seen you three times."

"That's a commonplace answer," he retorted. "Worthy of a bread and butter, Miss. A free soul recognises his mark the first instant he lays eyes upon it. As it happens I have been following your career for years. I praise your beauty, because I thought it would please you, but it was not your beauty which first attracted me, but your mind. A woman with a mind? How rare and how glorious!"

"What does a woman do with such panegyrics!" murmured Mme. Storey. "If she accepts them as no more than her due, she is absurd; if she indignantly rejects them, she is no less absurd. It's really very hard to be a woman."

"You shall not laugh me off," he said. "I am mad about you!"

Said Mme. Storey coolly: "I am not well enough acquainted with you to know, exactly, what you mean by that."

"I mean everything by it!" he cried.

"Well, marriage?"

"If you would!"

"Well, I wouldn't."

"You have had an unhappy experience, perhaps."

"That don't signify. Whether it were my first or my sixth essay, I decline to commit matrimony with any man alive!"

“You are right,” he said promptly. “I asked you to marry me because I wished to show you that I was all yours. But after all, what have enlightened souls such as you and I to do with such silly conventions. Love is shared Heaven; Marriage is . . .”

“Hell,” put in Mme. Storey.

“You shall not laugh me down. Look at me. Give me your answer.”

“I am not prepared to make any answer just now,” said Mme. Storey dryly. “In fact, I never would make any answer. If I ever felt inclined towards you, you would know it without my saying anything. You’ll just have to watch and wait.”

“Rosika! Rosika! Glorious woman! Look at me . . .”

Just then young Crider opened the door of my office. The sight of him gave me a slight shock. I had become for the moment so absorbed in Rawlings’ lovemaking, I had forgotten what the outcome must be.

The lad’s blooming cheeks were pale with excitement, his eyes glittering. “We’ve got him!” he whispered. “It was the bath opening off his own room. The lead ball was missing, and this one exactly fitted!”

My heart began to pound again. The show-down was upon us now.

“What am I to do?” whispered young Crider.

“You sit down right here,” I said sharply. “Mme. Storey didn’t tell me, but you may be needed.”

“Golly! I hope there’s a scrap!” he said. “I’ll back the Inspector!”

“A scrap, here!” I said indignantly. “What are you thinking of!”

“Oh, no, of course not!” he said somewhat abashed. But the irrepressible grin immediately returned. “Just the same I bet Madame Storey wouldn’t mind.”

I went to the window. I saw the Inspector walking gravely up and down the path inside the railings, his hands behind his back. Presently he looked up at my window, and I gave him a sign. Two minutes later he entered the door.

The sight of him so ordinary, so matter-of-fact; all in the day’s work, reassured me somewhat.

“How should we proceed?” he asked.

“I suppose I should announce you,” I said.

He nodded, and I tapped on the door of Mme. Storey’s room. She sang out, and I entered, my heart pressing up big in my throat. Mme. Storey was seated at her desk, and Rawlings was looking up at a picture on the far wall. The lines of his back showed that he did not welcome the interruption.

“Inspector Rumsey calling,” I said, carefully schooling my voice.

“Oh, yes,” said Mme. Storey. “I was forgetting. He has come to consult me about the Orr case.”

Rawlings turned around. “The Orr case?” he said indifferently.

“That poor young lawyer who was found murdered in his room,” said Mme. Storey.

“Is it confidential business? Or may I stay?” said Rawlings with his superb effrontery. He even dared to suggest a certain proprietary interest in Mme. Storey’s business.

“Stay, by all means,” said Mme. Storey dryly. “I was about to suggest it . . . Show the Inspector in, Bella.”

When I went out I found a messenger boy in my office. Young Crider was receipting for the telegram. I took it automatically, and laid it on Mme. Storey’s desk, when I showed the Inspector in. I remained in the room. Terrified as I was of what was to come, I was still more terrified of missing it.

Rawlings smiled pleasantly at the Inspector, as much as to say he was prepared to be agreeable to the honest fellow, mere policeman though he was. And for a moment Rumsey was taken aback by the elegance of the man, and his supreme effrontery. Only for a moment. The Inspector turned dogged about the jaw.

“Is this the man?” he asked Mme. Storey.

“This is the man,” she said dispassionately.

I saw the hard animal spark leap out of Rawlings’ eyes, but I swear his face never changed a muscle. His smile even broadened, as he turned to Mme. Storey to ask:

“What is the Inspector’s interest in my humble self?”

The Inspector answered for himself. “I must trouble you to come with me.”

Rawlings' eyebrows went up. "Where?" he asked humorously.

"To police headquarters. You're under arrest."

Comic pantomime of astonishment from Rawlings. "What for?"

The Inspector was grim. "The murder of Schuyler Orr."

A little vein stood out on Rawlings' forehead, but he laughed with every appearance of merriment. "Is this some sort of joke?"

"I'm sorry," Mme. Storey said, with a tinge of real regret in her voice; "but this admirable acting is wasted on the Inspector and I. We have established a case."

Rawlings permitted himself to become a little indignant. "But I am George Rawlings," he said with dignity. "I enjoy a certain position; I am a man of large means. May I ask what possible motive I could have for murdering this insignificant lawyer, whom I never heard of in my life?"

"I don't know," said Mme. Storey coolly. "I hope to learn to-morrow. I have just received this telegram from Chicago." She read:

"I have found it. You may safely arrest the man in question.

"CRIDER."

"What hocus-pocus is this?" demanded Rawlings indignantly. "What has he found?"

"I don't know," said Mme. Storey again. "I suspect it was something hidden under the fourth step from the bottom of the stairway in the old house at 232 Division Street."

A subtle change took place in Rawlings' face. Her last words, somehow, told him that the game was up. He never ceased smiling, but the quality of his smile changed. Gone were the elegant manners; the hard animal recklessness took possession of him. He bent a look of fearful hatred on my mistress; a look I cannot forget. Her steady gaze upon him was remote, impersonal and, as I say, with a tinge of regret. At so much power wasted.

He walked smartly across the room towards the Inspector. I noticed that my mistress half turned her chair, and glanced out of the window. Rawlings thrust his two hands out and said with a sneer:

"I suppose you're going to handcuff me."

“Such is my intention,” said the Inspector bluntly; and put a hand in his pocket.

It happened in a flash. You have seen a cat strike. So Rawlings struck with his clenched fist, and the Inspector dropped like a felled ox. Rawlings sprang for the door. I was standing in front of it. My heart turned to water, and I confess I flung myself out of his path. But immediately behind me was young Crider with his eyes glittering. Seeing him, Rawlings swerved, and with an incredible leap cleared the window sill and crashed out, carrying the casement with him. A magnificent and purely animal act.

It was all over in a breath. The Inspector picked himself up shaken, but without loss of dignity. It was all in the day’s work for him.

“He was too quick for me,” he said philosophically.

Mme. Storey had not moved, though the man had passed out three feet in front of her. “It’s quite all right,” she said calmly. “From where I sat I could see the two men below. They have him.”

11

Crider got in from Chicago during the afternoon of the following day. Inspector Rumsey, young Crider and myself were all with Mme. Storey when he came. The same eager question was in the eyes of all of us. By way of answer Crider drew a linen envelope from his pocket, and from it took a legal paper which he handed to Mme. Storey.

"That's what I found under the step," he said.

Mme. Storey read it out to us in her clear and level voice:

"Last Will and Testament

"I, John G. Elder, lately known as John G. Joplin, hereby devise and bequeath all that I die possessed of to my lawful wife Ella May Elder of Ancaster, New York, and should she predecease me, to our only child Aline Elder of the same place.

"Elizabeth G. Shotover, my faithful companion for seven years past, who has been known as my wife, is not to participate in my estate, inasmuch as I have made provision for her during my lifetime. The said Elizabeth Shotover, being cognisant of my wishes, and coinciding in the same, will not of her own free will advance any claim against my estate.

"I appoint the Inter-State Commerce Trust Company my sole executor. I append herewith a list of my properties in lands and shares.

"I direct my executors to consider no claims that may be advanced against my estate by George Shotover, nephew of the said Elizabeth Shotover, the said George Shotover being an unprincipled blackguard who has swindled me on more than one occasion in the past.

"For the information of my executors after my death, I wish to state the following facts: My real name is John Gordon Elder, and I was born in the city of Joplin Mo. on April 2nd, 1868. On May 24th, 1899, I married Ella May Prentiss at Ancaster, New York, where proof of the marriage may be found on the register. Our child Aline was born in Chicago on April 14th of the following year.

"Two years later upon discovering proofs of my unfaithfulness, my wife left me taking the child, and returned to her native place. I am obliged to say she was justified in her action, for I had deceived her on many occasions. Since then I have never heard from her. We are not divorced.

"I changed my name at that time, and made a new start in Oklahoma. I amassed great sums of money through the sale of oil lands and in other speculations. Until lately my heart was hard to my wife and her child, and I consider them dead to me, but being upon my death-bed, as I believe, I have experienced a change of heart and so far as I may, I wish to make amends to those I wronged. Amen.

"(signed) John G. Elder,
"lately known as
"JOHN G. JOPLIN."

"What a tale!" murmured my mistress. "Fearful that his secret might escape before he died, I believe he wrote this out of his head without legal advice. That would account for the informality. But it would stand. . . . You have other information?"

"Yes, Madam," said Crider. "I went to the probate office to see what kind of a will had been filed when Elder or Joplin died. The will that was actually probated was signed John G. Joplin, and there was no mention of his real name. In it he left all he possessed 'to my beloved wife, Elizabeth G. Joplin.' Presumably evidence of a marriage had been faked up, for no question had been raised. The bank and George Shotover were appointed joint executors.

"I went to the bank and interviewed the former trust officer, now a vice-president. He remembered it well, since it was one of the largest estates he had ever administered. No question had ever arisen in his mind that all might not be regular. The estates had been settled up and the proceeds handed over to the beneficiary, who had gradually withdrawn her business from the bank, but in a perfectly regular manner, and had finally left Chicago, with her nephew, if such he was. The descriptions he furnished of Elizabeth Shotover or Joplin and George Shotover corresponded exactly to those of the poor woman who died or was murdered in Pequannock, and to the man we know as George Rawlings. 'A handsome, dark young man with a prominent Roman nose.' Well, he isn't so young now, but he still has the nose."

“Well, that’s the whole story,” said my mistress. “One must believe that this was a copy, whose existence was unsuspected by George Shotover or Rawlings. He got hold of the original with or without the connivance of Elizabeth, and destroyed that. The testator expresses a fear here, that Elizabeth might fall under the influence of George after his death. George tempted her with millions. Well, she paid dear for her weakness. And she kept the secret of the hidden copy, and got back at George in the end. That’s very like a woman. How much was it, Crider?”

“Ten years ago it was over several million dollars, Madam. The bank official said it should have greatly increased.”

“Well, Rawlings said it amounted to more than half a million a year now. I don’t doubt he spoke the truth.”

A little later, Inspector Rumsey and the Criders having departed, I was greatly astonished to see Aline and her tall young Edward walk into my office. I forgot to mention in the midst of the excitement, that they had returned to Ancaster to open the library. Mme. Storey had urged it, since there was nothing they could do to further the case. And here they were back again! Aline in an adorable new hat, and Edward’s young face all relaxed and beaming with happiness. The fact that the marks of what he had been through still showed, made his present happiness all the more shining. What a handsome pair!

I took them into Mme. Storey’s room. They were ridiculously embarrassed. It would have been patent to a child what had happened, but, of course, my mistress and I made believe to be completely mystified, and what a business they made of telling us!

Edward cleared his throat portentously. “We . . . er . . . we . . . that is Aline and I you know . . . we . . .” He stalled, and looked helplessly at her.

Aline said: “We came to tell you . . . we came to tell you . . . we came to tell you . . .” She caught her breath and looked imploringly back at Edward.

It was up to the man. He blurted out like a small explosion: “We’ve been and done it!”

“Done what?” said Mme. Storey, making out to be greatly alarmed.

“Well . . . er . . . got married so to speak,” stammered Edward.

“So to speak!” echoed Mme. Storey as if scandalised. “Oh, my children!”

Then we all roared with laughter.

“In Ancaster, yesterday,” said Edward.

“Just one or two,” said Aline. “It was all got up in an hour.”

“The trustees decided,” said Edward, “since the library had been closed for a week, it could stay closed another week while we had a trip.”

“Everybody thinks we’re imprudent,” said Aline, “but we don’t care.”

Mme. Storey got up and gravely kissed Aline, and shook Edward’s hand.

Edward jumped up in his agitation. “Imprudent or not, I couldn’t help it,” he cried strongly. “Every moment that she was out of my sight it was like those days over again. A nightmare. I couldn’t rest! Now I have her, I’ll watch over her myself. . . . The trustees seem to think it wouldn’t be the thing for husband and wife to go on working together, so we’re dependant on my salary alone. It’ll be close going, but we’ll make out somehow!”

“Oh, I think you’ll make out,” said Mme. Storey, “Your wife has half a million a year.”

Very little remains to be told. After Rawlings leaped from the window that day, he put up such a struggle that it took both of Inspector Rumsey’s men to subdue him; consequently his chauffeur who was waiting in the car close at hand, got away. The abandoned car was subsequently found in a side street, but the chauffeur was never apprehended. Neither were the Wiltons, man and woman, ever found. Satisfied with having laid their master by the heels, Mme. Storey did not concern herself with these cases.

It was proved by chemical analysis that the unfortunate Elizabeth Shotover had been poisoned; but it was not proposed to try George Shotover or Rawlings for this crime. As a matter of fact, he was never tried at all. He killed himself in his cell, by means of a poison obtained no one knew how. One guessed that it was not the trial he dreaded; he simply did not want to live without the prestige of a man of millions.

Proving the old will was a long business, but no serious difficulties developed. The fortune itself was found in the form of a trunkful of negotiable securities in Rawlings’ apartment. He was evidently prepared for instant flight. Aline and her Edward are now in the full enjoyment of it.

Rawlings is dead and out of the way of doing harm; nevertheless, I still dream occasionally of the shadow of that long nose upon the wall, and wake

up trembling.

IT NEVER GOT INTO THE PAPERS

1

COMMODORE VARICK died very suddenly about half-past five in the afternoon. The cause of death was given as heart failure induced by a violent attack of gastritis. The news caused a great shock because the Commodore was looked upon as a man in the very prime of life. As a matter of fact, he was fifty-five, but so brisk, well-preserved and straight-backed a little man as to seem years younger. He used to drive on the Avenue in his open automobile, sitting up on the back seat with a haughty stare just like royalty, with his bodyguard sitting in front.

I received my first news of the affair from Mme. Storey when she came into the office the following morning. The Varicks were friends of hers. Tossing a newspaper on my desk, she said:

"Poor Bill Varick is gone. Shockingly sudden. I dined there two nights ago."

She went on into her room and I read the paper. It had spread itself on the event, of course, for Commodore Varick was more than a mere individual, he was an institution. There was a three column head on the first page, and a half page obituary inside, reciting the Commodore's life story, and the history of his family. He was the fourth William Henry Varick of his line, and his name was woven into the very texture of the annals of New York if not of all America. In fact, all over the world, Varick has become synonym for the American millionaire.

The third William Henry left a number of sons and daughters, consequently the fourth William Henry, he whose obituary I was reading, did not inherit his entire fortune. But he was the head of the clan, and still an enormously rich man. This one's accomplishments had been mostly in the social line. He married an ambitious woman, and New York soon became too small for them.

The title of Commodore had been bestowed on him by our most important yacht club. His yacht *Manahatta*, a dream of luxury, became fashionable in all the harbours of the old world. Before the war he had entertained the King of England on board; besides King Leopold of Belgium and a host of lesser potentates. And, of course, he was always in the forefront when royalty visited our shores. The Princess Cristina von Habsburg was staying at his house at the moment of his death. The mere recital of his clubs filled a long paragraph, and all in all the newspaper did not exaggerate in terming him "our first private citizen."

And now he was dead after half an hour's illness, and his mantle had fallen on the muscular shoulders of that delightful scapegrace, William Henry Varick fifth, better known as Hank Varick. In the newspapers of late, the fame of the Commodore himself had been overshadowed by the escapades of his son. I did not suppose that he was any worse than other young men, nor did I believe more than half I read about him. He was a sort of crown prince, and his slightest actions were, therefore, front page stuff.

Apparently the reporters followed him all around the country on the chance of picking up copy. The stories were of the usual sort where youth, irresponsibility and wealth are in conjunction. He was handicapped by being an only child. At this time I had never seen him, but his oft published photographs depicted a handsome, stalwart, laughing young fellow. All the gifts of the gods were his.

I was still reading the newspaper when Inspector Rumsey entered my office. Rumsey headed the detective force at this time. He and Mme. Storey had worked together on a number of cases, and were the firmest of friends. Rumsey had an admirable command of his features, but at this moment he was plainly disconcerted. It startled me. "What's the matter?" I asked.

"A bad business," he said curtly. He nodded towards the next room. "Is she down yet?"

"Yes," I said. "Go right in."

"You'd better come in, too," he said. "She'll want you to hear this."

I locked the outer door to guard against interruptions, and followed him full of trepidation. I had never seen the matter-of-fact Inspector so upset, and it had the effect of a convulsion of nature.

In the long room Mme. Storey, clad in one of the clinging Fortuny robes that become her so well, was lounging with her elbows on the big Italian table, a negligent cigarette in one hand, and in the other a lump of sugar that

she was holding up for Giannino the ape to nibble at. At sight of our good friend's face, she straightened up and let Giannino have the lump of sugar. "What is wrong?" she asked.

"I'm in the deuce of a hole!" he said in a voice of extreme bitterness. "I'm a poor man, but I would give a thousand dollars to be away on my vacation this minute!"

"Can I help?" she asked.

"If you won't, nobody can," he said laconically.

From his inside breast pocket he took an envelope and handed it to her. I was looking over her shoulder. It was a cheap commercial envelope of the sort that is sold by the million. It had come through the mail. It was addressed in block letters very painstakingly formed:

INSPECTOR RUMSEY
POLICE HEADQUARTERS
300 MULBERRY ST.

Inside there was a little slip of white paper on which was lettered in the same manner:

COMMODORE VARICK WAS POISONED.

None of us spoke. For the space of thirty seconds or so the room was so still you could hear Giannino's little teeth nibbling at the sugar. The possibilities that loomed ahead of us were truly dreadful.

Then the Inspector broke out: "There may be nothing in it. Very likely it's the work of the sort of crank that such an occasion always brings to light."

"Yet, you've got to take notice of it," Mme. Storey put in quietly.

"Sure," he cried, "that's the damnable part of it! There *may* be something in it. And if it should come out later that I had been warned, and had taken no action, I'd be ruined."

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"What *am* I going to do?" he echoed. "Push in amongst the cardinals and bishops and governors and senators who are leaving their cards at the house this morning, and demand that an autopsy be performed?"

"It *is* a bad business," murmured Mme. Storey.

“The reporters are there,” he went on, “and even my appearance at the house at such time would be enough to start an ugly scandal. Or anybody connected with the department that I might send. And suppose I get my autopsy, and everything proves to be all right, the scandal will go on just the same. The public will never believe but that Commodore Varick was poisoned, and that we were all engaged in a conspiracy to hush it up. A nice figure I would cut!”

“I see what you’re getting at, Inspector,” said my employer with a very dry smile.

“You’re a friend of Mrs. Varick’s,” he said cajolingly. “You could go to the house to leave your condolences without exciting any remark. I suppose you would be going there anyway this morning.”

She nodded.

“Show her this communication privately,” he went on, “and tell her from me that I am very reluctantly forced to insist on an autopsy. I’ll send doctors not known to be connected with the department to the house at any hour she sets. It can be performed in perfect secrecy, and if everything proves to be all right, as I am sure it will, no whisper of it need ever reach the press.”

Mme. Storey arose and took a turn down the room. Her brows were knitted. “Really, Inspector, this is a bit thick!” she said. “You find yourself in the worst possible hole, and you’re attempting to climb out on *my* shoulders! I think a lot of you, my friend, but . . .”

“Oh, leave me out of it,” he said earnestly. “I’m not thinking of myself so much as of the Varick family. I hate the idea of starting an unnecessary scandal at their expense. And with death in the house at that. Why, the reputation of a grand old family like that is like a work of art that cannot be replaced. I don’t want to have a hand in defacing it. It’s the property of the public, so to speak, and you and I are servants of the public, aren’t we?”

Mme. Storey smiled at his ingenious sophistry. While he was speaking she had made up her mind for quite different reasons. “Since you put it that way I can’t very well refuse,” she said ironically. “I will go. It is necessary to act quickly. I will change my dress. You will come with me, Bella.”

2

THE VARICK house was a great place of Vermont marble occupying a frontage of half a block on the Avenue, facing the Park. It was one of the older houses of that neighbourhood, and was already at this time becoming hemmed in by hotels and apartment houses; but it had been rebuilt and modernised on several occasions, and was still among the two or three most imposing dwellings in town. There was a grand effect in its severity and plainness that the more modern architects with their French chateaux and Italian palazzi strive for in vain.

We drove up in a taxi-cab which looked rather undignified amidst the long line of elegant private cars crawling up to the front door through the side street. But Mme. Storey cared nothing about that. The arrangements at the house were perfect, of course. There was a footman on the sidewalk to open the door of our car, another to open the great steel grill lined with plate glass, a third to receive our cards and to separate the sheep from the goats, and still others to usher us the way we should go. Back of them all stood the majestic figure of Jarboe, the Varick butler, overseeing all. All the men servants were dressed in black morning coats.

This ceremony was taking place in a superb marble hall that ran right through the centre of the building flanked by a double row of antique marble pillars, and ending in a great bay filled with gigantic tropical ferns. In the centre of the hall was a little fountain of porphyry, and a great shallow stairway with a wrought steel balustrade swept up at the right. Among the visitors the merely great left their cards and went out again, but the very great were ushered into the state drawing-room at the left to be received by Mr. Varick's brother, while members of the family connection were ushered into a more intimate room on the right.

We hardly belonged to any of these categories but Mme. Storey caught the eye of Mr. Jarboe who came directly to us, a signal honour. To him she whispered her request to be allowed to see Mrs. Varick.

"Mrs. Varick is seeing *nobody*," he answered with a slightly shocked air.

"May I send her a message?"

"Certainly, Madam."

She scribbled a few words on her card, and handed it to him. She asked if we might wait in a place where we would see nobody, and we were

therefore shown into a soberly furnished office behind a masked door.

Presently a footman came to say that Mrs. Varick would see Madame Storey, and led us, not up the great stairway, but into a little elevator hidden in the wall, where no one saw us enter. We alighted in another noble hall panelled in oak, and lighted by a great dome of Tiffany glass. There were a dozen doors all around, and I wondered mightily what was behind them all. Our conductor opened one of them, and we found ourselves in a foyer with more doors. The interior of that house was like a maze, and I wondered if the occupants ever got lost in it.

The footman opened another door, and we found ourselves in Mrs. Varick's boudoir. I had merely the impression of an amber effect, luxurious and flattering to the complexion. The mistress of it all was seated in a *chaise longue* holding a cigarette between fingers that trembled slightly. She was most beautifully dressed, not all in black; black and white. I remember it struck me as strange that she should be wearing a hat. Later I learned that she never appeared in the daytime without one. It was a lovely French hat partly shadowing her face, and the whole effect was of some rare and exquisite orchid—a little withered. Servants were continually coming and going, and she was issuing instructions with a forced air of calmness very painful to see.

While Mme. Storey approached her, I remained standing near the door. Thus I was out of earshot, but I could follow all that occurred with my eyes. Mrs. Varick was surprised to see my employer at such a time, and more than a little inclined to resent my presence. Mme. Storey hated what she had to do—I could tell it from her stony expression, but went about it directly and simply. Finally she drew the fateful slip of paper from its envelope, and showed it to Mrs. Varick.

When the widow read the words upon it, she forgot that she was a great lady. A little strangled cry escaped her, and she clapped the back of her hand to her mouth, that piteous gesture common to all women. Several of the women in the room ran to her side, but she waved them back.

"Leave me! Leave me!" she said sharply. ". . . All except you!" She clung to a slender blonde girl in black. This, I presently learned was her personal secretary, Estelle Gilsey. "Look! Estelle, look!" she whispered, showing the slip.

The girl cried out strangely, seemed about to faint. This, I remember, struck me as rather excessive in one who was merely a paid employee.

I drew a little closer to the group. To Mme. Storey, I heard Mrs. Varick say in a strained voice: “But this is probably the work of some mischief-maker, some insane person!”

“That is what we think,” said my employer.

“Then why torment me with such a suggestion?”

Mme. Storey patiently explained the situation.

“Oh, why isn’t Henry here!” mourned Mrs. Varick. She referred to her son. It appeared that nobody knew where he was. They were telegraphing all over the country for him.

Mrs. Varick angrily repudiated the suggestion of an autopsy, and my employer with the greatest gentleness and patience undertook to show her that she had no choice in the matter, that even the great Mrs. Varick was amenable to the commands of the law, and that we were all working to save her feelings, and the feelings of the family so far as it might be done. Finally, with a flood of tears she gave in. The tears relieved her, I think. The secretary did not cry; throughout all that followed, white-faced and stunned, she was a more tragic figure than the widow.

Mrs. Varick clung to my employer’s hand now. “Rosika, you manage everything,” she said imploringly. “You are so wonderfully capable! There is nobody else I can trust. Oh, keep it out of the newspapers! And above all, don’t let my husband’s family know!”

“I will do my best,” said Mme. Storey gravely.

In two minutes she had Inspector Rumsey on the wire, and within a quarter of an hour, the three doctors appointed by the police department had been admitted to the house by a rear door. They were all men of discretion, and in order to guard against possible leakages, they had volunteered to conduct the autopsy entirely by themselves without the usual assistants. The body of Mr. Varick was still lying in his bedroom, and there they operated. No one else was permitted in the room. The servants, I think, must have suspected what was going on, but they were wonderfully loyal. No whisper of it was ever revealed.

During the dreadful period of suspense that followed Mme. Storey and I remained in the boudoir with Mrs. Varick and Miss Gilsey. My employer having explained who I was, Mrs. Varick no longer resented my presence. She lit one cigarette after another in her trembling hands, and tossed them away after a puff or two. I do not remember that a single word was exchanged. I spent the time looking at Miss Gilsey who was very beautiful,

and who seemed to be of a gentle and open nature; but she was like one who had received a blow on the head, not quite all there. I wondered at it.

At length Dr. Pulford the senior of the three physicians, came in. His face was like a mask, revealing nothing. He said in measured tones:

"I regret to have to inform you that Commodore Varick met his death as a result of having taken poison through the mouth. It was one of the alkaloids, probably aconite, which is the most powerful of the alkaloids, but it will require an analysis to determine that for certain."

With a sigh like an infant, Mrs. Varick fell over sideways into the arms of her secretary. The girl's face was like death.

3

Dr. Pulford brought Mrs. Varick around by simple measures. The poor woman then went off into a helpless, shaken weeping, very affecting to see. But notwithstanding her high position, her air of authority, she was only a shallow woman. Her husband's untimely end did not distress her so much as the threatened family disgrace. The girl, Estelle Gilsey, who never made a sound, took it much harder, really; but I couldn't tell what was the nature of her feeling, whether grief, horror, fear or guilt.

Mrs. Varick's whole cry was to keep it out of the newspapers. "Rosika, I depend on you for that," she wept, fondling my employer's hand.

"My own idea would be to keep it secret as long as possible," said Mme. Storey dryly, "simply in order that the guilty person might not escape. However, the police must decide."

"The police!" cried Mrs. Varick. "Oh, keep them out of the house! That would kill me! Rosika, you take charge of everything. I engage you for that purpose. Money, you know, is no object."

"But I could not accept an engagement on such terms," said Mme. Storey. "My object would be the same as that of the police, to discover the truth."

"Of course! Of course!" cried the weeping woman. "But you do it. They ought to let you do it. You are far cleverer. Keep the police out of the house!"

"Inspector Rumsey must decide that," said my employer. ". . . There is one thing that I would recommend," she added. "Under the circumstances a public funeral would scarcely be permitted. Let all the arrangements be cancelled, and let it be given out that Commodore Varick is to be buried privately at the convenience of the family."

"Even that would create a scandal!" cried Mrs. Varick.

"But not so great a scandal as the other," remarked Mme. Storey dryly.

"Have the orders given!" cried the distraught widow.

When Dr. Pulford took his leave, Mme. Storey signed to me to detain him outside the room. There she presently joined us.

"Can you add anything to what you have told us?" she asked.

He shook his head. “Not much at this time. Commodore Varick died as the result of having taken a powerful dose of a poison, probably aconite.”

“A very large dose?”

“Yes, Madam, it must have killed him almost instantly. Well, in half an hour perhaps; in an hour at the outside.”

“Putting aside the possibility of suicide for the moment, how could he have been induced to take it?”

Dr. Pulford shrugged and spread out his hands. “How can one say? It is true that aconite, like all the alkaloids, has an intensely bitter taste, but on the other hand, an infinitesimal quantity would be sufficient. As small a quantity as one three-hundredth of a grain is enough to set up symptoms. How much Commodore Varick got I cannot say; half a grain, maybe.”

“Could it have been administered in tea or coffee?”

“It is possible.”

“Could the symptoms have been mistaken for those of gastritis?”

“Evidently they were,” returned Dr. Pulford dryly. “Was there only one physician present when he died?”

“Only Dr. Slingluff, the family physician.”

“A very distinguished man,” said Dr. Pulford prudently. “It seems a little strange, but I should not like to commit myself.”

“Is there any antidote for aconite poisoning?” asked Mme. Storey.

“Atropine,” he answered promptly.

“Could aconite in so highly concentrated a form be readily procured?” was her next question.

“It is in the pharmacopœia,” he said. “Aconitina is the term applied to the alkaloid. Therapeutically it is little used nowadays; it would be difficult to obtain, but possible.”

“One last question, doctor. In poisoning cases of this sort, does the victim retain consciousness until the end, or near the end?”

“It is usual,” he said gravely.

“Thank you very much.”

He went away. We had no sooner returned to the boudoir than a footman entered to announce that Dr. Slingluff was in the house and wished to know

if Mrs. Varick desired to see him. Mme. Storey and I exchanged a glance. Coming at this moment, it seemed almost as if the family doctor had received some intimation through the air of what was going on. At Mme. Storey's suggestion Mrs. Varick retired to her bedroom, and we waited in the boudoir for Dr. Slingluff. It was curious to see how completely my employer had assumed command in the great house. From Mrs. Varick down, all yielded her implicit obedience. At such moments Mme. Storey is very impressive. Her beautiful face becomes as cold and grave as a sybil's. Only the glowing dark eyes reveal the forces within.

Dr. Slingluff was in the forefront of his profession. Having started many years before as a general practitioner, he had gradually won to a commanding position as a heart specialist. It was only for the Varicks and a few other old family friends that he still acted as a general consultant. He was a handsome, dignified man about sixty, with an open face, a man you would like ordinarily; but I noticed that he changed colour at the mention of my employer's name; in fact, I saw a fine sweat spring up on his forehead, and that hardened my heart against him.

Mme. Storey went to the point as directly as an arrow. "I am Rosika Storey," she said. "Mrs. Varick has asked me to see you. It has been discovered that Commodore Varick met his death by poison. For the moment, I am acting for the police."

At the word "poison" the doctor went staggering back, and his face became ghastly. *But he was not surprised.* "Oh, my God!" he gasped. "Who told them?"

This answer clearly revealed guilty knowledge, but for the moment Mme. Storey affected not to notice it. "I am not at liberty to divulge that," she said.

He made a desperate effort to recover himself. "Poison!" he said, straightening up; "this is preposterous!"

"It was revealed by an autopsy."

He was freshly shaken. "An autopsy!" he stammered. "Without my knowledge."

"At the command of the police," said Mme. Storey.

Some moments passed before he could give a coherent account of the death-bed scene. "At a few minutes before five yesterday," he finally began, "I was called to the telephone by William Gabbitt, the Commodore's valet. Gabbitt told me that his master was very sick; that he had found him lying

helpless on the floor of his bedroom; that it seemed to be a gastric attack such as he had had before, only worse. So I hastily gathered a few things together, digitalis . . .”

“Digitalis?” she interrupted, “what was that for?”

“Heart,” he said, “that was the danger. I instructed my secretary to telephone for Orrin, the stomach specialist, and I ran here—I live just around the corner. I was here within five minutes of receiving the call, but I instantly saw that my old friend was done for; he was already at the point of collapse.”

“Who was with him?”

“Gabbitt, and Jarboe, the butler. I sent for Mrs. Varick, but she was out of the house. I wouldn’t allow anybody else in the room. I did all the things that one does, but it was too late. I sent Gabbitt running to my office for atropine, and Jarboe to the pantry for an icepack. Before either of them got back the Commodore was dead.”

“Atropine?” said Mme. Storey, softly, “is that a gastric remedy?”

“I wanted it to accelerate the beating of his heart.”

“Why didn’t you bring it with you?”

“One can’t foresee everything.”

“Then you were alone with him when he died?”

“Yes.”

“Why did you send Jarboe out of the room? There were plenty of footmen.”

“To tell you the truth, I couldn’t bear to have a servant see my friend in such an extremity.”

“Was he conscious?”

“I cannot say for certain. He was incapable of speaking.”

“Then he said nothing to you before he died?”

“Not a word, Madame.”

“H’m!” said Mme. Storey. I knew the same thought was in her mind as in my own; that it was very painful to see a naturally decent and upright man struggling to tell a convincing lie. I wondered what *had* taken place in that death chamber.

“Was it not rather unwise to have no other witness to his death?” asked Mme. Storey.

Dr. Slingluff drew himself up. “Well, I did not expect anybody to accuse me of having poisoned my friend,” he said with dignity.

“Nobody has,” said Mme. Storey mildly. “Had you no doubts as to the cause of death when you signed the certificate?”

“I would not have signed it if I had had. Doctor Orrin joined with me in signing it when he came.”

“Did he suggest an autopsy?”

“No, he was quite satisfied with my explanation. Every one of us makes mistakes.”

“This one is likely to have important results for you, doctor,” said my employer mildly.

“Ruinous!” he cried in despair.

While she was still questioning him, we heard the sounds of a commotion out in the middle of the house, a new voice, young and ringing. At the sound of it, Dr. Slingluff turned paler still.

“Henry!” he gasped. “Oh, God! I can’t face him now!”

With that he turned and fled through a door. It gave on some sort of service passage. Presumably he knew his way about the house. Mme. Storey and I looked at each other.

“Shouldn’t he be stopped?” I said.

“He is not the sort of man who can escape,” she said. “We can always find him.”

“Was it *he*?” I stammered.

She slowly shook her head. “He wouldn’t have sent for the antidote,” she said.

“But he knows who did it!”

“So it would seem,” she said with her most cryptic air.

A young man burst into the room, followed by several persons. I don’t know who they were, servants of some sort, I assume. All these people moved surrounded by a mob of dependants of one sort and another. The

young man turned around and waving his arms, cried: “Get out! Get out!” They melted silently through the door, and closed it.

I recognised the heir to the Varick millions, a handsome young giant with a mop of tawny hair, and eyes as blue as the sea. At the first sight of him something went out of me to him that I could not get back again. I soon learned that it was the same with everybody, man, woman or child, but especially women, of course. I could even see by the softened expression in Mme. Storey’s eyes that she felt it, too. I cannot explain it; he was handsome and vigorous, but so is many another young man who leaves you cold. I do not care for young men, as a rule. This one had the combined attraction of a boy and a man, but that was not the whole of it. There was something you could not resist. If he had been a longshoreman’s son it would have been the same.

At the moment the tears were coursing down his cheeks. He was quite unashamed of his emotion. In fact, he was so distraught by emotion, he accepted the finding of two strangers in his mother’s boudoir as a matter of course. He started speaking as if he had always known us.

“My father!” he cried, searching our faces for some hope. “Is it true? Is it true? Is he dead?”

“He is dead,” said Mme. Storey.

“Oh, nobody will ever know what this means to me!” he cried, clapping his hands to his head. “Fathers always die, of course, but this is different!” He turned to us again with streaming eyes. “Because I was a bad son to him! a bad son! And now I can never make it up to him!”

His mother heard his voice and came running in from her bedroom, followed by her secretary. She precipitated herself into her son’s arms. From his protective attitude one might have supposed him to be the parent.

“Poor little mother!” he crooned. “Poor little mother! This is hard on you!”

But a strange thing happened. Over his mother’s head he exchanged a look of the most poignant meaning with the girl behind her. Their very souls were in that glance, then both quickly lowered their eyes. Mme. Storey did not miss that swift look, of course. I knew it by her great carelessness of manner.

I could not bear to be present at so intimate a family scene, and I turned my back on it. But I could not avoid hearing what went on; the widow’s self-pitying complaints, and her son’s clumsy attempts to comfort her. There was

something shocking in seeing the great Mrs. Varick go all to pieces. The exquisite and flowerlike woman was sadly wilted now. So incoherent and disconnected was her speech that it gave no hint of the real situation beyond the fact that her husband had died with frightful suddenness. In the end the girl spoke, electrifying us all by saying, in a curiously breathless voice:

"Henry, your father was poisoned. There has been an autopsy."

He dropped his mother, and stepped back. "Poisoned!" he said hoarsely. "*Poisoned!* . . . Then God help us all!"

Mme. Storey caught my arm and led me from the room. The others never noticed whether we were there or not. In the little foyer I resisted, thinking of my employer's duty in the case.

"It is terrible!" I said, "but should you not stay? Will not the truth come out?"

"Enough has come out for my present purpose," she said dryly.

4

We made a tour of Commodore Varick's private suite under guidance of Gabbitt, the English valet. This Gabbitt was a quaint-looking person, like the figure of a barber out of an old-fashioned print; a neat, brisk, spare little man with a great bush of hair that looked as if it had been artificially curled. One expected to see a comb sticking in it ready for use. It would have been impossible to guess the man's age. It transpired that he had served the Commodore for over twenty years. He was devoted to his master, but took the present situation very philosophically. He had the air of a man who has seen so much that nothing can astonish him any more. He answered Mme. Storey's questions promptly and with seeming candour. It did not appear to occur to him that, as one of the last persons who had seen Commodore Varick alive, he might be under suspicion too.

First we entered a plainly-furnished room at the north end of the second floor, that Gabbitt called the office. There was a young woman operating a typewriter here, who neither paused in her work nor so much as looked around when we passed through. This struck me as strange. I wondered what on earth she could be writing at such a time. Adjoining the office was the Commodore's study, a handsome corner room corresponding to Mrs. Varick's boudoir at the other end of the house. It was luxuriously furnished in masculine style with immense leather-covered easy-chairs grouped round the fireplace, and many rare sporting prints hanging from the panelled walls.

Mme. Storey's first examination of this room was hasty, but she did not miss much. A sheet of paper lying with others on an open escritoire attracted her attention. There was a drawer below with a key in it. She put the paper in the drawer, locked it and took the key. "Something I will study later," she said.

Outside the study there was a little foyer, and from that a short passage leading to the other rooms of the suite. Opening off the passage were, in order, a serving pantry, a little bedroom for Gabbitt, and the Commodore's bathroom. Here Mme. Storey opened a wall cabinet. Her eyes skated rapidly over the miscellaneous articles on the shelves, and fastened on two kinds of medicine; a liquid, and some capsules in a little pasteboard box. She asked what they were.

"Digitalis in the bottle, 'm," said Gabbitt. "For the heart. Fifteen drops in water three times a day. The capsules were for the digestion; one after every

meal."

"The Commodore was taking these at present?"

"Yes, ma'am. The prescriptions were refilled regular."

We took these medicines, and afterwards sent them to a chemist to be analysed.

Next came the dressing-room, another comfortable lounging place, with a dressing-table, chiffoniers, and with clothes presses built into the walls. Beyond it was the Commodore's bedroom, where his body still lay. A man was on guard there. I averted my eyes from the bed. Mme. Storey did not examine the body at this time, but merely inquired what lay beyond the further door. It was Mrs. Varick's bedroom, Gabbitt said, and beyond that were the other rooms of her suite. Both suites extended along the Fifth Avenue front of the house. Between the two of them, these little people, neither of whom exceeded five feet six in height, spread themselves over eight or more immense private chambers. Such is earthly glory!

We returned to the study, where Mme. Storey questioned Gabbitt at some length. The valet told how he had been having tea in the servants' hall when a call over the house 'phone summoned him to his master. He found the Commodore lying in agony upon the floor of the dressing-room. I omit the harrowing details. Assisting his master to his bed, Gabbitt telephoned for the doctor and for Jarboe. He tried to get Mrs. Varick, but she was out of the house. During the brief interval that elapsed before the arrival of the doctor, the valet applied what restoratives his experience suggested.

"Gabbitt, did you suspect poison?" Mme. Storey asked. (I ought to state that the valet knew by this time what had happened.)

"Well, ma'am," he answered, "I think the thought was somewhere in the back of my head, but I did not acknowledge it. Being but a servant, I left it to my betters."

In one respect Gabbitt's story differed sharply from Dr. Slingluff's. Up to the moment that he was sent out for atropine, the Commodore's mind, he insisted, was perfectly clear. The sick man would allow no one to be sent for but his wife and the doctor. He evinced an agonising anxiety lest the doctor might not come in time, but it was not with any idea that he could be saved. He knew he was dying.

"Did he suggest that he had been poisoned?"

"No, ma'am, no! He kept sayin' it was gastritis."

“H’m!” said Mme. Storey.

“He said one thing that was strange,” Gabbitt went on, biting his lip—it was the first evidence of emotion the little man had shown; “He says, ‘Gabbitt, if I should go out of my head, I beg of you never to repeat what I say! Bury it in your breast!’ ” The little valet turned away and made believe to arrange some objects on the table. “That hurt me, ma’am,” he murmured. “But I didn’t let on anything. I just pressed his hand, and he seemed satisfied. . . . As if I would have given him away! After twenty years! . . .”

He straightened up and went on in his ordinary voice: “There was no need for me to go for the atropine, but I got the idea the Commodore had something private to tell the doctor, so I left the room. I have seen men die before, and I knew that neither atropine nor nothing else could save my master then. I wasn’t gone but ten minutes. When I got back he was dead.”

“Gabbitt,” said Mme. Storey, “who was the last person he saw before he was taken sick?”

“Why, ma’am, so far as I know it was Miss Priestley,” was the answer. “Him and her had their tea together every afternoon at four when he was home.”

“Miss Priestley?”

“His secretary, ’m. That is to say, his literary secretary. That is the young lady who is working the typewriter in the next room.”

“Why do you call her literary secretary?”

“To distinguish her from his private secretary and his financial secretary. Those two are gentlemen. The Commodore was writing his memoirs, and Miss Priestley was engaged to help him with that. Every afternoon from two until four, when his engagements permitted, they worked together, and after tea the young lady went home.”

“And tea was served yesterday as usual?”

“Yes’m. I took it in myself from Hannaford, one of the maids, and set it out on this very table. Then I called my master, and went down to my own tea in the servants’ hall.”

“What did the tea consist of?”

“Just thin bread and butter, ’m, and a plain cake. The Commodore ate very plain, along of his gastritis, but he does love his tea—did love it, I mean. He would drink two or three cups of an afternoon.”

“Gabbitt, tell me the exact arrangement of the tea tray,” said my employer. While she listened to him, she lit a cigarette.

“Yes’m. All they sent up from downstairs was the bread and butter and the cake; also cream if required; the Commodore did not use it himself. The Commodore’s own special brand of tea I keep up here in a silver tea-caddy, also the silver kettle which plugs into an electric outlet. The Commodore had his own notions about how tea should be made; he wanted every cup made separate. So the tea was put into silver tea balls which were dipped into the cups after the boiling water was drawn.”

“Did the Commodore do this himself?”

“Oh, no, ’m. If there was a lady at the table she did the honours.”

“Did the Commodore take his tea weak or strong?”

“Very strong, ’m. He liked to taste it bitter.”

“Did the Commodore and Miss Priestley always have tea alone together?”

“No, ’m. There might be other guests from time to time. Or if the Commodore had special guests, Miss Priestley might take her tea in the housekeeper’s room.”

“When you were called back up stairs had the tea things been removed?”

“I can’t say, ma’am. I was too excited to take notice. After my master was dead I tidied up, not knowin’ what else to do. They was gone then.”

Mme. Storey pressed out the lighted end of her cigarette in an ash tray. “All right, Gabbitt; thank you very much,” she said. “We had better talk to Miss Priestley, since she is close at hand.”

5

WHEN we entered the office for the second time, the girl arose from her machine and turned around as if she had guessed what we came for. I was astonished when I saw her. Certainly the Varicks, both husband and wife, had a flair for beauty in choosing those who served them. Miss Priestley was a very Juno, a maiden Juno, tall and dark with Juno's short upper lip, straight nose and haughty glance. Superb! However, I withheld my judgment for awhile because I have learned that these goddess-like shells sometimes house very small souls. I wondered if the solution to the mystery lay in her. She was visibly all keyed up, but that was natural. She had herself under good control.

She knew as much as Gabbitt did of the situation, consequently it was not necessary to enter into explanations. My employer introduced herself, and, in order to persuade the girl to relax, murmured the obvious things about what a sad occasion it was, etc., etc. The secretary rose to it like any woman—in words, but with a curiously monotonous voice like a child repeating a lesson. Her remote glance did not share in what she was saying. She was like a beautiful statue with a phonograph inside it.

"Yes, I have lost more than my job here," she said, "I have lost a friend. All I can do for him now is to finish his work." She waved her hand towards the machine.

"Sit down," said Mme. Storey soothingly. "I am told that you were perhaps the last person to see the Commodore before he was taken sick, and I look to you to help me."

"Certainly," said Miss Priestley—but she did not sit. "Anything I can do. However, I am not the one you are looking for."

Her odd manner intrigued my employer. "No?" she said with half a smile. She was studying the girl through her lashes.

The secretary went on in her toneless voice: "You have been told that I had tea with the Commodore yesterday, but I did not."

"Who did?"

She made a slight gesture with her hand. "Secrecy was enjoined upon me, but I suppose everything has got to come out now. It was the Princess Cristina von Habsburg."

The amused look faded out of Mme. Storey's eyes. "So?" she said quietly. "What were the circumstances?"

"Commodore Varick wished to have a private talk with the Princess without anybody in the house knowing about it. Everything is gossiped about so. The Princess is staying in the house. As soon as the tea had been brought, and Gabbitt had gone down to his tea, I was sent to fetch her. Her suite is on the south side of the house. I brought her to the door of the Commodore's study, and then I went down and had tea with Mrs. Colford in her room."

"Mrs. Colford being the housekeeper?"

"Yes."

"What did Commodore Varick want to talk to the Princess about?"

Miss Priestley answered with a perfectly expressionless face: "I don't know. That is outside my province."

It was pretty clear that she was lying here, but it would have done no good to tax her with it. Mme. Storey went on: "How long did she remain in his study?"

"I can't tell you. I did not see her again. After I had finished my tea, I went home. That was before the news of the Commodore's illness had got about. I knew nothing of it until I read it in the newspaper this morning."

"What a shock it must have given you!" murmured Mme. Storey.

"Yes," said the girl. Not a muscle of her face changed when she said it. An extraordinary person.

"Where is the Princess now?" asked my employer.

"I understand that she has left the house, but I cannot tell you where she has gone."

"Let us ask Jarboe." My employer looked about the room. "May I ring?"

"The telephone is quicker," said Miss Priestley. She took down the receiver, and said in the same cold toneless voice: "Please ask Mr. Jarboe to come to the Commodore's office for a moment."

While we waited for Jarboe, Mme. Storey lit a cigarette. Miss Priestley declined one. My employer sauntered about the room making polite conversation. But I knew of old that her mind was not necessarily idle when she was making idle talk. I could see that her eyes were busy; I could see

too, that the secretary was covertly watching her with a strained air; and for the dozenth time that day I asked myself: What dreadful secret does this grand house conceal!

Jarboe was quickly at the door. He knew that Mme. Storey was a person to be deferred to. She asked him at once what had become of the Princess.

Jarboe, of course, had had to be taken into the family confidence as far as anybody, but he was the butler of butlers, and though murder stalked through the house, there was not the slightest alteration in his usual demeanour. His superb aplomb might have concealed anything—or nothing. He said:

"Her Highness left the house shortly after four yesterday afternoon, Madame."

"Did you see her go?"

"No, Madame, nobody saw her leave except Wilcox the footman, who was attending upon the front door."

"What did he tell you?"

"He told me that the Princess came running downstairs alone, in a high state of agitation. In fact, she was weeping. Wilcox was very much upset. He thought it most unseemly that Her Highness should appear upon the street in such a state, and he hesitated about opening the door. She stamped her foot, and commanded him to open it, and of course, he had no recourse but to obey. He came immediately to tell me, and I went to the Princess' suite. I found that her lady-in-waiting, Madame von Hofstetter, did not know that the Princess had left the house. She was greatly upset. However . . ."

"Wait a minute," interrupted Mme. Storey; "did she have no hat on when she ran out of the house?"

Miss Priestley answered. "She already had her hat on when I fetched her."

"I see. Go on, please, Jarboe."

"While I was still talking to Madame von Hofstetter," he continued, "the telephone rang, and it was the Princess. She ordered Madame von Hofstetter and her maids to follow her immediately to the Hotel Madagascar. They packed very hastily, and left within half an hour."

"Then they were all out of the house before the alarm of the Commodore's illness was raised?"

"Yes, Madame. I sent the trunks to the hotel later."

"Have you any idea of the reason for the Princess' abrupt departure?"

"None whatever, Madame."

Who could say if he was telling the truth.

My employer turned to me. "Well, let us go ask her, Bella."

It turned out that there was quite a crowd hanging about the front door, which included both reporters and photographers. It was of the highest importance that our comings and goings should not be remarked, so Jarboe put us into a car in the rear courtyard of the house. We pulled down the curtains and got out unseen.

"Big game, Bella!" said my employer to me with a curious dry smile. "The Princess is a member of one of the greatest houses of the old world. Her ancestors have ruled for centuries. The ex-King of Saxony is her brother-in-law, I believe, and she calls the King of England cousin. It is the first time we have stalked Royalty!"

"How strange that Priestley girl's manner was," I said.

"That in itself signifies nothing," she answered. "Everybody in the house was acting strangely. Except Gabbitt. Perhaps Gabbitt did it. He was the only one who had his wits about him."

But I did not think she was speaking seriously.

In three minutes we were at the Madagascar. Mme. Storey asked for the manager. We did not suppose, of course, that the Princess had registered under her own name. "A young foreign lady of high position," said my employer. "She came yesterday alone, and was followed later by her companion, and several maids."

"Oh, you mean the Countess von Hilgenreiner," said the manager. "She left an hour ago to go on board the *Baratoria*."

An exclamation was forced from my employer. "Good Heavens! And the *Baratoria* sails at three!"

Our eyes flew to the clock on the wall. The hands pointed to ten minutes to three. And the pier was three miles away, the streets crowded with traffic! We ran out of the office leaving the manager staring.

"Quick, Bella," cried Mme. Storey. "Jump in that car at the door and drive as fast as you can to the ship. Go down Tenth Avenue."

“I can’t possibly make it!” I stammered.

“Go!” she cried. “The ship is connected by telephone. I will get the Commander on the wire and ask him to wait for you. Tell him that there are police reasons for detaining the Countess von Hilgenreiner, or whatever she calls herself. I will follow you as soon as I can pick up Inspector Rumsey. We will need official support in this.”

6

THE *Baratoria* was queen of the Brevard line fleet, and her commander was a knight, Sir Everard Bertram, R.N.R., K.C.M.G., and goodness knows what else beside. I was greatly relieved to see the liner's huge bulk and her four mighty red funnels towering over the pier when I arrived. Evidently the telephone message had got through. On the pier everything was at a standstill; the passengers lining the ship's rails and a great crowd of friends filling the pier openings, everybody wondering no doubt why she did not sail. The gangplanks were still in place and I hastened aboard. At the head of the gangplank a cabin boy was waiting to conduct me to the Captain.

I found him pacing his cabin, watch in hand, a magnificent personage, resplendent in gold braid. Mme. Storey has crossed with him many times, and he knew me by sight. His face cleared when I entered.

"Here you are!" he said. "I thought I recognised Mme. Storey's voice over the telephone, but I feared it might be a hoax. What is the trouble?"

"There is a lady aboard who is wanted by the police," I said.

"What is her name?" he asked, picking up a passenger list.

"When we last met her she was calling herself the Countess von Hilgenreiner. She won't be on your list because her decision to sail was a sudden one."

"What's her right name?"

"Please wait until Mme. Storey comes," I begged him. "She has stopped only to pick up a police official."

In a minute or two my employer came sauntering in, perfectly cool and smiling. She and the Captain greeted each other as old friends. She said immediately:

"I won't waste your time, Sir Everard. I can rely on your discretion. The person we want is the Princess Cristina von Habsburg."

"Good God!" he cried in dismay. "A royal princess! What a frightful scandal this will let loose!"

"I have it in mind," said my employer dryly. "Is she aboard?"

“Yes. I have spoken to her. I had them put her into the Tudor suite on B deck. What is she wanted for?”

“At the moment, as a material witness only. No charge has been laid.”

“Have you the police back of you?” he asked anxiously.

Mme. Storey opened her handbag. “Here is a warrant for her arrest. Furthermore, if you will look over the side you will see Inspector Rumsey there in a police launch. I didn’t want him to show himself to the reporters on the pier. They hailed me, but I told them I was just coming aboard to bid good-bye to a friend.”

“But when you take her ashore the jig will be up. The reporters have interviewed her.”

“I don’t want to take her ashore,” said Mme. Storey coolly. “I want the reporters to think that she has sailed for Europe. It is of the utmost importance that the frightful scandal you speak of should not be released prematurely.”

“Then what do you propose to do?”

“I have sailed on vessels when belated passengers were put on board through a door in the hull,” said Mme. Storey. “When you get straightened out in midstream can’t you open a door on the side hidden from the pier, and put her aboard one of the tugs? The tug can steam off up the river, and by-and-by the police launch will overhaul her, and receive the Princess.”

By this time Sir Everard had read the warrant. “Very well,” he said. “It shall be done.”

“Then come on, Bella,” said my employer briskly. “We mustn’t hold up the *Baratoria* a moment longer than necessary.”

The bravest of men is subject to terror in some form or another. The magnificent Sir Everard turned pale. “Good God, Madame Storey,” he cried, “don’t leave me to face that woman alone! Picture me putting a royal princess aboard the tug kicking!”

My employer laughed. It was the first time I had heard that silvery sound all day.

The Captain saw nothing funny in the situation. “Come with me and prepare her for what is to follow,” he urged. “The *Baratoria* can wait for that.”

“All right,” she said. “Lead the way.”

A moment later we were knocking at a door opening from a corridor on B deck. It was opened to us by a worried little lady, very elegant in a German fashion, evidently Madame von Hofstetter. Over her shoulder I glimpsed a delightful little sitting-room with doors opening to the right and left.

"Compliments," said the Captain with stiff courtesy; "I should like to speak to the Princess for a moment."

"I am very sorry," said the lady-in-waiting in excellent English, "but her Highness is seeing nobody."

"I am more than sorry," said Sir Everard dryly, "but I am the Commander of this vessel, and it shall not sail until I have spoken with the Princess."

She had no recourse then but to give way. We entered the room. She tried to make a stand against Mme. Storey and me.

"Who are these persons?" she demanded.

"Representatives of the police," said Sir Everard dryly.

"Oh, *Mein Gott*!" cried the little lady, and made haste to shut the door behind us. "I will prepare the Princess," she said tremulously, and started to move towards one of the doors.

But Sir Everard was before her at the door. "Pardon me," he said; "there is no time for that. The ship waits. These ladies must be admitted to the Princess immediately. I will wait here."

So Mme. Storey and I entered the adjoining room, a bedroom. It was the first time I had ever been so close to a royal Princess, and I was all eyes. In a word she was an exquisite little person, a blonde with dark eyes. It was not at all one's idea of a German princess, but I recollected that she was of Vienna, the most elegant of European capitals. She was little more than a girl, but so perfect was her finish, her air of distinction, she might have been almost any age. A Dresden china princess, but with nothing insipid about her. She was seated in an arm-chair with her handkerchief pressed to her eyes, but the instant she perceived that we were strangers she sprang up, electrified with indignation.

"What is the meaning of this intrusion?" she cried with a stamp of her foot. "Leave the room! . . . Madame von Hofstetter, who are these persons?"

But the lady-in-waiting had dissolved in tears, and was unable to explain.

I will pass quickly over the scene that followed. It was a lively one! The little Princess endeavoured to crush us with her royal anger, but she met her match in Mme. Storey, who smiled down at her in an amused and tolerant fashion, and patiently explained that she must prepare to leave the ship.

"This is outrageous!" cried the Princess. "I am the Princess Cristina von Habsburg! Do you not know what that means? I am not subject to your laws! I will communicate with our ambassador!"

"I believe that Austria is now a republic," said my employer mildly.

She never got it. "The City of New York shall suffer for this insult!" she cried. "Why should the police seek to detain me!"

"Commodore Varick died yesterday afternoon," said Mme. Storey.

"Did he?" she said coolly.

"Didn't you know it?"

"No."

Mme. Storey's face turned grimly humorous. "The newspapers . . ." she began.

The Princess tossed her head. "I don't read your horrible newspapers."

Alas! for royal truthfulness. There was a newspaper lying on the sofa at that very moment, with the name Varick uppermost in the headlines. Mme. Storey pointed to it mutely.

The Princess was not in the least abashed. "I haven't looked at it," she said. "And anyway, what of it? I was merely their guest. I am sorry for them, but it has got nothing to do with me."

"Commodore Varick was poisoned," said Mme. Storey in a low tone, "and you were the last person to see him before he was taken ill."

The Princess stared at her in what appeared to be the purest amazement. One could not be sure, of course. "That was not in the newspaper," she said naïvely.

"No," said my employer dryly.

The little lady was breathing hard with emotion. She seemed to be scarcely capable of speaking. "And do you mean," she gasped, "do you dare to charge that *I* poisoned him? In Heaven's name why should *I* poison an American millionaire."

“I don’t know,” said Mme. Storey. She patiently explained the measures she had taken to protect the Princess from newspaper publicity.

“I will not leave the ship!” said the Princess with another stamp of the royal foot.

Mme. Storey shrugged. There was no use waiting for more. The rest was up to Sir Everard. He shook his head lugubriously as we passed him on the way out.

7

THE scene now shifts to Mme. Storey's maisonnette in East Sixty-—— Street. The address of this recherché establishment is not in the telephone book, and I shall not give it here. My employer had made an arrangement with Inspector Rumsey to bring the Princess there, and while we waited for them we had a much needed bite of lunch. Mme. Storey ate with an abstracted air, and was disinclined to talk of the case.

In about an hour Inspector Rumsey brought the Princess and Madame Hofstetter along in a taxi-cab, while the two maids followed with two plain-clothes men in another. Maids and plain-clothes men were put into the dining-room to wait, while the rest of us gathered in the 1850 parlour overhead. There was a great change in the little Princess. The royal air was subdued, and she was much like any other frightened girl. But there was a hardness about her that was not girlish. In fact, she was an exotic specimen, quite outside my experience, and I could not make her out. I will say for her that the daughter of a hundred Habsburgs was not craven. She kept her head up.

Mme. Storey's manner towards her was kindly. "Sit down," she said, "and let us talk this matter over quietly. You are not charged with anything."

"*Merci, Madame*," said the Princess ironically. "Can I have a cigarette?"

"Surely!" said my employer, offering the box. "If you'd rather talk to us women alone, Inspector Rumsey will wait downstairs."

"It doesn't matter," she said indifferently. She puffed gratefully at the cigarette.

"Please tell us exactly what took place between you and Commodore Varick yesterday afternoon," said Mme. Storey.

"I cannot do that," said the girl impatiently. "It was a private matter, and has nothing to do with the public or the police."

Mme. Storey drew a long breath for patience. "Pardon me," she said, "but in view of what happened immediately afterwards, it is of the greatest concern to the police, and you must tell."

An agonised look came into the girl's face. "*Mon Dieu!* it would kill me if these things were printed in the newspapers!" she murmured. "You cannot understand my feelings! You are commoners!"

We Americans smiled a little at this, though goodness knows, it was piteous, too. Mme. Storey said gravely:

"I promise you it shall not appear in the newspapers unless it has some connection with the death of Commodore Varick."

The Princess would not sit down. Standing by the mantelpiece, she began abruptly to tell her story. She did not appear to be of any particular nationality, but was merely of the great world. Only her continuous, slight, graceful gesticulation betrayed her foreignness.

"I met the Varicks last winter at Cannes. They have a big place there. Pushing people, but not ill-bred for Americans. They courted me, and I, well, my family is ruined, and I cannot afford to be too particular; I allowed myself to be courted. Presently the son was brought forward; a personable young man, but somewhat crude in manner. I took that to be American. He bestowed his attentions upon me. We were seen everywhere together. A few years ago he would never have presumed, but, as I say, my house is fallen, my father is dead, and I must do the best I can for myself. My mother, the Archduchess, was invited to stay with the Varicks. Mrs. Varick sounded her out in respect to the match, and my mother expressed herself as being agreeable to it. No definite proposal was made, but I was given to understand in many ways that all had been arranged. The behaviour of Mr. Henry Varick . . . possibly I do not understand American customs. . . ."

A spasm of pain passed across the girl's face. She paused before continuing. "When the Varicks departed for New York, I was invited to accompany them, but my mother thought that it would be unseemly for me to do so. It was arranged that I should follow them later, and visit them in New York. My mother having a dread of the ocean, my friend Madame von Hofstetter accompanied me. We arrived a week ago. It was immediately apparent that some hitch had arisen. The manner of both Mr. and Mrs. Varick towards me was strained. Day after day I waited, and the young man did not appear. Finally I learned that he had been in the house and had departed again without seeing me.

"Yesterday afternoon," she continued, "Commodore Varick sent his secretary, and I was conducted with much secrecy to his study. He was in a state of painful embarrassment. From his stammering and beating about the bush I gathered that there was an impediment to the match. Me, I am accustomed to speaking plainly. When I taxed him with it, he said yes, to his great regret, everything was definitely off. . . ." The girl's cheeks flushed red at the recollection. "*Mon Dieu!* to *me*, a Habsburg! After I had

condescended to these *canaille*! After I had allowed myself to be brought across the ocean! *Dieu!* I thought I should die with rage. What could I do? I ran out of the house that moment, and sent back for my servants to follow me."

A silence followed the completion of her story. The little Princess stood there breathing fast. We all felt, I think, that she had been pretty badly used. Finally Mme. Storey said, in a casual manner:

"Before you left the room, had you and Commodore Varick drunk tea?"

The girl struck her forehead. "Let me think! Yes, I remember that tea was made. I made it with little silver balls." She said this in a seemingly open manner, but she was far from being a simple maiden, and how could one tell?

"Was it drunk?"

"I did not drink any," she said quickly.

"And the Commodore?"

"I do not know. . . . Yes! I have a recollection of seeing him swallow it, of the emptied cup."

"Was this before or after he made his announcement to you?" asked Mme. Storey softly.

"I can't remember," she said listlessly. Then she started. "Before! Before! Before!" she cried excitedly.

"H'm!" said Mme. Storey. She took a turn up and down. "Did Commodore Varick give any reason for breaking off the match?" she asked, offhand.

The Princess's back was stiff and her chin up as she answered. "Yes, he said the young man was disinclined to it." She got it out all right, then came a disastrous breakdown. She extended her arm along the mantel, and dropping her head upon it, broke into an uncontrollable sobbing. "I wish I was dead!" she muttered. It was piteous.

Madame von Hofstetter flew to her and took her in her arms. The elder woman turned an imploring face over her shoulder toward Mme. Storey. "Where can I take her?" she asked.

"Into my bedroom across the hall," said the latter, opening the door.

They disappeared. When my employer returned, Inspector Rumsey said anxiously: “What do you make of it?”

Mme. Storey’s face looked pale and drawn. “The proud little Princess has a heart just the same as any common girl,” she said. “She has had the misfortune to give it to Hank Varick, who has more hearts than he can use.”

“A nasty case!” said the Inspector. “It will be difficult to bring it home to her. No witnesses.”

“I’m not satisfied that she did it,” said Mme. Storey, pacing the room.

“But her rage!” he said. “And she comes off bad stock, those royalties, accustomed for centuries to remove their enemies in just such a manner.”

“Quite!” said Mme. Storey, smiling a little at his honest Americanism. “But I never before heard of a girl who killed the father because the son had jilted her. The motive does not seem adequate. Moreover, it is hardly credible that a royal Princess should be carrying around a dose of aconite ready to administer to anybody who might displease her. Aconite is not a habit-forming drug. Nobody takes aconite for the kick in it.”

“Then who did it?” he asked blankly.

“Oh, I’m not saying she *didn’t* do it,” said my employer. “Frankly, I don’t know. What I do see is, that we have scarcely scratched the surface of this case as yet. There is a deal of hard spade work before us. Is it your wish that I should continue to represent you?”

“Sure!” he cried, “you must not desert me now.”

“Very well,” she said, “I will return to the Varick house and stay there until I see light. I will communicate with you by telephone when necessary, according to the method we have used before. You and your men must trace that anonymous letter to its source if it is humanly possible to do so. The Princess and her entourage will stay here in my place, under guard. Bella goes with me.”

While Mme. Storey was still issuing instructions, her maid Grace entered, bearing a letter on a salver. She said: “This has just come, Madame. It is marked urgent, so I brought it right up.”

Mme. Storey put out an inattentive hand for the envelope. But when her eyes fell upon it she started. “Look at this!” she cried, holding it up. The address was printed in the same sort of carefully-formed characters that had appeared on the anonymous letter addressed to the Inspector. She tore it

open. It contained a slip similar to that other slip, with a single line of printed characters:

LOOK INTO HANK VARICK'S MOVEMENTS YESTERDAY.

8

In my employer's quaint and charming parlour, Mme. Storey and Inspector Rumsey laid out a joint plan of campaign. It was of prime importance to trace the two anonymous letters to their source. The Inspector had already set the police machinery in motion to trace them through the mails, while Mme. Storey was to work to the same end inside the Varick house. It was fairly obvious now that they had originated in the house, since no one knew that Mme. Storey was at work upon the case except certain persons in the Varick household. Inspector Rumsey further agreed to have the recent movements of young Henry Varick investigated as far as possible, and a report prepared for Mme. Storey covering the young man's whole career, so far as the details might be learned from old newspapers, and from inquiries amongst his associates. By this time the Inspector's doctors had definitely reported to him that Commodore Varick had come to his death as the result of a powerful dose of the alkaloid of aconite. Tannin was also found, and the inference was that he had taken the drug in strong tea. But this was not positively established. The police were already at work endeavouring to trace any sales of the drug aconitina that might have been made lately. Sales of this powerful drug were rare.

In order to provide us with additional assistance inside the house, Mme. Storey arranged to have Crider, our cleverest and most dependable operator, apply to Jarboe, the Varick butler, for a job as footman. She arranged with Jarboe later to take him on. The Princess Cristina von Habsburg, her lady-in-waiting and their maids, were to be accommodated in Mme. Storey's maisonnette for the present. Mme. Storey's servants were to feed them and make them as comfortable as possible, and a plain-clothes man would be on guard in the entrance corridor at all hours of the day and night. The Princess was given the privilege of consulting counsel, but she made no move to do so. I need hardly say that she very willingly joined with us in our little conspiracy to keep this case out of the newspapers for the moment. We expected it to break sooner or later.

All these arrangements having been effected, Mme. Storey telephoned to the Varick house for the same car that had carried us away from there three hours earlier. It was a closed car, having shades that pulled down inside the windows, and by this means we returned to the house, through the courtyard, without having been recognised by any of the loungers or watchers in the street. We made our headquarters in Commodore Varick's

office on the second floor. It was now nearly six, and Miss Priestley, the "literary secretary," had gone home. We had learned that Mr. Henry Varick was still with his mother, but Mme. Storey made no effort to see him as yet. She wished to avoid giving him any reason to suspect that he was being investigated. We interviewed several members of the household whom I need not mention, since they contributed nothing of moment to the case. My job was to take notes of all interviews.

It was not until Mme. Storey had her second talk with Gabbitt, the Commodore's valet, that we began to strike pay ore. The quaint little fuzzy-headed man made an excellent witness, but how far he was telling the truth, I could never have undertaken to say. He was a philosopher in his way. There was a curious reasonableness about him—I mean, that while he was devoted to his master, he nevertheless felt free to criticise him. At this time we were making a more intensive examination of the Commodore's suite.

"Gabbitt," said my mistress, "what were the relations between Mr. Henry and his father?"

"Bad, ma'am," said Gabbitt. "All the world knows that."

"But how do you mean bad?"

"Well, ma'am, it was the usual thing between a rich father and his son. Particularly when it's an only child. When he was little, Mr. Henry was spoiled, and when he grew up his father blamed him because he turned out wilful."

"When did the trouble between them start?"

"Four, five years ago when Mr. Henry was in college. He was very wild. It was one scrape after another."

"With women?"

"Yes, ma'am, gen'ally speakin'. Mr. Henry complained to me once that it wasn't his fault, that they fair flung themselves at his head. Quite apart from being William Henry Varick, and all that, Mr. Henry is a very attractive young man, so gay and full of life."

"So we have perceived," said Mme. Storey.

"He wasn't to blame for all the trouble, though it is only fair to state that he was no Sir Galahad neither."

"It is scarcely to be expected," said my employer dryly.

“His name made him a fair mark for scoundrels, and there was always somebody, either man or woman, trying to blackmail him. It cost the Commodore a pretty penny to settle with such people. The Commodore was *very* sensitive about any scandal attaching to the family name. Mrs. Varick would take her son’s part, naturally, and there were bitter family scenes. My memory is hazy about the details of these scrapes . . .”

“Never mind that,” said Mme. Storey. “Proceed.”

“The Commodore was always reproaching his son for doing nothing but spend money,” Gabbitt continued, “and some time after he had left college —he did not graduate, Mr. Henry undertook to go into business on his own account. In college the only thing he had been any good at was chemistry. . . .”

“Oh, chemistry,” said Mme. Storey.

“Yes, ’m, and so his thoughts naturally turned towards the chemical business. His idea was to form a combination of all the drug manufacturers in the country, and to found a great research laboratory that would advance the whole business. It looked like a good scheme, and his father backed him heavily, stipulating only that the family name be kept out of it. The Commodore didn’t want to be connected with trade in any way.”

“Quite!” said my employer.

“It started off all right, but something happened. I don’t understand the details. Mr. Henry always claimed that he had been rooked. Very likely he lacked the skill and experience to conduct so vast an enterprise. At any rate, there was a tremendous crash, and whereas it had cost the Commodore a few thousands to get his son out of his college scrapes, his liabilities in the chemical affair ran into the millions. The family finances were seriously affected. It led to a bitter quarrel between father and son, and since that time, Mr. Henry has not been seen much about the house. It is said that he visited his mother secretly. Last summer Mrs. Varick patched up a truce between father and son, and in the fall Mr. Henry accompanied us to Europe.”

“Gabbitt,” said Mme. Storey, “from your observation, would you say that the affair between Mr. Henry and the Princess Cristina was a serious one?”

“She thought it was,” said the little man promptly, “and Mr. Henry was undeniably smitten. But we who had watched him grow up were not taken in by it. He was easily smitten. As soon as we sailed home she passed out of his mind. Why, there was a girl on board ship . . .”

“Never mind her,” said my employer good-naturedly, “but tell me what was the last occasion that Mr. Henry saw his father.”

“Day before yesterday, ’m. This is Wednesday, yes, it was Monday afternoon.”

“What were the circumstances of his visit?”

“The Commodore had been telegraphing and telephoning all over the country to find him, the Princess Cristina being here. The general feeling amongst us servants was that Mr. Henry was purposely keeping out of the way. Be that as it may, when he was sent for he had to come. He came on Monday afternoon, and there was a terrible quarrel between him and his father in the study. I supposed that it was over the Princess, being as the Commodore’s heart was set on that match. I was in and out of the dressing-room and the pantry, and just at the end, Mr. Henry opened the door into the foyer, and I heard his father call after him: ‘I never want to see you again!’ And Mr. Henry’s answer, hard and bitter: ‘You shan’t!’ Then the slam of the door, and Mr. Henry was gone!” Gabbitt made a dramatic pause.

“Go on,” said Mme. Storey.

“It had happened before,” he resumed, “and I didn’t take it so serious. Not until yesterday morning, that is, when the Commodore’s lawyer turned up and a new will was made.”

“Oh, a new will.”

“Yes, ma’am. That had happened before, too. But on former occasions the lawyer had been called in and instructions given him, and after a few days he would come back with the will to be signed. This time the will was made on the spot, so I knew the Commodore was bitter angry. The lawyer wrote it out himself on Miss Priestley’s typewriter, and afterwards Miss Priestley and me was called into the study to witness it. It was a short will; scarcely filled one sheet of paper. The top part of the sheet was turned under when we signed, and I don’t know what was in it.”

We were in the pantry at this moment, and while Mme. Storey listened her eyes were passing along the rows of cups and glasses on the little buffet. “One moment,” she said. “Have you got a magnifying glass of any sort? A reading glass will do.”

It was fetched her from the study. She examined the shelves. “Gabbitt, how many of these cups did you set out on the tea-table yesterday?” she asked.

“Two, ma’am. No guests were expected.”

“Any of these glasses?” pointing to a row of tall, iridescent tumblers.

“No, ma’am. Those are for whisky and soda. The Commodore don’t indulge at tea-time.”

My employer passed on into the study without offering any comment. “Well, go on,” she said, and then, very unexpectedly: “Mr. Henry came back yesterday afternoon?”

“Why no, ma’am,” said Gabbitt in great surprise. “Not after such a quarrel!” It seemed to me that he was a little *too* open-eyed, too innocent then.

“No?” said Mme. Storey carelessly. “Well, that’s all now. Thank you very much, Gabbitt.”

He lingered in the doorway, eyeing her anxiously. He was longing to ask *her* a question, but did not dare. Mme. Storey affected to ignore him. He went out.

9

MME. STOREY questioned several of the servants with a view to learning if young Henry Varick had been in the house on the day before. All blandly denied it, nor could she entrap them into any admission.

"Lying," she said coolly, when the last had gone. "Notice that they did not say, 'I did not see him,' but all said, 'He was not here.' "

"Why not ask Mrs. Varick's pretty secretary, Miss Gilsey?" I suggested. "She could tell you."

"Quite," said Mme. Storey, "and would immediately tell Henry that I had asked. I don't want to put him on his guard. I want to meet him as if by accident, and fall into casual talk. If I am able to bring that about, don't you dare to let a note-book appear. Remember all that passes as well as you can, and put it down afterwards."

With Jarboe, my employer pursued a slightly different method. She told the butler it was necessary for her to have a complete lay-out of the house in her mind, especially the second floor, and the three of us strolled around, while he pointed out the different rooms. Mme. Storey said: "The Commodore's suite, and Mrs. Varick's, which adjoins it, occupy the whole of the Avenue frontage on this floor. I've got that straight. What else is there?"

"On the south side is the guest suite lately occupied by the Princess Cristina," said Jarboe, indicating. "And there's an extra bedroom at the back that was given to her lady-in-waiting. Would you like to see the rooms?"

"Oh, no," said Mme. Storey. "I don't suppose they left anything behind."

"Next to the back bedroom comes the grand stairway," Jarboe continued, "and this passage on the left of the stairway leads to the elevator, and on back to the main service corridor and service stairs."

We looked into the service corridor.

"Next to the passage comes another guest-room," Jarboe said, proceeding; "not occupied at present; and on the north side of the house is Mr. Henry's suite, which consists of study and bedroom. The rooms have been his since his schooldays, and are still kept for him with all his things, though he has had a private apartment outside for the past two years."

It was strange to hear how the perfect butler's carefully modulated voice coloured with emotion when he mentioned the darling of the house.

"Mr. Henry is in the house at present," he went on, "and would, I am sure, be glad to have you see the rooms if I mentioned it to him."

"Never mind, thanks," she said.

"On the third floor," said Jarboe, like the guide on a sightseers' 'bus, "there are twenty-five rooms, including several suites for guests, the housekeeper's suite, rooms for the maids, and so on. The footmen sleep in the building across the court, which was once the stables. Would you wish to go upstairs, Madame?"

"No, thanks," said my employer dryly. "Jarboe," she said, in a voice that arrested his spiel, "there's a door there in the back corner, adjoining Mr. Henry's suite, that you have passed over every time we have been around? Where does that go?"

"Another stairway," he said, with an air of great carelessness.

"And where do the stairs go?"

"Just to a passage below."

"And where does that passage go?"

"Nowhere in particular, Madame, just around the court."

"Who uses that stair?"

"Nobody uses it now, Madame. What it may have been designed for originally, I cannot say."

"Well, let us explore it," said Mme. Storey.

The butler followed very unwillingly. The straight, narrow stairway led us into a bare passage with windows looking out on the court. At the right, this passage ended with a door opening on the main service hall and stairway; at the left, it turned a corner and continued around the north side of the court. On this side there was a small door opening from the passage. My employer, trying it, found it locked. The dignified butler had a very unhappy air. He said: "That door leads into the ballroom, Madame. It is used only when there is an entertainment, to facilitate the service. Shall I send for the key?"

"No matter," said Mme. Storey, continuing.

The passage ended on this side at a heavy door locked by a spring lock on our side. That is to say we could open the door, but could not come back that way without putting it on the latch. The wall we passed through here was over a foot thick; evidently a party wall. On the other side of the door the passage turned sharp to the left again. This part ran on endlessly, and was perfectly dark except for a glimmer of light through a glass door over a hundred feet away. There were no doors in it. It was a weird feature to find in a modern house. The door at the end, we found, gave on the street, but it was ingeniously masked by a stoop built over it. There was a heavy iron grill outside, such as they use to protect basement doors. The street we looked on was one strange to us. However, it was not difficult to deduce that it was the next cross street to the north of that on which the public entrances of the Varick house opened. My employer looked at the disconcerted Jarboe with a smile.

"Jarboe," she said, "you are the chief servant of this household. How ridiculous to pretend that you did not know of the existence of this passage. Why, who sweeps it?"

He spread out his hands in gesture of surrender. "Madame, you must pardon me. A good servant never betrays the private affairs of his master. The habit of years was too strong to be broken."

I thought it rather a neat apology.

"You're forgiven," said Mme. Storey, cheerfully. "Now tell me the history of this passage."

"It was constructed during the last rebuilding of the house," said Jarboe. "The Commodore owns the houses at the back of his property, and had this passage made under one of them so that he could enter and leave his house privately. So many people hang about the front door, newspaper reporters, photographers. . . ."

"Process servers," put in Mme. Storey slyly.

"My master was a man of blameless life," said Jarboe with dignity.

"Oh, quite! I don't blame him. What's the use of being a millionaire, if you can't have a little privacy."

Jarboe looked relieved. We strolled back.

"Jarboe," said Mme. Storey, "think before you answer my next question. The truth is bound to come out, and you can best help the family by assisting

me to get at it as quickly as possible. . . . Did young Mr. Henry also use this passage?"

Jarboe stumbled in his speech, gulped hard, and finally blurted out. "Yes, Madame. Mr. Henry was also provided with the two keys necessary to come in this way."

"Did his father know about it?"

"I fancy not, Madame. I fancy Mrs. Varick must have procured the keys for Mr. Henry."

"Ah! Now, Jarboe, the truth! Did not Mr. Henry come in this way yesterday for the purpose of seeing his father?"

"No, Madame, no!" he replied agitatedly.

"But couldn't he have come this way, and gone out again without ever your seeing him?"

"If he had been in the house I should certainly have heard of it, Madame. There are servants everywhere, and everything is talked about."

"That is not quite an answer to my question. Is it not possible that Mr. Henry came this way yesterday and went out again without your seeing him?"

"Of course, it is *possible*, Madame," said Jarboe, with an unhappy air.

10

By-and-by Jarboe came to the office to say: "Mr. Henry Varick's compliments to Madame Storey. He is dining downstairs at half-past seven, and wishes to know if Madame Storey will do him the honour of joining him."

It amused my employer to treat the magnificent Jarboe in an offhand and facetious manner. "But, Jarboe, I have nothing to wear!" she said.

He never smiled. "Under the circumstances, Madame, I am sure Mr. Henry will understand."

"Very well. Tell him that Madame Storey and Miss Brickley will be happy to join him."

Jarboe looked a little dubious at the inclusion of my name. However, he marched off.

"Mr. Henry has decided to take the bull by the horns," remarked Mme. Storey to me.

When the hour arrived, my mistress and I went slowly down the sweeping stairway arm in arm. How I wish I could convey in a phrase the stateliness of that great house. I think proportion had a lot to do with it. The height and width of those noble halls upstairs and down were in exactly the right relation to their length. There were several footmen in the lower hall in plain evening dress, but not quite the same as the astute face of our man Crider amongst them. Certainly no time had been lost in installing and outfitting him. One of the footmen (not Crider) approached us, saying: "Mr. Henry is in the gold room," and led the way across the hall into the middle one of the three great drawing-rooms that filled the Fifth Avenue side of the house. Our young host came forward to greet us.

"I have already seen you to-day," he said to Mme. Storey, "but I did not know you. My mother has told me about you now, and what you are doing for us. It is wonderful of you!"

My employer brought me forward: "My secretary, Miss Brickley."

I turned hot and cold when he looked at me. He had the bluest eyes I have ever beheld, blue as the tropical sea. It was perfectly ridiculous, but the same feeling of helplessness came over me every time he looked at me.

After a courteous greeting, he paid no further attention to me. Giving an arm to Mme. Storey, he led her through the state suite.

"It was very good of you to have us downstairs," she said.

"Oh," he said, with a painful gesture, "nothing is to be gained by crying and carrying on about our loss. I'm done with crying now. Things have got to go on. I ordered dinner downstairs hoping that I could persuade you to join me. We must become acquainted; we must work together."

"Surely," said Mme. Storey.

I resented her coolness. I was enraged by the thought that she was, as I thought, trying to bring the murder home to him. God forgive me! I was jealous of my mistress. Issuing out of the farther drawing-room, we crossed the great central hall again. The dining-room was opposite. It was another long and lofty room with a row of windows at the end that must have looked out on the court. It was dark except for a cluster of shaded candles on the small table, and another cluster on the sideboard. The density of the shadows made the lofty ceiling recede even farther. I felt like an insect under it. Yet, as I presently learned, this was only the family dining-room. There was a state dining-room somewhere else.

Mr. Varick put Mme. Storey at his right and me at his left. "I ordered a small table," he said, "because the family mahogany is depressing for so intimate a party. Would you like more light?"

"This is perfect," said Mme. Storey.

The meal commenced; *hors d'œuvres*, soup, fish, and so on. In the beginning the conversation was merely polite; it seemed to be tacitly agreed that all painful subjects must be deferred until we had at least got our food down. Nobody cared about eating, and many things were sent away untasted. It threatened to go on for ever, until Mme. Storey said in her brusque and humorous way: "Look here, *must* we eat any more?"

"No, no!" he said, rousing himself. He spoke to the footman behind his chair. "Never mind the game, or dessert. Just fruit, coffee, cognac, and cigarettes."

When this was put on the table the servants left the room for good. Mr. Varick leaned towards my mistress. "Well . . . what's the real situation?" he asked in a strained voice.

She spread out her hands. "I have collected a lot of information, but I seem to be no nearer a solution. All I have done is to detain the Princess

Cristina."

"She could hardly have done it!" he said with a half smile. In spite of grief and fatigue that incorrigible smile was always near the surface. "She had nothing against the old man. If it had been me, now."

"My idea, too," said Mme. Storey. "But I had to prevent her sailing."

Quite simply, and with a glint of mirth in his weary eyes, he told us of his affair with the Princess. To his father his casual frankness must have seemed scandalous, but it is only the way of the younger generation. "It was never put up to me in so many words, but of course I knew they wanted me to marry her. And I was willing; she was easy to look at. Besides, I wanted to please the old boy; I've been a thorn in his side ever since I grew up. I had made such a mess of my own affairs always, I thought they might as well have a try at settling them.

"And so it started. But I soon forgot it was a made-up affair. I had never known anybody like Cristina. In fact, I got perfectly crazy about her, though I suppose it didn't go very deep. But I never let on to her she had me going; I didn't dare. For she was a terrible girl, you know, imperious. Wanted to get her little foot firmly planted on your neck, and keep you down. Well, not for Joseph! So I just joshed her. What a delicious little spitfire! We spent the time quarrelling like devils—and making up. It was a heap of fun. Because, you see, in public she was always very much the Princess, and as soon as we got alone together, whew! the lid blew off!

"It wasn't Cristina that I balked at; I could have tamed the little termagant, and enjoyed doing it. It was her life, her gang, it was everything she stood for that stuck in my crop. I don't know if I can explain what I mean. That crowd of decayed aristocrats and cast-off royalties that fluffs around Europe from one expensive resort to another sponging on millionaires. In a going kingdom like England, the King is a real person, but the others are just play-actors. The whole business of Highnessing them, and going down on your marrow bones, and slipping them loans on the sly, is a comic sham. Yet my Dad couldn't see it. If he could buy lunch for a hereditary Prince he was happy. . . . Do you know Europe after the war, Madame Storey?"

"I know it," she said dryly.

"Then I need say no more. By God! that atmosphere would have suffocated me! I'm an American. I must have air. I must be free to say my say, and walk out on the show if I don't fancy it."

"Oh, quite!"

"So I saw almost from the first that marriage was out of the question, and after that I was just out for the fun there was in it. I swear I never thought Cristina was taking it seriously. A hundred times a day she called me a boor, a peasant, a barbarian—with trimmings. She said she'd sooner marry her footman than me. However, since she came to America, I suppose she *did* take it seriously. Those girls over there don't savvy like ours do. Maybe it's because they don't want to. At any rate, they're not such good sports. Oh, well, anything I ever started was bound to turn out badly."

He swallowed a pony of brandy, and continued: "Where I made my mistake was in not having it out with the old man in plain words. But it was impossible to have a thing out with him, unless you both got in a rip-roaring passion. When I tried to talk to him about it, he turned it aside. So I just drifted. When we left Europe I thought the scheme had been dropped. Wrong again! I was soon made to understand by little things that the match was *settled*. In short, that I had to marry the girl. That turned me stubborn and I . . ." He suddenly broke off and took another drink.

"You what?" prompted Mme. Storey.

"Oh, I made up my mind I'd be damned if I would!"

This was obviously not what he had started to say. However, my employer let it pass. "Her coming brought things to a head," she suggested.

"Yes," he said ruefully. "I lit out. But the old man ran me to earth, and I had to come back. Got here Monday, day before yesterday. We had it out then with a vengeance. I tried to reason with him, but he wouldn't listen. Insisted that I had compromised myself. That made me laugh. 'Good God!' I said, 'if a fellow had to marry every girl he had petted, Brigham Young would be nowhere!' He said, in his stiff way: 'It is somewhat different when a Princess is involved!' 'Princess, my eye!' I said; 'her family was kicked out of that job twelve years ago!' We were soon shouting at each other in the old way. He said I had allowed him to commit himself so far that he couldn't draw back, and I said that I didn't give a damn for his commitments, that I was the one who had to marry the girl. He mounted his highest horse. He said that I *had* to marry the girl, and there was no argument about it, so then I played . . ." He suddenly bit his lip, and seized his glass again.

"Played your trump card?" suggested Mme. Storey.

"No," he said with an embarrassed smile, "I didn't have any trumps. Played my last card, I was going to say. I said I wouldn't marry her, and

stood pat."

There was clearly an important omission here, but as Mme. Storey was not supposed to be examining him, she couldn't very well take notice of it. He went on to describe the final scenes of his quarrel with his father. In doing so he completely forgot himself; his cheeks became flushed, and his eyes sparkled with remembered anger as he acted the scene out. "He said he'd cut me off without a cent! And I said go to it!" In the middle of this the blue eyes suddenly went blank, and he caught himself up gasping. "Oh, God! what am I saying! And he lying upstairs cold!" He sprang up from his chair, and walked away into the shadows. He leaned his arms against the wall, and dropped his head upon them. It was terribly affecting.

"However, that has got nothing to do with the tragedy of yesterday," said Mme. Storey soothingly.

"No," he said heavily. He returned and dropped into his chair. All the light had gone out of his face. He stared before him, fingering a wine-glass without noticing what he was doing. "That is a complete mystery," he murmured. "Surely the doctors must be mistaken. Who would want to kill my Dad?"

"Did he cut you off?" asked Mme. Storey—though she knew very well.

"Yes," he said indifferently. "Made a new will yesterday morning."

"When did you learn that?"

"Just a little while ago, from my mother. The lawyer has talked to her."

"How did your father receive you yesterday afternoon?" asked Mme. Storey in a conversational tone.

I could have shrieked a warning to him, but anyhow it would have come too late. He fell directly into her trap. "Well, he had quieted down some," he said gloomily. "But he wouldn't let me talk."

A second later he realised that he had betrayed himself. He lifted a ghastly face towards my employer.

"How . . . how did you know I was here yesterday?" he stammered.

"I didn't know," she answered. "You have just told me."

A horrible silence fell upon us three. I was enraged with my mistress. It didn't seem like the square thing to do, to accept his invitation to dine merely for the purpose of entrapping him. On the other hand I felt a kind of fierce joy in the young man's desperate situation. It seemed to bring me a

little closer to him. If the whole world abandons him I will still be his friend! I told myself.

11

AFTER a while Henry Varick raised his head, and said with a kind of weary defiance: "Well, suppose I did see my father yesterday afternoon? What of it?"

"Nothing," said Mme. Storey mildly. "I am only wondering why you tried to conceal the fact?"

"Well, I was tempted because it seemed easy to conceal it. I came through a secret entrance, and I met nobody. Nobody knew I was in the house except . . . my mother."

"And Miss Gilsey," put in Mme. Storey.

He stared at her again. "You are a terrible woman!" he murmured. ". . . Yes, Miss Gilsey saw me come, because she is always with my mother. But she would not have betrayed me."

"Nor your mother's maids?"

"Nor my mother's maids either. I didn't notice whether they saw me or not . . . As for my reason for concealing my visit, surely that must be clear to you. It appears that my father was taken sick a few minutes after I had left him. Anybody could foresee what a nasty story that would start. The scapegrace son, and all that. My whole past life raked up. My object was simply to keep a dirty mess out of the papers. I had no fear of the outcome. Why, no sensible person would believe that I had done it. A son does not poison his father! It is incredible! Am I a monster?"

Mme. Storey expressed no comment.

"And, anyhow," he went on, "what a fool I would be to make an attempt on my father's life when he had just made a will cutting me off!"

"But you did not know that," she coldly pointed out. "You told me you had just found it out. Yesterday all you knew was that your father *intended* to change his will. On former occasions it had not been accomplished so quickly."

The young man pressed his head between his hands. "Oh, God! what a frightful position I am in!" he groaned.

"Why did you come back yesterday?" asked Mme. Storey.

“For the most natural reason in the world. I had cooled off. I was sorry for some of the things I had said. I hoped he might be sorry too.”

“Were you prepared then to accept the Princess?”

“Oh, no! There was no question about that,” he answered quickly. “I just wanted to say I was sorry. I suppose it won’t be believed, but I loved my father. Besides, why not confess it? I am only human. I was worried about the will. I care for money as little as any man, but the threat that had been held over me was that Theodore Varick, my father’s nephew, was to get it all, in order to carry on the family traditions—Oh, my God! The thought that that . . . excuse me! that *he* might be able to crow over me! that snooper! that worm!—he’s not a man, he’s a water-cooler! Why, for the last five years he’s been sucking up to my dad, sympathising with him for having such a graceless son! Gad! once I had the pleasure of smashing his pasty face and I hope to do it again! Anything to keep Theodore out! I came back prepared to eat humble pie, to agree to anything short of marrying myself to that foreign woman.”

“You went direct to your mother’s room?” prompted Mme. Storey.

“Yes.”

“Did you send word to your father that you were in the house?”

“No, indeed, he would only have refused to see me. I went to his study. I went through all the rooms of the two suites so I wouldn’t show myself outside.”

“Was the Princess still with him?”

“No, he was alone when we . . .”

“Who was with you?” interrupted Mme. Storey.

“Nobody,” he said. “A slip of the tongue. I was thinking of my mother. We had been discussing whether she ought to come with me, but she didn’t.”

“Now, come,” said my employer with dry good-humour. “Isn’t it a fact that Mrs. Varick was out of the house altogether at that hour?”

“Well . . . yes,” he said sullenly. “If you know everything already why ask me? She was out. Is that important?”

“No,” said Mme. Storey. “Go on.”

“Cristina must have just gone, I could smell her perfume, and my father was still fussed.”

“That made it more difficult for you then.”

“No, on the contrary, I think he was relieved that the thing was done with. He treated me pretty decent—for him. Of course, he was pretty stiff with me, he was never the one to admit he had been wrong. But I think he showed it a little. At any rate, he didn’t refuse my hand. He had his tea, and I drank a whisky and soda . . . Gabbitt must have found the glass! Was it he who gave me away?”

“No,” said Mme. Storey. “Every servant in the house knew you had been here, and all of them lied.”

“Well, bless their hearts!” he said with a twisted smile. “I seem to get everybody in wrong. It would have been better if I’d never been born!”

“What did your father say to you?” she asked.

“He scolded me for having sneaked into the house secretly. Said it was very *infra dig*. He was afraid somebody might find me in his study. He sent me away, and told me if I would come back after things had cleared up—by that he meant after Cristina had left the country; she was not named between us—and would come in by the *front door*, he would be glad to see me.”

“He did not refer to the new will he had made?”

“Not a word! He wouldn’t, you see, if he was feeling more kindly towards me. He would just tear it up afterwards. At any rate, I thought he had climbed down a good deal, and I went away happy. . . . At Buffalo in the middle of the night the telegram was put on the train that brought me back. And now everything is ruined! My father is dead, and Theodore has his shoes, I suppose!” His head went down between his hands again.

“Where were you going on the train?” asked Mme. Storey.

“Nowhere in particular. Just keeping out of the way until Cristina sailed.”

“How unlucky that there was no witness to the final interview with your father,” remarked Mme. Storey. It had the sound of a question.

He hesitated for the fraction of a second; his eyes bolted painfully; then he blurted out: “No, there was no witness.”

12

Soon afterwards we left the dining-room, and sauntered down the great hall. Following upon the little outburst of emotion that I have described, we had assumed the ordinary appearances of good form. It is instinctive. Nothing in my employer's manner suggested that Henry Varick had rendered himself an object of suspicion by his disclosures. She talked of ordinary matters in an ordinary manner. He answered in kind, of course, but I could see from his uneasy glances that he did not know what to make of her. He was wondering whether he had to deal with an agent of the police who was trying to entrap him, or with a woman of the world who took everything as it came. As a matter of fact, my employer was both.

"The library is at the other end," he said; "it's a pleasant room. Let's go in there."

It was a most inviting room, but "library" I judged to be a polite fiction; there were no books visible. Though the spring was well advanced there was a wood fire burning on the hearth which gave off a most agreeable warmth. We ranged ourselves before it in luxurious easy-chairs, and talked like congenial acquaintances, who had nothing in particular on their minds. This sort of rambling casual conversation is one of Mme. Storey's most insidious lines of attack, and I could see that Henry Varick was growing more and more visibly uneasy. He must have been under a terrible strain. The only other light beside the fire was given by a shaded reading-lamp in a corner.

I say we talked, but the truth is they talked, while I sat perfectly silent, feeding my infatuation with the sight of that handsome young face in the firelight, haggard with passionate emotion. It was most of all tragic when he smiled in a reckless boy fashion, trying to carry things off lightly. I was in a rapt state, scarcely mistress of myself. It only needed a spark to set *me* off. While we sat there a footman came in with a note for Mme. Storey. This I judged must come from Inspector Rumsey via the underground channel they had provided. She read it with a bland face, tore it into small pieces, and tossed them on the fire.

"From Inspector Rumsey," she said. "He says he can trace no sales of aconitina recently."

I guessed that there was more in it than this, and so, apparently did Henry Varick. He watched the little pieces catch fire one by one with an expression of balked curiosity.

More conversation followed. Mme. Storey discussed her work on the case with apparent frankness. Some time afterwards, long enough anyhow for us not to connect what she said with the arrival of the note, she brought the talk around to the plan of the second floor. “In order to be able to figure out what happened, I must have that clear in my mind,” she said. “I visited most of the rooms to-day, but I didn’t like to go into your suite without having you along.”

There was but one thing that he could reply to this. “Shall we go up now?”

“If you don’t mind.”

It was rather touching to find in that grand house a simple boy’s room. I judged that it had been changed very little since Henry Varick was fifteen or sixteen years old. The school pennants were still tacked on the walls, and that type of picture that adolescent boys like, depicting flamboyant misses in sports clothes. There were fencing foils and masks hung up; a set of boxing gloves; a shotgun, a rifle, and various sporting trophies. There was an armoire full of baseball bats, hockey sticks, tennis rackets and like impedimenta. Evidently young Henry had been no effete son of luxury.

This was the “study,” which like “library” downstairs was a misnomer. Two shelves, and those not full, contained all the books. Many of them I noticed dealt with chemistry and drugs. Mme. Storey pulled out a fat green volume that was entitled: *Pharmacology and Therapeutics* and skimmed through it. “Have you consulted this lately?” she asked.

“Not in years,” he said carelessly.

She then did something that I had seen her do before; a simple trick that has an uncanny effectiveness. Holding the book loosely between her two hands, she let it fall open of itself. She repeated this two or three times. “Yet I should say that it *has* been consulted recently,” she said quietly, “and more than once. See! It opens of itself on page 425.”

We looked over her shoulder, he on one side, I on the other, and there we saw staring at us from the page a chapter heading: XXI—ACONITINE.

It gave me a horrid shock; Henry Varick, too. He stepped back, his face working spasmodically.

“Well,” he said harshly, “does that prove anything?”

“No,” said Mme. Storey, closing the book and putting it back.

“Anyhow,” he went on, in a loud, strained voice, “I am perfectly familiar with the action of aconite. I wouldn’t have to consult that book.” This was an answer that cut both ways.

The next object of interest in the room was a glass fronted curio cabinet that contained the schoolboy’s collections. One saw the usual things neatly set out on the shelves; the minerals, the fossils, the arrowheads and pipe bowls. And on the lower shelves; butterflies, beetles, birds’ eggs and miscellaneous souvenirs. It was more comprehensive than the usual youngsters’ gatherings, because this boy had been well supplied with money. I could picture the handsome, intent stripling arranging his treasures.

“Where is your collection of drugs?” asked Mme. Storey quietly.

It came like a blow. He caught his breath, and started to answer, but she checked him with a sudden, involuntary gesture. “Ah, don’t lie to me!” she said with real feeling. “It shames you and me both. I am to blame. I will deceive you no longer. The letter that I got from Inspector Rumsey said: ‘I have learned that Henry Varick while he was engaged in the drug business caused a collection to be made of samples of every drug. The samples were contained in a walnut case which was sent to his home. Presumably the drug aconitina was included amongst the rest, but I cannot verify this at the moment. See if you can trace the case.’ ”

“I wasn’t going to lie to you,” Henry Varick said in his rapid, strained voice. “I had such a collection, but I destroyed it two years ago. When the trust busted I was sick of the business. Besides, such a thing was too dangerous to have lying around.”

It was only too clear that he was lying then. It made me feel sick at heart.

“How did you destroy it?” asked Madame Storey.

“Burned it up entire in the furnace downstairs.”

She said no more, but led the way into the bedroom adjoining, a bare and sparsely furnished chamber almost like a hospital room. Amidst the almost oppressive luxury of that house it was like a breath of fresh air. In one corner stood a narrow white bed.

Mme. Storey stood in the doorway looking around her without speaking. Out of the corner of my eye I could see that the face of the young man beside me was livid and sweating. I suffered with him. Finally, my employer said in a deadly quiet voice: “Turn down the mattress, Bella.”

A groan was forced from the young man that seemed to come from his very entrails. “Oh, God! I’m lost!”

With trembling arms I obeyed my mistress. Between mattresses and springs there was revealed a flat square walnut box of the sort that artists use to carry their paints in. Evidently, it had been hastily thrust there while a better hiding place was sought, or a chance to destroy it.

“Have you anything to say?” asked Mme. Storey.

He broke into a bitter fleering laughter. “Say? What do you want me to say? You’ve got a case against me, haven’t you? Better proceed with it. I guess I’ve reached the point where I’d better keep my mouth shut without advice of counsel.” This was merely the bravado of one who was half-crazed.

Meanwhile, I had laid the box on the bed, and let the mattress fall back into place. The box was locked.

“Have you the key?” asked Mme. Storey.

“What’s the use?” he cried. “I admit the stuff was there, and it’s gone now.” Nevertheless, he produced his keys, and sought for the right one.

“Have those keys ever been out of your possession?” she asked.

“No.”

“Was there ever another key?”

“No.”

I could no longer keep still. I was in a state approaching collapse myself. “You are convicting yourself!” I cried to him.

“Oh, what does it matter?” he said.

My mistress gave me a curious glance of pity. I didn’t want pity from her. In the condition of mind that I was in, she represented the enemy. “When did you put it under the mattress?” she asked.

“This afternoon. I intended to burn it to-night when the house was quiet.”

“Oh, keep still! keep still!” I cried, clasping my hands. Neither paid any attention to me.

“Where was it before that?”

“In the curio cabinet.”

“Has anybody a key to that cabinet but yourself?”

“No.”

By this time the box was open. It was lined with red velvet, and was divided into scores of little grooves holding glass phials full of drugs, stopped with wax or some such substance. Each phial had its label neatly pasted around it; and as a further precaution, there was a number under each groove, and an index pasted into the top of the box. *One groove was empty!* Under it was the number 63, and our eyes flew to the index above, we read opposite 63; Aconitina.

13

MME. STOREY sent for Jarboe, and Mr. Henry was locked in his bedroom. The windows looked out upon a stone paved well or court about thirty feet below, and there was no way he could have escaped short of wings. However, the house was full of the young man's friends, and my mistress telephoned to Inspector Rumsey for a guard to be sent. This man, Manby, was posted in the outer room of the suite. Jarboe was heartbroken by this turn of affairs. We took nobody else into our confidence. When Mrs. Varick learned her son was a prisoner we expected the devil to pay.

Mme. Storey and I slept in the house. Early next morning the body of Commodore Varick was privately removed to the family vault in Woodlawn cemetery, there to await further orders from the police. There had been no official reading of the will, but everybody in the house now seemed to know what it contained. The Commodore had created a great trust fund of which his wife was to be sole beneficiary during her lifetime. Upon her death the fortune was to be divided into three equal parts, of which one was to go to the New York Hospital, one to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and one to Yale University. Mr. Henry's worst fear was not realised, inasmuch as Mr. Theodore Varick's name did not appear.

In describing the dramatic scenes that took place inside the house, I must not omit mention of the efficient, but quite unspectacular spade work that was going on outside. There was a small army of operatives engaged on the case. To ensure secrecy, Inspector Rumsey had agreed that, at any rate for the first twenty-four hours, our men should be principally used on this work. Every move of Dr. Slingluff's and Miss Priestley's was shadowed. On Miss Gilsey we could get no line because she lived in the house, and had never left it since the murder. The valet, Gabbitt, and indeed, all the servants in the house were picked up whenever they went out. Frequent reports from these operatives reached Mme. Storey under cover to Mrs. Varick.

In addition to these outside men, our best operative, Crider, was installed as a footman inside the house. Crider's work however, resulted in nothing. He complained that from the very first, every servant in the house was aware of who he was, and became mum in his presence. This looked as if Jarboe had played us false, since none but he knew where Crider had come from. By a clever piece of detective work the police had established that the first anonymous letter (the one addressed to Inspector Rumsey) had been mailed

in a pillar box on Lexington Avenue somewhere between 36th and 42nd Streets shortly before eleven on Tuesday night; whereas the second letter (addressed to Mme. Storey) had been dropped in a chute at the branch post office in the Grand Central Station at 3.30 on Wednesday afternoon. The peculiarly formed characters had aided in the tracing of these letters.

A report had been received from the chemists to whom Commodore Varick's medicines had been sent the day before. It was to the effect that they contained nothing but what was represented on the labels; the first, a tincture of digitalis of the usual strength; the second, capsules containing a simple compound of pepsin and bismuth.

Mme. Storey and I established ourselves in Commodore Varick's office. My mistress dictated to me some notes she had taken of an examination of one of the maids while I was busy elsewhere. This maid, Nellie Hannaford by name, had removed the tea things from the Commodore's study. Hannaford said she met nobody in the Commodore's suite. She said that Gabbitt had already been sent for to come to his master, but there were three doors between her and the Commodore's bedroom, and she saw nothing, nor heard nothing that led her to suppose the master had been taken sick. In fact, she hadn't heard anything about his sickness until after he was dead.

She said she found on the study table two empty cups that had contained tea, and another cup in the service pantry full of tea that had been made and not drunk. Four of the tea balls had been used, indicating that four cups of tea had been made. The cups belonged to a tea service that was kept in the Commodore's suite, and it was her duty to wash them in the pantry, and return them to the shelves. She denied having found a glass that had contained whisky and soda. (In making this statement we supposed she was lying.)

"Who could the third cup of tea have been for?" I asked involuntarily.

"Think, Bella," said my employer with a smile. "Surely it was obvious when we questioned Henry Varick last night, that he did not go to his father's study alone. Mrs. Varick was out of the house, remember."

The picture of a lovely blue-eyed face rose before my mind's eye, a face stony with distress. Estelle Gilsey! I thought in amazement. Another one! Good Heavens! this young man was entangled amongst women like a horseman in a thicket! While we were still engaged in routine work Miss Priestley entered the room. The tall dark girl still had faintly the look of one suffering from shock. Her curious parrot-like utterance carried out the idea. What she said seemed to have no relation to the remote, sombre glance of

her dark eyes. It was her room that we were working in, and Mme. Storey apologised politely.

"Oh," said Miss Priestley with a gesture, "I scarcely know what right *I* have here now that the Commodore is gone. The bottom has fallen out of everything. It is just a blind instinct that brings me back to finish his work as far as I can. . . . I will carry it into the study if I am in your way."

"No, indeed!" said Mme. Storey. "If anybody moves, it shan't be you. At present we are only engaged in routine work."

Lighting a cigarette, my employer leaned back in her chair, and started chatting with the girl in offhand, friendly fashion. She told Miss Priestley many of the details of the case that had come to light overnight, but not the more important developments. And then, characteristically, she graduated by insensible degrees from the act of *giving* information into that of *seeking* it.

"I expect that will be a very interesting book," she remarked, with a nod towards the pile of typescript that the secretary had taken from a drawer.

"Oh, yes!" said Miss Priestley; "the Commodore was acquainted with all of the most eminent persons of his time."

"And, of course, his end will give the book a tragic interest now."

"Oh, don't!" said the girl with one of her curious wooden gestures. "It is too dreadful to reflect that what you say is true!"

"Is it nearly finished?" asked Mme. Storey.

"Yes. I shall be able to bring it up to the end of 1918. That will include all the most interesting parts of the Commodore's life."

"How long had he been working on it?"

"Since last May. It is just a year since he engaged me to help him with it."

"A year!" said Mme. Storey. "Bless me! Isn't that a long time to take in writing a book? I understood that books were written overnight nowadays."

"Not this one," said the girl patting the sheets. "The Commodore took the greatest pains in polishing his style. . . . Besides, you must remember that he was a man of many engagements. He could not spare very much time to it."

"Did he work on it when he was in Europe last winter?"

"No. He had no intention of doing so. The script was left at home."

“What did you do during that time?”

“I stayed at home. The Commodore was good enough to pay me my salary while he was away. I was so familiar with the work that he wished to be sure of getting me to go on with it when he returned.”

“Was Mr. Henry interested in this work of his father’s?”

“I can hardly say that he was interested in it. Mr. Henry is not very literary.”

“But he knew that it existed?”

“Oh, yes. He was in and out of the house all last summer at Easthampton while we were working on it. A reconciliation took place between Mr. Henry and his father in June, and he stayed a month with us.”

The conversation was rudely broken off at this point. If my description of the plan of the house was clear, it will be remembered that the room beyond the Commodore’s office was Mr. Henry’s study. There was a door between, but it was not used. I suppose it had been locked when the rooms were first divided into suites. From the next room we heard a suppressed shriek. Mme. Storey and I both jumped to our feet, but Miss Priestley was before us. That strange girl, as if electrified by the sound, was out of the door like a flash and in through the next door, Mme. Storey and I making a bad second and third. In Mr. Henry’s study the situation could be read at a glance. The detective stood barring the way to the bedroom door. Facing him stood Estelle Gilsey frozen with horror, one hand clapped over her mouth as if to still an incontrollable need to shriek. A black dress emphasised the fragility of her fair beauty. She turned to my mistress.

“He won’t let me in!” she gasped. “. . . He is a policeman! . . . Henry is arrested . . .!”

Before my mistress could answer her Miss Priestley spoke. The dark girl held herself like a very Juno then, her handsome face icy with scorn. Her self-control was in very odd contrast to her mad dash out of the room just now. Verily, as I knew to my cost, a woman’s infatuation leads her to cut strange capers! I perceived in Julia Priestley still another victim. She said with a superb air of scorn: “What are you doing here?”

The blonde girl beyond half a glance paid no attention to her. She repeated her agonised question of my mistress: “Is he arrested?”

“What are you doing in his room?” reiterated Miss Priestley. “In his bedroom? Have you no shame?”

Miss Gilsey turned on her then. It appeared that the blue eyes could flash sparks, too. “What business is it of yours?” she demanded.

“You would not have dared while the Commodore was alive!” cried the other girl. “His body has scarcely been carried out of the house. You are shameless!”

“Be quiet!” cried the blonde girl, stamping her foot. “Everybody knows what’s the matter with *you*!”

What a scene! It appeared that the delicate little thing could show her claws, too. We are indeed all alike under our skins. My mistress was taking it all in with a sphinx-like regard. To add to the confusion Mr. Henry began to pound on the other side of the bedroom door. “Let me out! Let me out!”

Mme. Storey nodded to the detective, who thereupon opened the door. Henry Varick seemed to catapult out of the inner room. He had eyes for none of us except Miss Gilsey. He seized her in his arms. “Oh, my darling!” he murmured.

She, too, forgot the world. Her arms wreathed themselves around his neck. “Henry! . . . Henry . . .!” she murmured. I thought she was about to faint.

So it was revealed at last which one among the many girls young Henry favoured. I experienced no feeling of jealousy against Estelle Gilsey. In the first place, I had seen from the beginning that there was some sort of an understanding between them, and anyhow, in my crazy infatuation there was no thought of self. I cannot say as much for Julia Priestley. She surveyed this scene with cold and amused scorn, but the rising and falling of her breast betrayed the inner tempest. She uttered two words: “Good comedy!”

That drew Henry’s attention to her. When he perceived who it was he dropped his girl as if she had been red hot. He flushed and then paled, and a craven look came into his face that was very painful to see if you were fond of him. The tall girl seemed taller still, regarding him like an empress with flashing eyes. He could not face the situation. He turned and fled back into his bedroom.

Estelle made as if to follow him. “Henry!” she gasped. But at that moment there was a knock on the outer door, and she stopped. Strange it was to see how we all drew masks over our faces. There was one thing all were agreed upon in that house; to hush things up. Estelle allowed the detective to lock the bedroom door. Meanwhile, Mme. Storey opened the other. It was Jarboe, showing an anxious face. Evidently he had heard

something, but had succeeded in keeping the other servants off. Mme. Storey reassured him with a word, and he went away again.

But the interruption had put a permanent quietus on the scene. Both girls had had time to reflect on the danger of giving too much away. Each was now elaborately ignoring the other. As soon as Jarboe was out of the way, the tall beauty marched out of the room with her head up, and, as you might say, all colours flying. When she disappeared the little blonde's head went down, and she began to shake. She struggled hard to get a grip on herself, but couldn't make it. Apparently she thought it was useless to ask to see Henry again. With her face working incontrollably, she suddenly darted for the outer door.

Mme. Storey detained her for a moment. "Keep the secret from Mrs. Varick as long as possible," she said. "Don't return to her until you can show a smooth face."

The girl nodded her head mutely, and flew. When we returned to the next room the other one, extraordinary creature! was tapping away at her typewriter as if she had never left it.

15

THE next thing that happened was the arrival of Inspector Rumsey at the Varick house. It transpired that Mme. Storey had sent for him before I was up. He arrived in a closed car by way of the courtyard. We three retired into the Commodore's study to consult.

"I must yield up my responsibility in this case," said Mme. Storey at once.

"Hey?" said the Inspector, very much startled. "What's the matter?"

"The situation here grows worse and worse," said my employer, "and I cannot any longer be responsible to the police. It ties my hands. It forces me to act in a manner counter to my best judgment."

"But you have full liberty of action," he protested.

"No I have not. Sit down, and let me tell you the whole situation," which she proceeded to do. I helped out by reading portions of the notes I had taken.

When she had come to an end the Inspector shook his head heavily. "Bad! Bad!" he said. "I quite understand your feelings. But my duty is clear, of course. I must arrest Henry Varick."

"That is what I expected you to say," said Mme. Storey with a faint smile; "and that is why I must wash my hands of you. Because *I am not satisfied that Henry Varick poisoned his father*."

My heart jumped for joy hearing her say this. I felt that I had found my dear mistress again. I blamed myself for having doubted even a moment that her heart was in the right place.

"But," protested the Inspector, "Commodore Varick died of a dose of aconite; his son was the last person to be with him before he was taken sick; by his own admission he had eaten and drunk with his father; and Henry Varick *had the aconite*. Why, it's a *prima facie* case!"

"Not quite," said my employer. "And anyhow, I don't care if it is or not. I may say that there is even more damaging evidence against Henry Varick. I know it is there, though I have not yet brought it out. It wouldn't make any difference. All the evidence in the world would not satisfy me."

"You are illogical," complained the Inspector.

Mme. Storey arose and tossed her hands up. “Ah, there’s the rub!” she cried. “There’s the old point of division between you and me. You work by logic, my friend, and I by intuition. Oh, everybody is on your side—everybody except Bella here, who is just another silly woman and doesn’t count—lawyers, judges, juries and the great public, all on your side, all they think of is evidence. It’s absurd the importance they attach to evidence, which is the most unreliable thing in the world.”

“You can’t take intuition into a court of law,” said the Inspector.

“So much the worse for the court,” she retorted. “That’s why so many trials are solemn farces. And look at the work it makes for me! Three quarters of my time, I suppose, is spent in digging up ‘evidence’ to prove what anybody can see is so at a glance!”

It was impossible to tell whether she was speaking quite seriously or not. This was an old subject of dispute between her and the Inspector.

He said: “Well, to return to Henry Varick; what makes you suspect he may not have done it?”

“The whole character of the man, and all the former acts of his life so far as they have come to light.”

“I can’t go with you there!” said the Inspector. “My whole experience teaches me that murder crops out in the most unexpected places.”

I saw a retort spring to my mistress’s lips, but she withheld it, for fear, I suppose, of hurting our old friend’s feelings. She said: “Granted. I base my opinion of Henry Varick’s innocence on what I have observed of him during the past twenty-four hours. On what he said; on the way he looked when he said it; and on the tones of his voice. There are men, of course, who can simulate anything, but he is not one of them. He is just an ordinary, scatterbrained, impulsive young fellow, who has been a little spoiled by too much kindness—especially from our sex; and who has never taken serious thought of anything in his life.”

“I have not had the advantage of seeing him,” said the Inspector dryly. He thought that Mme. Storey had fallen a victim to the young man’s charm like all the other women.

It did not escape her. “It is true, what you are thinking of,” she said with a laugh. “I am crazy about him. But, letting that go for the moment, consider actions. A murder by poison, of course, is not committed in the heat of passion; it requires planning. If he planned this out, is it reasonable to

suppose that he would go off to Buffalo, and leave that tell-tale of drugs here in the house?"

"They always forget something."

"Surely! But not *the* thing."

"Does your intuition suggest who *did* commit this murder?" he asked dryly.

"I may have my notions," she said, "but I do not intend to speak of them until I have dug up the necessary evidence."

"How long will that take you?"

"How can I tell?" she said, spreading out her hands. "I may never get it. Lots of things which are as plain as the nose before your face cannot be *proven*."

"What is the additional evidence against Henry Varick that you spoke of?" he asked. "I suppose I have the right to ask for that."

"Oh, assuredly!" she said, turning away with a gesture. "But it's so painful! so very painful! However, all must come out, of course." She turned back. "Will you promise me not to allow this last disclosure to reach Henry Varick's ears for a week?"

"But why?" he demanded.

"Simply because it would break his heart."

"Oh, very well," he said, a little nettled. He thought we had both lost our heads over the young man.

"Let us find out if Dr. Slingluff is in the house," said Mme. Storey. "He has been making frequent visits to Mrs. Varick."

My heart began to beat as soon as this name was mentioned. From the first I had suspected that the secret was in the possession of the family doctor. Gabbitt was despatched to find him. Within five minutes he returned, having the handsome, dignified practitioner in tow. Mme. Storey introduced the two men to each other. As soon as he learned that he was facing a police officer, Dr. Slingluff began to sweat. He was such a nice looking man that it was painful to see. My employer wasted no time in beating around the bush. She said: "Doctor, we had a painful interview yesterday, and a still more painful one is before us. It was perfectly evident to me yesterday that you were—if you will excuse me, lying! It may have been from the highest motives, but it was nevertheless—lying!"

He puffed out his cheeks. “Madam!” he cried, “your sex protects you. No man would dare . . .”

“Why become angry?” she interrupted with a smile. “If I am wrong you can afford to laugh at me.”

He subsided.

“What the Inspector and I want to know is,” she went on, “why you signed that certificate as you did, when you knew that Commodore Varick had been poisoned.”

“I did not know it!” he cried. “I have already told you . . .”

“Now, doctor,” she said cajolingly, “with your skill, your vast experience, you cannot expect us to believe that.”

“I don’t care whether you believe it or not!” he cried. “It’s true!”

“You’re a naturally truthful man,” said Mme. Storey, “and lying like everything else to be successful requires practice.” She pointed to a little diamond shaped mirror that was let into the top of the escritoire. “Look at yourself in the glass, doctor. If you saw that face upon another would you not say that the man behind it was lying?”

He would not look, of course, but strode away, cursing under his breath.

“Consider a moment,” she went on. “I am your friend because I believe that you are actuated by the highest motives. Won’t you fare better with me than you would with a bawling lawyer in open court? You can’t get away with this. If you persist in trying to do so, an inevitable public humiliation awaits you.”

He dropped in a chair and flung up his hands, “Very well,” he said, “I was lying! . . . Oh, God! what a relief!” He wiped his face and forehead with his handkerchief.

“Why did you lie?” asked Mme. Storey.

“Because the Commodore asked me to. He was my oldest friend.”

“Ask you to!” interpolated the Inspector in astonishment.

“The moment I clapped eyes on the Commodore I saw that he had been poisoned,” said Dr. Slingluff. “I suspected aconite owing to the intolerable prickling of the skin of which he complained. No other poison gives rise to that symptom. I sent Gabbitt on the run to my office for atropine, but I saw that it was too late for atropine or anything else. My real reason was to get

the man out of the room because I saw my friend had something of a private nature to say to me. He took one of my hands between his; he was perfectly conscious, but I had to stoop low to hear him. He said: 'Fred, I have been poisoned!' I nodded. He said with an agonised look of entreaty in his eyes: 'Keep it a secret, Fred. It rests with you. Oh, God! don't let me die with the fear of disgrace and horror on me!' And so I promised, and a look of relief came into his dying eyes. Could I have acted differently?"

"Certainly not," said Mme. Storey. "But was that all?"

"That was all."

"You're an enlightened man," she said, "you're the sort of man, I take it, who reserves the right to think and to act for himself on all occasions."

"I hope so," said Doctor Slingluff.

"Well, wouldn't it be consistent with your idea of what is right to give such a promise to a dying man to ease his death, and then break it afterwards if the public interest demanded?"

He saw that he was in a trap, and refused to answer.

"You see," said Mme. Storey mildly, "you have not yet told me why you lied."

Silence from the doctor.

"Commodore Varick also, was a man of the world," she went on, "he must have known that in asking such a thing of you, he was asking you to betray your professional reputation, your duty to the State. Didn't he appear to be aware of this?"

"No," said Dr. Slingluff.

"Didn't he give any reason for making such a request?"

"No!"

"Didn't he," Mme. Storey asked very softly, "didn't he tell you who poisoned him?"

The same symptoms of extreme agitation appeared in the doctor's candid face but he said, as before: "No!"

Mme. Storey sighed. She said: "It may help to clarify the situation if I tell you that Henry Varick has been under arrest since last night. We have built up a strong case against him."

Doctor Slingluff started up out of his chair, and dropped back again in a heap. His eyes seemed to start out of his head in horror. Then he covered his face. “Henry arrested!” he groaned. “Then everything is over!”

“You see there is no further occasion for lying,” said my mistress gently.

“No!” he murmured wretchedly. “No! God help us!”

“What were Commodore Varick’s last words to you before he died?” asked Mme. Storey.

“He said,” came the husky reply, “he said . . . Henry poisoned me.”

I pass over my private feelings at that moment. The others shared them at least to some degree, I fancy. As Mme. Storey had said, the situation was too painful. After the stricken doctor had left the room, Inspector Rumsey turned to my employer in a kind of amazement. “And you knew it all the time?” he said. “You knew what was coming?”

“Yes, I knew it,” she said soberly, “in a way.”

“How *could* you have known it?”

“By intuition. There was no other way of accounting for the doctor’s agony of mind yesterday when I questioned him.”

“Can you still tell me that you are not satisfied as to this young man’s guilt?” demanded the Inspector.

“I am not satisfied,” said Mme. Storey stoutly. “In this latest disclosure there is merely an emotional effect, there is no proof. You are crushed by the horror of that father’s death, believing that his son had poisoned him. Suppose he was mistaken?”

“Impossible!”

“Suppose the Commodore had taken several substances into his mouth about that time, how could he know which might have contained the poison?”

“By the remembered taste afterwards.”

“It may have been disguised.”

“You are simply hoping against hope,” said Inspector Rumsey. “My duty is clear. I must take Henry Varick down to headquarters.”

Mme. Storey spread out her hands in surrender.

16

HOWEVER, HENRY VARICK was not taken away just then. Mme. Storey said; "Before we part company in this case, Inspector . . ."

He interrupted her in great concern: "Part company?"

"Well, hereafter, I suppose you will be for the prosecution and I for the defence. But let us try one last expedient together with a view to discovering the truth."

"What do you propose?" he asked.

"You are familiar with the criminal procedure in France and Italy," she answered; "how they bring accused and accusers face to face in the court room, and let them shout at each other, the idea being that the truth will somehow reveal itself in spite of them. It's not a perfect method, but it has its points; if there must be shouting in court it seems more reasonable to let the principals do it than their hired lawyers, as we arrange it over here. I propose that we have Henry Varick and his accuser in here together."

"But his father was his accuser," objected the Inspector, "and he is dead."

"He has another accuser," said Mme. Storey. "Telephone to Mauley to fetch him in here, and I'll produce her."

He did so. Meanwhile Mme. Storey went to the door into the office. When she opened it one could hear the uninterrupted tapping of the typewriter within. She said: "Miss Priestley, will you be good enough to come in here for a moment."

The secretary entered with a look of polite surprise. Inspector Rumsey's eyes opened at the sight of her, and that indefinable change took place in him that one always sees in a man upon the entrance of beauty. My heart began to beat again, foreseeing another painful scene. I wished myself away from there, for I felt that I had had about all I could bear.

A moment later Henry Varick was brought in. The detective was sent back to wait until he was called for again. Henry knew by instinct, I suppose, that the stranger in the room was a police official, and a desperate look came into his eyes. When he saw Julia Priestley also, he changed colour, and looked around him wildly like a trapped creature. All this created a very unfavourable impression on the Inspector. Guilty! his look

said just as clearly as if he had enunciated the word. But good Heavens! the unfortunate young man was half mad with grief and terror. How could he have looked any differently? If I had been in his place, I should have looked just the same. So far as I could see, Miss Priestley never looked at him.

"Sit down," said Mme. Storey to Miss Priestley. My employer had assumed a bland and smiling air that might have concealed anything.

Henry was not invited to take a chair, but he did so anyway, not having become accustomed as yet to being treated as an inferior. So there we were, the five of us. We were grouped around a table at the end of the room farthest from the fireplace. It was the same table upon which tea had been served two days before—the Commodore's last meal. The Inspector was seated directly at the table, and myself a little behind him. My mistress had told me not to produce a note-book, so I had nothing to do but sit with my hands in my lap and look on. Mr. Henry had his back to the windows, and Miss Priestley was across the room. Mme. Storey was between them, but she did not remain in one position, frequently rising to pace back and forth.

She said to Miss Priestley with her blandest air: "I asked you in, knowing your great interest in this matter. Our labours are completed for the moment. It would not be proper for me to say that Mr. Henry Varick is guilty, but our case against him is complete. He is about to be arrested."

A haunted look came into the young man's face as he listened to this. It seemed like gratuitous cruelty on the part of my mistress, but it was all part of her plan.

"Inspector Rumsey and I want to thank you for the great assistance you have rendered us," she said.

The girl started. "I don't understand you," she said.

"I am referring to the two letters you wrote," said Mme. Storey. "One to Inspector Rumsey and one to me. The first started this investigation, and the second directed it into the right channel."

This was a surprising piece of news to me, and, likewise, to the Inspector. But both of us looked as if we had known it all along.

"I wrote no such letters," said Miss Priestley with an air of great astonishment.

"Oh, I quite understand your reasons for wishing to keep in the background," said Mme. Storey with a friendly smile. "They do you credit. But unfortunately we need you for a witness."

The girl shook her head with a mystified air. “What reason have you to suppose that I wrote the letters you speak of?” she asked.

Mme. Storey went to the escritoire, and unlocked the drawer that I had seen her lock on the day before. From it she took the sheet of paper she had then put away. There was a slip clipped to it that she detached. “This appears to be a sketch for a title page to Commodore Varick’s book,” she said. “As soon as I saw the lettering I recognised the same hand that had written the two anonymous notes. There is just as much character in block letters, of course, as in written ones. You have a taste for lettering, I see. The characters are formed with care.”

Miss Priestley did not turn a hair. Glancing at the paper, she said with a smile: “I am sorry for the truth of your deductions, but that sketch was made by Commodore Varick, not by me.”

“That can hardly be,” said my employer, still most polite, “because this slip was pinned to it. I read upon it: ‘Here is a sketch I have made. I hope you like it.’ And signed with your initials: J. P.”

“Oh, then I have made a mistake,” said the girl with the utmost coolness. “So many sketches were made at different times; some by the Commodore and some by me. . . . However, I know nothing about any anonymous letters.”

“Ah, you can’t be allowed to keep modesty in the background,” said Mme. Storey smiling. “In the net of espionage we have spread you had to be included, of course, and we know all about your movements during the past thirty-six hours. You live in an apartment on Lexington Avenue at Thirty-Seventh Street. From a hall boy there we have learned that you went out about nine-thirty on Tuesday night, returning in a moment or two with a newspaper. The incident was fixed in the boy’s mind, because he wondered why you hadn’t sent him for it. The late editions that night carried the first news of Commodore Varick’s death. When you read that his death had been ascribed to natural causes, you feared that the ends of justice would be defeated, and you wrote the first letter. You came out with it a half-hour or so later, and again the hall boy wondered why you didn’t let him post it. But you had a very good reason, of course. It was addressed to Inspector Rumsey at Police Headquarters. Through the post office we have established that that letter was posted on Lexington Avenue somewhere between Thirty-Sixth Street and Forty-Second, and was taken up in the eleven o’clock collection.”

Miss Priestley listened to this with an enigmatic smile. It was all a mystery to Henry Varick, of course. He sat forward in his chair listening with strained anxiety.

"The second letter we can bring even closer to you," Mme. Storey went on. "You will remember you and I were talking in the next room about half-past two yesterday, when the name of the Princess Cristina was suddenly injected into the case, and I went tearing off to find her. Again you thought the real criminal was likely to escape, and you sat down and wrote the second note. You left this house at three-ten, somewhat earlier than your custom. You were picked up by a detective and followed. You entered the branch post office in the Grand Central Station, and dropped a letter in a chute. My operative could not see the address; however the post office has reported to us that the second anonymous letter was received through a chute in that post office and cancelled at 3.30."

"Well, I give in," said the girl with a calm gesture. "I didn't want to appear in this horrible case, but I see it is inevitable."

"Inspector Rumsey and I have only one question to ask you," said Mme. Storey. "How did you know that Commodore Varick had been poisoned."

"I didn't know it," she said quickly, "I only suspected it."

"Your first note stated it as a fact."

"I know. I thought an investigation ought to be made. I thought that would be the best way of bringing it about."

"Oh, quite. What made you suspect that he had been poisoned?"

Miss Priestley hesitated. She glanced fleetingly at Henry through her lashes. "Ought he to be present when I am telling these things?" she asked.

Mme. Storey looked at the Inspector in seeming concern. A glance of intelligence passed between them which the girl could not have seen. "How about it, Inspector?" my employer asked. "Is it proper for him to hear this?"

"Oh, yes," said the Inspector with a judicial air. "A man is always entitled to hear what he is charged with."

I doubted very much if this was the usual practice; however, the girl could have known no better. She resumed with the air of one conscientiously performing a disagreeable duty: "Mr. Henry knew all about poisons. I knew that he had a collection of dangerous poisons. In the past I had heard him talk about poisoning people . . ."

“Oh, no!” cried Henry in a shocked voice.

The girl looked at Mme. Storey. “I knew this was going to be painful,” she murmured.

“Let me explain!” cried Henry desperately. “It is true that I have talked to her about poisons. I have described to her how men would die after having taken different poisons; aconite, strychnine, arsenic and so on; but I never proposed to poison anybody!”

“It is not important,” said Mme. Storey smoothly. “The fact that you had talked about poisons is not sufficient in itself to have aroused her suspicions.” She turned to the girl. “How did you know that Mr. Henry had been in the house on Tuesday afternoon?”

“I saw him,” was the calm reply. She went on: “In my anxiety to keep out of all this, I suppressed part of the truth yesterday. I did not, as I then told you, go down stairs as soon as I had admitted the Princess to the Commodore’s study. I went into the office where I had some work to finish. A few minutes later I heard the rumble of a man’s voice in this room. I was greatly astonished, because I had not heard the Princess leave, and I knew that the Commodore had no other appointment. In fact, I was alarmed. We all considered it a part of our duty to protect the Commodore from possible intruders. I went to the door between the two rooms and opened it a crack. I saw Mr. Henry in here.”

“Was he alone with his father?”

A pinched look came into the girl’s face. “No,” she said stiffly, “Miss Gilsey was here too—if that is her name.”

“Ha!” cried the Inspector.

“I told you that,” said Mme. Storey.

“But you only surmised it. This is direct evidence.”

My mistress smiled. To the girl she said: “Please describe what you saw in this room.”

“Oh, as soon as I saw it was a family matter I closed the door,” she said. “I had only the briefest glimpse.”

“What did that glimpse show you?”

“As I opened the door I heard the Commodore saying: ‘Not a cent! Not a cent! Let the marriage be annulled and I’ll settle!’ ”

Mr. Henry started up. “My father never said that!” he cried.

“Please be silent!” commanded the Inspector.

“What marriage did he refer to?” asked Mme. Storey.

“The marriage between Mr. Henry and Miss Gilsey.”

The young man dropped his head between his hands. “I wanted to keep her out of this!” he groaned.

“Oh, they’re married, are they?” said my mistress coolly.

The girl’s nostrils became pinched again. “He said they were. But that was on the day before. On Monday afternoon Mr. Henry saw his father alone, and they had a violent quarrel. They talked so loud I could hear a good deal in my room. Mr. Henry told his father then that he was married to Miss Gilsey. I don’t know if it’s true, or if he just said so to get out of the match with the Princess. At any rate the Commodore was infuriated because he looked upon Miss Gilsey as an adventuress. He told his son not to expect a cent from him, and ordered him out of the house.”

“That was on Monday,” said Mme. Storey; “now, returning to Tuesday, what did you see when you looked in this room?”

“They were grouped around the tea-table—this table. As it happened it was just in line with the crack of the door. The Commodore had that moment risen, and was walking away towards the window there. His back was therefore turned to me. Mr. Henry was standing between me and the table, and his back was towards me. Miss Gilsey was seated at the table with the tea-tray before her, and I could see her face. . . .” The girl hesitated.

“Well?” prompted Mme. Storey.

Miss Priestley was breathing quickly. “Nothing happened,” she said with a jerky gesture. “Nothing that I could swear to on the witness-stand. It was just a glimpse. . . . I saw her give him an extraordinary look. His hands were hidden from me . . . but he bent over the table a little . . . it seemed to me that the movements of his arms were suspicious . . . that’s all.”

It was a horribly vivid picture that she called up. I think we all shuddered. Mr. Henry’s face was hidden.

“And from that you thought . . .?” Mme. Storey prompted further.

“Well, taken in connection with what had happened the day before,” said Miss Priestley. “I knew that Mr. Henry feared the will was going to be changed. As a matter of fact it had already been changed, but he could not

have known of that. I supposed that he had brought the girl along in a final effort to soften the Commodore's heart, and when that failed he was rendered desperate."

"Quite!" said Mme. Storey.

17

It seemed as if Mme. Storey's plan to confront them would come to nothing, owing to Henry Varick's having been utterly crushed by the girl's statement. He sat with his elbows on his knees, and his head pressed between his hands. In order to stir him up, the Inspector said in a rasping voice: "Have you nothing to say, sir?"

The young man started to his feet with a wild, despairing face. "What she says is nearly true," he cried; "but just that little difference makes all the difference between life and death to me!"

"You may question her if you wish," said Mme. Storey.

He quietened down. "I don't want to question her," he said, "but I want to tell her something." He approached the girl, looking at her steadily. Something new had come into his face, something firm and fine; it was the look of a man brought to the last extremity of grief and danger, who is suddenly lifted out of himself.

"Julia, is it worth it?" he said.

She was shrinking away from him with a look of repulsion. "Do I have to submit to this?" she murmured, appealing to Mme. Storey.

"It is his right to break down your story, if he can," said my mistress.

The girl drew a long breath, and stiffened herself. "He can't do that," she said confidently, "because I have said nothing but the simple truth. But let him try." She sat down in the same chair that she had before occupied, and met Henry's glance with a cold smile.

This time his eyes did not quail from hers. "Julia," he went on, in a low, moved voice, "I'm sorry for the way I treated you. I am a coward where women are concerned. I can't bear to hurt them. Ever since I grew up it seems I have been running away from women. And that only made matters worse, of course. I wouldn't face things out. But now I must face things out. If only for once I could find the right words to express the truth! Julia, I treated you badly. Must I die for that?"

He paused, searching her face to see if his words had had any effect. How she was able to withstand the appeal in those deep blue eyes, I could not comprehend. The only sign of emotion she gave was to rise suddenly,

and press herself against the wall, as if to get as far as possible from him. Her face was like marble.

"You know that this story you have told will send me to the chair," he resumed. "It's so nearly true that you can tell it with an easy conscience. But is it worth it? In your heart you know that I am incapable of killing my father. *You know me!* Why, the whole trouble between us arose from the fact that I was too tender-hearted and easy-going, and you were ambitious. You scorned me, remember, because I hadn't the heart to whip a puppy at Easthampton that had nipped me."

I cannot hope to convey in print the moving quality of that grave, young voice, low and shaken in tone. I know the tears were rolling unchecked down my cheeks, and I could see that both the Inspector and my mistress were affected. But the girl listened with a twisted smile in her white face; the smile of one who would die sooner than give in.

"You are mistaken if you think I lied when I told you I loved you," he continued. "Your beauty laid a spell on me. I worshipped your beauty. You possessed me entirely. . . . But I couldn't marry you. Our natures were too different. We would have driven each other mad. I should have told you this, or written it, plainly, but I couldn't bring myself to write the words that would hurt you. I hoped you would just forget me when I went away. . . . But we were happy while it lasted, weren't we? I was in Paradise. If you send me to my death you will forget your anger against me, you will only remember the times that we were happy. How will you feel then? Is it worth it, Julia? I cannot believe that anybody so beautiful can have a bad heart. . . . Do you remember . . ." He took a step closer to her, and murmured something none of us could hear. "After that," he asked gravely, "after that, can you bring yourself to swear my life away?"

She strained her face away from him. "I'm sorry," she said in an unnatural, twanging voice, "but the truth is the truth! I have nothing to change in what I said."

Henry Varick slowly raised his shoulders, and spread out his palms; then his whole body sagged. "Well, that's that," he said in a flat voice. "I'm done for, I guess." A painful recklessness appeared on his face. "Come on, Inspector!" he cried out. "Come on, old cock, let's go! I don't know where I'm going, but I'm on my way!" He stopped short, and an awful goneness sounded in his voice. "Oh God! I wish it was to the death chamber that you were taking me! That is over in a minute, but the weeks before that . . .!"

The Inspector seemed disposed to linger, to talk things over with Mme. Storey, and the young man cried out sharply: “Come on! Come on! I can’t stand any more of this!”

At a glance from my mistress the Inspector bestirred himself. As the two men reached the door, the girl shrieked. The sound seemed to be torn from her breast. “Stop! Stop! I cannot bear it! I lied!”

The two men turned back. When the girl’s unnatural self-control broke, everything went. Her convulsed face seemed scarcely human. It was dreadful to see so complete an abasement.

“I lied!” she moaned. “I lied from beginning to end. He didn’t do it! It was I who poisoned Commodore Varick. Oh, what a wretch I am!” She struck her head with her clenched hands.

Henry Varick stared at her like one transfixed with horror. “You killed my father!” he murmured from time to time: “You killed my father!”

I was dazed with the suddenness of it. My mistress motioned to me, and I automatically drew a sheet of paper towards me, and with trembling hands started to take down what the girl said, scarce knowing what I wrote.

Her body swayed forward and back. The words came gabbling from her lips, as if some terror urged her to get it all out before she could think. “I will tell all! It has been in my mind for a long time. But it was Henry that I meant to kill. Because he was false to me. First with that foreign woman, and afterwards with the contemptible Gilsey girl. It was the poisons that put it into my head. Always they were in the next room, tempting, tempting me. I found a key that would open the door, and I could go into Henry’s study at any time without anybody knowing. He was never there. There was a book in there, too, that described all the different poisons and how they acted. . . .

“I collected old keys. I bought them in junk-shops and other places, many, many keys, until I had got one that would open the curio cabinet, and a little one that opened the box of drugs. I took out the bottle of aconite, and locked all up again, and threw away the keys. Then I bided my time, and studied how to give Henry the poison. But I could think of no way. I never saw him any more. I wrote asking him to come to see me, but he paid no attention to the letter. . . .”

“She did . . . she did!” murmured Henry, like one in a trance.

“Then I heard Henry tell his father that he was married to that white-faced blonde, and I went mad . . . mad! I changed my plan. I couldn’t get at Henry, but I had plenty of opportunities with his father. I wanted to strike at

them, I didn't care which one. I made up my mind to wait until the Commodore had changed his will, and then kill him. That was to be my revenge. I didn't think until later of putting it off on Henry. That made it sweeter!

"I knew the Commodore took a capsule after every meal. There was a white powder in it that looked just the same as the aconite. I got some empty capsules and filled them with the aconite. There was only enough to fill three. When Henry and the girl were with the Commodore in his study, I sneaked around outside, through the foyer of the suite and into the bathroom. I took the capsules out of the box, put the poisoned ones in, and went back to my room. I watched and listened. I saw Henry and the girl go. The Commodore was half-reconciled to them, and it made me smile to think how I was going to dish them all!

"When the Commodore left his study, I followed and listened at the crack of the door. I heard him go into the bathroom and come out again. Then I knew the thing was done. I knew that I would have just as much time as it would take for the capsule to melt in his stomach. Plenty of time to get away. He returned to his study, but he never saw me. I was back in the office then. I went around through the foyer into the bathroom. There were only two capsules in the box, so I knew there had been no slip-up. I replaced them with two of the harmless capsules, and went downstairs."

So much for the facts of her story. I shall not speak of the unfortunate girl's ravings. It is too painful. Too great an effort of self-control is followed by the collapse of all resistance. It left her exhausted and shaking, finally apathetic. Detective Mauley was called in, and she was handed over to his care. Unable to speak above a whisper then, she begged for permission to rest for ten minutes in the office. This was granted.

The other four of us were left looking at each other, scarcely able to comprehend what had happened. I for one was conscious of an immense weariness. I felt as if I should drop in my tracks. But it was a delicious kind of weariness, the feeling that comes after a shattering storm, when you find quiet in your ears once more. Blessed, blessed quiet and peace. At first you can hardly believe it. But I looked at Henry Varick, and there he was, safe, and my heart was content.

He, I think, was the first to speak. "And are you through with me, now?" he asked wonderingly. "Am I free?"

"Free as air," said Mme. Storey, laying a hand on his shoulder. "Go to your wife and tell her. And to your mother. You appear to have lost your

fortune, but you have them!"

Gladness shone out in his face like the sun breaking through. He had already forgotten the poor, hysterical wretch in the next room. Well, such is youth! "What do I care for the money!" he cried. "If I am free." He ran out of the room.

"Well, I expect your mother won't let you starve," remarked Mme. Storey dryly. "And wills have been broken before this!"

"And so you were right after all!" said Inspector Rumsey generously.

"As it happens," said my mistress, smiling. "But I was not nearly so sure as I made out to be."

Our excitements were not yet over, for presently Detective Mauley burst into the room with a dismayed face. "She has given me the slip!" he cried.

To make a long story short, at a moment when Mauley was not looking directly at her, the prisoner had slipped from the office into Henry's study adjoining. Mauley was not even aware that she had unlocked the door. She slammed it in his face, and got out into the main hall. By the time Mauley got through the two doors, she was nowhere to be seen. None of the servants had seen her. To us, of course, it was apparent that she had gone down the enclosed stair, of which Mauley knew nothing, and out through the secret passage. The Inspector was in a rage, but Mme. Storey took it with more than usual calmness.

"It is all for the best," she said enigmatically.

"For the best!" he exclaimed indignantly.

"I take it she has gone home," said my mistress, gravely. "But wherever she has gone she will soon be found, my friend. The resolve to kill herself was in her eye."

"Justice will be defeated!" cried the Inspector.

"Man's justice," murmured Mme. Storey with an imperceptible shrug.

"We must follow her!" cried the Inspector.

"No! Let us not be seen there," said my mistress, laying a hand on his arm. "Send Mauley."

And so it was done.

In my note-book I find the following clipping:

> "At 11.15 yesterday morning the body of Miss Julia Priestley, 26, was found dead at No. —— Lexington Avenue, with a bullet through the heart. A new .38 automatic was clutched in her hand, and her clothing revealed powder burns. From the position of the body it was apparent that she had stood in front of a mirror to aim the gun. She was found in the bedroom of a small three-room apartment that she occupied alone at the above address.
>
> "The body was discovered by Detective-Sergeant James Mauley. Sergeant Mauley had been sent to Miss Priestley's apartment as the result of a mysterious message received by Inspector Rumsey at headquarters a few minutes earlier. Inspector Rumsey was advised by a woman's voice over the telephone, that he had better send a detective to the address given. When he asked for particulars, his informant hung up. It is supposed that this was Miss Priestley herself. When Sergeant Mauley reached the apartment, he found the door ajar, as if for his convenience. The woman's body was still warm.
>
> "For the past year Miss Priestley was employed by the late Commodore Varick as an amanuensis in the preparation of a book that he was writing. It is supposed that the death of her employer, which came with such shocking suddenness on Tuesday evening, and the consequent loss of her employment, temporarily deranged the young woman's mind. Her nearest relative is a brother living in Cleveland, Ohio, who is on his way to New York to take charge of the body."

And that is all that ever got into the papers.

THE BLIND FRONT

1

I THINK I have mentioned that it was Mme. Storey's custom to take a walk in the Park every afternoon upon leaving the office. At a time when we were working nights in order to clear the decks for her annual trip abroad, I made it my custom to accompany her. We would then return to her house for an early dinner, and settle down to an hour or two of hard work. Our route through the Park never varied; entering at the Plaza, we would make our way to the fountains at the end of the Mall, circulate around the north side of the lake, and issue out at the Arsenal. These walks were a delight to me; my mistress, shaking off business when we closed the office door behind us, was the most entertaining talker in the world.

One afternoon, I remember, we were upon the subject of what constitutes good looks in a man. I was airing my ideas, and Mme. Storey was listening with a bantering smile; then she said: "In a moment or two I will show you what I consider a completely handsome man, my Bella."

You may be sure I awaited the illustration with the keenest curiosity.

When we reached the wild garden to the north of the lake—the prettiest and most secluded spot in the Park, she said: "There he is."

I saw two men sitting on a bench. I did not need to be told which was which; one was merely ordinary while the other was indeed one of the handsomest men I have ever beheld. I shall not weary you with a catalogue of his charms; suffice it to say that he was about thirty-three years old, of medium height, notably broad-shouldered and spare of frame; in colouring, brown. He had the look of a soldier. His features were perfect. It was not features, though, which constituted his uncommon beauty, but expression; noble is the only word for it. He was gazing straight before him with a look of proud sorrow that drew the heart right out of one's breast; yet one would never have dared to sympathise with such a man. I thought of all the ill-starred heroes of whom I had read.

"Sir Launcelot du Lake," I murmured.

“Exactly,” said my mistress; “that man has loved! . . . He is blind,” she added in a voice sharp with compassion.

An involuntary cry of pain escaped me. “Oh! I had not noticed it!” I turned my head to look at him again, but he was already hidden by a bend in the path.

“I see them nearly every time I pass this way,” said Mme. Storey. “The second man is a secretary or attendant. He has the face of a scoundrel, but of course his master cannot see that. I have noticed that while he takes care to butter his voice in speaking to his master, his eyes glitter with contempt. . . . The whole situation is written in the master’s proud face,” she went on; “you can see that he has not always been blinded; he is not yet accustomed to it. That, taken in connection with his military air, suggests that he is a war casualty. The fierce pride which is so evident would not tolerate pity, and least of all the pity of a woman. Returning from the war blinded, he has deliberately cut himself off from his friends, and from the woman whom he loved, and now he lives alone at the mercy of his servants, who undoubtedly swindle him.”

“But how can you know all this?” I murmured.

“It is written there so that he who runs may read. But people are so unobservant! I doubt if anybody beside ourselves has ever seen it. I suspect that even those who have known him all his life have allowed themselves to be deceived by his stubborn pride. Yet he is perishing of lonesomeness!”

We walked on in silence for awhile; then Mme. Storey said: “One feels it one’s duty to interfere in such a situation. To-morrow, if he is there, let us speak to him, my Bella.”

I smiled at her, not thinking that she was in earnest. But on the following afternoon, finding the blind young man and his attendant sitting on the same bench, Mme. Storey sat herself down beside him, and I had no choice but to occupy the fourth place. My mistress started to talk in a gay strain, ostensibly for my benefit, but in reality to attract the young man’s attention. He continued to look straight ahead of him, and not a muscle of his face changed, but I was aware from a certain intentness in his pose, that he was eagerly drinking in every word. Now that I had been furnished a clue by my mistress, I could see that he was starving for the lack of a little gaiety and friendliness.

The antics of three children in front of us caused Mme. Storey and I to burst out laughing. She turned to the young man, saying: “There you have a

primary lesson in the art of subjugating the male! Did you ever see anything neater?"

"I am blind," he said stiffly.

"Are you really?" said Mme. Storey in the coolest manner possible. (It was exactly the right tone to take with him!) "One would never have suspected it. Picture to yourself two little boys of five and six walking with their sister aged three. The boys are of a mercurial temperament, the girl lymphatic. It is too much trouble for her to keep up with them, and she doesn't try to. Whenever they get a certain distance ahead of her, she just sits down, and they have to come back and pick her up."

The young man smiled. Mme. Storey, determined not to allow a silence to chill the atmosphere, hastened on: "This is always an amusing corner of the Park. That policeman yonder, talking to the pretty nursemaid, surely has the softest job in the world! Nothing to do but prevent the boys from picking flowers and pegging stones at the wild ducks. Do you know him?"

"He has spoken to me," said the young man stiffly. "Many people speak to me. They have me at a disadvantage."

"Well, I like that!" said Mme. Storey, laughing.

He blushed deeply. "Oh, you were different," he said quickly. "Your voice did not suggest that I was an object of pity."

"Pity!" said Mme. Storey in a voice of great surprise. "Why, you are one of the handsomest men I ever saw. Of course, it must be inconvenient to lose one's sight, but I am sure you have plenty of compensations!"

He made no answer. He tried to look as if he were annoyed by her frank speech, but I am sure he was not so, really. Mme. Storey rattled on: "There's one thing to be said for blindness, you can imagine the world to be a perfectly beautiful place, without any danger of being reminded of the contrary."

"Unfortunately, there are ugly voices," he said.

"Well, I suppose there are," she said. "Americans neglect the speaking voice shockingly."

"You are not American?" he asked.

"But I am!" she replied. "I'm as American as a barred Plymouth Rock!"

He chuckled. His face softened wonderfully when he laughed. "There's nothing the matter with *your* voice," he said shyly.

“Nor yours,” said Mme. Storey promptly. She cast a gay and triumphant look at me as much as to say: “I have got him going!”

To him she said: “There’s no need to ask if you are American.”

“I suppose not,” he said. “My name is Stephen Venson.”

“Venson is one of the old Knickerbocker names, isn’t it,” said Mme. Storey. “What was your grade in the army?”

“Why, how did you know?” he asked, surprised. “Captain.”

“My dear man, West Point is written all over you.”

There was no lack of talk after that. How delightful it was to see the young fellow come out of himself. Mme. Storey’s suggestion that he was an attractive man worth any woman’s attention, put him on his mettle, as she intended it should. You would never have supposed that he was blind. His eyes showed no alteration. They turned on you naturally when he spoke, and sparkled with animation. It was odd to see how disconcerted the attendant was by this innocent exchange. He was an unpleasant blonde young man with a long neck encased in a stiff collar, sharp, mean features, and an unwholesome pallor. He was one of those women-haters that our sex instinctively recognises. The glances that he bent on my mistress were fairly poisonous. Twice I saw him whisper to his master. I think he said: “Shall we move along?” Captain Venson ignored him the first time, and the second time he said: “No!”

The pretty nursemaid having moved along, Mme. Storey beckoned to the policeman stationed at the wild garden. “Officer!” The honest Irishman came over grinning from ear to ear, as any man would on being summoned by my beautiful mistress.

“Officer,” said Mme. Storey, affecting an innocent air: “are those really wild ducks?”

“Yes, Miss,” said the bluecoat; “mallards. The shyest birds there are. But they come and nest in the Park every summer, and raise their broods in the midst of the crowds. They have learned that they are safe here.”

“How wonderful!” said Mme. Storey.

The policeman strolled on. Soon afterwards, Mme. Storey said to me: “Well, Bella, we must toddle along.” To the young man she said, with offhand friendliness: “Good-bye, Captain.”

“Good-bye,” he said with infinite regret in his voice.

As we walked away I said: “If I am any judge, that attendant or secretary or whatever he is, is a rascal. What made him so terrified of us? I believe there is something more in the situation than the mere peculation of servants.”

“I think so, myself,” said Mme. Storey. “I’m glad we butted in. We’ll find out now.”

Knowing that my mistress did nothing at random I asked curiously: “Why did you call the policeman over?”

“Well,” she said with a delightful smile, “Captain Venson, though blinded, is very much of a man. He will be curious to know what I look like. He will ask his man, of course, and will receive an unfavourable report, I fear. But perhaps he will not believe it; the man may betray his animus in his voice. After all, my Bella, I have not the voice of an ugly woman. He said as much himself. Well, if he wants additional information, there is the policeman handy. Perhaps he may ask him. If I reason correctly, when we come to-morrow we will find Captain Venson sitting alone.”

2

AND we did! You should have seen his handsome face light up when my mistress hailed him. “Here we are again!”

“I had no reason to suppose that you would come,” he said, “but I was hoping it.”

“Where is your man?” asked Mme. Storey.

“Oh, I was tired of him,” he said. “I made up an errand that will keep him out of the way for an hour.”

“What if it should rain?” asked Mme. Storey.

“Well, I shouldn’t melt,” he said, smiling back. He enjoyed having her joke with him on the subject of his blindness; it was only pity that he couldn’t stand.

“I’m glad he’s gone,” said my mistress. “He was like a death’s head at the feast.”

“What does he look like, really?” asked the Captain. “Nobody has ever told me.”

“Well, I don’t want to shatter any illusions,” said Mme. Storey lightly, “but since you ask me, I am forced to say he looks to me as if he had served more than one term up river.”

“How odd!” said Captain Venson, “and I not know it! I don’t like him, of course, but all servants are tiresome. He’s a good enough servant, as they go. But I’ll get rid of him now.”

“Don’t do that,” said Mme. Storey quickly. “One may easily be deceived in a man’s face. And if he’s a good servant you might do worse.”

“All right,” he said indifferently; and the subject was allowed to drop.

As on the day before, my mistress proceeded to flirt with him outrageously. “Perhaps you were waiting for somebody else,” she said. “If we are *de trop* you must not hesitate to give us a hint.”

“No,” he said, “my mind was not running on gallantry.”

“I am crushed!” said Mme. Storey.

“Oh, I didn’t mean that . . .” he began.

“Well, if we see her coming we’ll beat it,” she said.

“You get me wrong,” he said, smiling. “I am no ladies’ man. Never was. You must know that from the ease with which you can tangle me up.”

“That’s the most dangerous kind,” said Mme. Storey.

“And are you a coward?” he asked.

“Alas, no!” she sighed. “I am ever to be found where the danger is thickest.”

“Then I will be as dangerous as possible.” Mere fooling of course; but it was cunningly calculated to put him at his ease. It was odd to see how grateful he was to her. I suppose the poor fellow had made up his mind that no woman would ever again take that gay and challenging tone towards him.

Presently he said with mock severity: “You are a coquette!”

“Mercy! how flattering to a plain girl!” murmured Mme. Storey.

“I have my own idea about that,” he said.

“No,” said Mme. Storey, “I admit that I am clever; but I cannot deceive you; I am very plain.”

“Your friend seldom speaks,” he remarked.

“She’s a deep one,” said Mme. Storey quickly. “Better be careful of her.”

Leaning forward, he turned his eloquent sightless eyes in my direction. “Tell me,” he said, “on the level, what does she look like?”

Mme. Storey favoured me with a broad wink.

“Well,” I said with a judicial air, “she wouldn’t be so bad if her eyes were not crossed, though to be sure her hair is rather scanty, her chin is a couple of inches too long, and her nose is only a blob, poor thing! But she has the most expressive ears!”

It would have done your heart good to hear his laugh ring out. “You’re a pair!” he said. “But you can’t fool me! Yesterday, after you’d gone, I asked the cop what she looked like!” He said this with a cute air, poor lamb, as if he thought himself monstrous clever; and it was my turn to laugh—but my laughter was silent.

“And what did he say about me?” asked Mme. Storey eagerly.

“Well, he was rather incoherent,” said Captain Venson, “but the general effect was highly laudatory.”

“Yes,” said Mme. Storey, “I slipped him a couple of dollars.”

“He said that you reminded him of a thoroughbred race horse.”

“What, fast?” cried Mme. Storey in high indignation. “Oh, the wretch!”

The hour slipped by, and in no time at all, as it seemed, I beheld the servant returning at a little distance. He was coming from the west side. As good luck would have it, I saw him before he saw me. From my mistress I have learned the art of watching things without appearing to look at them, consequently I was able to follow his very peculiar actions during the next few minutes, without his being aware of it.

He slipped behind a syringa bush, where, partly hidden, he watched us for a few minutes, his ugly face uglier still with fear, suspicion, and ill-will. Then he disappeared. Presently I saw him from the other side. He had evidently circled around the hill behind us. He beckoned, and another man joined him. The two of them sat down on a bench some hundred yards off, trusting to the throng of nursemaids and children to conceal them from us. There they watched us.

The second man was older, and had something of a foreign look. He was dark, fat, and smooth-shaven; very neatly dressed, but not in the style of a gentleman. He was not bad-looking, had it not been for the hard and angry stare he bent on us. This was a much more formidable antagonist than the tallow-faced secretary. After studying us awhile, he went away; but still the secretary did not come directly towards us. He must have circled around behind us again; for in the end I saw him approaching from the west, walking fast, as one who wished to prove his zeal in carrying out his master’s orders. However, he had but an imperfect control over his features; his self-conscious air gave him away.

He reported to Captain Venson that he had been unable to procure what he had been sent for in the stores on upper Broadway.

“No matter,” said his master carelessly.

The servant (his master addressed him as “Belding”) sat down on the other side of Captain Venson with a humble air. He had never so much as looked at Mme. Storey and I. He kept his eyes down, but one could tell from the pose of his head that his ears were stretched to catch every word. The presence of this mean-faced eavesdropper put a damper on the gay and frivolous conversation, and Mme. Storey presently rose.

“Oh, must you go?” said Captain Venson with a falling face. “I don’t even know your name.”

“I am Miss Barbara Underhill,” said Mme. Storey with a bland air; “and my friend is Bella Chalmers. We share half a house together at . . .” (She gave her true address.) “Look here,” she went on, as if struck by a sudden thought, “why don’t you come and have dinner with us some night. Just the three of us. It would be fun!”

The young man coloured up with pleasure and embarrassment. “It’s awfully kind of you,” he stammered, “but I couldn’t.”

“Why not?”

“It’s so long since I dined out, I’ve forgotten how to behave.”

“Oh, nobody behaves at our house.”

“I’m sorry . . . I couldn’t.”

His distress was so real that Mme. Storey forbore to press him further. “I’m sorry, too,” she said, holding out her hand. “Good-bye.”

“But . . . wait,” he said, retaining her hand. He became more and more embarrassed. “Why shouldn’t you and Miss Chalmers come and dine with me? . . . Awfully unconventional, of course . . . but as long as there’s two of you . . . and you . . . you don’t sound like a conventional person. Will you come?”

By the gleam in my mistress’s eye I perceived that this was what she had been angling for. She turned to me. “What do you say, Bella?”

“I should be charmed.”

“Well, if Bella says we can go I guess it’s all right,” said Mme. Storey. “She keeps me in order. Myself, I’m dying to come.”

“Splendid!” cried Captain Venson, his face all lighted up.

“When shall it be?”

“As soon as possible. Just give me time to get my cook accustomed to the idea. I’ve never had any company before. Say three days. Are you free on Friday night?”

“Yes.”

“Good! Then say Friday at seven. I live at number —— Fifth Avenue.”

“We’ll be there!”

It was curious to watch Belding’s face when he heard this invitation given and accepted. Up to this moment his suspicion of us had been merely

general. Now a special and particular fear broke in his face. As Mme. Storey and I walked away I wondered greatly what there could be in the blind man's house that the servant was so terrified of having us see.

On the following morning at her own place Mme. Storey received the following note.

"Dear Miss Underhill,

"What will you think of me? I feel that I must call off the dinner for Friday night. My establishment is totally unsuited for the reception of ladies. But, believe me, I shall always be grateful that you were willing to come.

"Yours sincerely,
"Stephen Venson."

This letter was written in neat, clerkly characters, and signed obviously by another hand in a sprawling style.

"Perhaps Captain Venson knows nothing about it," I suggested.

"That would be too clumsy a trick," said Mme. Storey. "The deception would be discovered the first time we met him in the Park. We are dealing with cleverer people than that, I am sure. Consider how easy it would be for the servants to work upon his fears until he was unable to face the thought of having two strange women come to his house. No, he wrote the letter; and now the worst of it is, he will be ashamed to meet us after it, and will have his man lead him to a different part of the Park."

"What shall you do?" I inquired.

Smiling, she sat down and wrote the following reply:

"Dear Captain Venson,

"We are coming anyhow, and you had better be prepared to feed us. Hell knoweth no fury like a woman starved!

"Sincerely,
"Barbara Underhill."

3

VENSON was a name long and honourably known in the annals of New York; and Mme. Storey had no difficulty learning further particulars about the latest bearer of it. It appeared that Captain Stephen Venson was the last of his line. He had once been engaged to Gloria Suffern, one of the most prominent girls in society. One was continually coming upon her name amongst the notes of social doings in the newspapers, and her photograph in the rotogravure supplements. I understood that Mme. Storey had met her somewhere; and on Friday I was informed that she was coming to tea at the office that afternoon, and bidden to order in cakes.

"Society girl" is a loose term and may be used to cover almost anything; but this one was the real thing. Slim, high bred and exquisite, she had the look of being used to a rarer sphere than us common mortals. She was slender, vivacious, and darkly beautiful; at least twenty-eight years old, I should say; though Time had not yet so much as breathed upon the glass of her loveliness. She was dressed with that aristocratic simplicity which is the despair of imitators. The freedom of her style rather took my old-fashioned breath away; but I liked her from the start. She was fascinating to a plain body like me.

I shared their tea. While we ate and drank, the conversation was merely general. Both of the great world, which after all is such a small world, Mme. Storey and Miss Suffern found plenty in common to talk about. If our visitor was wondering what she had been asked for, she was far too well bred to betray it. She had a delicately cynical attitude towards life that distressed me rather, for it seemed to me she was not like that, really. I remember they were talking about a certain prominent lady who had come a cropper; and Miss Suffern said, with a curling lip: "She was soft. I have no patience with it. Every woman learns almost from her cradle that life is unfair. The only thing to do is to harden oneself and get as much fun as you can out of the mess. Especially where men are concerned. It's always a duel. No quarter shown on either side. You must learn to fence warily; and never, never, let your guard down! . . . I'm glad I'm living now," she went on with a laugh; "because it's getting worse all the time. After us the deluge!"

When they lighted up their cigarettes, Mme. Storey came to the point immediately. "I suppose you are wondering why I asked you to come and see me," she said, smiling.

“Dying with curiosity,” said the girl.

“I am half in love with the handsomest man I ever met,” said Mme. Storey, “and I want to talk about him.”

“To me?” said Miss Suffern. “How delightful! Do tell me who he is. You have the reputation of being immune, you know.”

“Stephen Venson,” said Mme. Storey, studying her cigarette.

I scarcely liked to look at the girl when this name was spoken; but I need not have been afraid. “What, old Steve!” she cried, laughing with a perfectly open brow. “How priceless! You are right; he is the handsomest man of his day. But where is he? I haven’t seen him for ages. He seems to have dropped completely out of sight!”

Now, any woman *must* have felt more than she showed upon suddenly hearing the mention of her old lover’s name; and this gave me the idea that her whole clear-eyed, laughing attitude was simply an assumption; was, in fact, her way of keeping up her guard, as she had phrased it. Her real feelings remained hidden.

“I suspect it is his own fault if he is never seen,” said Mme. Storey.

“Oh, quite!” said Miss Suffern. “When he came home from the war with a halo of heroism about his head, it seemed positively to infuriate him when we fell down and worshipped. He deliberately insulted his best friends and drove them away.”

It was noticeable that she did not refer to her lover’s blindness. I suspected that the subject was too painful.

“I can understand that,” said Mme. Storey; “but it seems a little strange that his old friends did not see through it.”

“You might blame his men friends for allowing themselves to be driven away,” said the girl, “but what could a woman do after he had told her up and down that he had done with her?”

“Why, nothing, I suppose,” said Mme. Storey softly.

“She couldn’t be sure, you see,” Miss Suffern went on, “whether this was due to some wrong-headed notion of saving her, or whether he really was tired of her. So she waited, feeling sure that if he loved her still, some message must come. But no message ever came, and so . . .” She ended with a shrug.

“And yet it is possible that he may love her still,” suggested Mme. Storey.

“Possible,” said the girl, with her air of carelessness; “but what is one to do about it?”

Mme. Storey made no reply; and a silence succeeded. Suddenly the girl, in a slightly higher pitched voice, began to talk quickly about something else. My mistress brought her back with the quiet question:

“How did he receive his injury?”

Miss Suffern replied quite simply: “Oh, didn’t you know? It was a very gallant affair. It happened at Auban. We suffered a slight reverse there, as you may remember. Somebody blundered, and Steve and his men were sent across the river to hold an untenable position. He held it, too, against a whole division, until he was ordered to retire again, most of his men having been killed. Steve was the last to go, facing the advancing Germans. Behind him he saw one of his men who had been left for dead raise his head. Steve went back and picked him up, and the *Flammenwerfer* got him, the flame-throwers . . . his eyes. Blinded as he was, he brought the man back . . . somehow.”

“How splendid!” murmured Mme. Storey.

“But one may never speak of it to him!” cried the girl. “He acts as if it were a deadly affront.”

“Do you not understand boy-nature?” said my mistress. “One must appear to take everything for granted.”

“I know,” cried the girl. “But nothing that I could do would help. I am hateful to him!”

“But that is nonsense!” said Mme. Storey.

“No! No!” cried Miss Suffern. “He wrote to me. Nobody could have put it plainer. These were his words: ‘The war has changed everything. The man you used to know is buried under tons and tons of French mud. I no longer care for you. It is better to state the brutal fact plainly once and for all.’ ”

“But, of course,” murmured Mme. Storey, “if he had made up his mind that it was his duty to set you free, he would do it in good style, wouldn’t he? He would take care not to let you suspect the real reason.”

“Even it you are right,” the girl said hopelessly, “what good does it do to bring it up now? The thing is ended!”

"Do you love him?" asked Mme. Storey softly.

She gave my mistress an extraordinary look. "Why should I go on making pretences?" she said suddenly. "I am sick of making pretences! . . . Yes! Yes! Yes!" she cried passionately. "I have loved him ever since I was a little girl! I rush about and rattle and laugh to try to fill my emptiness; but my life is a desert without Steve!"

"Well, his life is not exactly a garden," said my mistress dryly. "I wish you could have seen him as I saw him, sitting in the Park at the mercy of a mean and scoundrelly servant."

"What can I do?" asked Miss Suffern helplessly.

"Nothing of yourself," said Mme. Storey; "but, perhaps a third person . . ."

"I have my pride too," said the girl.

"I do not overlook that, my dear," said my mistress smiling.

Under stress of the situation they had both risen. Suddenly the girl cast herself into Mme. Storey's arms, and burst into tears. I made believe to remember that I had something to do in the next room.

From Miss Suffern we learned that Stephen Venson's man of business was Aemilius Woolfries of the firm of Woolfries, Dardan, Sempill and Woolfries, the eminent lawyers. On the following morning we went down to see him. His secretary informed us that appointments with Mr. Woolfries senior had to be made several days ahead. However, the name of Mme. Storey proved to be a passport, and we were shown in without waiting. Mr. Woolfries was an old gentleman of splendid presence, and beautiful manners. I suspected that his fine presence had contributed to his eminence more than brains, as I could see but little evidence of the latter.

When Mme. Storey told him of her suspicions in respect to the situation of Captain Venson, he smiled indulgently. He took the suggestion that the blind man was being victimised by his servants as a reflection upon himself, and pooh-poohed it without so much as examining into it. It appeared that our Captain was a relative of his.

"It is deeply regrettable that my cousin should have chosen to cut himself off in the manner that he has," said Mr. Woolfries, "and I assure you that I feel for him with all my heart. But after all, that is his own affair. As to his being a victim, I assure you there is nothing in it, my dear lady. I have

taken all proper precautions against such a thing. Captain Venson is not a rich man, as you may have supposed. He owns the house in which he lives, and enjoys a sufficient income to keep it up in a modest style, but that is all. If there was any leakage it would immediately become apparent. He employs three or four men servants under the direction of a sort of major-domo, M. Pelletier, who is a very superior person. M. Pelletier acts as his butler and cook. Every month he brings me his accounts which I find in apple-pie order. M. Pelletier not only runs my cousin's establishment in admirable fashion—I make regular visits there to see for myself, but he is most prudent and economical in his expenditures. It is very good of you to interest yourself in poor Stephen's affairs, and I thank you. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Nothing, thank you," said Mme. Storey with her sweetest smile. "Good-morning."

Mr. Woolfries bowed us out with many compliments.

When the door closed Mme. Storey said to me: "Well, that's that. We will now go ahead without the assistance of that old pouter pigeon."

4

On Friday evening, clad in our best bibs and tuckers, Mme. Storey and I wended our way towards Captain Venson's house. It was a pity that our host was blind, for my mistress, clad in one of the straight plain evening gowns that become her so well, never looked more beautiful. My breast was agitated by a deep stir of excitement which was hardly justified by the situation, for as yet we had nothing to go upon but mere suspicion. But there it was!

The house was one of the older dwellings facing the Park, and was neither large nor grand in effect, but its situation was of the choicest. At some period it had been altered from an American basement to the English type, and the entrance was now a few steps lower than the street. As far as one could judge from the outside, it was well kept; the windows polished; the handsome curtains crisp and spotless.

I received a slight unpleasant shock at the sight of the man who opened the door to us. A tall, weedy young fellow with a thatch of red hair kept in its place with difficulty by the liberal use of pomade, and pale green eyes, he had an even more evil cast of features than Belding, the personal attendant. Out of his mask-like face he favoured us with an inimical glance; clearly we were anything but welcome there. If it was true that Mr. Woolfries made regular visits to the house, how blind he was not to take alarm from the mere faces of these servants.

We were admitted to a handsome hall, reception room at the left, stairway at the back of the hall, winding up through the middle of the house. At the top of the first flight Captain Venson was waiting to greet us. In his evening clothes he looked handsomer than ever. Though very nervous, he was unfeignedly glad to see us. No reference was made to the exchange of notes between him and Mme. Storey.

The servant ushered us up another flight to a fine bedroom at the back, where we were left to remove our wraps, and powder our noses. The window of this room looked into a deep well, formed by the blank walls of the buildings on the adjoining lots. In New York even the rich are not sure of having daylight in their rooms. At the back of the bedroom there was a dressing-room occupying the rear extension. In the dressing-room there was a door giving on a service passage and stairway. From Mme. Storey I have learned to take notice of my surroundings, wherever I may be.

I may say at once that the house was admirably kept throughout; you cannot deceive a woman as to that. One's fingers came away clean from the shelves; and there was no dust in the corners. So far, Mr. Woolfries was right then; but the feeling of disquiet in my breast grew and grew. For one thing, the house was too still; it made one shiver. And during the whole time that we were there I could not rid myself of the feeling that we were under espionage.

Returning to the main floor, Captain Venson led us into the drawing-room. He was able to make his way unaided about the rooms that he knew. The drawing-room, which occupied the whole width of the house, was a handsome apartment, sparingly furnished. Every object which might prove a trap for the blind master had been removed. This whole floor was practically one room; for the drawing-room was separated from the central hall merely by a row of pillars; another row of pillars marked off the dining-room at the rear. There were curtains hung within these pillars. The whole effect was more spacious and airy than you would ever have guessed from the outside of the house.

After a few moments conversation, the same servant who had let us in, drew back the dining-room curtains, and announced dinner. An exclamation of pleasure escaped Mme. Storey. The dining-room was in darkness except for the table itself, which was brightly illuminated by a galaxy of candles under pink shades. With the roses, the silver and crystal, set off against the snowy linen, the effect was charming.

Captain Venson smiled happily. "I'm so glad you're pleased," he said. "M. Pelletier saw to everything."

I began to have a great curiosity to set eyes upon this paragon among servants. The table was round, and small enough to conduce to a pleasant feeling of intimacy amongst the three of us. Captain Venson sat facing the sideboard with Mme. Storey on his right hand, I at his left. This brought me facing the pantry door which was in the back left-hand corner. There was another door at my left hand which I could see led to the service passage and stair. The same man waited on us; his name was Barker. He used the both doors that I have mentioned. They were old-fashioned service doors, swinging noiselessly in both directions, covered with green baize, and each having a small oblong piece of glass let in at the level of the eye. This was to prevent collisions between the servants when more than one was serving; but I could not help thinking what admirable peepholes they made. I had not a doubt but that we were well scanned during the progress of the meal.

The dinner was simple and delicious; a soup; an escalloped fish served in ramekins; salmi of duckling with olives. As the courses succeeded each other I observed that nothing required the use of a knife; thus our host was not obliged to betray his disabilities. Poor fellow! that was the reason, of course, why he would not dine out.

Mme. Storey kept up a gay rattle of talk. I need not repeat it, since I have already given you a sample of her style; and what she said has nothing to do with the story I have to tell. She guessed, of course, that every word was being listened to outside; she was playing the scatterbrained beauty, a role least calculated to arouse the servants' suspicions. Our host was happily unconscious of any undercurrents. A smile wreathed his lips, and those tragic eyes of his were beaming. I think he was happier than he had been in a long time. I cannot say that I was happy. That servant padding noiselessly about the table with a mask upon his cruel, mean face gave me the creeps. I could not help but feel that something was very, very wrong in that house.

We had coffee and cigarettes before leaving the table. Stirring her cup, Mme. Storey said: "You have a wonderful cook."

"Yes, M. Pelletier," said Captain Venson smiling. "He makes things go smoothly. I am grateful to him. Before he took charge of me . . .!" He finished with an eloquent gesture.

"How long has he been with you?"

"Over two years."

"Look here," said Mme. Storey, "could we not ask him in in the old fashion, to congratulate him upon his dinner?"

"Certainly," said Captain Venson, "he would be tickled to pieces." Summoning Barker, he requested him to ask M. Pelletier to be good enough to step up to the dining-room for a moment.

We had to wait a few minutes for him. "He's changing his clothes," said Captain Venson, grinning.

It was so. M. Pelletier finally appeared from the service passage clad in a perfectly fitting cutaway coat, sharply creased trousers, and pointed shoes. Such a costume, I believe, is proper to the old custom too. I was hardly surprised to behold the same smooth, fat, dark-skinned face that I had seen in the Park. I knew at a glance that this was the man we had to deal with; the others were merely his creatures. But there was nothing hard or ugly about his expression now. Standing just within the doorway, bowing repeatedly from the waist, he seemed fairly to exude good nature.

"Miss Underhill asked to see you," said Captain Venson smiling.

M. Pelletier redoubled his bows. His whole make-up was of Paris; those pointed shoes, those striped trousers; even his hair was brushed in a French manner, and in his lapel he wore the button of the *legion d'honneur*—or what appeared like it.

"I wanted to thank you for a wonderful dinner," said Mme. Storey. "Everything was delicious!"

M. Pelletier seemed to be almost overcome. "Ah, *merci! merci, mademoiselle*," he cried with a whole fresh series of bows. "*Mademoiselle* ees too kind! One does one's poor best, *mais dans l'Amerique*—excuse me my Angleesh, in America one hardly looks for *le vrai gout*! Alas! *les Americains* do not care w'at dey eat!"

"It is not so in France, eh?"

"*Ah, la Belle France!*" he cried, kissing his finger tips. "*Non! Non! mademoiselle*, in my Paris dining is an art. You know Paris, hey?"

"Oh, I've been there," said Mme. Storey, "like all good Americans."

"Ees it not beautiful?" said M. Pelletier clasping his hands.

"I adore it," said Mme. Storey. "Tell me, in your salmi was there not a dash of Tarragon?"

"Ah! Mademoiselle has the true taste!" he cried rapturously. . . . "But was eet too much?" he asked anxiously.

"No, indeed. Just a suspicion. It revealed the artist."

"Ah, *mademoiselle*! If I could cook for you *toujours*! What a happiness!"

"I say," protested Captain Venson humorously, "you'll be taking him away from me directly!"

"No such luck!" retorted Mme. Storey. "I haven't a kitchen worthy of such an artist."

"Ah, *mademoiselle*," breathed M. Pelletier with his hand on his heart, "eef I could just once make for you *les copuilles Alceste Pelletier*! Eet ees *mon chef d'oeuvre*!"

"Well, perhaps Captain Venson will ask us to dinner again."

More compliments passed to and fro. The man was an admirable actor. One could see by the brightness of his eye that he was really enjoying this comedy. His French sounded all right to me; but I knew if it was not perfect it would never get by Mme. Storey; France is her second country.

When M. Pelletier was bowing himself out a thought seemed to strike him. Returning, he said to Captain Venson: "*Pardonnez moi, monsieur.* Maybe when you 'ave risen, *mademoiselle* would like me to show her the house? It would be a pleasure to show a friend of *monsieur's* that we take good care of him."

"Nonsense!" said his master. "What does she want to look at an old house for?"

Mme. Storey clapped her hands together. "Oh, yes!" she cried. "If there's anything I love it's to explore a strange house. Do let him show us, Captain!"

"Certainly, if you would enjoy it," he said smiling.

"We have finished our coffee," said my mistress. "Let us go now."

As we left the dining-room she whispered to me: "His French is rotten! He's no Frenchman!"

In making this proposal to look at the house, the clever man over-reached himself. His very anxiety to prove to us that everything was all right suggested that there was something wrong. The time was not wasted for us, for the knowledge of the house that we gained on this tour was to prove of inestimable benefit to us later. M. Pelletier led the way; Mme. Storey and Captain Venson followed; and I brought up the rear. My mistress slipped her hand through the blind man's arm. In this manner while appearing to hang on to him, she was enabled to steer him around the difficult corners. Apart from the certain rooms which he frequented, the rest of the house was strange territory to its owner.

First the entrance floor which had been the basement of the original house. In front was the rectangular hall which I have already referred to, with a reception room alongside. Back of the reception room was a large cloak-room to be used when there was an entertainment; and back of this the kitchen looking out on a yard. The yard was no more than a small paved court surrounded by lofty blank walls. On the side of the house opposite to the main entrance a narrow passage ran through from the service stair at the back to a service entrance on the street.

On the floor above were drawing-room, central hall and dining-room as I have described; pantry occupying the rear extension. Above that again, Captain Venson's bedroom occupied the front of the house with dressing-room and bath adjoining. A large, well-lighted room, it was as bare as a monk's cell; the soldier's taste was revealed. The only ornament it contained was the sculptured head of a beautiful woman over the fireplace. I looked closer and beheld—Gloria Suffern! Poor fellow! A photograph would have been of no use to him, of course; but one could see him when he was alone, wistfully passing his fingers over the bronze features.

"What a charming head!" said Mme. Storey. "Who is it?"

"Oh, nobody in particular," he said hastily. "Just an ideal head that I picked up at Gorham's. My friends tell me it's a good piece of work."

The rear of this floor was occupied by the bedroom where Mme. Storey and I had taken off our things, with a dressing-room in the extension. The floor above was similarly planned.

"Captain Venson, he make me take the front room on this floor," said M. Pelletier deprecatingly. "Mr. Belding, he sleep in the rear."

"Oh, there are plenty of spare rooms," said his master. "They might as well be used."

The floor above, which was the top floor, was divided into a number of smaller rooms. The other servants slept up here. In addition to Barker, there was a kitchen man named Gumpold, whom we did not see on this occasion. M. Pelletier exhibited the front rooms and the rear rooms, but there was also, as we could see, a middle room which he passed over. He hesitated for a second by the door of this room as if inviting a question concerning it; but Mme. Storey did not put it, and, of course, I did not. This ended the tour of inspection. I must say again, that the whole house was beautifully kept.

Afterwards Mme. Storey, Captain Venson and I returned to the drawing-room, where my mistress opened the grand piano, and played and sang to the infinite delight of our host. He listened in a trance of pleasure. It would have wrung your heart with compassion to see him sitting there with his wistful, sightless eyes, and a half smile playing about his lips. As we were leaving he said simply: "This has been one of the best nights I can remember. You spoke of coming again. Did you mean it?"

"Rather!" said Mme. Storey.

"Make it soon," he pleaded.

“How about next Friday night?” This astonished me, for she was booked to sail on the French line on Thursday.

“Friday’s all right if it may not be sooner.”

“On Friday, then.”

M. Pelletier himself did us the honour to open the front door. “I hope Mademoiselle is pleased with everything,” he said deferentially.

“More than pleased,” said Mme. Storey. “You are a marvellous housekeeper, M. Pelletier.”

She did not mention that we were coming again. He would learn that soon enough from his master.

As we drove away in a taxi I said: “Why did you put off our next visit for a week?”

“I need the time to make an outside investigation.”

“But your ship?”

“I shall take a later one. I am resolved to get to the bottom of this matter.”

“What do you suspect?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. But the key to the mystery is to be found in that middle room on the top floor. There was somebody in that room. I heard him creep to the door to listen while we were in the passage.”

“Why didn’t you ask about the room?”

“Because Pelletier wished me to. He was primed with an explanation. We must have a look in there without consulting him, my Bella.”

5

On the following morning we went down to Police Headquarters to consult our old friend Inspector Rumsey. Mme. Storey described to him the curious situation that we had stumbled on.

"Do you want me to act?" he asked.

"Not yet," she said, "let us find out first what we are up against. But you might help us to see if we can identify any of our men from the photographs you have on file here."

We set to work. If there is any job more tedious than that of scanning hundreds of photographs I have yet to find it. The expression of a man facing a police camera is always the same, and the monotony of this endless succession of hard blank faces has a hypnotic effect. Presently you find yourself looking at them without seeing a thing, and have to turn back.

However, it fell to my share to make the most important find. As my eyes were skating over the pictures they were arrested by a peculiarly wary look in a pair of dark eyes looking out from a smooth plump face. M. Pelletier! This was the history attached to the card:

"Daniel Devore or Vore; swindler. Has used many aliases, but is widely known throughout the underworld as French Dan." (A description of his physical characteristics followed). A well educated man, of considerable intelligence; and a voluble and persuasive talker, his specialty is crimes involving elaborate deceit, rather than crimes of violence. Will put up a fight though, if cornered. Has been on the stage; is a good actor, and a master of the art of make-up. Rarely seen without some sort of disguise; prides himself on being able to mystify his closest associates. Enjoys a great reputation amongst younger criminals, and never has any difficulty in surrounding himself with a gang. Has served a term at Sing Sing prison 1909-1913. Arrested many times since, but always escaped conviction."

"French Dan!" said Mme. Storey, looking over my shoulder. "I've heard of him."

"One of the worst!" growled Inspector Rumsey. "Slippery as an eel, as I know to my cost. He made a monkey of me in the Stock Exchange swindle, two years ago. Since then he's dropped out of sight."

"Two years," said Mme. Storey. "That's just the period of his employment by Captain Venson. I am sure he has not been idle."

Mme. Storey found the other two men we were looking for. Belding's sickly face was revealed as that of one Henry Mappin, alias "Collars." According to the card, he wore this particular style of collar to hide a conspicuous scar on his neck. He was a former clerk who had first gone to jail for robbing his employer's till. Since then he had specialised in cheque raising. Barker's stiff thatch which even pomade was unable to subdue, was easy to pick out. It appeared that he was known to the police as Sawney Feehan. Starting as a mere pickpocket he had risen to be a sneak thief. Though still under thirty, he had served three prison sentences, and was at present wanted for another robbery.

"A pretty crew!" commented the Inspector.

Mme. Storey's next step was to put a watch on the Venson house. Because of its situation this happened to be easy. As I have stated it faced the Park; at this point the East Drive runs along within a yard or two of the street, but at a higher level; seated on a bench alongside the drive, therefore, partly screened from the street by leaves, our men had a first-rate view of the house they were set to watch. We put Emmerich and Shannon on the job; good men, both of them. I quote from Emmerich's first report.

"At 2.15 p.m. a stout dark-complexioned man about fifty years old came out of the house; neatly and plainly dressed; had a cagey eye. He corresponded to the description furnished me of the wanted man. He stood on the curb, and hailed a taxi. According to instructions I had a cab waiting handy, and I followed. He drove to number —— West 14th Street, paid off his taxi and went in. This is an old house now rented out in cheap unfurnished rooms. The front door is always open, and anybody can go in and out without attracting attention.

"I watched from a drug-store across the street. In about half an hour he came out again, but fixed up so his own mother wouldn't have known him. He would have got by me all right if I hadn't been warned that he was an expert in disguise. He had made his face look all red and puffy, like, and whitened his hair; stuck on a big white moustache. He was all dressed up like an old dude; elegant blue suit, grey spats, grey stick as he walked. He had changed his whole expression to suit; looked like a regular sport. It was the best make-up I ever saw; he come right out into the strong sunlight and got away with it.

"First he walked around to Seventh Avenue, and bought a buttonhole bouquet at a florist's. Then he hailed another taxi. I lost a minute getting a cab, but I managed to follow. He got out at Madison Square, and walked up the Avenue, admiring himself in the plate glass windows, and giving every pretty woman the glad eye. Went into ——'s store. Stopped at the jewellery counter and priced some cuff links in a funny gobbling sort of voice. This was just a stall; he didn't mean to buy anything. Walked right through the store, and hailed another taxi on Madison Avenue. I followed.

"He drove to —— Fifth Avenue, a big office building. Went up in the elevator to the offices of the Sterling Securities, a big mail order investment house. There is a big waiting-room there with plenty of people sitting round, so I was able to wait for him without attracting notice. But he never came out again. After waiting an hour and a half I made some inquiries, and I found that the Securities Company occupies two floors. They have their own private stairway, and my man must have gone up that, and got out from the floor above without my seeing him. I'm sorry I fell down on this. Will try to do better next time. I don't believe he was on to me following him; he's just naturally a cagey guy."

So much for Emmerich. Shannon meanwhile had been left on watch. He reported:

"After Emmerich left me nobody entered or left the house until four o'clock, when Captain Venson came out with his attendant. As I had been instructed not to bother with them, I let them go. Shortly after five another party came out, smallish, nervous-looking, dark-haired man about fifty-three years old, I should say, but it's hard to say about that dried-up kind. Wore glasses and walked stooping; needed a hair cut bad. Dressed kind of foreign with an old cutaway coat that was too big for him, and a black velour hat though the weather is so hot. Walked along kind of creeping and timid, like as if he was afraid of being looked at. Had the look of a professor down on his luck.

"I hadn't any instruction about this man, but thought I better follow him on the chance. Nothing came of it. He just walked through to Third Avenue and walked up and down nowhere in particular, gaping in the store windows, and sometimes just standing on a corner. In about forty-five minutes he came back and went in. Seemed like he was just taking the air."

I may say here that according to Shannon's reports, this peculiar looking creature came out of the house every afternoon at the same hour, walked around aimlessly for a little while, and went in again. As he never appeared

at any other time, it was clear that he must be living in the house. Evidently Captain Venson's establishment included a member of whom the master was completely unaware.

To return to Emmerich: On Sunday he reported that our man appeared after lunch dressed in his best in the character of M. Pelletier the major-domo. He proceeded directly down town to the corner of the Bowery and Broome Street, where he met a respectable looking woman of his own type. He took her down to Coney Island, and showed her a good time. This was highly characteristic of the mystifying tactics of French Dan. If he knew he was being followed, he must have been laughing in his sleeve at us.

On Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday afternoons he had himself driven to his place on Fourteenth Street, whence he shortly afterwards reappeared in an elaborate disguise. He never made any effort to throw his tracker off on his way down town. It seemed as if he was just playing with Emmerich. Each day as soon as he was ready, he shook himself, apparently with ease. The story was always the same; only the disguise and the method differed. On Monday he appeared as a very old gentleman, dignified and stately; on Tuesday he dressed in a blatant style like a millionaire from the cow country; on Tuesday he sported a top hat and sideburns like a pillar of the church. It was noticeable that he always played the part of a rich man. Emmerich was wild. We had that room on Fourteenth Street visited at a time when we knew French Dan would not be there; and found just what we expected, clothes to fit every sort of character and a great store of make-up materials; but not a shred of evidence of any other sort. It would have been very discouraging, had not Mme. Storey put out another line which yielded better results.

6

On Monday morning she sent for Benny Abell. I've had occasion to mention Benny before in respect to other cases. As you may remember, he was an ex-hold-up man who was famous for his daring exploits not so long ago. He generally worked single-handed. He was not a natural born thief, but the victim of circumstances; consequently when Mme. Storey gave him a chance to go straight, he took it and he stuck to it. He's a small, keen man of thirty-five, who could pass for ten years younger. He was never a sneak thief nor a clever schemer, but a brave man who took his life in his hands every time he turned a trick. He is naturally one of the squarest men I have ever known. It is not often we are able to use him in our business, because everything connected with his former life is hateful to him now; but on one or two occasions he has been of great service to us.

"Benny," said Mme. Storey, "do you know a crook called French Dan."

"Sure," he said, "everybody knows French Dan. Back in 1920 I turned a trick with him. He has always made out to think a heap of me, but that's all a con."

"Would you be willing to help me land him?"

"Sure," said Benny quickly. "He's a skunk."

"Hm!" said Mme. Storey, "if he knows that you think he's a skunk, you wouldn't be much use to me in this."

"But he doesn't know it," said Benny. "He treated me square enough because he had need of me. It was others I was thinking of. French Dan is the sort of man who gets off and his pals go to jail."

"I get you," said Mme. Storey. "He's up to some crooked work now that involves a helpless friend of mine, and I want you to find out for me what the game is. Would you know how to get in touch with him?"

"I could give a good guess," said Benny. "There's a little social club down in Chrystie Street where he used to hang out. If he no longer goes there himself, some of the fellows will put me on to him."

"Well, go to it," said Mme. Storey. She laid out the situation to him as far as we knew it.

On Tuesday morning we got Benny's first report in the mail. It ran: "I went down to the —— Pleasure Club, Monday afternoon. I didn't have any trouble getting in, because there was a fellow there I knew called Lam Cregan. He squared me with the bunch. Seems my name is still remembered amongst them. It is known that I was a member of the Varick Street gang which was broken up by Mme. Storey last year, and that I made a getaway. What they do not know is, that it was Mme. Storey who helped me get clear; and that she afterwards got the outstanding sentence against me cancelled. As far as these fellows know, this unexpired sentence is still hanging over me, so they regard me as safe. I accounted for myself the last year by saying I had made a bit of money out of my operations, and had been knocking about to see the world, and just got back broke. I fed them a lot of dope about London and Paris and so on, and they were too ignorant to know the difference.

"The club occupies the second floor of an old building down there. They hang out a sign and all, and everything looks open and regular; but it's purely a crook's hangout, and any straight fellow that got in there would be like a fish out of water. It's supposed to be under the protection of —— (Benny named a local politician); but I don't know anything about that. You might know what it was by the fact that it's crowded in the daytime when straight fellows are working. They've got an old pool table and a broken down piano. Some play cards.

"I played cards all afternoon with Lam Cregan, and a couple of other fellows. I didn't want to let on what I was after, but it wasn't necessary, because Lam himself let fall the name of French Dan. He's a famous man amongst that bunch. They all know he's a skunk, but they admire him because he seems to get away with it.

" 'Where's French Dan now?' I asked.

" 'Oh, he's battling around town,' said Lam. 'He comes in here nearly every night at ten o'clock. Seems he's working some graft that keeps him busy all day.'

" 'What is it?' I asked.

" 'You can search me! French Dan's got a close mouth. But I'll say it must be something good, for he's lousy with jack.'

"That was all then. Lam and I had our dinner in a restaurant, and went back to the club after. Sure enough, in comes French Dan, all dressed up to the nines, and sporting a diamond as big as a cranberry. You'd think I was

his long-lost brother the way he pumps my arm up and down and beats me between the shoulders. Right away I seen in his cagey eye that he wanted to use me in some way. So it seems I have met up with him just at the psychological moment as they say.

"But, of course, nothing came out right away. French Dan ordered in liquor for the bunch in honour of my return, and there was a lot of racket and carrying on. He said he had to get home early, so about 11.30 the two of us got out, leaving the others drinking. We walked up town together. French Dan talked a whole lot without saying much, in the way he does. We made a date to meet at the corner of Broadway and 42nd the next night at nine o'clock. He said he couldn't get off before that. He said we'd take in a show and all. At Delancey Street he hopped in a taxi and left me."

On Wednesday morning we received this from Benny Abell:

"French Dan and I met on Tuesday night as agreed. He took me to the Winter Garden, best seats in the house, and afterwards blew me to a swell feed at the Elysia Night Club. The whole racket must have set him back a good twenty-five. All the time he was sort of beating round the bush, telling me what a nervy fellow I was and all, feeling me out, like. And, of course, I played up to him by making out I was flat broke and ready for anything. When we were through eating he suggested we better go to a room he had where we could talk quiet. So we hailed a taxi. His room was at —— West Fourteenth Street. It was a crummy looking joint with nothing in it but a big dressing-table to make-up at, and any God's amount of clothes hanging on racks. French Dan always was bugs on disguising himself.

" 'Same old stunt!' I says.

" 'Well, it's the same and not the same,' he says grinning. 'I admit I get my amusement this way, but it's very valuable in our business, too. I can go right into Police Headquarters and lay a complaint against myself without any of the dicks getting wise.'

" 'But who wants to go into Police Headquarters,' I says.

"By-and-by he makes out he has an impulse to confide in me. 'Benny,' says he, 'I've got the finest plant I ever had in my life. I've been working at it for two years now, and whenever I am ready to cash in I'll be a rich man.'

" 'What is it?' I asks.

" 'I can't tell you that,' he says, wagging his hand. ' 'Tain't that I don't trust you, Benny, but I got to think of the fellows that's in with me.'

“I said nothing.

“ ‘Just the same, I wish to God I’d had you in with me from the beginning,’ he says.

“ ‘Well, I was right here,’ I says.

“ ‘I know,’ he says, ‘but I didn’t rightly know your worth then.’

“I let it go at that.

“ ‘It’s a bunch of dummies that I got in with me,’ he said disgusted like. ‘Boneheads! I got to do everything myself. It ties me down.’

“ ‘It’s a darn shame,’ I says.

“ ‘And that’s not the worst of it,’ he went on. ‘You can’t blame a man for being dumb; that’s nature’s fault; but if he’s yellow that’s another story. One of my men’s got a yellow streak in him. I believe he’d rat on me if he got the chance. I admit I’m anxious.’

“ ‘Who is it?’ I asked.

“ ‘Sawney Feehan.’

“ ‘Never heard of him.’

“ ‘I got to eliminate him,’ French Dan went on, ‘but I can’t do that neither, until I can put my hands on a man to take his place.’

“This spiel of French Dan’s kind of struck a chill into me. When he spoke of ‘eliminating’ a fellow who was in with him, it could mean nothing more nor less than murder. God knows I don’t want to assist at a murder. But I had gone too far to back out, so I just nodded my head.

“Finally it came out plump and plain: ‘Would you consider an offer to come in with me, Benny?’

“I wasn’t going to jump down his throat, of course. ‘I’d have to know what it was first,’ I says.

“ ‘No,’ he says, ‘you’ll have to trust me. You know me, Benny. All I can tell you now is, it’s the biggest thing I’ve ever pulled!’

“ ‘Well, what is there in it for me?’ I asks.

“ ‘I was just coming to that,’ says French Dan. ‘You see me and the other boys has been working at this for over two years. And now the time is ripe for a clean-up. I expected to carry it on for a while yet, but I don’t want to risk what we’ve got by trying to get too much. So we’ve decided to clean-

up. Within two weeks the whole thing will be settled. Now, just coming in for the last two weeks, you can't expect to share on the same basis as them that's been in it from the start.'

"Sure!' I says. 'I ain't a hog. What do I get?'

" 'One per cent.,' he said.

" 'One per cent!' I hollers. 'What the hell do you think I am!'

" 'Keep your shirt on,' he says. 'One per cent. will net you fifteen thousand or more. Not a bad cut for two weeks' work if you ask me.'

" 'One per cent. hell!' I grumbled.

" 'Well, never mind the percentage,' says he. 'I'll guarantee you fifteen thousand flat.'

" 'Not enough,' says I, and we argued it back and forth. Finally I got him up to twenty thousand, and we shook hands on it.

" 'What have I got to do?' I asks.

" 'We're all playing the part of servants in a rich man's house,' says he, 'and you'll have to be one, too. Can you answer the door bell and wait on the table?'

" 'I can make a stab at it, if you will coach me,' I says, grinning.

" 'It won't matter,' he says, 'because your master is blind.'

"I made as if to draw back at this. 'Hell!' I says, 'I don't want to turn no trick against no blind man!'

" 'You don't get it, Benny,' he says; 'you ain't within a thousand miles of it! This is something new, this is. You'd never guess it. We don't intend any harm to the blind man. We're just using him as a cover for our operations.'

" 'Will you swear it?' I says.

" 'There's my hand on it,' says he. 'We ain't agoing to harm him, neither in his person nor his pocketbook!'

"You never can believe what French Dan says, but in this particular, from the way he said it, I think it's on the level.

"So we appeared to come to an agreement at last; and French Dan instructed me to call at Captain Venson's house at nine o'clock Wednesday morning. He promised to supply me with a suit to wear while serving, but

told me to bring my own stuff in a bag, as maybe he wouldn't be able to let me out for a day or two. He will undoubtedly watch me like a cat in the beginning, so I may not be able to communicate with you for a bit."

This report gave us plenty of food for thought. One had to keep in mind the fact that French Dan might have been lying to Benny. He was certainly lying part of the time. I was amazed at the amount said to be involved. If one per cent. was fifteen thousand dollars, the whole loot must have been in the neighbourhood of a million and a half! Where had they got it? Certainly not by mulching poor Captain Venson, whose whole fortune was only a little more than one tenth of that sum. In short, I was completely mystified. What Mme. Storey thought, she did not confide in me.

Though Benny had warned us he might not be able to send anything further, we anxiously looked for some word from him all through Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. It would have been of inestimable value to us to be armed with complete information when we went to the house on Friday night; but nothing came, and we had to go without it.

7

THIS brings me to the most exciting night of my whole life. I hope I may never experience such another. I am not brave like my wonderful mistress; I *hate* suspense and danger. It makes me savage.

We had no warning of what was before us. It was a lovely evening at the end of June, I remember. At seven o'clock the sun was still high, and the shabby old Park looked almost glorious under its westering beams. The fashionable neighbourhood in which we found ourselves was already beginning to be forsaken; most of the fine houses were closed for the summer. But there was a great throng of people in the Park, taking the air, and many motor-cars were purring up and down the Avenue.

Of course, I knew it was no pink tea that was before us, and my heart was beating fast as I went down the four steps that led to Captain Venson's door. I received my first shock when the door was opened to us by Benny Abell himself, though this was natural enough; but something in his face warned me of trouble. To all appearances the correct and deferential man-servant, Benny's face was very pale, and his eyes showed a strained look. He appeared to wish to bar our ingress.

"Don't come in!" he whispered out of the corner of his mouth. "It is dangerous!"

My heart seemed to stop beating then. He could say no more, for the smiling, unctuous face of M. Pelletier was to be seen in the hall behind him. If Benny wished to keep Mme. Storey out, he had certainly gone the worst way about it, for she is never one to take a dare. She walked in with a cool smile, and I had to follow her, of course, though I was half-paralysed with terror. All the strength seemed to have run out of my legs. "Good-evening, M. Pelletier," said my mistress in her ringing voice; "have you got *les coquilles Alceste Pelletier* for us?"

"*Bon soir, bon soir, mademoiselle*," said the smiling scoundrel, bowing repeatedly. "*Oui! Oui! Oui! Les coquilles sont prêt!* The what you say? scallops were brought down from Boston by aeroplane especially for your dinner!"

"Flatterer!" said Mme. Storey.

The major-domo had in the meantime dismissed Benny with a curt nod. He now led us up the stairway. On the first landing stood Captain Venson

smiling and colouring with pleasure. My breast warmed over him. In that dreadful house here was something that was simple and honest.

M. Pelletier waited with his foot on the bottom step of the next flight. It seemed to me that there was something unspeakably sinister in that unctuous smile of his. "Follow me, *mesdemoiselles*," he purred, when greetings had been exchanged.

"Don't trouble yourself," said Mme. Storey. "We know the way now."

"*Permettez-moi*," he insisted. "Eet ees an honour!" He led us up to the bedroom we had used upon our former visit. Mme. Storey closed the door behind us, and stood listening.

"He is waiting outside," she whispered. "He suspects we might try to do a little exploring. . . . Let us explore," she added suddenly. "Listen, Bella; while I hold him in talk, you run up the service stair to the top floor. You saw the ladder leading to the roof. The scuttle is fastened down with hooks on the inside. Fix the position of that inside room in your mind, and go up through the scuttle, taking care to make no noise. That room is bound to have a skylight. Snake your way across the roof and take a peep through it!"

Imagine my feelings upon receiving these commands! There was nothing for it but to obey, though. Mme. Storey, bending over, ripped open a seam at the bottom of her skirt. Upon the dressing-table amongst every conceivable article that might be required in the feminine toilet, was a housewife containing needles and silk thread. With a sign to me not to start until she got the man going, my mistress picked up the housewife and went outside, closing the door. I listened with my ear at the crack.

"Look, M. Pelletier, I tore my dress in getting out of the taxi. Skirts are so tight nowadays! Miss Chalmers has never learned to sew, and neither have I. Our fingers are all thumbs. But you are so clever I am sure you could. Will you please?"

Hearing him murmur: "*Certainement, mademoiselle! Avec plaisir!* I waited for no more, but kicked off my slippers, and ran out through the dressing-room to the service passage, and up the stairs. Two flights. On the top floor I was sure I could hear sounds of some one moving in the hidden room. Hastening up the ladder, I unhooked the scuttle. The damned thing stuck, and I could have wept with chagrin. However, I was only delayed for a moment. Putting my back under it, I raised up, and it came free with only a little noise. There was a stick which came down and held it open. I drew myself out on the roof, and crept on all fours to the skylight which I knew

must be over the hidden room. I peeped through it, taking care not to show any more of my head than necessary.

Well, in a word, what I saw beneath me was a miniature bureau of printing and engraving; steel plates, acid baths, engravers' tools; a shelf with a row of pots containing coloured inks. At one end of the room was a printing press of a design that was new to me. It was a hand press, and must have been practically noiseless for its rollers were covered with many layers of felt. I have since learned that it is the kind of press ordinarily used by artists in printing etchings. There was a man working at it, whom I recognised from his unkempt hair and meagre frame as the "professor." Even as I looked he was pulling the big levers towards him that drew plate and paper between the rollers. When the plate returned, he pulled off the paper, and examined it. A ten dollar bill! The operation was slow, since he had to ink the plate by hand for every impression. Even so, I suppose he was able to print hundreds in a day. So this was the source of the million and a half! On a table at the side of the room there was a pile of completed bills that must have represented many thousands of dollars.

All this I got in a second or two, you understand. I was afraid to linger in case the workman might look up. Creeping back through the scuttle, I softly let it down, and hooked it, then I flew down the back stairs. I dreaded that some discovery might have been made below. As a matter of fact, I don't suppose I was gone five minutes in all, and Mme. Storey was certainly clever enough to have kept M. Pelletier engaged for twice that time, had it been necessary. When I regained the bedroom she was still jollying the major-domo outside the door. I moved a chair to let her know that I had returned. She presently came in smiling; questioning me with her eyes. I whispered to her what I had seen. She nodded without making any comment except to press my hand. There was a telephone on a stand at the head of the bed. She took down the receiver—and presently hung it up again.

"As I expected, dead," she murmured.

I suppose I was as pale as a ghost. "This will never do," she said, smiling. Leading me to the dressing-table, she rubbed a little rouge into my cheeks. "Smile, my Bella," she said cheerily. "It is a woman's best armour!" We issued gaily out of the room, arm in arm. M. Pelletier appeared never to look at me. He led the way down stairs. My mistress continued to chaff him.

"I hope you took into account the time necessary for a woman to titivate, M. Pelletier. I should never forgive myself if the *coquilles* were dried up."

"*Les coquilles* wait upon your good pleasure, *mademoiselle*. Zey are lucky to get zemselves eaten by you at any hour!"

Mme. Storey laughed like a girl. Immediately after we returned to the main floor dinner was announced, and we entered the dining-room.

8

TERROR had the effect of sharpening my faculties; consequently every detail of that meal is engraved on my memory. The table was a picture; to-night pink snapdragons, one of the loveliest flowers, were used for the decorations in combination with azure delphiniums. The goblets and wine glasses were of rock crystal, cool to the lips; the silver was of a quaint Georgian design; the china was antique royal Worcester. Such things are unpurchasable nowadays; they must have been heirlooms in Captain Venson's family. While we ate the radio was turned on in the hall; and the strains of a violin solo stole into the room, not loud enough to interrupt conversation.

Abell waited upon the table, and M. Pelletier remained in the room throughout, presiding over the sideboard. Ostensibly this was to do us honour; but in reality, of course, it was to enable him to watch us all, and especially Abell. Abell was clever enough to play the part of a well-trained servant very creditably; but he could not hide his agitation from us, who knew him so well. This more than anything else unnerved me; for I knew Abell as a man of iron nerve. His fears were not on his own account, but on ours. He worshipped the very ground that Mme. Storey trod on.

What a strange, strange meal! Across from me sat my beautiful, sparkling mistress; nobody could ever have guessed from her that anything was amiss. She never ceased bantering Captain Venson in the affectionate manner that charmed him so. Her teasing, you see, saved his sensitive pride, made him feel like a man as good as any; while her genuine friendliness warmed his breast. After all he was only a man like any other and he craved a woman's sympathy, though he would have died sooner than confess it. To see him sitting there all unconscious; his face slightly flushed, and his sightless eyes beaming with pleasure, put the crowning irony on the scene.

"We shan't come again if you're going to throw yourself like this," said Mme. Storey. "What, turtle soup! Whoever heard of such a thing! Am I an alderman to be feasted thus? Oh, but it's good, though!"

"I had nothing to do with it," said Captain Venson with his happy smile. "M. Pelletier arranged all. I hope you'll come often so I may be sure of getting something good to eat."

"It would bankrupt you."

"We can live on hash in between times."

M. Pelletier, overhearing this, permitted himself to smile in the manner of a privileged servant. His air of being deeply impressed with the importance of the occasion, but fully equal to it, and entirely good-humoured, was perfection. There was something horrible about it when you knew the man for what he really was.

The soup was followed by the famous *coquilles*. I suppose the dish was delicious, but I was incapable of appreciating it. It was composed of several sorts of sea food artfully combined, dressed with a wonderful white sauce, and baked on scallop shells. Mme. Storey told me afterwards it was nothing in the world but *Coquilles St. Jacques*, a dish well-known in Paris, which M. Pelletier had simply re-christened in his own honour.

The main course consisted of the breasts of some tiny bird delicately toasted, and covered with another of M. Pelletier's piquant sauces. Each piece was no more than a good mouthful. For dessert we had marvellous meringues filled with whipped cream flavoured with maraschino. Poor Captain Venson was soon in difficulties with his. After pursuing it helplessly around his plate for awhile, he quietly abandoned it.

Throughout the meal M. Pelletier played with Abell like a cat with a mouse. He could see as well as we could that Abell was burning for an opportunity to communicate with my mistress. With almost a caressing air the major-domo hovered over him, under pretence of showing him the proper way of doing this and that. Always kind and patient and tactful. At a moment when Abell went into the pantry, he apologised to us for his newness.

"A handy fellow, but ees not yet accustom' to the niceties of sairving."

"I like my new servant," said Captain Venson to Mme. Storey. "He has a voice that doesn't grate on one. What does he look like?"

"A good-looking lad in a poker game with the cards running against him," said Mme. Storey.

Captain Venson laughed. "I get the picture!"

Abell returned from the pantry bearing three rolls on a salver. We each took one. Now Mme. Storey ordinarily does not eat bread with her dinner, and when I saw her break her roll up, and convey part of it to her mouth, I guessed that there was something unusual about that roll. I took the occasion in breaking a piece of my roll, to turn it over, and glance surreptitiously at the bottom. There, pencilled on the hard crust, I read this message: "He knows you."

My breath failed me for a moment. Danger loomed very close. As from a little distance I heard Mme. Storey still chaffing Captain Venson. It enabled me to pull myself together.

I realised that Abell, not knowing which roll Mme. Storey would take, must have scribbled his message on the bottom of each. The third roll was lying disregarded by Captain Venson's plate. I glanced at it, longing to see him break it up and destroy the tell-tale message; but no such luck. M. Pelletier had his eye on it, too. Coming forward upon the pretext of filling his master's wine glass, he contrived to knock the roll to the floor. Picking it up, he handed it to Abell with a gesture ordering him to replace it. Of course, M. Pelletier read the message in that moment.

My breast became tight. I glanced across at my mistress. Of what use was it to keep up the comedy now? Should we not have sprung from our chairs and made a break to escape from that terrible house? Abell would have followed us. I got no encouragement from her. She was saying to Captain Venson in her unconcerned voice, speaking of the violinist: "He's playing that in E minor. It would be amusing to try to accompany him on the piano."

What a woman! I was obliged to sit tight, and control my shaking nerves as best as I could. Mme. Storey was right, of course. The front door was a long way off. Any attempt to escape would only have involved our blind host in the affair to his cost.

A moment or two later Abell went into the pantry for coffee. On this occasion M. Pelletier followed him out. Abell never returned. I heard a smothered exclamation from behind the pantry door, and slight sounds of a scuffle—so slight that Captain Venson's attention was not attracted. I felt sick with apprehension. Mme. Storey's face hardened, but she never interrupted her talk with our host. What could she do? She was unarmed. How can a woman arm herself when she goes out in evening dress?

Mme. Storey looked at me significantly; and from me towards the head of the stairway outside. I got the suggestion, and slipping out of my chair, ran to the stairs, and peeped down. Beside the front door lounged the figure of a man with his hands in his pocket, a big man with a brutal face. This was Gumpold the kitchen man. Returning to my chair, I let Mme. Storey understand with a look that there was no escape that way.

After a considerable wait Mr. Pelletier re-entered the room with a murmured apology. His face bore an ugly smile. At his heels came Barker with the coffee; Barker's sullen face also showed signs of the trouble below

stairs. As he handed the cups, Captain Venson became aware that the servant had been changed. “Where is Abell?” he asked mildly.

“Very sorry, *monsieur*; Abell, he feel indispose’,” murmured Mr. Pelletier, with a hateful, complacent air. “Barker will finish serving.”

I wondered if they had murdered our friend.

After passing the cigarettes the servants withdrew, and did not appear again. When Mme. Storey had finished her coffee, she said casually:

“Shall I sing to you?”

“I was hoping you would!” said Captain Venson eagerly.

Singing at such a moment! It was like an irrational nightmare!

9

MME. STOREY sat down at the piano, while Captain Venson, taking a fresh cigarette, flung himself back in an easy-chair with an anticipatory smile on his handsome face. My mistress ran her hands idly over the keys, then paused as if to consider what she should sing. Summoning me to her side with a nod, she whispered in my ear: "There's a telephone booth in the left-hand corner of the hall adjoining the service door. While I am singing, see if you can get a connection. Call Inspector Rumsey . . ."

"Can't you make up your mind?" put in Captain Venson. "Sing that German song you sang last time. What was it? *Der Schönste Engel.*"

"So sentimental," objected Mme. Storey. The real reason she didn't want to sing it was that it was too short.

"But I liked it," he persisted. "I suppose my taste is bad."

By elaborating the accompaniment she made it last out long enough for me to accomplish my purpose. I need only say that I found the instrument dead. The wires had been cut. The crafty M. Pelletier was not likely to overlook anything so obvious as that. On my way back, I peeped down stairs, and saw that Gumpold was no longer in sight. Re-entering the drawing-room I spread out my hands to indicate to my mistress that there was nothing doing on the telephone.

When I could get a chance I whispered to her imploringly: "There is no one by the front door now. Let's make a break for it. What else can we do?"

She shook her head firmly. "We'd never make it. The moment the music stops they would be on the alert again. It is only when they hear me singing that they relax their watch. . . ." This while her fingers were playing back and forth over the keys.

"Sing 'Greeting,' begged Captain Venson.

"All right," she answered. "If I can remember how it begins."

He hummed the air for her a bit off tune.

"Bella," whispered Mme. Storey in my ear, "while I am singing this song have you got nerve enough to steal down the service stair and see what they are up to?"

My heart sunk like a stone; Mme. Storey never recollects, of course, that others may not be as brave as herself; but I clenched my teeth together and nodded.

"Should you meet any of them say that you want to call a taxi and you can't get the telephone to answer."

She started the song. Her voice was as clear and unfaltering as a mellow peal of bells.

"Sweetheart, when you walk my way,
Be it night or be it day;
Dreary winter, fairy May,
I shall know and greet you."

I started to kick off my shoes, but she stopped me with a frown. And, of course, if I had met anybody in my stocking-feet, I could never have accounted for myself. So I stole out in my shoes.

The dining-room was dark. How could I know whether anybody was concealed there watching us? I had marked the position of the light switch, and I turned it on. The room was empty. Crossing it, my heart failed me utterly as I put out my hand to push open the door into the service passage. I was so sure I would find somebody behind it. But I went through nevertheless. The passage was dark. I dared not make a light here for fear of betraying my coming to those below. I could not tell whom I might stumble over. I stole down the stairs, guiding myself with a hand on the rail. There was a similar swing door on the lower landing, and it also had a little oblong piece of glass let in at eye level. A beam of light was coming through it.

I peeped through, and the extremity of my fear was a little relieved, for I saw at a glance that the whole gang was gathered in the kitchen; French Dan, the "Professor," Belding, Barker, and Gumpold. But Benny Abell was not anywhere to be seen. For the moment the crooks had forgotten about us. There was trouble between them; their faces were hot and they were angrily disputing, though they kept their voices low.

I had not to look far before discovering the cause of the trouble. Good Heavens! Never in my life have I had such a shock of astonishment. I simply could not believe my eyes. On the kitchen table, under the light, lay a leather suitcase with the cover thrown back, and it was full, literally running over with jewellery. None of your cheap stuff, but only gems of the rarest and choicest description. A mass of diamonds winking under the light like little suns; and I could also catch the creamy glimmer of pearls, the green

fire of emeralds, and rubies like bright drops of blood. Imagine a mass of necklaces, bracelets, pins and rings, thrown in anyhow. Some of the smaller objects had dropped out on the table. The value of the stuff was simply beyond computation. I was reminded of the pictures of Aladdin's cave that I had looked at in my childhood.

These swinging doors do not fit very closely, and I could hear almost as well as if I had been in the room with them. French Dan was standing in front of the table in an attitude that suggested he was trying to protect the loot from his rapacious men. I heard him say:

"You get back to the front door, Gumpold, and keep watch."

"Aah," growled Gumpold, "I guess I got a voice in decidin' this matter, ain't I? She can't make a sneak while she's singin' and playin'. I'll slip back as soon as the music stops."

French Dan turned to Barker. This was the one whom Abell had said he had had trouble with. "Go on up to the dining-room, and keep your eye on them."

"To hell with it!" retorted Barker. "I want to know what we're gonna do. I don't trust you, Dan, and you know it! You'd double-cross us all if you got the chance. You're noted for it!"

"You're a liar!" cried French Dan.

"Easy, fellows! Easy, for God's sake!" begged the little Professor in a panic. "If we get to quarrelling everything will be lost!"

The disputants quietened down. There was some mumbled talk that I could not catch. I was wild, as you may suppose, to learn what they were going to do; but Mme. Storey was nearing the end of her song. There were only four verses to it. As soon as she stopped I knew that Barker would return to the dining-room. I had often heard her sing the song. She came to the words: "Here or in the courts of Heaven," which are twice repeated, and I turned and ran noiselessly back up the service stairs.

As I entered the drawing-room, Captain Venson was in the act of praising Mme. Storey for the song. How strange the contrast between that elegant couple in the drawing-room, and the hot-eyed thieves disputing over the treasure in the kitchen! I was barely in time, for Captain Venson turned to the chair where I had been sitting, saying:

"Don't you like that song, Miss Chalmers?"

"It is one of my favourites," I said, trying not to gasp the words out.

Mme. Storey could see by my face that I had startling information. While she played a sort of intermezzo I whispered to her what I had seen. Captain Venson was talking away, and we had to give one ear to him. My mistress's face turned grave, but she never let the music stop for a moment. She whispered:

"Are you willing to try again while I sing another song?"

I nodded. I had been through so much by this time, nothing seemed to matter.

"Sing 'Widmung,' " said Captain Venson. This is another short song.

"After awhile," said Mme. Storey. "Here is one I haven't sung you."

She started the introduction to the Serjeant version of "Blow, Blow, Thou Winter Wind." This is an old-fashioned song with many repetitions and an elaborate accompaniment that would give me more time. Mme. Storey cunningly interpolated additional repetitions.

"I will make it last five minutes or more," she whispered.

A moment or two later I again had my eye within a couple of inches of the little pane in the kitchen door. All five of the men were still there; still arguing. Gumpold was speaking at the moment that I returned to my post.

"I'm a reasonable man. I admit he's the boss, and I'm willing to obey orders as long as I'm satisfied. But at that I've got the right to have my say. For over two years we been workin' on this plant, and we ain't cashed in a cent. Now we got this damned female dick in the house, and we stand to lose everything we worked for. Well, what we gonna do about it, that's what I want to know!"

Barker broke in passionately: "I told you from the first we ought to have sold the jewels as fast as Dan bought 'em in with the phony bills. But you wouldn't listen to me. And now where are we?"

"Yeah," retorted Dan, "and if we had cashed in as we went along, what would have happened, eh? You would have thrown your money around, and got drunk and blabbed, and within three months the game would have been broke up, and us behind the bars. We went over this in the beginning, and you all agreed it was worth while to save the stuff up for the sake of gettin' a big stake at the final clean-up. What's the use of grousing now?"

"That's all right," said Barker, "but the woman is on to us now. What about our stake now?"

“Well, is it my fault that she’s in the house?” snarled Dan. “That’s just an accident, kind of.”

“Was it an accident that you brought Benny Abell into the house?”

“Well, he can’t do no more harm.”

“Accident or no, she’s on to us,” grumbled Gumpold. “What we gonna do?”

“She isn’t on to us,” said Dan. “She only suspects.”

“Aah, Benny Abell must ’a’ told her.”

“Benny didn’t know himself till he come into the house. Since then I’ve taken damn good care he didn’t get no chance to tell her. . . . He can’t tell her now.”

My blood ran cold at this.

“Aah, we’re wastin’ time talkin’,” cried Barker. “She’s on to us, and there’s on’y one thing to do; take the stuff and beat it quick while she’s singing!”

A general murmur of assent greeted this proposition. I sent up a silent prayer that they might be led to accept it. At that moment it was nothing to me if they got away with their fabulous riches, so that my mistress and I were allowed to escape out of that horrible house.

French Dan strenuously opposed it. “Yeah,” he said, “and what’ll happen? In half an hour the alarm will be raised, and we couldn’t realise a dollar on the stuff if we tried to give it away. What’s more, we got a hundred thousand dollars in bills still to pass. Once an alarm is raised you might as well stand on the corner and pitch that hundred thousand down a sewer opening. Well, a hundred thousand isn’t to be picked up so easy. I’m not gonna let it go without a fight.”

One could see that his words impressed them—except Barker, of course. Gumpold said: “What else can we do?”

“Give me twenty-four hours,” said French Dan, “and I’ll guarantee not only to pass the rest of the bills, but to dispose of the stuff, or most of it.”

“Yeah,” sneered Barker. “Once you turn over that satchel to French Dan you’ll never see him again.”

A stream of furious low curses broke from French Dan’s lips. I thought he was about to strike the other man down; but no blows were passed. “You

cur!" he said. "How much more of this do you think I'm gonna put up with? It's been the same right from the start. You've done nothing but stir up bad blood in the crowd, and sow trouble. You got ideas of your own; you can only oppose my ideas. I seen from the beginning you was no good, and I had to carry you ever since, a dead loss!"

Once more the Professor essayed the rôle of peacemaker. "Dan! Dan!" he said urgently, "cut it out, for God's sake! They'll hear you upstairs. You're losin' valuable time. What do you care what he says. All the rest of us is with you, Dan."

Gradually French Dan quietened down. "All right," he said sorely, "it's up to you fellows. This plant was my idea. I got the whole thing up, and I've been runnin' it ever since. Ain't I gone out every day and disguised myself and passed the bills in the swellest jewellery shops in the country? And never once failed to get by with it. There ain't another man in the country who could have pulled it off but me. All right; you can choose now; are you with him or with me?"

"Put it to the vote," suggested Gumpold.

"Suits me," said Dan. "Put it to the vote. If you beat it out of here to-night, you stand to lose everything you've worked for. If you stick it out twenty-four hours you got a good chance of realisin' in full."

"I say, stick it," said the Professor promptly.

"Same here," growled Gumpold.

"Me, too," added Belding.

"I say beat it," said Barker with a defiant air.

"You're outvoted, old man," sneered Dan. "No need for me to vote."

"Now you gotta put the other proposition to the vote, too," insisted Barker. "Do we hand over all the stuff for Dan to dispose of, or do we divide to-night, and each man take his own?"

On this vote the current set against French Dan. Only the little Professor, who appeared to be completely under his domination, sided with him. Barker plumed himself on the result.

"I'm satisfied, so I can handle my own," he said.

French Dan gave him a poisonous look.

“Well, that’s settled,” said Gumpold, with an air of relief. “Now, how are we gonna handle the women?”

You can imagine how I stretched my ears. With a common instinct of caution the five of them drew close together, and French Dan lowered his voice to a whisper. He issued elaborate instructions, illustrated with gesticulations of which I could make nothing. I could not hear a word. I ground my teeth together in my chagrin. The tears sprang to my eyes.

Before he had finished, the five of them suddenly raised their heads, startled. I jumped, too. In my absorption in what they were saying, I had forgotten all about the song. I suddenly realised that it was over. Barker started to move quickly towards the door behind which I stood. I flew up stairs on wings, and across the dining-room. Fortunately, I had not on this trip turned on the dining-room lights, so I was not forced to betray myself by turning them off again as I passed through. As I crossed the hall I heard a door close below. This would be Gumpold returning to his post beside the front door. When I re-entered the drawing-room, looking like a ghost, I expect, and certainly trembling, I found that Captain Venson had already missed me.

“Where were you?” he asked, smiling.

“I went out in the hall to look at your pictures,” I said. “I like to move about when there is music.”

It got by all right. He and Mme. Storey discussed what she should sing next. Her fingers played back and forth across the keys. As I could, I whispered to her the gist of what I had overheard below. Her face turned very grave.

It was obvious that I must make another attempt to learn what the crooks designed against us. Mme. Storey struck up a jolly old English song called “The Keys of Heaven,” which has many verses, and I slipped out of the room again. As I crossed the hall I had a definite hunch that somebody was in the dining-room, and I turned on the light. Barker was revealed, making believe to busy himself amongst the objects on the sideboard. I had caught him fairly; but he faced me with a hardy sneer on his mean face. I suppose he thought that things were so near a show-down it was hardly worth while keeping up the part of the obsequious servant any longer.

“Did you want something, miss?”

“A glass of water,” I said. “I thought I had seen it on the sideboard.”

“It’s in the pantry. I’ll fetch it.”

When he handed me the glass he could not quite meet my eye; an insolent leer shot out sideways from his pale orbs. I returned to the drawing-room, letting Mme. Storey understand with a glance that nothing further was to be learned *via* the back stairs. She went on with the song, while Captain Venson listened with his wistful half-smile.

10

MME. STOREY announced that we must go. Captain Venson was in distress. Having exhausted all his arts of persuasion without avail, he sadly pressed the bell for a servant. I waited in the sharpest trepidation. What would they spring now? However, M. Pelletier appeared, looking exactly as we had last seen him in the dining-room; suave, deferential and smiling. It was almost enough to persuade me that I had dreamed what I saw and heard in the kitchen.

"The ladies are going," said Captain Venson. "Please call a taxi."

"Certainly, *monsieur*."

The arch-hypocrite disappeared within the telephone booth as if to carry out his master's bidding. We proceeded up to the bedroom unaided. When Mme. Storey closed the door, I cried out involuntarily: "Oh, lock it! Lock it! At least we are safe in here!"

She shook her head with a grave smile. "Look," she said, "this door opens in. Locked or not it would be a simple matter to burst it open."

I ran to the open window with the impulse of screaming for help.

"Steady!" she said quickly. "That would do us no good!" She joined me at the window. "In these walls that surround us there is no window that commands this one," she pointed out. "Long before the source of the cries could be established, they would have silenced us. Also the blind man."

My sorely tried nerves gave way at that. Turning, I cast myself upon her. She passed a strong arm around my shaking shoulders. "Courage!" she murmured. "You have behaved so wonderfully to-night! . . . Pull yourself together, and tell me all that you can remember of what you overheard downstairs."

I did so. When I came to the part about Benny Abell I began to shake again. "They have not killed him," said Mme. Storey confidently. "Not yet!"

"How do you know?"

"It is true that they are desperate men," she said. "Sooner than lose all that they have worked for so long, they would put us out of the way. But that moment has not yet arrived. It is obvious that they have something else to try first."

“It’s the suspense . . . the suspense,” I faltered.

“I know,” she said. “But just keep one thing in mind. School yourself not to cry out, not to struggle, whatever happens. If you can do that I promise you that our lives at least will be saved.”

It was a simple matter to throw our wraps about us. There was no reason for us to linger in the room; but I simply could not bear to leave its shelter. “Oh, wait! wait!” I begged her.

“Come!” she said firmly. “There is nothing to be gained by this.”

“Look at me!” I said, calling attention to my distracted, tear-stained face in the mirror.

“No matter,” said my mistress kindly; “Captain Venson can’t see you, and it makes no difference about the others now.”

So we went down the stairs. Captain Venson was standing at the foot with his friendly smile, and that far-away look in his fine eyes which was the only evidence of sightlessness that they betrayed. “I’ll see you down to the front door,” he said.

As we set foot to the first step of the next flight, M. Pelletier—or French Dan, as you like, came up from behind us. “Beg pardon, *monsieur*, the telephone.”

“The telephone?” said Captain Venson, “I didn’t hear it ring.”

You couldn’t catch that rogue napping! “I muffled the bell while *mademoiselle* was singing,” he said smoothly.

“Who is it?”

“I do not know the voice, *monsieur*. ’E say eet ess important.”

“Oh, bother!” said Captain Venson.

Mme. Storey put out her hand. “Good-night,” she said. And “Good-night,” I added with a sinking heart.

He turned back towards the telephone. In a few seconds he would discover the deception, and I thought we might have waited, but Mme. Storey proceeded firmly down the stairs, and I had to follow. She was determined to keep Captain Venson out of the affair if she could. She knew that he was as brave as he was helpless, and that if he once got a hint of what was going on he would make an uproar that might well be fatal for all of us. She was right, as you will see.

French Dan scampered down the stairs ahead of us, and stood waiting at the front door with his hand on the knob. But the door was not opened for us as we approached. Now for it, I thought. He said smoothly—he was smiling still, but his eyes were as bright and hard as an animal's: "I am sorry ladies, but I cannot permit you to leave just yet."

Notwithstanding the control I had put upon my nerves, a little cry escaped me. It was not much more than a gasp, but instantly the man's face became convulsed with rage, like a beast of prey backed into a corner. My heart fainted at the sight. He whipped out a gun.

"If you make another sound," he said, "I'll kill you both—and the blind man!"

There was a silence.

I was frozen where I stood. Beside me, Mme. Storey watched him steadily, all the expression gone from her face.

He resumed more calmly: "I have no wish to injure you. If you do what you're told, no harm will come to you—nor to him. But we are desperate men. If there is any interference with our plans it means death."

There was a footstep on the stairs. Captain Venson was coming down. I thought this must be the end. French Dan pointed peremptorily towards the door into the reception room, which was behind us. We backed into the room. The other four men were lined up in there as still as statues. All four pairs of eyes were fixed on us. French Dan opened the front door and slammed it. He then followed us into the reception-room.

Captain Venson was almost at his heels, feeling his way slowly. As he entered the room, Belding slipped behind him, and drawing a gun, held it within a foot of his master's head. I was sickened by the sight, and the room turned dark before me. Mme. Storey steadied me, with the grip of her cool hand on my wrist.

"Have they gone?" asked Captain Venson.

"Yes, *monsieur*," said French Dan, deferentially.

The blind man hesitated. A puzzled look flickered across his face; he was half suspicious. Perhaps he had heard the slight cry that I had given. Perhaps he sensed the presence of others in the room. Nobody stirred. "Who is here?" he asked sharply.

"Nobody," purred French Dan. "I just stepped in to switch off the lights."

Only partly satisfied, Captain Venson began to feel his way slowly around the room with outstretched arms, a heartbreaking sight. Belding followed him, pointing the gun. All the servants looked at us as much as to say: One sound out of you, and the trigger will be pulled! They had no difficulty in keeping out of their master's way. He stumbled over a chair and collided with a console. A ghastly game of blind man's buff. Meanwhile, one of them, I think it was Gumpold, got a door opened behind us, and we were pulled through it. One by one the men slipped after us, and the door was softly closed, leaving French Dan alone with his master.

We were now in the long, narrow corridor that I have mentioned as running through from the back of the house to the service door on the street. One of the men had a pocket flashlight. Still without a sound—we were as careful to avoid making a noise as they were—we were shepherded back to the service stairs. It was at this point that I had stood peeping into the kitchen.

A door was opened under the stairs, and by the light of the electric torch I saw another flight leading down into a sub-basement. We were told to descend. There was now no longer any reason to preserve a strict silence. It was unspeakably dreadful to be thrust so deep underground, and my heart sank with every step. The room at the foot was evidently a laundry. From it a passage led forward to furnace room and coal cellar, no doubt. Midway to this passage we came to a heavy, old-fashioned door with a big key in it. We were halted outside the door, and forced to submit to having our hands tied behind us, and our ankles bound together.

It was Barker, the mutinous one, who tied Mme. Storey's hands. They stood a little apart from the rest of us, and she took occasion to whisper to him: "French Dan's got it in for you. You'll never be allowed to leave this house alive. You'd better come in with us!"

He looked at her in a startled way, but said nothing.

French Dan came down during the operations of tying us up. "He's satisfied," he said with a laugh. "Go and put him to bed, Belding."

We were carried into a black, airless hole and laid on the floor. The door was slammed and the rusty lock creaked as the key was turned.

11

CLOSE beside me out of the blackness sounded a wary voice: "Who are you?"

I almost jumped out of my skin. Then a rush of relief and gladness filled me. Abell's voice! "Benny!" I cried. "Are you all right?"

"Right enough," he grumbled. "But trussed up like a chicken. . . . Madame Storey, is she there, too?"

"Present!" she answered coolly, from the other side of me. "But, like yourself, unable to shake hands."

"Oh, this is damnable!" he cried in a breaking voice. "They had me boxed. I was helpless. What must you be thinking of me?"

"I bungled the job myself," she said quickly. "I'm certainly not blaming you!"

"Did they hurt you?"

"Not a bit of it! The worst thing I suffered was the loss of my cigarette-case."

"Ah, don't joke about it!" he cried. "I cannot bear it! I wouldn't mind what they did to me. But to think they should get *you*! . . . a woman like you in the power of that foul wretch! Oh . . .!" The poor fellow beat his head against the floor in his despair.

"Oh, it's not as bad as all that!" said Mme. Storey. "This is uncomfortable, I admit, but they haven't 'got' me yet, nor any of us. If they had intended to bump us off, they would have done it on the spot. No, we shall escape with our lives, but at a considerable loss of reputation, I fear."

"What's the idea, then, sticking us down here?"

"We have later information than yours," said Mme. Storey. "They need another day in order to pass the balance of the counterfeit bills. To-morrow night we'll be set free."

I doubted if Mme. Storey felt as much confidence as her voice expressed. While it might be true that the gang had no intention of deliberately murdering us, the chances were that they would be more concerned in making their getaway next day than in liberating us. Of course,

when Captain Venson was deserted by his servants in a body, an investigation would be set on foot, and in the course of time we would be discovered. But before that might we not have suffocated in our black hole?

"It makes me sore to think of French Dan's getting away with his bag full of treasure, and giving us the laugh," said Mme. Storey; "still it's a lot better than having the curtain rung down for good."

"Oh, why didn't you turn away from the house when I warned you!" groaned Abell.

"I'm sorry," said Mme. Storey; "but I never could take a dare."

There was a long silence.

After a while Mme. Storey said cheerfully: "And, anyhow, I've still got one line out. It may hook something."

"What is that?" asked Abell eagerly.

"Oh, I don't want to raise your hopes unduly. Let's wait and see."

Frequent silences fell upon us, though each of us was searching for cheery things to say. During those silences we were all busy in fighting our private terrors. That still, black, airless hole was like a tomb. One imagined that one could feel the earth pressing on one. Such was the stillness that we could hear the breathless ticking of Mme. Storey's tiny watch. The same hideous thought kept striking on my brain like a little hammer: Buried alive! Buried alive! Buried alive!

Finally Mme. Storey said: "Roll over on your stomach, Bella, and let me tackle the knots at your wrists with my teeth."

"Won't do us much good," said Abell dejectedly. "The door is two inches thick, and it opens towards us. Impossible to burst it out. There's no other opening. I had a look at the place when I was shoved in."

"Never mind," said Mme. Storey, "it will give me something to do."

Using her tongue as a guide, she patiently attacked the knots. Hours passed, as it seemed to us, and she appeared to make no progress; but she never gave up. During this time Abell told us his story.

"Trouble started as soon as I was brought into the house," he said. "Barker guessed that French Dan had some idea of replacing him with me, and he did all he could to stir up the other men against me. Told them my coming in would cut down everybody's share. I was not let out of the house, of course. They all watched me. There was a lot of muttering quarrelling,

but open trouble didn't break out until last night, and then a situation developed that was a bit more than French Dan could handle, clever as he is.

"They asked him up and down why he had brought me in at the last moment, and he couldn't answer without confessing that he intended to put Barker out of the way. I offered to get out, but they wouldn't let me go after I'd been let in on all their secrets. Barker offered to take his share and get, but they wouldn't hear of that either. Once he was safe with his cut, they feared he would rat on the rest of them. Like all gangs of crooks none of them could trust any of the others. They wrangled in the kitchen half the night without settling anything.

"Now, threats had been made against me, and when we went to bed French Dan took me into his room to sleep, on the pretence of protecting me. As soon as we were alone he opened his scheme to me. That was for the two of us to sneak up to Barker's room—he slept by himself on the floor above, overpower him and give him his quietus. French Dan had a little thin dagger that he proposed to plunge in his heart. Afterwards we would stick him under the floor of the coal-hole in the front cellar. It was paved with loose brick, French Dan said, that would be easy to prise up and put down after. Once Barker was out of the way the other fellows wouldn't care, he said.

"Well, there was a nice proposition to have put up to you in the middle of the night! I refused to have anything to do with it, said I hadn't bargained for a murder, and French Dan got sore. I begged him to let me get out, and end the trouble that way, but he wouldn't. What's more, he said if I made any move to escape from the house he would rouse the whole gang against me. He said he couldn't do anything more for me against them; it would either have to be Barker or me. When he saw he couldn't make me do it, he got sorer and sorer. We spent the rest of the night in that room watching each other, both afraid to sleep.

"To-day French Dan didn't dare to leave the house. Every hand was raised against me now. I was practically kept a prisoner in the kitchen. Now French Dan, in first recommending me to the gang, had told them that I had escaped from Sing Sing, and there was an unexpired sentence against me. Barker went out during the day. He took a train to Sing Sing. By working a little graft in the office he found out that the sentence standing against me had been cancelled by order of the governor. When he returned in the afternoon with this information, the jig was up. French Dan washed his hands of me. I didn't expect to live through the night. They all quietened

down against me, and made out everything was all right. That was more dangerous than their threats.

"Their plans were upset by an order from Captain Venson that I must wait on the table when you came to dinner. He liked me, you see. French Dan still made out everything was all right. I was allowed to open the door for you, but he was close behind me. They didn't suspect then that there was any connection between you and me. Up to that time they had only a general suspicion and dislike of you, because you had interfered with them by making friends with Captain Venson. I warned you at the door. If you had taken it, I would have run out with you. They couldn't have touched us in the open street with people passing."

"I was foolish not to," said Mme. Storey frankly.

"No! No!" said Abell. "I see now what I ought to have done. I ought to have charged out of the house carrying you two along with me. But I lost my head for the moment. As soon as the door closed behind you it was too late. But they had as yet no suspicion of you, and I thought you would get through all right."

"What a sight it would have made for the Avenue," murmured Mme. Storey, "if the three of us had tumbled in a heap on the steps!"

"Better that than this!" said Abell bitterly. He resumed: "By this time they had all made up their minds that I had been planted in the house as a spy. It was after dinner had started that Gumpold suggested maybe it was you who had put me there. Maybe you were not the society woman you pretended to be, but a female dick yourself. Somebody mentioned the name of Madame Storey on a chance. Barker searched through a pile of old newspapers until he found a photograph of you. Then the fat was in the fire. It was at this moment that I tried to warn you by scribbling a message on the rolls. French Dan saw that, and you know the rest. The whole gang jumped on me in the pantry, and I was tied up and put down here. I was simply in Hell all this time, not knowing what had happened to you."

"Well, you see it was not so bad as you expected," said Mme. Storey lightly. "We diverted ourselves with music during the evening, and here we are, reunited safe and sound. . . . And now," she presently went on, "Bella's hands are free. She will untie the rest of us, and we can at least move around and stretch our cramped joints."

12

ABELL had matches, and we were able to explore our prison. On three sides it was bounded by the rough stone foundation walls of the house, the fourth side was of matched planking. The place had evidently been a store-room; there were heavy shelves down each side, but these were now empty.

"The lock is screwed on the inside of the door," said Mme. Storey in a hopeful tone. "It was designed to keep people out, not in. If we could improvise a screwdriver we could take the lock off."

"I have a pocket-knife," said Abell.

Breaking off the point of a blade in a crack of the lock, he attacked the first screw. Unfortunately, the knife was of hard and brittle steel, and it kept chipping away. The old screws were rusted fast in their places.

"There is another blade after this one goes," said Abell doggedly.

It seemed as if we must have spent hours in the place, but Mme. Storey's watch revealed that it was only a little past midnight. My mistress's hearing is extraordinarily acute. While Abell was still at work upon the lock without having accomplished anything, she suddenly snatched his hands away. She had heard a sound outside.

"Throw yourselves down as if you were still bound," she whispered. "If there is only one of them, seize him, Benny, when I engage him in talk."

I lay down, took a couple of hasty turns of the rope around my ankles, and put my hands under me. Presumably the others did likewise. The rusty lock creaked, and the flash of an electric torch blinded us. We could not see who held it, but the mean, whining voice betrayed him. It was Barker.

"Well, what's your proposition?" he said. "Quick with it! I can't stop."

"Get us out of here before morning, and I'll protect you from French Dan," said Mme. Storey. "You shall have a sum equal to what your cut would have been."

She purposely spoke very low, so that he was drawn closer to her to hear. After a flash of his light on me and on Abell to assure himself that we were secure, he kept it on Mme. Storey's face. This gave Abell the chance to creep between him and the door. I held myself ready to spring.

“How do I know you won’t turn on me once you’re out?” whined Barker.

“I’ve never done it yet,” said Mme. Storey.

“They’ll keep a watch until morning.”

“Just let me get out of here, and I’ll undertake to get by them, and get by you, too.”

Then Abell leaped, and Barker went down on his face. The flashlight still burning, rolled away on the floor. I flung myself on his head with the instinct of keeping him from shouting for help. But I heard Mme. Storey’s voice: “Leave him to us, Bella! Quick, the light!”

Securing the torch, I threw the light on Barker so that they could see what they were doing. Mme. Storey sat on his shoulders, Abell on his legs. I need not have been afraid that Barker would yell for help; he knew that he stood in greater danger of his mates upstairs than of us. He put up a furious struggle on the floor, but uttered no sound. Little by little they got his arms bound behind him, just as ours had been bound a while before; and his ankles lashed together. Mme. Storey took a gun from him. When they arose he lay there, twisting, snarling, cursing horribly, but still careful not to raise his voice. A moment later the three of us were outside in the passage, and the door locked.

“There’s one accounted for!” said Mme. Storey with satisfaction.

But there were still four between us and our freedom.

Crossing the laundry, we crept softly up the cellar stairs on all fours. We dared not use the torch. At Mme. Storey’s suggestion, we had carried the pieces of rope with us. I had mine loosely knotted about my waist. Mme. Storey went first, gun in hand. We let the door at the head of the stairs stand open. In the service passage outside the kitchen, a beam of light was still coming through the little pane in the swing door. We peeped in. All four men were in the kitchen, all deeply absorbed in the task they had in hand. The way out through the front was therefore clear, nevertheless we lingered for a moment, so extraordinary was the scene before us.

They were all grouped around the centre table. The suitcase was resting on a chair alongside. French Dan had what appeared to be an inventory in his hands, consisting of several pages. Gumpold was taking the jewellery from the suitcase, one piece at a time. Apparently each piece was tagged with a number. Gumpold read off the number, French Dan found it in the inventory, and read off the value of the piece, which was then added to one

of five separate piles on the table. The whole table was blazing with gems—an astounding sight. This distribution was not being accomplished without a good bit of discussion. Suddenly French Dan raised his head suspiciously. "Where's Barker?" he asked.

"Went up to his room after cigarettes," answered Belding indifferently.

"He's been gone too long," said French Dan, scowling. "That —— would play me a dirty trick if he could!"

"Ain't likely to try it on as long as his stake is still in the concern," said Belding, indicating one of the piles of jewels.

"That's all right," said French Dan, "go see where he is."

Belding started towards the door behind which we stood; we three softly retreated a few yards up the service passage towards the front of the house. Belding ran unsuspectingly up the service stairs.

"Too good a chance to miss!" whispered Mme. Storey. "Come on, Benny! Bella, give me that rope. You stay on watch at the door!"

My heart sank. It was on my lips to whisper: No! No! We have been near enough to death already. Let us get out while the way is clear! But it would have been useless to speak. A mad fit of recklessness had seized on Mme. Storey; there was actually the quiver of laughter in her voice. And in Benny Abell she had a kindred spirit. They ran noiselessly up the stairs. Belding could now be heard on the second flight. I returned to my post at the kitchen door.

Inside, the distribution had been resumed; but French Dan was still uneasy. He raised his scowling face a couple of times and listened. Finally he said: "Jansen, go downstairs and see if everything is all right."

Jansen was the Professor. As he came out I retreated as before. He turned in the other direction, and started down the cellar steps after pushing a button at the top, which turned on the lights in the cellar. I followed to the head of the stairs. I knew well enough what Mme. Storey would have wanted me to do. Fate had delivered the Professor into my hands. A little man, and somewhat enfeebled, he was no more than a match for me. A little bit of the same feeling of recklessness seized on me. I peered down the stairs, half tempted, half afraid. I wanted to do my bit, too. Finally I kicked off my shoes and went down. The laundry was brightly illuminated, but once the man had gone into the passage, I could keep out of his range of view. I heard him at the door of the store-room. "Hey, you in there; can you hear me?"

The feelings of Barker, who was inside, must have been mixed. At any rate, he did not answer, and the professor tried again: “Hey, there, do you want to eat?”

Not getting any answer, he will open the door and look in, I thought; I was standing within six feet of the man, but hidden from him by a projecting corner. When he opens the door I’ll give him a push inside, and lock the door on him. . . . But then, I thought: He’ll jump up and beat on the door and yell; and French Dan and Gumpold will be down here long before Mme. Storey and Abell could come to my aid!

I instinctively looked around for a weapon. There was a dismantled washing-machine in the laundry, and the rubber rollers of the wringer lay on the floor. I picked up one of them; a perfect weapon, hard enough to stun a man, and soft enough to dull the sound of its own blow. I am not at all a bloodthirsty person, but I realised I had gone too far now to stop. If the Professor were to come out of that passage, there I was, under the light, and not a corner to hide in. In fact, I did not think at all. I acted by instinct.

He stood there rattling the store-room door, and calling to those whom he supposed to be within. It had evidently occurred to him that we might have freed ourselves, and be lying in wait for him, and he was afraid to open the door. When I realised that he was not going to open it I hesitated no longer. Grasping my roller in both hands, I took two steps forward, and brought it down with all my strength upon his head. He had his back to me, and never saw what hit him. He collapsed like a sack of rags on the floor, and never uttered a sound. I began to shake all over, and the roller dropped from my nerveless grasp. That’s what it is to be a woman.

I couldn’t allow myself the luxury of collapsing too. Stepping over the body of the Professor, I unlocked the door, and somehow I dragged him in. I scarcely knew what I was doing. There was not a sound from Barker inside. When I got the door locked again, I leaned against it gasping. Then a sweet little feeling of triumph began to steal through me. After all, I had done my bit. Two of them were accounted for. I hoped that it might really be three, for Mme. Storey and Abell had had time enough to deal with Belding now. But the two who remained were by long odds the most formidable of the gang.

I hastened back across the laundry, and up the cellar stairs, putting out the lights at the top. Before I could reach the door into the kitchen, I became aware of the sounds of a scuffle, not loud, somewhere towards the top of the house. The two men in the kitchen heard it, too; they sprang up; and I

pressed myself back into the corner at the head of the cellar stairs. Gumpold came charging out through the swing door, and sprang up the stairs. He had a natural courage. French Dan did not follow him, and for the moment I was at a loss how to act. But Mme. Storey had told me to remain on watch at the kitchen, and I held to that.

After a moment I ventured to peep through the little pane. French Dan was engaged in sweeping all the jewels pell-mell into the suitcase. He snapped it shut, and running across the room, pulled a straw hat out of the drawer of a dresser, and jammed it on his head. He must have had it hidden there in readiness. Picking up the suitcase, he started towards me. There was an evil grin on his face, and his purpose was only too evident; a panicky feeling seized me. Of what use would it be to us to capture the four underlings if the master escaped us, and with the treasure to boot? It was up to me to stop him single-handed.

I backed away down the long dark passage that led towards the service door on the street. I heard him softly approaching. As I came abreast of the door into the reception room, I said low, making my voice as much like a man's as possible: "If you come any farther I'll shoot!"

He gasped in astonishment, and scuttled back to the corner where the passage widened to pass the service stairs. I heard a switch click, and the passage was flooded with light. I whipped inside the reception-room. I knew I was a goner if he once caught sight of me. He must at that moment have been peeping around the corner at the back of the passage, but he couldn't see me.

A long silence succeeded. This was frightfully hard on my nerves. What would he do next? Try to steal around through the main hall and escape by the front door, no doubt. The main hall was in darkness. I remembered that the switch controlling the lights was immediately outside the reception room, and without showing myself, I put my hand outside and pressed it. The lights sprang on. None too soon either; for I heard a door sharply pulled to at the back, as if I had caught him in the very act of opening it.

Another period of inaction, and my nerves began to flutter and jump. The only two exits from the house were now brightly lighted, and I, hidden in the dark reception room, commanded them both. He knew where his enemy was, of course. What would he do? Make a dash for one door or the other; but which? I could not watch both doors simultaneously. I finally shoved two chairs out into the narrow passage, and dropped a third chair on top to barricade that way.

I then lay down on the floor, and peeped around the frame of the door into the main hall. All was quiet and empty. Just beyond the foot of the stairs the wall on my side ran out, narrowing the hall to the dimensions of a passage which ran to the kitchen. I could not see into this narrow part. If he had made a break to get out, what could I have done? Given him a scare, that was all. Just the same, every moment that I delayed his escape worked for our side. I was sick with anxiety not knowing how my mistress and Benny Abell were faring. No sounds now reached me from the upper part of the house.

At the back of the reception room there was a third door that I had scarcely taken account of. I learned afterwards that it led into the cloak-room which occupied the middle part of this floor. This cloak-room also opened on the narrow part of the hall, and that was how he got me. I had no warning of his coming. The first thing I knew a flash was thrown on me from behind, and I heard a hateful croak of laughter. He had discovered that his antagonist was only a woman, unarmed at that.

I sprang for the front door. I had taken notice that it was fastened with a chain, and my instinct was to thrust my arm through the chain, and thus delay French Dan's escape a little longer. He was close at my heels. I got my arm through the chain. Dropping the suitcase, he seized me around the body, but was unable to drag me away. The pain in my arm was excruciating. For a moment or two we struggled there, his frantic smothered curses at my ear. With all my might I called on my friends for aid.

Finally French Dan seizing me low around the hips, hoisted me straight up, and my arm was pulled helplessly through the chain; the tips of my fingers clutched it and gave. He flung me aside on the floor with great force, knocking all the breath out of my body. Unable to move, I had the unspeakable chagrin of seeing him pick up the suitcase, and open the door.

But as he stepped into the vestibule, he came face to face with Mme. Storey. He all but collided with the gun she was presenting at him. "What's the hurry?" she said smiling.

French Dan with a low cry, staggered back into the hall. Mme. Storey followed, kicking the door shut behind her. At the same moment Abell came running down the stairs, took a flying leap over my body, and flung his arms around French Dan from behind.

"Five!" said Mme. Storey lowering the gun. "Not a bad night's work, my children."

In my relief and weakness, I burst out crying like a child.

13

A CONFUSED scene followed. Captain Venson came down the stairs, clad in a dressing-gown. His head was up, and the sightless eyes flashed; a tragic figure, helpless and unafraid. Of old habit, he had snatched up his service revolver; but what he expected to do with it I'm sure I don't know. "What is going on here?" he demanded.

"It's all right," cried Mme. Storey, "your friends are in control."

An extraordinary astonishment broke in his expressive face. "Miss Underhill!" he cried. "How did you get back here?"

"I never left," she said demurely. "Not Miss Underhill, but Rosika Storey, at your service."

He looked, if possible, even more amazed. "Madame Storey!" he murmured. "What does it mean?"

"Well, it's quite a long story," she said; "briefly, you've been surrounded here by a gang of counterfeiters, and we have just rounded them up."

His first feeling, naturally enough, was one of injury. "Oh," he said with a laugh that did not hide his chagrin, "and I thought you came to see me!"

"So I did," said Mme. Storey quickly. "It was not until I got inside the house that I discovered this situation."

"What gang do you mean?" he asked.

"The admirable Monsieur Pelletier," she said dryly; "Belding, Barker, Gumpold, and a fifth man whom you were housing without suspecting it. He operated the printing press in the middle room of the top floor."

"Good God!" said Captain Venson. ". . . And Abell?"

"He is my assistant. He is now holding Monsieur Pelletier, who is better known as French Dan."

"Who else have you with you?"

"Just my secretary Miss Brickley alias Chalmers."

"Good God!" cried Captain Venson again. "Just two women and a man against these five scoundrels."

"Yes," said Mme. Storey, smiling broadly, "we collared them one at a time, and we're feeling immensely proud of ourselves. . . . Just wait a minute till I get this fellow tied up, and I'll tell you all about it."

When I was able to speak I asked her how on earth she had contrived to turn up so opportunely outside the front door.

"We were delayed by Belding, who barricaded himself in a room," she said; "but Gumpold fell right into our arms. I was afraid I couldn't make it in time by the stairs," she added carelessly. "I dropped out of the drawing-room window."

All we had with which to tie up French Dan was cord, cut from the portieres. However, Mme. Storey continued to stand over him with the gun, while Abell slipped out of the house to fetch the police. In a moment or two a couple of patrolmen arrived. Abell meanwhile had got Inspector Rumsey on the telephone, who asked us to keep the prisoners in the house until he could get there.

He arrived in short order. Our honest friend's face was a study when the situation was explained to him. Indeed, he roundly abused Mme. Storey for taking such a risk without consulting him.

"Well, to be honest with you," she said laughing, "I didn't know what I was up against until I got inside; and then I couldn't get out again."

When the prisoners had been taken away under a proper escort, the five of us gathered in Captain Venson's dining-room for some refreshments, which Abell foraged for in pantry and refrigerator. The story was then told in detail. At intervals Captain Venson with his absurd face of astonishment ejaculated: "Good God!"

And the worthy little Inspector would come in like his echo: "Good God!"

Mme. Storey got to laughing so she could scarcely go on.

Leaving Abell to look after Captain Venson, Mme. Storey took me home with her for what remained of the night.

An amusing incident occurred next morning. When Mme. Storey and I arrived at the office, a good deal later than usual, we found a harassed looking gentleman waiting in the hall. He introduced himself as an official of the United States Treasury. Somewhat boiled down, his tale was as follows:

“The government is aware of the existence of a plant for the manufacture of bogus ten dollar bills. It is the most perfect counterfeit that has ever been made; so good, in fact, that it has never been detected in the bills passing from hand to hand, or through the banks. The fraud is only discovered by means of the serial numbers, when the bills are returned to the treasury to be checked up and destroyed. And, of course, this may be months or even years after they were first issued, since bills of this denomination may remain in circulation for a considerable period.

“What makes the fraud so difficult to detect is the fact that the counterfeit bills are printed on the regulation government paper. We know how the counterfeiters got the paper. Nearly three years ago, several bundles of it mysteriously disappeared in transit between the mill and the government printing offices, notwithstanding the elaborate precautions that are taken to prevent such a thing. We have never been able to trace it.

“Well, a year or so after the loss of the paper, the bills began to turn up at the treasury, first one at a time at long intervals, but in gradually increasing numbers, until of late it has become a matter of very serious concern. It so happens that the counterfeit bills have sometimes been returned before the genuine bills bearing those numbers, and have been passed by the treasury, and destroyed. This creates a very embarrassing situation. The bills pass through so many hands before reaching us, that it has been impossible to trace any of them back to their source. Once a counterfeit bill turns up we generally run the makers of it to earth in short order, it is so difficult for them to conceal their plant. But in this case we are evidently up against a new combination. In short, Madam, having failed to catch the gang by the usual methods, I am empowered to ask you if you will undertake the investigation of this matter.”

Mme. Storey allowed him to tell his tale without interruption. Keeping a serious face turned towards the worthy official, she favoured me with the ghost of a wink. He concluded by showing us one of the counterfeit bills side by side with a real one. They were apparently identical. It was only when looked at under a strong glass that differences began to appear.

When he looked at her for an answer, Mme. Storey leaned back in her chair, and began nonchalantly: “This bill was printed by the notorious Karl Jansen who is well known to you. In fact, he was employed by the bureau of Printing and Engraving some years ago. He was released from prison about three years ago, and since then I suppose you have been congratulating yourselves that he had turned to honest courses. . . .”

The gentleman's lower jaw was already hanging down an inch or so. "No, we suspected Jansen," he murmured, "but we couldn't find him."

"Jansen could always make a plate," Mme. Storey resumed, "but he lacked the right sort of paper before, and he had no notion of how to pass his product. On this occasion he associated himself with French Dan Vore, another famous rogue, who supplied the necessary executive ability. I have no doubt it was French Dan who engineered the theft of the paper, and I know that it was he who passed the bills, principally in the purchase of valuable jewellery. I can't tell you how much they printed and passed, but it happens they never divided the jewellery, and its value is roughly about a million and a half . . ."

"Good God!" gasped the treasury official. "But how did you know . . . how did they . . . where did they . . .?"

"One question at a time," said Mme. Storey smiling. "With three other crooks they hired themselves out as household staff to Captain Stephen Venson, a blind gentleman of some means. The printing press was set up on the top floor of the blind man's house where it has been working merrily away for the last two years and more. This house is a mansion in the choicest part of Fifth Avenue, so it is not surprising that you could not find the plant. It *was* a new combination!"

"Where are they now?" he gasped.

"Lodged in the Tombs," said Mme. Storey serenely. "You may obtain further particulars from Inspector Rumsey of the police. I have no doubt that he has already communicated with the department, and that you will find a telegram at your hotel."

The poor man in his astonishment was wellnigh incoherent. We understood that he was trying to thank us in the name of the government, intimating that he would do his best to have a suitable compensation awarded. Mme. Storey said with her delightful smile:

"Oh, that's all right. There will be no charge. Good-morning."

Benny Abell remained with Captain Venson as his personal attendant and secretary. This was a job much more to Benny's taste than that of operative in a criminal investigation. Captain Venson evinced a boy-like curiosity concerning our business, and expressed a wish to visit us at our office. So a date was set for him to come to tea. Mme. Storey then called up

Miss Gloria Suffern, and asked her on the same afternoon, half an hour earlier.

Miss Suffern was prompt, and my mistress occupied that half-hour in telling her the story of what had happened in the blind man's house. The girl's face offered an expressive play of emotions as she listened. She blushed deeply at mention of the bronze head of herself which stood in Captain Venson's room. Her first thought was not of the dangers we had run, but of him. "Oh, poor Stephen!" she murmured. "How terrible that he should have been at the mercy of such a gang!"

"Exactly," said Mme. Storey dryly. "It is really up to some decent person to rescue him."

When the buzzer sounded that announces the arrival of somebody in the outer room, I went out and received Captain Venson from the hands of Abell, who then went off about his own affairs. According to instructions I led our guest directly into Mme. Storey's room. At sight of him the girl sprang to her feet, turning as pale as paper. She was obviously about to fly from the room, but at a glance from Mme. Storey, she dropped back in her chair. Her eyes dwelt hungrily on Captain Venson's face. He, of course, was entirely unaware that there was anybody in the room beside Mme. Storey and me.

My mistress handed him his tea, and kept up a rattle of talk to get us over the first difficult moments. Finally she said to him:

"Do you know I heard a story about you that grieved me. Whenever I hear a story about one of my friends I always charge them with it. It clears the air."

"What did you hear?" he asked, greatly concerned.

"This person said that you were once engaged to Gloria Suffern, and that you broke it off in the most brutal manner."

He smiled a smile of male obstinacy, and refused to answer.

"What was the matter with her?" asked Mme. Storey slyly.

That roused him. "Matter with her!" he cried. "Nothing! She's the finest girl in the world. She's true blue! If there was anything in the gossip you heard that reflected on her it's a lie!"

"Oh, no," said Mme. Storey; "it reflected on you. Why did you break it off?"

“I should think that would be obvious,” he said. “I come home from France blinded, and find everybody still in the grip of war hysteria; our maimed heroes, and all that bunk. Gloria with her generous spirit was ready to sacrifice herself. She would have regretted it all her life. Naturally, I broke it off as decisively as I could.”

“But the war hysteria has passed now,” said Mme. Storey, “shouldn’t you . . .”

“No, no!” he said violently, “she has forgotten me!”

“And you . . .?” asked Mme. Storey softly.

He gave a despairing sort of shrug, and shut his mouth tight.

The girl could stand no more. “Oh, Stephen . . .” she cried brokenly.

He sprang to his feet. “Gloria!” he cried.

“Here, Bella, this is no place for us!” cried Mme. Storey, dragging me out and slamming the door.

LONDON AND GLASGOW: COLLINS’ CLEAR-TYPE PRESS

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

On Page 58 of the printed book, there is reference to Burchall’s Island and further down on the same page, to Hershell’s Island. It is not clear whether these refer to two separate islands, or the same one. If it is one, it is not clear which name would be correct. Therefore, the page has been left exactly as it is printed in the book.

In the story “It Never Got Into the Papers” the section numbering skips from 13 to 15. There is no section numbered 14. The numbering has been left as printed.

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Book name and author have been added to the original book cover. The resulting cover is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *The Casual Murderer and other stories* by Hulbert Footner]