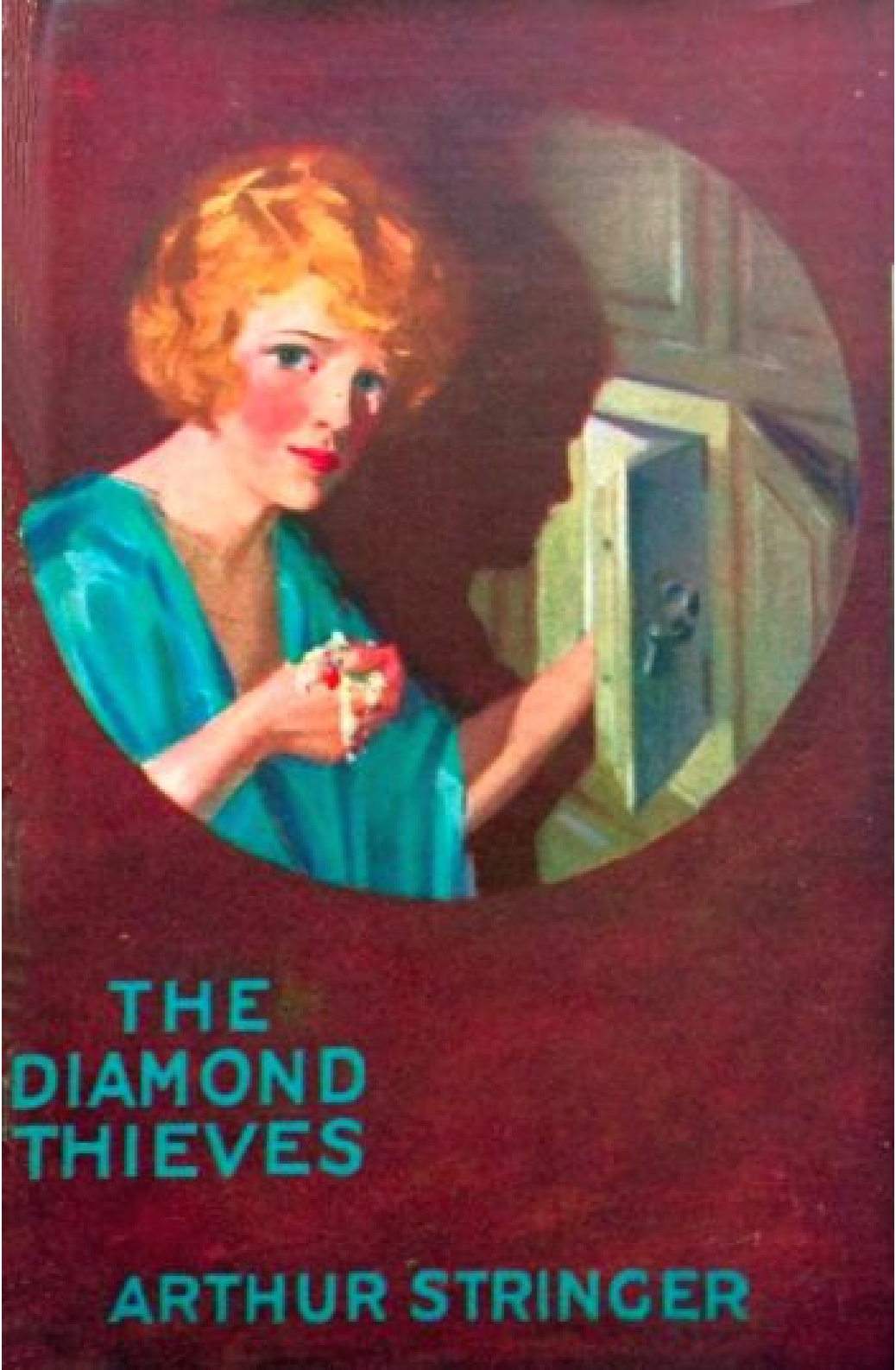
THE
DIAMOND
THIEVES
ARTHUR STRINGER

Title: The Diamond Thieves
Date of first publication: 1914
Author: Arthur Stringer (1875-1950)
Illustrator: W. (William) B. King (1880–1927)
Date first posted: May 26, 2026
Date last updated: May 26, 2026
Faded Page eBook #20260541

This eBook was produced by: Mardi Desjardins, Cindy Beyer & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at https://www.pgdpcanada.net

This file was produced from images generously made available by HathyTrust.

THE DIAMOND THIEVES

OTHER BOOKS BY
ARTHUR STRINGER

— — —

THE DOOR OF DREAD
THE MAN WHO COULDN'T SLEEP
THE HOUSE OF INTRIGUE
TWIN TALES
THE PRAIRIE WIFE
THE PRAIRIE MOTHER
THE PRAIRIE CHILD
THE WIRE TAPPERS
PHANTOM WIRES
THE GUN RUNNER

So I carefully and silently lifted those orderly jewels, one by one, and case by case, out of the vault and dropped them into my pillow-slip.

The Diamond Thieves

BY

ARTHUR STRINGER

Frontispiece by
W. B. KING

INDIANAPOLIS
THE BOBBS-MERRILL COMPANY
PUBLISHERS

Printed in the United States of America

PRESS OF
BRAUNWORTH & CO.
BOOK MANUFACTURERS
BROOKLYN, N. Y.

A WORD TO MY WINKIE

I love you, Winkie. That's the first thing I want to write. I love you so much that it hurts. It hurts, and yet it's like band-music going by. There's a sobby sort of glory in it, rapture and tears all tangled up together, so that even as I put down those precious words, "I love you," I get a frog in my throat and a pain just under my fifth rib. For it's like a band going by, in more ways than one. It's a burst of grandeur, and then silence and loneliness. It marches past and dies away, and then you must get busy, or make-believe that you're busy, or you'll die of a broken heart. That, dear Winkie, is mostly why I'm doing what I'm doing. I am trying not to remember. I'm losing myself in this strangest of lives; I'm drugging myself with work, just as some women would drug themselves with heroin. For I've lost you. And I know that I've lost you. And I'm writing all this, Winkie, so that some day you'll read it and understand. You'll see, then, that I wasn't quite what you must have thought me. You'll know, too, that all the wrong-doing wasn't exactly on my part. And some day, some day when it's too late, you'll understand it was you, just YOU, I always thought of, and you, just YOU, I always loved. But I may not be here myself when you find this out. For there are risks in this work, and God himself only knows how quickly the end might come. I'm indifferent to that end, at times, and this indifference is both my peril and my salvation. It doesn't much matter, after all, what becomes of me. I know pretty well what you've thought of me. I can't altogether blame you. But if you love a man, and see his faith in you curl up and die like a poisoned kitten, you simply can't help an occasional gulp of self-pity. And your disbelief in me doesn't make the road I'm compelled to follow any easier to travel. For I always had a hankering after the finer things of life. And I always felt that you stood for those finer things. I felt that, from the day I first clapped eyes on you in the surgery of St. Andrew's where they'd brought your poor battered big body to be patched up after that rum-runner's midnight Packard had skyhooted you into a bean-field. Your eye met mine, in that white-walled surgery, and I don't know how or why it was, but in an instant some invisible hand reached out and turned the key in the padlock of my heart. You may not remember it, but you smiled a little before the ether-cap went on, and even Doctor McKeough had to laugh as you made me take your hand and said: "Hold it tight, Gray Eyes!" You shouldn't have clung to me like a homesick baby, Winkie, during those days

of pain. You shouldn't have made me special you, when even our superintendent saw it was wrong. You shouldn't have made me wheel you to the roof garden for all those wonderful June afternoons when we watched the oriole nesting in the big elm above the maternity ward and you talked so endlessly of aniline dyes and words I'd never known or seen. And you should never have made love to me, Winkie, just as you should never have kissed me in the doorway of the diet kitchen, with Miss Primpett's eagle eye not ten feet away from where you were holding me against your broken collar-bone. For everything might have been so different if that had never happened. I might still be wearing a sedate white uniform and making bandages in the east-end room at St. Andrew's. I might still be going to chapel and believing in the uprightness of man and the prayer of Florence Nightingale, instead of being a sad-eyed probationer in this infirmary of the underworld. And it's about my underworld I'm going to write here, for, even though it's too late, I want you to know what took me there, what has held me there. I've simply got to put it all down in black and white. It's a sort of safety-valve for me. I've got to "exteriorate" it, as dear old Doctor Angus would express it; I've got to cleanse my soul of it. If I seem to tell more than I ought to, you'll have to forgive me for unearthing so much of the sordid, since that is the only way I can get it out of my system. I'm afraid I'm a good deal like your poor old Uncle Augustus, who drove his landaulet into a baby-buggy and even after being exonerated by due process of law found himself unable to keep from talking about that awful accident. For months and months, you once told me, he buttonholed people and told them about that baby and how it had come to be killed. It preyed on his mind and haunted him and obsessed him and nearly drove him and all the rest of you into Bloomingdale. And the one and only thing that kept him from going quite out of his head, you affirmed, was the fact that he could wander about like a second Ancient Mariner and ease his soul of what was rankling in it. So, if all other things fail, you can say I'm another Ancient Mariner in petticoats. For, as my new friend Toosey Attrill would put it, I'm going to spill the beans. I'm going to tell you about things that aren't often explained in the sheltered laboratory of a chemical engineer who is satisfied to give his life up to the study of coal-tar colors. So when, dear Winkie, you are showing the Germans how you can beat them at their own Thiazol and Flourindine game, and while you are waiting for your perfected naphthol black to bring you in the millions you once said it might do, I want you sometimes to think of me and remember that if life has taken much away from me, the greatest loss, after all, is the loss of the man who might have loved me!

CONTENTS

THE DIAMOND THIEVES

THE DIAMOND THIEVES

CHAPTER I

THE PLANT OF THE BLUE PEAR

I'LL NEVER quite forget that night in the inspector's office, the night when the whole thing first started. I'd dipped down into Chatham Square to talk the Hanna Case over with Toosey Attrill, with pert and sloe-eyed Toosey who was playing stool-pigeon for both the Jewelers' Protective Union and the Security Alliance which hangs the little blue plates on the front doors of its clients. And those little blue plates are a sort of professional high sign to the interested, politely signifying: "Beware the Dog!"

That impossible Toosey and I had talked through her second cigarette before a couple of the inspector's runners were after me like a pair of ambulance-chasers. Sloan wanted me, they reported, and wanted me quick. And remembering it was Sloan, and certain other things, I went.

Most people, I recalled as I stepped into his office, acquired the habit of going when Sloan wanted them. He had an eye almost as steely as Miss Primpett's, back at St. Andrew's.

"Balmy," he said to me after he'd shut his door with the frosted panel-glass, "I want you to go up and get old Grosset's Blue Pear."

It came just like that, about the same as a thunderclap out of a clear sky.

"How d'you mean *get*?" I demanded, when my breath had come back to me. For it was a big shell, all right, that had suddenly exploded at my feet. I'd been in that Maiden Lane work long enough to pick up the family history of most of the bigger stones of America, I'd pretty well learned my little lesson about precious jewels, and how they were imported, and how they were handled, and how they were guarded. And I knew that the man at the desk was talking about the third biggest diamond on all the North American continent.

"Steal it," was Sloan's offhanded reply. But that smile of his made me think of an icicle on a wintry eave.

"My lip's cracked," I retorted, after the manner of Toosey Attrill, "and it hurts me to laugh."

It was plain, however, that Sloan wasn't in the mood for levity.

"I mean it," he declared, with a Jess Willard fist-thump on the end of his desk, "And you're going to do it."

I sat there eying him. He sat there returning the compliment. I remembered that the Blue Pear had been a product of the De Beers mines, and because of the beauty of the stone many carats had been added to its weight, when it was cut in Amsterdam, by leaving it pear shaped. It had that rare violet-blue tint which always adds to the value of a diamond of the first water—and I knew enough of the trade to remember that while yellows and browns and greens were a taint in a stone, blue itself was an asset and a blessing. Like all such gems, it had both its history of toil and hardship and its tangled romance of crime and intrigue. And several years ago an eccentric old collector known as Eleakim Grosset had brought the jewel to America and added it to his private collection.

"What's the frame-up?" I finally inquired, for I saw that Sloan was still watching my face.

"I guess it's somewhere in that old phrase about 'diamond cut diamond,'" was his reply.

"I don't quite get you," I announced.

"It's this way, Balmy," he went on in a more confidential tone. "You've got to take a fall and take it right in public."

I could understand what he was saying, in a general way, but my mind refused to grasp the immediate idea.

"Then what you want is an Annette Kellerman and a camera-man," I temporized.

"We've got a situation here we can't sit and joke over," announced the inspector, with a shoulder-movement of impatience. "Post-war conditions have caused our annual gem imports to run up over sixty million dollars. The entire Old World is unloading on us. But during these last few months when we've been turning into the world's biggest market, there's a bunch of diamond thieves who've been getting altogether too busy. You know that as well as I do, from the Griswold robbery right down to the Hanna case. I don't want to grouse about 'em. But they're beating us at the game. And neither the Protective Union nor the Security Alliance seems able to cope with 'em. And when the Alliance gets where it can't run a thief down it may as well go out of business."

"Then why take it out on me?" I not unnaturally inquired.

"I'm not taking anything out on you. I'm giving you a chance any other operative would snap at. What I want, Balmy, is to get you inside their entrenchments. In plain English, I want that whole tribe of gem-thieves to see you get it in the neck. I want to plant you in their lines!"

The nerve of the man was colossal. But I'd never been a stool-pigeon and never intended to be one.

"That's not pleasant!" I calmly announced.

"No, it may not be so pleasant, for the time being. But it's a plunge that's going to pay. And to make good on your part of it you're going to slip up to old Grosset's house to-night. And when you get inside you're going to steal the third biggest diamond in all America!"

"Am I, now?" I said without enthusiasm. "And probably get sandbagged by that old skin-flint or his second cook while I'm doing it!"

"No danger of that, Balmy, for old Grosset himself is a sick man. In fact, he's sick in bed. And this office is doing its part."

"Putting the Blue Pear out on the window-sill, I s'pose, so I can pick it off on the run."

"Not exactly," he explained, doing his best to ignore my mockery. "But here's both a pass-key for the house itself, and a floor-plan showing how to get to that gem room of his. Those figures in the corner will give you the combination to the wall-safe. And if any second cook tries to interfere, both Wilkins and Doyle, remember, will be somewhere around to see that nothing serious happens to you."

"Aren't you overlooking the electric wiring?" I inquired.

"The office'll know how to attend to any alarms that come in," he explained, quite unconscious of the note of sarcasm still in my voice.

"And then what?" I demanded.

"You're going to get the Blue Pear out of that wall-safe and make a move to pass it on. And that'll be the cue for Doyle and Wilkins to round you up."

"Yes, round me up," I repeated, for I'd come to the point where I saw that the Security Alliance and Balmy Rymal were about to part company for life.

"You're thinking, of course, that we ought to put a man in that plant," continued my icy-eyed inspector. "And we should, in a way. But here's the trouble: we want somebody with brains, yes, and with nerve, for this work. We've four or five operatives who fill that bill. But every one of them is known. There's not a single man among the new bunch we can depend on.

But we *can* depend on you. I said that all along. And there's not six people in this whole city who know you're in any way affiliated with this office."

He had the eye of a Prussian officer coldly sending an underling into the jaws of death. I was cannon-fodder to him, and nothing more. But there was still a slight difference between warfare and Alliance office investigating. And I intended to let him know it.

"You don't seem to grasp it?" he asked.

"I don't grasp it," I acknowledged.

"It simply amounts to this: we're going to put the blocks to you, have you arrested, and publicly announced as a gem-thief!"

"Right in the open air?" I mockingly demanded. "And whether I like it or not?"

"It's got to be in the open air, as you call it. That gang has got to know it. You may even be indicted and given a sentence. But we'll have the ropes all laid—laid so it'll only mean going in one door and being let out the other. And I know you're not going to show the white feather and back away from the first big chance this office has given you."

I sat studying his face. He knew he'd flecked me on the quick with that mention of the white feather. I'd never been a meek and docile agent for that Alliance office of his, and more than once he'd seen me lie down in the shafts, so to speak, but never from the standpoint of timidity. Now, I realized, he was taking advantage of my courage itself. He was trying to convert my sheer dread of cowardice into something to further his own ends.

"And what am I going to get out of all this?" I quietly inquired.

"You're going to get the pull of your promising young life out of it," was his prompt reply. "It'll put you next to the people we've got to round up. It'll stamp you as one of them, for the time being, and that means the chance of making hay while the sun shines. And when you're making that hay you're going to make yourself. You're going to be not only the biggest operative in this office, but a regular little sister to the Central Bureau and the Washington service itself. And you know what that means. It means, Balmy, that inside of two years you can shake down any plum that hangs on that nice fat Federal tree over there!" And he nodded his head southward, apparently in the direction of the Republic's administrative offices and wagged his chin up and down as though I were Salome and he'd just handed me the president's head *au jus* on a platter.

Inspector Sloan was not a popular man; and as I sat there staring at him I began to understand why. Might, with him, was always right. And he was handling me without gloves now because he thought I lay in his power.

There weren't many of the plums of this world, it is true, that had fallen my way. And there were so many I wanted. I thought of Europe and a Park Avenue apartment, and then of Paris and clothes. I thought of a white-tiled bathroom all my own, with a hair-dresser once a week, and all the flowers I wanted, and a chance to study and travel and make myself into something my beloved Winkie wouldn't be ashamed of.

But at the mere thought of Winkie the whole card-house came stumbling down. For Winkie, after all, was the stumbling-block. If our paths ever crossed, he'd want to know. And the first law of the Alliance was secrecy—which meant that I'd never be allowed to explain things to my Winkie, to my Winkie who once said in St. Andrew's as he held me against his somewhat pleuritic ribs that I was surely steel true and sterling through and through. And that would take me further than ever away from him.

"Then s'posing we call the thing settled," suggested the inspector, who'd been watching my face with that chicken-hawk look of his.

"But there are a few details to this," I pointed out, declining to allow the sheer bulk of his personality to hurry me along a way I had no intention of following.

"Of course," he acknowledged as he pulled open one of his desk drawers and took out a little round bottle. He noticed the silent interrogation in my eye. "That's chloroform," he explained, "from an outfit in Faurot's office." And he tossed it across the desk-top in such a manner as to make it seem casual, even trivial.

"For my conscience?" I inquired, refusing to thaw before his sudden one-sided smile that was so plainly meant to be pacifying.

"For Grosset!" he grimly amended.

After all, I told myself, that white feather was going to turn itself into a hearse-plume. The man was asking too much of me. He was doing the next best thing to insulting my intelligence.

"You see, you've got to give old Grosset the cap," he explained with an effort at offhandedness, as he pushed the floor-plan and the little round bottle down toward my end of the desk-top. The realization of just how calmly he had been counting on me left me a little panicky, for a moment, wondering with what knowledge of the past he could have fortified himself.

"You've used chloroform before," he said, fixing me with his posthole auger of an eye.

"What makes you say that?" I contended, trying to meet his stare.

"Didn't the Hull House people tell me you'd been a trained nurse?" he half challenged and half queried.

"I took a part of the nurse's training, but I never graduated," I tried to explain to him.

"Exactly," he announced, sitting back in his chair. "You were put out of the hospital before you got your diploma."

"Or I wouldn't be in this particular office at this particular moment," I retorted, resenting the newer note of triumph in his voice.

"Then supposing you tell me *why* you were put out of that hospital," he suggested.

I wasn't afraid of him. And I wasn't afraid of my past. The only thing I was afraid of, I think, was that foolish white-feather idea. I was terribly afraid of being afraid. And if I hesitated, it was only for a moment. It was ten to one that he already knew what I was going to tell him. I didn't resent his knowing it. What I resented was his using that knowledge as a crow-bar to lever me into the hole he'd dug for me. And, being afraid, I was terribly intent on parading my courage.

"Go on!" Sloan prompted.

"I wanted to be a trained nurse and was taking my training in St. Andrew's Hospital," I began with rather a bored air.

"Where is St. Andrew's?" inquired my inspector.

"About fifty miles the other side of Detroit."

"And you didn't get along with the authorities there?"

"I don't think I was such an abysmal failure," I amended. "Even Miss Primpett acknowledged that I'd the quickest brain in my class. But I guess I'd also the quickest temper. And a fatal gift of daring which is never good for discipline. I seemed to have the kind of spirits that keep boiling over into trouble. I liked excitement, even then."

"Ah; it was for your high spirits they dismissed you?" inquired Inspector Sloan, using a tone I acutely resented.

"No; it was for something quite different," I retorted. And I found something relieving in the prospect of putting the real situation before him. "I happened to have charge of one of the wards. It was night work. When I was on duty there a young Italian was brought in. His name was Angelo Pareto. They said he'd just killed his eighteen-year-old sweetheart. It was in a fit of jealous rage, I think. Then, in a fit of remorse, he'd shot himself. And they'd found his body still warm, lying close beside the cold one.

"They brought him to St. Andrew's, and said he'd surely die. But he didn't. He was unconscious all the time. And every day, of course, a policeman would sit on guard beside his cot, for there was still an official

charge against him. And every night a second policeman would come and take the other's place. But that young Italian never opened his eyes. He never moved. Day and night he lay there unconscious, as far as we could make out. He was a nice-looking boy, with coal-black hair and clean-cut features, and an olive skin that was as smooth as a girl's. I felt rather sorry for him. It all seemed so hopeless. I hated to see him die. And I hated to think of him getting better and being marched off between those policemen to another way of dying that would be worse than the first. I used to watch him, when I got the chance. And something about him gave me a suspicion he was merely shamming. So that made me watch him closer than ever.

"The policeman, of course, would get tired of sitting there with nothing on earth to do. He used to slip out of the ward and have a smoke. For the patient was still unconscious, and for three full days and nights he'd taken no nourishment—at least, none that we really knew of. On the third night, when the big fat officer was out stealing a smoke, I had to leave the ward for a minute or two. As I started back, just as I went to go in through the door again, I caught sight of Angelo in that silly-looking bed-suit of his, slipping across to the dispensary pantry. I saw him gulp down some water and steal food from the shelves there. I edged away from the door. I did that to give him a chance to slip back into bed. I knew then, of course, that he was shamming, and I felt sorrier for him than ever. I should have reported him, of course, but I just couldn't make myself do it. The next day, when another officer was there on guard, some Italian visitors came to see Angelo. I wasn't there. But both the policeman and the day-nurse said that not a word passed between those callers and the patient, and the callers went away crying. But when I came back on duty that night I was rather excited about it all. I could *feel* something. I knew in my bones that something was going to happen. And I *wanted* it to happen. The first thing I did was to turn on all the radiators, so that the ward got like a hot-house. Then I went to one of the end windows and unlocked it and pushed it up."

"Without remembering about your Italian prisoner, of course?" interrupted the inspector, with his one-sided smile. But I ignored the interruption.

"The fat policeman, who'd been mopping his face, said he'd slip out and cool off a little. Then I remembered about Angelo, and went and stood over him. I didn't speak to him. I couldn't even know whether or not he understood English. But as he lay there he opened his eyes. I smiled down at him. And a minute or two later I had to leave the ward again.

"When I came back, the first thing I did was to look at Angelo's cot. It was empty. I at once began to search the ward. This took time, of course.

But I made my search a thorough one. Then I raised an alarm. I got the fat officer back, and began the search over again. But by this time Angelo had escaped. He'd slipped through the partly opened window, scrambled down a water-pipe, and his friends who'd been waiting outside with clothes had bundled him into a covered fruit-wagon and scurried off with him. . . . There was an investigation, and the superintendent, who'd been suspicious from the first, even took me before the Board. And I got rather tired of those pompous old parrots trying to cross-examine me and resigned on the spot!"

The inspector sat nodding his head slowly up and down, for all the world like one of those nursery-toy animals that have a hinge in the neck and a head that swings like a plum-bob.

"And your young Italian murderer?" he crisply inquired.

"Was never heard of again, so far as I know," I just as crisply retorted, a little nettled at his casual use of the word "murderer." Then I quite forgot to worry about the matter, for the inspector was rifling through a filing-cabinet, with rather a grim smile on his face as he did so.

"Angelo Pareto," he repeated aloud, as he came to a sudden stop and stared at the sheet in front of him. Then he looked up at me. "It may interest you to know," he went on, "that your olive-cheeked Angelo has managed to develop into one of the niftiest gem thieves on this side of the Atlantic!"

There was something about that official's smile which I resented with all my soul.

"What of it?" I demanded, with a touch of revolt which I couldn't quite control. The man at the desk shrugged a big shoulder. Then he swung briskly about in his chair.

"There's nothing, much," he retorted, "except that possibly we're losing time that might be of value." But I couldn't get rid of the feeling that he was concealing something it would be better for me to know.

"You think that Angelo Pareto and I may meet again?" I demanded, trying to read his face. But that face was a blank.

"When you do," remarked the inspector, "Angelo at least ought to let you off easy!" There was an oblique touch of mockery in his voice which still disturbed me. But he gave me scant time to brood over this. "There's just one more point," he hurried on as he glanced down at his watch. "What did you do after you left that hospital?"

I looked at him in wonder.

"Why, that's what brought me into this sort of work," I tried to explain to him. "A couple of weeks with that Hull House worker showed me I was going to be a failure there. I'd talked two or three times, you see, with

Deputy Commissioner Strevel about that Pareto case, and he finally asked me if I'd care to swing in with his office, to go as a trained nurse, in fact, and take care of a diamond-carrier who'd been shot in a hold-up. The police thought that particular carrier had framed his own hold-up. But after I'd been with him a couple of weeks I was able to show them they were wrong. And that first trained-nurse work took me on to the Hoey case, and the Hoey case brought me east and into the Alliance offices, as you know."

"You had your nerve with you, in those days!" regretfully remarked the man at the desk. It brought a flush to my face.

"I wasn't conscious of having lost it," was my quick retort.

"Then why does this Grosset *coup* give you cold feet?" was his equally quick inquiry.

"I wasn't aware that it had," I said, hot from the heels up. There were times when I hated that inspector. And this was one of them. Yet there was a nameless something about that big hulk of a man which cowed me, cowed me against my own will and against all my better judgment. And the knowledge of this only added to my anger. It fanned up all the latent fires of my hostility, and in the light of that sudden outburst I saw that I was being both insulted and coerced. And I promptly decided to save myself from both of these, and in the only way that seemed to lie open to me. I don't know what made me, but I suddenly thought of that old story of Owen Meredith's about the court lady who threw her glove into the lion's cage, as a test to her lover. That lover rescued the glove, but he flung it flat into the haughty lady's face. And I'd do the same, I suddenly decided, with the Security Alliance. I'd show this heavy-paunched Sloan whether or not I was making boutonnières out of white feather. I'd get him his Blue Pear, and I'd get it without the help of either Wilkins or Doyle. He could do what he liked with it. But after that he couldn't do what he liked with me.

I was still tingling with that foolish little burst of rage as I took up the pass-key and the floor-plan and the bottle from Faurot's office. I no longer turned them over as though they were marked-down waists on a Monday morning bargain-counter. My temper was up, and when temper gets on the see-saw with intelligence, only one of them can be up at a time.

"You needn't worry," I announced with dignity as I rose to my feet. "You'll get your Blue Pear all right!"

"Now you're talking!" agreed the calm-eyed man at the desk. But when he turned away to his telephone I couldn't help wondering if he wasn't doing it to hide a look of triumph on his face. When I come to think it over, I know that he must have been. But I didn't wait to make sure.

CHAPTER II

THE SPRING OF THE TRAP

IF you should ever happen to think, Winkie, that robbery is an easy way of making a living, just turn a side-street corner in the city, some midnight, and tell yourself that you're going to, that you've *got* to, break into say the sixth house from the avenue.

Walk slowly past that house with its frowning tiers of drawn blinds and its forbidding front door, and remind yourself that within half an hour, by hook or by crook, you have to be inside that unknown house, facing whatever it may happen to hold!

Just try it! Try it once, and then you'll wake up to the fact that the gentle art of burglary isn't quite so gentle as you may have imagined it and not one-half so appealing as some of the movies try to make you believe!

And that's the way I felt as I walked slowly past the Eleakim Grosset house for the second time. I had a pass-key and a floor-plan and Sloan's remembered assurance that both Wilkins and Doyle would be hidden somewhere in the neighborhood to help me out, in case I needed help. But I'd cooled down, by this time, and I knew that a bullet always traveled much faster than any two-footed messenger. And I was nearly scared out of a year's growth when a man brushed by me and disappeared in the darkness, plainly on his own preoccupied ends. I even whispered out loud, "Buck up, Balmy!" and reminded myself that I was still acting on the side of the law—and the law, I had come to learn, was a mantle that could cover a multitude of sins. And when I saw still another strange man drift by, with a slouch hat pulled down over his face, I felt my heart jump up into my throat and almost shut off my breathing. That stranger, I saw, was neither Wilkins nor Doyle, and I had to take my third turn up and down the lonely side-street before he was well out of sight.

Then I decided to down the medicine. I decided to get it all over with, at a jump, the same as a child shuts its eyes and bolts its castor-oil in one nauseous gulp. I got out my pass-key and went up those wide white steps without looking to the right or left. I told myself that I was Balmy Rymal, special agent and operative for the Jewelers' Protective Alliance, and that Inspector Sloan was behind me and behind Inspector Sloan was Commissioner Benright himself, and behind him again all the blue-coated

cogs of that immense machine which kept the Island of Manhattan a civilized one.

Yet my knees were knocking together as I went up those wide white steps and my hand was trembling as I put out my pass-key and tried to fit it to the lock. I don't think I even breathed as I turned that key and swung back the heavy door just far enough to let my body sidle in through the opening. I expected to find a light there, but all I found was a warm and velvety darkness, thick enough to cut with a knife. So I closed the door, without a sound, and stood with my back against it, staring straight in front of me.

It was like staring up at the lid of a cedar-chest. There wasn't a point of light, not a glimmer. There wasn't a touch of shadow less intensely black than another. And there wasn't a sound. It was the sort of silence that hurts your ear-drums, a kind of double-walled stillness that makes you think of a mine-shaft a mile underground and sealed up and forgotten by some ghostly Inca Indian of seven thousand years ago. Every corner of that house, I knew, could hold a danger. Every door might mean a menace. Yet oddly enough, once I was locked inside of it, I felt more certain of myself. I was at least committed to my adventure, and if things went right, why, that was a matter of luck; and if things went wrong, that, of course, simply meant that I'd have to face the music. And it wasn't likely to be such light and airy music, for Eleakim Grosset wasn't the sort of man to leave his wealth lying around without a watch-dog or two to look after it. For that old skin-flint, with all his money, wasn't the brand of collector to part lightly with his treasures. He'd give up life itself, I imagined, about as soon as he'd give up that great Blue Pear of his.

"Buck up, Balmy," I said once more under my breath as I started to grope my way forward. I counted my steps as I went, for I'd made a frantic and feverish study of that floor-plan and I felt like a blockade-runner creeping overnight into a well-mined harbor. I think I was really guided by a sense of smell more than anything else. For as I reached the stairs and crept cautiously up them I became conscious of aromas other than that of warm air. I could smell upholstery and that vague varnishy odor which always hangs over a heated room holding highly polished furniture. And the very air about me seemed to have a breathed-over scent, reminding me that I was in the neighborhood of other living beings, that I was sniffing and nuzzling my way into a lair where two-footed animals like myself most surely lived and slept and waited ready to battle for their own.

Then I came to the upper floor. I stood there listening and straining my eyes through the black velvet silences. But still I could see nothing, could hear nothing. So I groped my way to the side wall, feeling guardedly along

this as I went, counting each door that I passed, listening at every other step for any faintest echo of sound.

Then I came to the door which I knew to be the door into Eleakim Grosset's room. I can't say how long it was I stood in front of it, without moving. It may have been only a couple of minutes, but it seemed like an eternity. Then I slowly and cautiously turned the knob and as slowly and cautiously pushed back the door itself.

I didn't push it back far. But it was far enough to give me a one-eyed glimpse of the room. And that glimpse brought me my first ray of light since I had stepped into the house and closed the street-door behind me. That light, I saw, did not come from the bedroom directly in front of me. It filtered in through a second door, slightly ajar, which stood obliquely across the room from me. It was not a clear light. It was just diffused enough to make me believe that it came from a night-lamp in the second chamber, and that this night-lamp must be well shaded. But it was something to be welcomed, something to be seen with the eyes, something fixed and definite, after puddling through such velvet-muffled cisterns of blackness. It seemed even to take a load off my lungs and leave me able to breathe without that feeling of a coffin-lid between me and the outside world. And that lighted room, I knew from my floor-map, was Eleakim Grosset's gem room.

There, I knew, stood the rows of cabinets in which reposed his collection of peridots and olivines, of spinels and jargoons and tourmalines, of banded agates and amethysts and the finest series of zircons outside the Church collection in the British Museum.

But the more precious collection, I knew, was carefully stowed away in the huge wall-safe embedded in cement which stood on the far side of that second room. It was a strong-box, I'd somewhere heard, that was as formidable as any vault in Maiden Lane itself, not only built of laminated steel, but bristling with electric alarms and embedded in a base of concrete that went down to the very bedrock on which New York was built. Between that priceless collection of jewels and the outer world old Eleakim Grosset slept, like a withered old dragon across the floor of his cave. And I, at that particular moment, stood at the mouth of that particular cave.

As I stared through the uncertain half-light, in fact, I was able to make out the vague outline of the very bed on which that eccentric old man of millions must be sleeping. I could see the black mass of the heavy walnut head-board, the lower foot-board, and the vague gray of a ruffled counterpane which in a stronger light, I told myself, would surely be white. And between that area of vague gray and the black mass of the head-board I could dimly discern another patch of gray, a smaller one, a more mysterious

one. Yet as I stared at it, and still stared at it, it seemed to take unto itself a more defined shape, an outline and a meaning which could not be disputed. I knew, as I stood there, that I was staring at the sleeping face of the old millionaire himself.

I waited, without moving, straining my ears to catch some reassuring sound of heavy breathing. Nothing would have been more welcome to my ears than the nasal sing-song of a somewhat obese snorer in the midst of his midnight dreams. But that heavy-bodied man beneath the gray-blue counterpane, apparently, was the quietest of sleepers. And the longer I waited there, I reminded myself, the greater the risks I might have to face.

So I took a deep breath and closed the door behind me. Then I crept forward through the half-light, slowly and cautiously, with my little round bottle wrapped in a plain cambric handkerchief in my hand. I moved forward, with my eyes always bent on that vague patch of gray. When I reached the side of the bed I felt the way Lady Macbeth herself must have felt when she got ready to give Banquo his through ticket on the slumber-route. But still that round gray patch never moved.

My hand was shaking again, I noticed, as I pulled the cork from the little round bottle. The smell of the chloroform took my mind straight back to the hospital. It made me think of instruments and operating-rooms and white-topped tables. But I had wits enough left, as I soused that square of cambric, to remember that not a corner, not a thread, of that handkerchief must touch the sleeper's face.

This was not easy, for my hands were shaking more than ever and the chloroform fumes tended to make me a little dizzy. But I held my square of cambric over that gray patch of the sleeper's face until my arms ached. Then I emptied the last of my bottle and let the wet handkerchief fall softly over the face itself. It stood there, a pyramid of gray, so softly did I let it settle, as clearly defined as a tiny mountain-peak. It stood there like an ether-cone, covering the gray face from the line of the closed eyes to the line of the blue-gray chin.

I too stood, without breathing, waiting and watching. But there was not a sound, not a sigh or a movement, from the sleeper. And I knew he was well under. So I lifted the square of cambric away and dropped it beside the pillow on which that motionless patch of gray so quietly rested. Then I remembered what had brought me there.

An odd sense of security came over me, the next minute. I felt as though some invisible hand had reached out and closed and locked invisible doors between me and my midnight dangers. I was no longer concerned with Eleakim Grosset, or about him. My fingers were quite steady again as I

tossed the bottle between the two huge pillows. Then, I crept toward the slightly opened door of the gem room.

The stronger light, as I swung this door wider, made me blink a little. It wasn't until my eyes adjusted themselves to the newer conditions that I was able to make out the orderly rows of cabinets bordering one entire side of the room. And each cabinet held its orderly rows of velvet-covered trays, and against this somber background was arrayed the collection of rare and semi-precious stones for which that sleeping mineralogist behind me had traveled up and down the face of this wide earth.

I stopped to stare at an aurora-red specimen of spessartite, much clearer than any of the hyacinth garnets I'd ever seen before. I was just speculating, alone there in the silence of that shadowy room, that the weight of this stone must have been from six to seven carats, when a sudden explosion of sound crashed out through the silence behind me.

It sent a chill through me, a chill that shot a chain-lightning of tingles down my legs and ended up by needling and nettling the very root of my hair. My first frantic impression was that I'd clumsily rested one arm on the edge of the glass-covered case and in so doing had set off some hidden electric-alarm. But the sound was repeated, cavernously, again and again. Then it suddenly came home to me that I was hearing nothing more than the quarter-hour chime of a clock that stood against the opposite wall. I could even make it out, a tall and narrow Chippendale of dark wood, like a coffin on end, with black numerals on a dial of silver. But there was something solemn and disturbing about the tones of that chime. It seemed to warn me that my time was short. It seemed to say that if I had business in that house I'd better be getting on with it. And that brought me back to the wall-safe and the Blue Pear itself.

I no longer wasted time speculating on the possible weight of Ceylon garnets. I hurried on along the row of cabinets until I came to the end of the room, the end where I knew the heavy safe stood under its mask of wood panels, with what looked like two eighteenth-century *scrutoires* built in on either side of it, presumably to disguise the fact that the room really ended in a false wall. But I gave small thought to these as I swung back the double doors of polished hardwood covering the heavy metal of the safe-front itself. And this safe-front, I saw, stood almost as high as my head.

I glanced down at the floor-plan, for on one corner of it, I remembered, Inspector Sloan had penciled the lock-combination. My hand was already raised to the polished metal dial when I made a sudden and somewhat disturbing discovery. That safe-door, I saw, had already been opened. It was

even standing an inch or two ajar as I faced it. What it meant was more than I could fathom. And I had no time to sit down and worry it out.

I remember that I looked back over my shoulder, as I swung the heavy door open, to make sure, I suppose, that I was alone in the room. Then I turned back to the safe. As I did so I think I merely gurgled, gurgled with a foolish sort of sound, like the quavery *blat* of a sheep, when it goes head-first into a dip.

For instead of seeing the Blue Pear there I saw something quite different. What I actually beheld was a man in a black mask, with a revolver in his hand. He was crouched low, in an attitude that made me think of a track-runner waiting for the crack of the starter's pistol. But the fact that hit me hardest was that his revolver was leveled directly at my own startled head. And it was a big revolver, and a very ugly-looking one.

I didn't stop to think. When I acted, I acted entirely on impulse. I half leaped and half stumbled to one side, about the same as I'd sidestep a speeding car that threatened to cut me down on a street-corner. I went bodily against one of the hardwood doors, ricochetted off it with a spring, and, being given that start, ran wailing along the orderly row of cabinets for the door that opened into the next room.

I ran through that door and back into the bedroom before I became at all conscious of my surroundings. I don't know just when it was I discovered that the light had been turned on full and that beside the bed where Eleakim Grosset lay stood a figure of yet another man with his back to me. But this discovery brought me up short, like a sudden cross-wind. It pounded and buffeted me into a sort of helplessness of bewilderment, like the thunderous mass of a second breaker that towers and topples over you before you can get your feet after the first one has sent you sprawling.

As I stood there, shaking and panting, the figure at the bedside turned and looked at me. The first thing that struck me about this man was that his face showed more worry and abstraction than it showed surprise. And the next thing that struck me was that it was Wilkins himself.

We stood gaping at each other for a second or two. It was like a tableau of two for shadowgraphs. There seemed to be a look of pity on Wilkins' homely face.

"Where's Doyle?" I weakly demanded, for I was still thinking, I suppose, of the man with the revolver in the next room. Yet I spoke in a whisper, as though the sound of my voice might waken the sleeper on the bed.

"Telephoning for Sloan," Wilkins told me, moving a little along the bedside so that he stood between me and the gray-colored face on the pillow. And that fixed look of pity on his face disturbed me more than I can describe.

"What's wrong?" I whispered, with a sinking feeling. I tried to compel myself to calmness. But it wouldn't work. It was like telling yourself to sit easy on the edge of a volcano.

"You'd better come outside," Wilkins said to me very quietly, as he held me by the elbow and started to steer me toward the outer door. I let him lead me away ten or twelve steps, without protest. Then I came to a stop.

"What's happened?" I demanded, in a voice a little shrill from nervous strain.

The homely face of Wilkins was looking down at me with that cloud of vague pity still in it.

"*That old guy in there's been killed!*" He said it with a frown of what seemed to be apprehension. But he said it very quietly.

"Killed?" I echoed. "How? When?"

Wilkins looked pregnantly over his shoulder, as though to make sure I was the only listener.

"Chloroformed!" I heard him say, with a melancholy shake of the head.

That was all I waited for. I was no longer thinking of the man with the revolver. I was no longer thinking of the Blue Pear, or the Jewelers' Security Alliance, or the mission that had brought me into that midnight house. I was swayed only by the suffocating thought that I might have taken a human life. And that almost made my heart stop beating and left my legs like water so that I found it hard to walk.

Yet I went straight back to the bed. The smell of the anesthetic still hung thick above it. I reached out a hand and touched the blue-gray forehead on the pillow. It was cold. Then I slipped a hand under the bed-covers. The body I felt there was cold, too, cold as marble. And my three years in St. Andrew's should have told me there was something wrong about that marble-coldness, if my brain had been working right. But I wasn't myself that night. I was stunned into stupidity. There was a dead man there in front of me. Eleakim Grosset was dead, stone dead. And I was the woman who had killed him. I had taken a human life. I was a murderer, and for all time, now, my Winkie was beyond me, my hope of ever winning back to him was lost in a bottomless sink-hole of shame.

"Get me out of here!" I slavered, reaching blindly for something to hold me up. For I felt that I was surely going to faint. The very timbers of the

house of life seemed crashing down about my ears. I could feel Wilkins leading me blindly on down the darkened passages.

"Sloan ought to be here any time now," he said in a tone of complaint. He seemed to be talking to himself.

"But what'll we do?" I blubbered.

My guide didn't answer my question, so I repeated it.

"Sloan'll have to fix it up, in some way or other," he finally replied. He spoke without enthusiasm, apparently without hope.

We were almost down to the street-door when the sudden glare of a flash-light leaped up against my eyes and almost blinded me.

"Is it all right, Wilkins?" a voice asked out of the blackness behind the flash. I recognized that voice as Doyle's.

"Where's Sloan?" asked Wilkins, ignoring the other's question.

"Coming," was the other's preoccupied retort. "He says he can get her down to the office."

There was a moment of silence. The flash went out and left everything dark again.

"Well, he wants to get her quick," I heard the voice of Wilkins say over my shoulder.

They were talking of me, about me, as though I was not there between them. I no longer counted, with them. In their eyes I was something already eliminated from their world, something to be disposed of as one disposes of a corpse, something to be talked across as casually as you talk across a coffin. It brought a wave of revolt through my shaking body, a wave that stung and shocked me out of my torpor. And that made me think of something which I had for the moment forgotten.

"Wait!" I called out to the two figures beside me. "There's a man hidden up in that gem room, a man in a black mask!"

Neither of the two figures stirred. My bomb wasn't so effective as I'd thought it would be.

"I tell you there's a man hidden up there in that wall-safe," I repeated. "A man with a revolver!"

"How about it, Cleve?" asked Doyle in a voice of heavy skepticism.

"I *saw* him!" I frantically insisted. I think one of those men touched the other in the darkness. But I had no means of verifying this, just as I had no means of knowing what secret message might have passed between them.

"Nothin' to it," I could hear Wilkins' condoning voice say over my head. "The only man that's up there is a dead man!"

If he meant that as a stab for me, it went in, and went deep. It was all I could do to keep from shuddering. But I had no intention of sitting back with crossed hands, no matter what was in store for me.

"Then who opened that wall-safe?" I demanded.

"You did," retorted Doyle without hesitation.

"But it was opened before I got to it," I persisted.

I could hear Doyle's heavy sigh of forbearance.

"This girl's sure got her wires crossed," he announced, with the air of a man being tried beyond his patience.

"Then I'm going back to that gem room to get them straightened out!" I announced, and I said it with a sudden determination which brought them wheeling about in the darkness. I could feel a massive hand catch at my clothing. But I had no intention of being tied down there. So I freed myself with a jerk. I could hear one of the men call out to me sharply. But I ignored that command.

I ran stumbling through the blackness, with my hands outstretched in front of me, until I came to the stairway. Doyle and Wilkins were still calling for me to wait. But it was something quite different to their hoarse commands that brought me to a sudden standstill. It was the fact that I had come into unexpected collision with a human body, a human body hurrying noiselessly down the very steps which I was about to ascend. So feverish was the advance of that low-crouching body that I was half shouldered and half thrust aside before I could recover my balance. I think I called out, but I am not sure. And in another moment or two, as I caught at a newel-post to steady myself, I heard the street-door suddenly open and close again.

"She's gone!" gasped Wilkins, out of the blackness.

"Then, for the love of Mike, let's get after her," was Doyle's frantic comment as they went shuffling and groping toward the door.

But that door opened again before they could get to it. There was a momentary flash and clash of opposing pocket-lights and then darkness again.

"Who went out of here?" demanded a voice which I at once recognized as Sloan's.

"The Rymal woman," was Wilkins' answer.

I could hear Sloan's quick snort of disgust.

"What *man* went out of this house?" he said, even more sternly than before.

The next moment I heard the click of a light-switch and in the sudden electric glow of the lower hall I could see the three heavy figures. They, too, at the same moment must have seen me standing there at the stair-bottom with one hand against a newel-post. Sloan's face cleared, and a look of pity came into it, the same look that I'd already seen on Wilkins' face.

"This is an awful mix-up, Balmy," he said as he came slowly over to where I stood staring at him. I didn't answer him, for the simple reason that there seemed nothing to say.

He stood beside me for a moment, as though in doubt what his next move would be. Then he glanced back over his shoulder.

"Take care of her, you two, until I come back," he said as he strode past me up the wide stairway.

I stood looking after him until he had disappeared from sight. I stood waiting, in a reaction of lassitude. He seemed to be gone for ages.

His face was solemn as he came down the stairs again. He shook his head slowly as he stopped beside me.

"It's an awful mix-up," he repeated.

"Why?" I asked, though I knew what his answer would be even before I put the question.

"Because you've killed a man, Balmy, and God only knows what it'll cost our office to get you cleared!"

I felt alone on the icy peak of a forsaken world, a world without warmth or light or companionable human voices. It's the way Cain must have felt when he went stumbling out across valleys of empty rock and carried his brand into the wilderness where one life ended and another life must begin. I tried to put on as brave a face as I could. But I'm afraid it wasn't much of a success.

"What—what are you going to do with me?" I asked, struggling in vain to keep my lip from trembling.

He put his hand on my arm. The gesture, I suppose, was meant to be solicitous, as though he wanted to help me, as though he was going to do all in his power to help me. But for some reason which I couldn't understand, there was a thin glint of triumph in his eye, a glint which he didn't seem quite able to cover up. And commonplace as the answer to my question sounded, it seemed to leave everything oddly complex.

"I guess we'd better get down to my office and talk this over," he said, as he made a motion for one of his operatives to open the door for us. That door opened, I noticed, the same way a court-gate is swung aside to let a prisoner pass through. And that taxi-ride down to the inspector's office

rather reminded me of a ride to a cemetery. My thinking-apparatus was still out of working-order. What I had gone through seemed to have sent my brain into its funk-hole. It had broken my spirit and left me in a sort of seasick torpor that made courage want to keep flat on its back. I was afraid to glance over my shoulder into the past and I was equally afraid to peer forward into the future. I remember wishing I had a woman to talk to, a quiet-voiced and open-hearted woman who might have sat down and comforted me as a girl's own mother is supposed to comfort her. I wondered what my Winkie would do if I sent a frantic call up for his help. I pictured him as shrinking away from me, and looking down to see if there was any blood on my hands, and staring at me with a look of impersonal and helpless pity which I could never, never stand.

I had no one to turn to. I knew it. And I felt more and more like a refugee being spirited away from a ghostly mob that was still howling for blood. I felt, as I sat beside the silent and thoughtful Sloan, that I was merely a prisoner being smuggled to safer and sterner quarters.

Once we were back in the inspector's office I had hoped things would array themselves in a different light. But my hour in that dismal midnight room was nothing more than a dismal succession of humiliations. It seemed like a sort of long drawn out third-degree in which I couldn't even find the satisfaction of speaking for myself. For as Sloan sat at his desk, with both the office wire and his own private line busy, I could think of him only as a big black spider at the center of its web, setting a dozen and more threads of metal quivering with his calls, talking to this person and to that, from somebody supposed to be acting for the district attorney office to somebody else speaking for the Pinkertons, and still somebody else at police headquarters, and yet another unknown somebody at the Grosset house itself.

Then Sloan swung about in his chair and looked at me across his desk-top. His face seemed troubled, but there was a look of satisfaction in his eyes.

"I don't want to talk about this, Balmy, any more than you do," he said with a sort of ponderous solicitude that only added to my misery. "But I guess I've got this thing patched up. Patched up for the time being, at any rate!"

"What'll I have to do?" I weakly inquired, for I'd been sitting there thinking of myself as a harried fugitive from justice, dodging along the darker byways of the world, with dyed hair and another name and my heart always in my mouth at the never-ending nightmare of a hand being clapped on my shoulder and a voice commanding me to come along to headquarters.

Sloan seemed able to read my thoughts.

"No, you don't have to take any night train up to Canada and go in hiding," he declared. "You stay right here and face it out!"

I shook my head. But he ignored that movement of despair.

"We'll have some reports to do over, and two or three affidavits to doctor up, naturally. But if things go the way I want them to go, this—this little accident of yours is going to be something just between you and my office. Something, remember, just between the two of us!"

He said this impressively, and with decision, but it didn't for a moment take the load off my heart. I knew that he was trying to make it easier for me, that he'd worked there over his wires doing his best to piece together an amiable fiction which would stand between me and the arm of the law. But he wasn't able to help me in the way I wanted help. It wasn't in his power. It wasn't apparently in any man's power. He could save my scalp; but he couldn't save my soul.

"It's no use," I told him, with a hopeless little shake of the head. "You've tried to help me, I know—but, it's no use!"

He gave me one of his long stares.

"It's got to be some use," he said in his heavy voice. "We want you here, and we can't afford to lose you!"

"But what good can I be to you—now?" I contended, almost luxuriating in my misery, the same as you tongue the hole where a lost tooth has been.

"You stick to the Alliance, Balmy, and the Alliance will stick to you," was Sloan's answer to that infantile protest of mine. "It's an awful mess, I know, but we're going to get you out of it, and keep you out of it, in some way or another."

I saw then, in one prophetic flash, just what life held for me. I saw myself the marked and uncomplaining operative of their Security Alliance, with no choice as to what cases I should enter and what cases I should shun. I saw myself, a Don Quixote in skirts, a vigilante committee of one, careless of what I faced because there was so little in life left to care about, fighting for forlorn causes, reckless with the recklessness of lost hope, sallying forth on perilous cases, not so much because I no longer had a free choice in the matter, but more because I had no softer byway in life to tread. I saw it all, as clearly as a condemned man sees the cell which is to house him, sees it in that first vivid moment when a turnkey swings open the door that is to shut him in, forever.

"You're going to stick, aren't you?" I heard the voice of Sloan inquire.

"I've got to!" I acknowledged, without lifting my eyes. And the hopelessness of it must have shown on my face, for, when I did look up, Sloan was staring at me with open commiseration. Then he turned away and took up his receiver. The next moment I heard him calling for a taxi.

"You'd better go home, Balmy, and get some sleep," he muttered. He said it with a sort of gruff kindness. He was through with me, I could see, the same as an overworked office-man is through with an unlooked-for worry that has kept him too long at his desk. And in the morning, of course, he would have his hundred and one other worries to think about.

He came down to the street with me and held my arm as I climbed into the taxicab. Then he slammed the door shut and motioned for the driver to start.

I sat there, shaken in spirit, stunned, heartsick. It wasn't a home I was going to, but four walls that would seem like a jail, four unfriendly walls for which I paid so much every week. I gulped as I thought of them. And I knew they couldn't hold me in, any more than a wooden match-box could hold a weasel. So, instead of going to them, I suddenly decided on something altogether different. I commanded my driver to drop me at a Broadway hotel where the visible machinery of comfort might at least console my tired nerves as the drone of a motor sometimes consoles a tired mind. Once inside that hotel, however, I went straight to the switchboard operator and put in a call for "Mr. Winfred Ealand."

The operator stopped short at the "Winfred" as so often had happened before. She asked me, with a half-fretful sort of indifference, if the name shouldn't be "Winifred." And I had to explain that it was "Winfred," a man's name. For I wanted, above all things, to talk to my Winkie. I wanted the comfort of his voice and some word of help from him. And oh, Winkie, if I'd only been able to talk to you that night, if I'd only had you there to help me straighten things out, if I'd only stumbled across the thinnest ghost of a hope that it all mattered to you in any way—how different everything might have turned out!

But there was no way, the tired-eyed operator told me, after trying number after number, of getting in touch with Mr. Winfred Ealand. And once more all the world felt like a lonely icy moraine that sloped down to even lonelier precipices yawning up out of black depths of nothingness. And I couldn't get the picture out of my mind, of a gray face sunk deep in a blue-gray pillow, staring up into a vaguely lighted room through which a heavy odor of chloroform drifted. It was a picture, I bitterly acknowledged, which I might as well get used to. It was a memory which promised never to be shut out of my mind's eye. It was there, under my skin, a part of me, like a bullet

too deep to be removed from a soldier's body. And the sooner it was encysted and the sooner the dull ache of it became a habit, the sooner the old ways of life would come slinking back to their well-trodden water-holes of habit.

If I'd been able to think clearer, that night, I suppose I'd have saved myself from most of those slinking Terrors that crossed my mind's trail and crowded about my heels. But clear thinking was beyond me. It was one of the few times in my life when I wanted somebody else to do my thinking for me. But I could think of no one to go to—no one, at least, but Toosey Attrill. The thought of that rough-tongued and pert-eyed young stool-pigeon suddenly flashed out of the darkness at me, like a harbor-light on a lonely coast. Toosey, for all her youth, had known her troubles. She'd been through the mill where old Father Misfortune ground up his grain. She'd know how to listen to me. She'd leave me less alone in that gray fog of misery which hung about me like a cloud of coal-smoke. And I decided to go to Toosey Attrill and go at once. For Toosey and I, now, were much the same in the eyes of the law. We belonged to the same underworld.

There was relief even in movement. I was glad to walk through quiet side-streets and dip into the subway and be hurled onward in a car of clamoring wheels and companionable odors. I was glad to emerge again into the dead-hour quietness of the lower city and once more hurry on through the deserted streets, for those slinking Terrors still seemed somewhere close behind me.

It wasn't until after I'd crossed Chatham Square that I gave up hope. But when the sleepy-eyed Shake McMane told me that Toosey had been called out an hour before by a "singed cat" from the Pinkerton office, I felt that my last life-raft had sunk under me.

I stood in that sordid doorway that winked like a crafty eye on its sordid side-street, as much alone in the world as though I was the last woman on a worn-out planet wheeling desolately about a worn-out sun. I could feel my throat tighten as a weakening wave of self-pity swept through me. Then, biting my lips to keep from making a fool of myself and blubbering to the obbligato of the Second Avenue L, I turned about and closed the street-door which seemed to be shutting out my last hope in life.

As I did so a shadow fluttered across that door and something fell sharply at my feet, on the worn step. I did not look down to see what this was, for I was startled more by the transit of that shadowy figure of a man which skulked away and vanished into a tangled warren of cellarways. I didn't look down at my feet until I had made sure that furtive figure was no

longer in sight. Then I groped about in the uncertain light and found a small piece of brick wrapped up in a square of paper.

I unwrapped the fragment of brick, and turned it over and over in my hand, wondering what it could mean. I carried it with me as I moved somewhat apprehensively away from that lonely side-street neighborhood. I reached the corner before it occurred to me to look at the crumpled square of paper. So I stopped at the street-lamp there and smoothed out that none too clean-looking square. I saw that it had writing on it. It was uncouth and unformed writing, and in lead pencil. It took me some time to make it out. It said: "You no kill man Grosset they mak trick for you—I know—a frend."

That was all. I stared down at the roughly written words, in a sort of daze. I stared down at them without quite understanding what they meant, what they could mean. I was too tired, too heartsick, to give that ridiculous midnight message the thought that I ought to have given it. There was to be a time when it would all come home to me, when I was to remember that strange warning, and grow into a comprehension of its actual meaning. But as I stood under the street-lamp, frowning over these roughly penciled words, I at least felt that somewhere in that vast and sleeping city there was one human atom who knew of my unhappiness and in some blind and foolish way was trying to let me know that he knew.

And the thought of this, if it did not actually lift the blackness out of my soul, gave birth to a ghostly sort of hope that the truth they had marshalled against me wasn't altogether the truth. It was much the same feeling that a man lost in mid-Atlantic must have when he sees a smoke-plume low on the horizon and wonders whether or not that ship is drawing closer and closer to his little circle of desolation. And it gave me the strength to face the pearly promise of daylight that came creeping up over the East River and reminded me that no one can live without sleep.

So for three tossing hours I lapsed off into a sleep honey-combed with nightmare. After which I bathed and dressed with great care, grimly intent on keeping up a good front, no matter how wrong things might be inside. Then I imperiled a notoriously good digestion with three cups of black coffee and headed for the Alliance offices like a mill-hand heading for the round of labor that is to swallow up his lesser worries.

CHAPTER III

ON THE TRAIL OF THE STAR

INSPECTOR SLOAN'S glance was not so impersonal as usual when his eye met mine across the squared circle of his desk.

"Back in harness already, Balmy?" he asked with an arrested movement of his busy big body.

"Yes, I'm back," was my answer. "And the one thing I want you to give me, Inspector, is work. Give me enough to keep my head dizzy. Don't let me stop to think. If you want to help me, keep me busy!"

He laughed. Then he grew serious again.

"We're getting that little tangle pretty well straightened out," he finally admitted. "But I don't want you around this burg for a week or two. I want you off the map here, until the blow-over." He stopped, with his hand on a half-opened desk-drawer. "How'd you like to dip into a Middle West case?"

"I'd like anything that will keep me from brooding over my own troubles," I said with my face toward the window to hide the quiver in my chin.

He slammed the desk-drawer shut. It was like an auctioneer's mallet when the last bid is made.

"Little Spearman of Loeb & Levin's house has just been blackjacked in Detroit. They sandbagged him and took the Swartzdorp Star away from him. It looks like a Scar Parker job to me. So why not amble out there and investigate?"

I was on my feet, even before he had finished.

"When do I start?"

He smiled at my matter-of-fact grimness.

"Now!" he retorted. "And use Toosey Attrill. And remember it's the stone we want almost as much as Scar himself."

There was, I remembered, a wide streak of the theatrical about that inspector of mine. He had a weakness for giving big orders on the wing that way. It was part of his effectiveness. By being spectacular himself he spurred his agents into spectacular ways of doing things. It nettled them into a counter-effort to create an impression, to knuckle down and respond to a

sensational demand by an appropriately sensational success. But the trick was no longer new to me.

"That sounds very nice and stagey," I told him. "But it might help a little to have a few of the details of this case."

"Get the data from Doyle," he snorted back to me over his shoulder. "It's typed and ready for you. And the sooner you hike for Michigan the better!"

I knew that was my exit cue, and acted on it. Ten minutes later I had a carbon copy of the Doyle report, Toosey on the 'phone, and two berth reservations on a night train for Detroit. Twenty minutes later I had a hand-bag packed and a taxi at the door. And forty minutes after I was aboard my sleeper, with my feet up and my eyes down, quietly perusing a typewritten report which I kept well hidden behind the pages of an open *Cosmopolitan*. Then I sat idly studying the back of Toosey Attrill's ash-blonde head, eight seats in front of me. For, when Toosey and I traveled on a case, we always traveled as strangers.

This wasn't the first time I'd heard of the Swartzdorp Star. It was one of those big stones which, because of their size, are not primarily and immediately commercial. Yet they go tumbling and pushing through the channels of trade, attracting attention by their very cumbersomeness, moving as tardily and conspicuously as the white elephants they really are, and nearly always dragging after them, from the Hope Diamond down to the Blue Pear, a clanking chain of crime and sorrow and intrigue.

All Maiden Lane knew of the Swartzdorp Star, that pure white stone from the Kimberly Mines which had been cut double-rose by Van Dam, held up by the New York Board of Appraisers, bought by Bates, the race-horse king, passed on to a theatrical demi-mondaine who promptly christened it "Sammy's Salt-Cellar," then stolen and recovered and resold to a Brazilian coffee-importer who traded it for nitrate concessions to a Chilean diplomat who in turn hung it upon the throat of a volcanic little Spanish dancer two weeks before the same lean little throat was cut, almost from ear to ear, in a quite unsavory San Francisco resort. It reappeared a year later in Cairo and went northward again with the swallows, to glitter in the *Grand Salle* at Monte Carlo, when it was carried triumphantly off by a Russian Prince, only to return again to Amsterdam, where it was recut, and, several carats lighter in weight, once more found the waves of fate tossing it upon the shores of America.

It wasn't until I had gone through the Doyle report, however, that I was able to connect the Swartzdorp Star with the city of Detroit. There I found the old story once more retelling itself, only this time with a new trimming or two. An inland metropolis, finding itself half-way between iron and coal,

had also found itself suddenly blessed with the smoky crown of commercial prosperity. It strutted in its new-made wealth. It became known as the city of automobiles and easy money. And where the melon of urban riches cracks sweetest, the wasps of crime soon swarm thickest. And the City of the Straits, it seems, had been having its full share of the strong-arm squad.

For an ex-governor's wife, it also appeared, had snubbed the wife of a man named Woodworth, who'd piled up many millions in the automobile industry. That was the step that started things. It started a sort of warfare of display, a sort of duel of diamonds, each rival arming herself with ampler and ever ampler parades of precious stones which were meant to scream power at the other. It was a case of tiara versus sunburst, of coronet confronting dog-collar, of lavalliere campaigning against pendant, until the motor-king, catching an echo of gossip as to the Swartzdorp Star in a New York club, sought out the stone, and ordered it delivered to his wife in Detroit.

But it was not delivered. Before Henry Spearman, a carrier for the Maiden Lane firm of Loeb & Levin, could hand over the Star and eight smaller diamonds to the Woodward Avenue jeweler who was to mount them in a gold and platinum tiara, he was blackjacked in the streets of Detroit, presumably by one Scar Parker, alias English 'Arry, and the nine diamonds were carried away. Spearman, I found, still lay in Harper Hospital with a cracked skull, the local police had proved powerless to cope with the mystery, and not a clue, beyond the neatness of the job as a whole, had been left behind by the robber himself.

I went to bed turning these things over in my mind, slept indifferently, rose early, and breakfasted before Toosey was even out of her berth. Then, having inventoried the car and found nothing out of the way in any of my fellow-travelers, I bought a morning paper and went over it, heading by heading, to see what was happening in the world. By this time Toosey Attrill had emerged from the dining-car and had brushed by me, without an eye-flash of recognition, on her way back to her section.

It was then, and only then, that I became conscious of the man across the aisle from me. He was a lean man in clericals, with that priestly blue jowl which comes, I suppose, from close and frequent shaving. Otherwise, his skin was pasty, showing almost pallid against the blackness of his hair and eyebrows. From under these same brows blinked out a pair of abstracted and rather ingenuous eyes, confirming my first impression of an over-sedentary man of books as timorous in spirit as he was respectable in person. And at that particular phase of my career I wasn't much interested in sky-pilots.

Yet there was something about the man that puzzled me, that piqued my curiosity. It was not so much that I could see he was ill-at-ease. It was more the fact that he was covertly studying me, as though meditating, in his timid little mouse-like soul, the enormity of addressing a stranger. So I waited, idly studying the back of Toosey's head, while he indulged in certain preparatory preenings. Then he leaned timorously out across the aisle.

"I beg your pardon, madam," he quavered. "But might I borrow your newspaper for a minute or two?"

I stooped to gather up the discarded sheets. I was surprised, as I did so, to see that the blue-jowled stranger had crossed the aisle and was somewhat hesitatingly sitting down in the seat facing me. It was only his fixed air of timidity that prevented me from pointedly and promptly freezing him out. But I handed him the paper, in silence.

"Might I ask how far you happen to be going?" he ventured with a sort of gulp of desperation. I very quickly decided that he himself was going too far.

"That is a matter entirely between myself and the Pullman conductor," I coolly retorted. But his unmistakable flinch, at that speech of mine, made me almost feel sorry for him. I had seen, from the first, that he was no mere lady-killer astray from his flock. There was something more than hunger for conquest in those blinking and deep-set eyes of his.

"I get off at Detroit," he announced, as though the movement were one of vast importance. Then, apparently to bridge the silence which ensued, he timidly ventured a second inquiry. "Do you know that city?"

"I ought to. I was born there." It was a fib of the first water; but I said it without a quaver.

He sighed. "It is my first visit," he explained. The poor man, I decided, had seen so little of the world that a three-hundred-mile trip was an event in his life.

"Yet I'm visiting your city for what should be a pleasant mission—to read the marriage service for my wife's cousin. A cousin named Sheppard. Do you—er—happen to know the Sheppards?"

I shook my head.

"A very wealthy family there! Very wealthy! But also, I'm afraid, very worldly! And I, myself, am innately averse to display."

"Then these United States of ours must get on your nerves considerably," I said, feeling it was about time to put the brake on the wheel of his personalities. His eye ventured to meet mine. In it there seemed to be

mute protest at the spirit of hostility with which I was confronting him. Then he took a deep breath.

"There is much wickedness," he wistfully remarked, "in all great cities. It makes me—well—rather afraid of them. And especially afraid of Detroit."

"Why Detroit?" I impassively demanded.

He shifted a little in his seat.

"Because—well—because I approach it with a most unwelcome task on my hands," he replied, without meeting my glance. It made me laugh.

"So you're cynic enough to think that of marriage!"

He raised a pallid hand in protest.

"It's not the marriage," he corrected. "It is one of those semi-barbaric features of the ceremony which have come down to us from our pagan ancestors. I refer to the practise of ornamenting the human body with precious stones, after the manner of the ancients."

"Why should that add to your troubles in this particular case?" I unfeelingly inquired. But that reference to precious stones had left me distinctly interested.

He blinked abstractedly about him, to make sure that he was not being overheard.

"Because," he said in a lowered tone, "I have been asked to carry one of those things to some sort of a goldsmith in your city, to a man named Zwack, August Zwack, at 319 Coryell Street. And I undertook it, I assure you, much against my will."

"What do you mean by 'one of those things'?" I demanded.

"Why, a diamond, of course," he said in a tone of child-like complaint. "And one of rather formidable dimensions, so far as I'm able to judge such things."

I was very wide awake by this time. Yet I made an effort not to show it.

"But why should *you* be carrying it?" I casually inquired.

"I was told that the traveler who should have delivered it met with an accident a couple of days ago. He was beaten and robbed in the streets of your city, in open daylight. And I have no wish to share his fate. Yet, absurd as it sounds, for the last fifteen hours I have been oppressed by the feeling that I am being followed!"

"But who is there to follow you?" I asked, round-eyed with studied wonder.

He looked up and down the full length of the car, with a frown of trouble on his sallow face.

"That, of course, is more than I can say. But it distresses me, leaves me in a quandary."

I did my best to laugh at him.

"But we're all very humble and honest-looking, in this neighborhood," I protested.

"*You* are, I know," he said, looking me right in the eye. "I saw that from the first. And that prompts me to ask if you could possibly take a load off my mind, if you'll be generous enough to give me ten minutes of your time, and nothing more, when we reach the city."

"Doing what?" I demanded.

"Delivering this stone to Zwack's workshop on your way home," he replied, as he reached into the pocket of his black waistcoat and brought out something about the size of a bantam's egg wrapped in tissue-paper.

"But you've acknowledged that such a task may be a dangerous one," I protested, watching him as he almost disdainfully removed the wrappings of paper.

"No more dangerous than dropping a letter in a mail-box," he explained. "*You're* not being followed, you see!"

"But are you willing to trust me?" I temporized, still waiting for the last of the paper to be removed.

"Absolutely," he replied with vigor. "And no one will be the wiser. For, as you see, it's not a difficult thing to conceal anywhere about your person."

I stooped forward and stared down at the glitter of pale azure that blinked up at me from the palm of his hand as the last swathing of paper was drawn away. Then I stooped still lower, that my face might be hidden from the man sitting so close beside me. For lying on the palm of that sallow and absurdly steady hand I saw a huge diamond. It was cut Briolette, after the India fashion, and was oblong in shape, yet larger at one end than at the other. From its countless prisms and facets it refracted the light in countless rays of the tenderest blue. And it took an effort for me to hide the tingle that sped through my body. For I knew, at a glance and without a doubt, that I was looking down at the Blue Pear itself, the Blue Pear which had already cast its shadow across my life and had so mysteriously been stolen from the wall-safe of old Eleakim Grosset.

"Is that really a diamond?" I incredulously asked, trying my best to control my voice. But I continued to stoop low over that violet-blue wonder until I was sure of regaining my composure.

"They tell me so," said the melancholy-voiced man at my side. "But my knowledge of such things is limited. I imagined, in fact, that a real diamond

was always white."

I sat up in my seat again. During that last minute or two I had done not a little thinking. And a glance out the car-window convinced me we were drawing in toward the suburbs of Detroit.

"And you want me to take charge of this?" I asked, looking him straight in the eye. But that plaintive glance of his never wavered.

"And leave it with August Zwack at 319 Coryell Street," he repeated. "If it's not asking too much."

He crossed to his own section, lifted a large black umbrella to one side, opened a melancholy old suit-case of sheepskin and from the latter took out a package of manila envelopes. I watched him closely as he dropped the Blue Pear into one of these envelopes, moistened the flap and carefully sealed it. Then, balancing it on a knee of threadbare broadcloth, he penciled across the corner of the envelope, "Zwack, 319 Coryell," and with a sigh of relief stepped back across the aisle to my side. He sighed again as I took the envelope from his hand. I could feel the sharp facets of the jewel through its paper covering.

"If anything should happen?" I ventured, with a show of timidity as I snapped my hand-bag shut on that yellow manila envelope. Yet I knew, as I asked that question, that too much had already happened.

"My dear young lady, what *could* happen?" he blandly protested.

Instead of answering that question as I might have answered it, I glanced down at my watch, shook it and held it against my ear.

"It's stopped!" I complained, as I made an unsuccessful effort to open the case for inspection. His melancholy eyes followed my efforts, followed them without emotion. I stopped with a sniff of exasperation.

"Perhaps my nails are stronger," he suggested. I watched him in silence as he took the little disk of shimmering gold and vainly struggled to open the case. Then he stopped, looked at the dial, and handed the time-piece back to me.

"It's going again," he explained, with his lugubrious smile.

"So it is," I acknowledged as he got up from the seat, for the porter had announced "Detroit!" While that sedentary back in black broadcloth was still turned to me I clapped a handkerchief about the watch and dropped it in my hand-bag. Then I stood up and shook out my skirts.

It had not escaped my attention, during the last quarter of an hour, that my conference had been under the discreetly guarded inspection of Toosey Attrill. Not once, however, did I look in her direction. Yet as I stood up to make my way out of the sleeper I sent her a message. I did this by turning

my back to her and casually withdrawing an amber hair-pin from my hair just behind my right ear and re-inserting it just back of my left ear. It was a quite trivial movement. Yet in that little system of code signals which Toosey and I had worked out that movement said, as plain as Morse: "Tail this man, for there's something wrong!" And Toosey, as she stopped before a berth-mirror to tilt her hat, threw back the counter-sign which implied that she understood.

But it wasn't until I'd pushed my way out through the station crowd and stood bag in hand at the carriage-entrance that my melancholy-eyed friend in black unexpectedly reappeared. His movements, apparently, were snake-like in both their quietness and their quickness.

"You're going in a taxi, aren't you?" he quavered, with apprehension still in his abstracted eyes. And I announced to him that I was. For there seemed much about this sad-eyed stranger that I couldn't understand. But one thing, at least, was clear to me: he had plainly paid me the compliment of being in some way afraid of me. And I wanted to know why.

The next minute, I noticed, he was wig-wagging with that ridiculous black umbrella of his. It brought a driver wheeling in to the curb, with a swoop like a hawk's. Where he came from I couldn't exactly tell, but some ghostly instinct laid a finger on my shoulder and warned me to go slow. It wasn't so much that I merely disliked the appearance of that mysteriously opportune cab-driver. It was more that I detected a vague something flash between him and the somber figure beside me, a silent message which first prompted me to make a mental note of his license-number, "38960," and next persuaded me of the advisability of journeying in a vehicle of my own choosing.

Yet it was too late to draw openly back from that preferred conveyance. So I did the next best thing. As the cab swung out from the curb and slowed down again before the usual street-corner congestion of traffic, I flung open the door opposite the one I had entered by, and stepped to the running-board, bag in hand. From there I dropped to the pavement and hopped lightly up into an open-bodied old roadster in which sat a plump and genial-eyed youth of about eighteen. His car was moving just fast enough to bounce me up against him with a jolt that shifted his tilted panama a little farther back on his head.

"Where'd *you* blow from?" he asked as he stared at me rather open-mouthed with astonishment. But there was humor in his eye, and his face was a likable one.

"Quick," I said with the nerviest laugh I could summon up, "and you'll be a real hero and save a life!"

"But where the devil'd you *drop* from?" asked the plump boy as we rounded a corner and shot out from that tangle of traffic.

"Now north again," I commanded, still grinning, for I knew we hadn't been followed.

"What's the game?" asked the youth as he obediently took the next corner. I opened my purse and took out the manila envelope.

"Could you take me to 319 Coryell Street?" I demanded. "And quick enough to save a life?"

He repeated the address. Then he shook his head.

"There's no such street in this burg," he announced. "And I sure ought to know after being in the Merchants' Delivery for two years."

The truth came over me in a flash. It had really been waiting there, ready for some such match to explode it. I remembered the old state-fair con-trick, the roll-slipper's dodge for which the up-state hay-tossers used to fall. With one jerk of the fingers I tore the end off that manila envelope and shook the stone out in my hand. Instead of the Blue Pear I found a large Cape May crystal imitation of the original.

"What's that—a church window?" inquired my driver as we sped on. I dropped the worthless bauble back into my pocketbook. I knew that time was precious.

"Do you still want to save a life?" I asked.

"Sure!" responded the careless-eyed youth at my side.

"Then get me to Harper Hospital as quick as this little go-cart of yours can make it!"

"Say, this makes me feel like a movie star," he said as he turned the next corner and went speeding on. I waited until he drew up at the hospital. Then, as I stepped down, I lifted the revere of my waist-collar and showed him the official silver badge of the Protective Alliance.

"What do I owe you?" I asked.

"Not a cent," he called back, for I was already half-way up the steps.

In the office at Harper's I showed my badge again, ordered a taxi to be waiting for me, phoned Babbitt to expect me at Headquarters, and requested a ten-minute interview with the patient answering to the name of Henry Spearman.

That ten-minute talk with Little Spearman, who was suffering from shock and contusions but not, fortunately, from a fractured skull, did not add much to my knowledge of the case.

"That rough-neck got me before I even saw him. His second thump put me down and out, before I'd even got hold of my gun. There's only one thing I seem to remember. And I may be just dreaming that. As I swung on him, before he slugged me the second time, I imagined I saw a scar somewhere in front of his ear. But maybe I only dreamed it, for I can't even remember his face or what he wore."

That was enough. In two minutes I was in my taxi and speeding for Babbitt and his office.

"First thing," I told him as I carefully lifted my watch out and unwrapped it, "hand this to your Identification Bureau man and see whose finger-prints I've got there on the case. And then find out who drives taxi number 38960 in this town."

Then we talked Swartzdorp Star. But neither Babbitt nor his chief had much to tell me. The whole robbery was still a mystery. I was already on my feet when the Identification Bureau official brought my watch back to me.

"Sad Sam Everson, *alias* Curate Sam," he announced as he gave me the Bertillon record. "Con-man, hotel-thief and pennyweighter. Want to see his picture?"

"Don't need it, thank you," I said, holding myself in with an effort. For time, now, was more precious than ever. "When Miss Attrill reports here for me, send her to—"

"She's outside there waiting for you," announced the mug-hall officer.

I was out through that door in three seconds.

"Where'd he go?" I asked.

"To the Statler, and took room 617," was Toosey's prompt reply. "As Paul R. Garvin, of Chicago."

"Any phones?"

"Three." And she handed me the slip of paper on which the switchboard operator had obediently penciled the three calls from room number 617.

"But didn't you get the names?"

"I'd only a chance to cop the last one. That's the Norman Woodworth home!"

"Woodworth!" I echoed.

I was back in that office between Babbitt and his chief inside ten seconds.

"That car, Miss Rymal, is owned by a diamond-polisher named Raht and is not a public taxicab, as you thought. Raht, by the way, was arrested for

diamond-smuggling from Windsor in 1919, but was discharged. So there's no record against him."

"Thanks," I said to Babbitt as I handed him Toosey's slip. "But please phone Mrs. Norman Woodworth and say that Miss Elsie De Loche, the interior decorator she wrote about, is on her way out to her house. Then have Information dig out the names and addresses of those two phone numbers. I'll call in or call up some time within an hour."

I gave Toosey her instructions on the way down to my waiting taxi.

"Get back to that hotel, Toosey, and keep behind the scenery. But if anything happens, have a look-in if you can. Then find out Annie Casey's room number from the office and report to me there."

It was a longer run than I expected out to the stately mansion which harbored Mrs. Norman Woodworth. But it gave me a chance to ponder over certain aspects of my problem.

I was admitted to the Woodworth home by a dead-eyed English butler with burnsides and in full service uniform. The only semblance of life that showed on his mask of a face was when I requested to be shown to Mrs. Woodworth personally and promptly. That was something of which he plainly disapproved.

"What name, if you please?" he intoned, staring into space, with both chin and elbows up.

"Ethel Barrymore," I retorted. But my sarcasm was wasted, for the name plainly meant nothing to that statuesque bone-head in knee-breeches.

"And your business, please?" he asked, still blocking my way, when time, I remembered, was more than ever precious.

"I'll explain that when I see Mrs. Woodworth," I told him. Yet we stood there staring at each other, in a silent duel of glances for several seconds. To this day I don't know what led him to surrender. But he finally bowed and led me up-stairs.

There I found Mrs. Norman Woodworth, a much older and much stupider woman that I had expected, though at the moment quite unburdened of the junk and art-jewelry which hearsay had prepared me for. She was merely one of those finely-withered yet still flamboyant climbers on the walls of American commerce who reach out for esoteric Swamis, overfed Skye terriers, and family-trees that spring from well-paid genealogical agents.

"What's all this nonsense about my interior decorating?" she demanded, viewing me with a cold and hostile eye.

"It should have been exterior," I just as coldly retorted as I flashed my Alliance badge on her, "for it's about that Swartzdorp Star of yours that was stolen."

She sighed heavily.

"That diamond has already given me an attack of neuritis," she complained. "And what are you supposed to do with that silver thing pinned under your coat there?"

"I'm an operative from the Jewelers' Protective Alliance, working on this case," I explained.

"And what do you want of me?"

"Any information you can give," I replied. I said it without enthusiasm, for already I'd gaged the caliber of her sterile little soul. And I saw I was only wasting her time and mine.

"But those diamonds were never even delivered at this house," she explained, "so how can anybody in it be concerned in the case?"

"Then who in this house knew they were coming here, or even to the city?"

"Only my husband," she said after a moment's thought.

"And your servants?"

"I'm not in the habit of taking them into my confidence. And quite apart from that fact, I don't keep servants who can't be trusted, and trusted implicitly."

"Then you're sure of the record of each and every one of them?"

She seemed to resent this question, for her eyebrows went up.

"Would you mind talking these matters over with my husband?" she asked, with her finger already on the bell, "for my spare time to-day is extremely limited and Mr. Woodworth, you'll find, is still down-stairs and possibly more interested in these problems than I am."

"Gladly," I agreed, wondering if anything lay at the root of that aversion to talking over so personal a problem. It was a question which I mentally filed for reference.

The bell was answered by a trim-figured lady's maid with demure eyes and extremely red lips. She brought with her a personality quite as positive as her mistress's was neutral.

"Lucile, take this lady down to Mr. Woodworth," commanded the mistress of the house. Yet I noticed that she stood studying that red-lipped servitor with a new and narrow-eyed intentness. I apparently had handed her back a question or two for future reference.

Lucile bowed, flashed one oblique yet comprehensive glance over my unruffled person, and led me impassively down-stairs. She was small-bodied and sinewy, and walked like a panther. And she was interesting, quite outside the fact that her use of cosmetics was artful, with the art that conceals art.

Equally interesting, I promptly decided, was Norman Woodworth himself as we intercepted that gentleman in the act of pulling on his gloves at his own palatial front door. The first thing he suggested was power—the power that had put him where he was. Yet, oddly enough, my second impression of him was one of weakness, making me think of a showy facade with unsound timbers beneath it. He was what the world would call a handsome dog, yet beyond his handsomeness was a disquietingly protuberant eye and a sensual mouth, just as there was latent trickiness beyond his broad-breasted aggressiveness. He was, on the whole, one of those full-blooded, full-fed, high-living phrenetics with pathetically softened hands and prematurely hardened arteries.

"Mrs. Woodworth has sent me down to you about that interior decorating," I announced, for the dead-eyed butler was hovering about in the background and the red-lipped Lucile was stubbornly interested in something in the coat-press beside us.

Norman Woodworth's shrewd and guarded eye studied my face for a moment. Then he glanced down at his watch.

"I've got to be at the Chamber of Commerce in half an hour," he explained. "Can you come in my car?"

I did so, after ordering my taxi to follow. Mr. Woodworth, being a man of business, came straight to the point.

"What's the game?" he inquired, before we were under way. He was plainly not an utter stranger to the obliquities of intrigue.

I told him, in the two minutes' time, just why I was there.

"Then what do you want to know?"

"I infer from what your wife said, that you yourself engage your help."

"I do," he acknowledged.

"Then which one of your household servants would you be suspicious of?"

"Not one of them," was his prompt reply.

"Are any of them new?"

He hesitated at this.

"Parsons, my butler, might be described as a recent arrival in the house. But he was eleven years with the Vandertyls, the New York Vandertyls, before he came to us. I know that positively."

"And he came to you direct from the Vandertyls?"

The man beside me was silent for a moment.

"No, but he brought a recommendation from them. He was steward for seven weeks at the American Club in Havana. The climate there was too much for him. And when he was recommended to me I snapped him up, for good butlers are rare. And he has proved one."

"Who recommended him to you?"

Again there was the momentary silence.

"Somebody already in my employment—I don't just remember who. But as I've said, he brought references, of course, and letters and that sort of thing."

"These were preserved?"

"Yes, they're on file somewhere, of course."

"Later on, I'd rather like to look those documents over! And how about Mrs. Woodworth's own maid, the girl called Lucile?"

The man at my side laughed a little.

"That's the one element of the retinue not under my control. A lady's-maid, naturally, is something the lady herself must choose."

"But this girl called Lucile hasn't been long in the house?"

"I fancy not," he said, after a moment's thought. "But aren't we barking up the wrong tree in trying to hitch that diamond theft on to a house-maid, when the crime itself carries all the ear-marks of being a professional one: and this town of ours so overrun with crooks?"

"There are so many trees we have to bark up," I explained, "before the squirrel gets ready to jump!"

A frown clouded his face, either at this sphinx-like platitude of mine, or at the fact that I'd caught up my hand-bag again.

"Would you mind dropping me here," I said as I opened the door and motioned to my taxi-driver. We came to a stop.

"I'm afraid I haven't helped you much," ventured the motor-king.

"More than you imagine!" I told him.

He looked down at my expressionless face for a questioning second or two. Then he slammed shut the door, and I noticed that he did so with quite unnecessary force.

“Straight to Police Headquarters,” I told my taxi-driver as I climbed in, with my bag thumping after me.

CHAPTER IV

THE CASE WITHIN A CASE

"MISS RYMAL," asked Babbitt as I stepped into his office at Headquarters, "did you ever hear of a man named Pareto?"

That name, coming as it did, gave me an odd little shiver down the backbone. But the case I was on was mine, and I intended to keep it mine.

"It's new to me—but what about it?"

"Because a man of that name tried to call up your friend Curate Sam at his hotel. We ran down the number he left and found he'd been talking from a drug-store, without leaving a trail. So the help we tried to give you didn't pan out."

I preferred working without their help, but it wasn't my place to say so.

"How about those phone-numbers?" I asked.

Babbitt handed over a sheet from a scratch-pad bearing the fruits of official research. I glanced over the addresses without too apparent interest. One of the names I saw there was "Paddy Moran."

"I'd like you to put a plain-clothes man on the Woodworth town house," I announced as I tucked away that slip of paper.

"Anything else you want?" asked Babbitt, with his blandly forbearing smile.

"Nothing but a room at the Statler," I told him from the half-opened door, "and if this office happens to want me, be so good as to call for Miss Annie Casey. And, by the way, please wire our New York office to find out if Herman Vandertyl or his wife ever recommended an English butler named Parsons to the Woodworth family here."

I went straight to the Statler. There I ducked for cover, sent a bell-boy for the house-detective, showed my badge and explained who I was.

"I want a room on the sixth floor, as close to 617 as I can get it. Tell the office I'm here as Miss Annie Casey, in case of calls. And that sad-eyed Garvin stranger in clericals, by the way, is well worth watching when he blows across your beat!"

Inside of five minutes I had the room and was being smuggled up the freight elevator, after leaving instructions for the switchboard operator to keep especial tab on all phone-calls to and from 617. Once in my room I

ordered something to eat, verified my suspicions that 617 was still occupied, but ten minutes later had the satisfaction of beholding Curate Sam quietly locking his door and stepping into the elevator. I hurried back to my handbag, took out my "spider," my police revolver and a ten-inch piece of bar-steel with one end tilted up like a tack-puller. A "spider" is a sort of skeleton-key made of tempered wire, and with skill and patience should open anything from a cash-box cover to a bank-door.

It didn't take me long to master the door into 617. Once inside, I bolted that door behind me, made a quick survey of the room, and began to work on the shabby sheepskin suit-case, which was locked. This lock, oddly enough, was not easy, but in the end I got it open. Then I began my search.

I found a blue serge business-suit, pretty well-worn, cotton mesh underclothing, a worn Bible with a thumb-index, and a bundle of collars that buttoned at the back. I next unearthed a frugal bag of peppermints, a package of manila envelopes and a pair of amber-tinted spectacles in a leather case. Next came a flannelette night-gown and a pair of German felt slippers. Beyond these, and a few shabby accessories, the suit-case held nothing.

Yet everything it held, I told myself as I carefully repacked it, carried the brand of significance. Belongings such as these, I could plainly see, were not customarily carried by frequenters of such hotels. I was making a hurried search of the room itself when the telephone-bell rang and nearly made me jump out of my shoes.

After a moment's hesitation I answered the call.

"Is that you, Sam?" an anxious voice asked over the wire.

"Yes," I answered in a husky whisper, getting as close to Curate Sam's voice as I could.

"What's wrong there?" was the prompt inquiry.

"I'm not alone," I whispered back. There was a moment's pause.

"Did you put Pip Keefer wise?" asked the unknown voice.

"Sure," I answered, at a guess.

"All right," said the voice, and that ended the talk. And as I finished my search of the room, and carefully dumped the contents of the waste-paper basket into my handkerchief, for future examination, I felt that I'd give a good deal to know just who Pip Keefer might be.

I was glad to get out of that room and safely back in my own. There I worked over the handful of fragments from Curate Sam's scrap-basket. They had been torn into discouragingly small bits, and it was an extremely tedious

task. All I could get of value, after infinite piecing together, was: "—he Wayne," "——3719," and "—s on the bells."

A familiar look about that "3719" sent me back to my little list of phone-numbers from Babbitt's office, where I found it to be the same as one of the call numbers there designated. Then I sat down for a few minutes in front of my odd-looking exhibit, and tried to study things out.

I was still brooding over my fish-line tangle of twisted facts when Toosey pussyfooted up to my room. She had nothing to help me out. But I was already on the move again.

"What do you want me to do?" she demanded.

"I want you to come with me to the Wayne Hotel. Then we'll dig up a bell-hop called Pip Keefer."

When we got to the Wayne, on the river-front, I found that my guess hadn't been such a bad one. A young man named Keefer was "on the bells" there at night. His home address, I found, was 97 Schumacker Street. And to that address we hurried on, without loss of time.

It was not an inviting abode, being half cheap temperance hotel and half rooming-house. So I drew off until Toosey could roughen up her appearance and show an appropriate front for such quarters. While I busied myself by purchasing a package of safety-pins, she went in alone, took a room for a week, and duly reappeared to throw me the high sign to follow her. She coolly lighted a cigarette as she led me back through the musty hallways.

"Some dump!" she scornfully announced as she shut her door on a medley of off-key rag-time from an up-stairs piano that made me think of a dish-pan gone mad. Then, acting on my instructions, she re-opened that door to intercept a coatless mulatto carrying a tray of empty beer-bottles.

"Say, kid, which is Pip Keefer's room?" she casually inquired.

"Pip's asleep in twenty-nine. But he'll sure kill yuh, Blondie, if yuh go stirrin' him up b'fore six!"

I waited until the hall was clear, and then made a study of the room-numbers. Keefer's room, I found, was on the floor above. I crept up a narrow stairway padded with worn carpet, came to twenty-nine, and cautiously tried the door. It was locked. But in the lull of the dish-pan outbursts I could distinctly hear the sound of a sleeper, snoring through that bedlam of noise. Luck, so far, was plainly with me.

"Toosey," I explained as I put my revolver in my waist-front and pocketed my "spider" and safety-pins, "I've got to pick Keefer's lock and have a talk with him. If I'm not back in twenty minutes, call that cop on the

next corner and come after me. And keep an eye on the hall until I get inside."

Keefer's key was still in the lock and the clamp-end of my "spider" gripped the shank and turned the worn old lock-bar back without trouble. Then I carefully pushed the door an inch or two open, listened to the deep respiration of the sleeper, and stepped inside.

The drawn blinds darkened the room, fetid with its unclean odors. I closed the door and tiptoed to the head of the narrow iron bed. There I knelt beside the soiled pillow that vibrated with the recurrent snore of the head resting on it. Then I slowly and cautiously wormed my fingers in under that pillow, inch by inch, watching the sleeper's face as I worked.

I found what I expected, and even more slowly withdrew my hand, bringing with it a blue-barreled automatic. This, still watching the sleeper's face, I stowed away in my stocking. Then I carefully lifted the coarse gray-white coverlet, letting it fall gently over the sleeper's arm. Making sure that this had in no wise disturbed him, I got out my safety-pins, drew the full length of the coverlet edge in under the iron rod of the bedside, and looped and fastened it there with a row of pins. Then I crept round to the other side of the bed, beginning at the foot. There I carefully and slowly drew the heavy coverlet tight across the sleeper's body, looped it under the bed rod, and pinned it in place, slowly working my way from the foot to the head and drawing in every inch of slack as I went. In other words, I adjusted about Master Pip Keefer what to every hospital nurse is known as a restraining sheet. I deliberately encased him in that fragile yet effective strait-jacket of the ward whereby a young girl is able to control either the struggles of an unruly patient or the convulsions of a delirious one. I had often enough seen what such a sheet could do, and the one thing necessary, I knew, was that it should be tight. So slowly and carefully I drew in every possible inch of coverlet, until the snoring man lay there trussed as close as a mummy in a winding-cloth. He moaned in his sleep as I adjusted the last safety-pin, vaguely conscious, I suppose, of some exceptional pressure upon his slumber-laden body. But it hadn't so far proved enough to waken him.

So I tiptoed about the room, making a quiet but thorough search. It wasn't until I came to the unsavory pile of Pip's wearing apparel that I discovered anything worthy of note. In those pockets I found a roll of bills much too big for even the most frugal of bell-boys, an ample bunch of equally suspicious looking keys, five pawn tickets, and what seemed to be the floor-plan of some unknown house. The tickets and keys and floor-plan I tucked carefully away. Then I tiptoed to the window and deliberately raised the soiled blind.

The yellow-faced youth on the bed opened his eyes as the light struck him. I stood watching him, with my revolver in my hand. There was something ludicrous about his first convulsive struggles as he tried to turn over and found himself unable to move. He must have imagined that some sort of paralysis had overtaken him, for his eyes gaped, his jaw worked, and he fell to writhing and twisting like a cub in a bear-trap. But it was impossible for him to get free. I could see a sweat of terror moisten his forehead. Then, as he rolled his head from side to side, he caught sight of me standing beside the window.

"What the hell—" he cried, with a frantic yet futile effort at comprehension. "Say, who are yuh, anyway?" he exploded, in another effort to break loose.

"It's no use, Pip," I quietly told him. "You may as well take it easy until I get through with you. And if you start to holler," I told him as I took a step or two closer and held my gun by the barrel, "I'll tap you on the coco with this!"

He had no intention of hollering, but he was nearly dislocating his neck trying to study out the secret of why a bed-cover should be holding him such a prisoner. He made me think of a turtle trying to get out of its shell.

"Who are yuh, anyway?" he repeated, letting his head fall back on the soiled pillow.

"I'm Sam Everson's steady, and I'm going to know where he is."

The bloodshot eyes regarded me with open scorn. He was struggling hard to get at least one hand free.

"Yuh're a liar!" he said with quiet venom.

"Where's Curate Sam?" I persisted.

"What're yuh shootin' that stuff at me f'r? I don't know no Sam Everson!" declared the indignant Pip.

"Then why'd he say you did? And why were you talking to him this morning?"

"Who said I was talkin' with him?" he demanded, becoming quiet.

"Scar Parker said you were."

Pip regarded me out of the corner of his near-set little eyes. "Lady, yuh're sure ready for the lizzie-house!" he finally announced.

"You think you don't need to talk? Is that it?"

"I ain't got nothin' to talk about!"

"How about that Woodworth diamond robbery? Is Scar the liar or are you?"

"I don't know nothin' about di'monds!"

"Then where'd you get 'em to pawn?" I demanded, showing him the tickets. It was a wild guess, but I tried an even wilder one. "And what gave you cold feet about the big blue one?"

"I never got the big blue one!" he shouted back at me.

"Of course you didn't, since Curate Sam happens to be carrying that himself," was my quiet response. Then I put out another feeler. "And you didn't get the big white one either. Pareto told me that much. But you worked with those taxi-bandits, Raht and Moran, and got the eight little ones between you, while Scar himself carried off the Star!"

"Somebody's sure been wisin' yuh up, haven't they!" mocked the man on the bed. "But no skirt's goin' to butt into *my* business!"

"That's just the trouble, Pip," I told him. "A skirt has been butting into it, right along!"

"Whose skirt?" he guardedly demanded. And I knew as quick as a shot that my guesses hadn't all been blind ones.

"That's the question," I equivocated. "Whose *is* she?"

"*Whose* are *you*?" was his counter-demand.

"Well, I'm not Scar Parker's and I'm not Norman Woodworth's," I sagely announced. And that seemed to give him something to think about. "But what I want to know," I went on, "is how she ever threw a harpoon into him?"

"Into who?" questioned the oblique-eyed Pip.

"Into Woodworth!" I answered, watching his face. And I knew by the expression on that face that my shot had at least been a ringer.

"I don't know nothin' about Woodworth!" was Pip's all too patent lie.

"Then it wasn't from her that Scar got the tip the stone was on its way out here?" I asked.

"Say," said Pip, struggling in vain to rise on his elbow, "yuh can't third-degree no talk out o' me! And I'm gettin' tired o' this embalmer's lay-out business!"

I stepped over still closer to him. Pip Keefer, it was plain, hadn't intended to talk. But he'd done so without quite knowing it.

"Pip," I said, "you're in this Swartzdorp Star business, and there's no way you can—"

That speech of mine was cut short by a startlingly authoritative knock on the door behind me, and I naturally hesitated a little before answering it.

But our visitor knew no such qualms. A chair suddenly thundered against the pine panels and the door splintered open. Through it stepped Toosey, with alarm on her face and a revolver in her hand.

"Are you all right?" she demanded. The matter of my time-limit there had quite slipped my mind.

"Of course I'm all right," I retorted. "But where's that cop?"

Toosey's expression shifted from alarm to indignation.

"That cop gi'me the laugh and told me to take another shot in the arm. And when I showed him me badge all he said was to quit dreamin' I was the Sheriff o' Wayne County!"

"Then get Babbitt down here, and get him quick," I commanded.

Toosey, in fact, had already stowed her gun and started for the door when she suddenly fell back. For a step sounded in the hall outside and I'd just time to swing in behind the door as the steps stopped and wavered in front of Pip Keefer's room.

"Ah, my friend," intoned a melancholy and quite unmistakable voice. "I am in search of an unfortunate youth who is said to be seriously ill, who, indeed, is—"

"Then how'd I suit?" I inquired as that blue-jowled figure in clericals stepped into the room and gave me a chance to slip between him and the still open door.

Sad Sam Everson swung half-way about, but it was only to blink down at my revolver, leveled directly at his black broadcloth vest-front.

"You move an inch," I told him with all the ferocity I could fling into the words, "and you're the deadest crook outside a casket! So stick 'em up, and stick 'em up quick!"

He knew very well what I meant by that nod toward his hands. He raised them slowly above his shoulders, and stood there staring at me with hate in his eyes. But in that attitude of his there was something absurdly benevolent, as though he were a minister about to bless his flock. Toosey, in the meantime, was keeping scowling guard over Pip Keefer.

"Never mind that sardine," I called out to her, "until we finish up with our bigger fish here. Toosey, frisk Curate Sam and see what he's carrying. Try every pocket, and don't be afraid of him, for as sure as he moves an inch he'll have a hole through his ribs!"

It was big talk for a frail, as Toosey would have phrased it, but the situation called for our boldest front. I continued to glower at Sad Sam as

Toosey went through his clothes, pocket by pocket. Pip Keefer, by the way, was quite forgotten in the excitement.

"Here's a pawn-ticket," announced Toosey as she handed me a slip of paper over her shoulder. But at one glance I saw that Toosey was mistaken. Instead of being a pawn-ticket it was a claim-check on the Hotel Statler deposit-vault. And I felt at once, that Sad Sam Everson had thrown me off the trail by resorting to the obvious. He'd simply deposited his precious diamond at the hotel-office for safe-keeping.

My eyes were still bulging with this discovery when a double explosion took place. It was an explosion of movement, beginning with the sharp rip of a sheet on the bed behind me. At the moment that I involuntarily turned to investigate this, Curate Sam flung Toosey violently against me. As I staggered back against the bed Pip Keefer snatched the claim-check from my startled fingers, sprang for the door, and bolted down through the empty halls.

I followed, with my revolver still in my hand, while Toosey Attrill just as frantically took up the chase of the man in clericals, who'd fled in an opposite direction, toward the back of the house.

I was close behind Pip as he made for the street, for above all things I wanted that claim-check back in my possession. Now, a man in an abbreviated night-shirt, speeding through the streets of a city in broad daylight, is not a difficult mark to follow. But Pip, attired for speed, traveled at a rate which easily overmatched my grimmest efforts. The chase, I saw, could not be a long one. I'd already sent a bullet flying wildly after him, and thereby still further increased his speed, when a patrolman, beholding that flying figure, dodged behind a house-step. I hadn't much time for thought, but my first vague impression was that the officer in question was discreetly seeking shelter. Instead of that, however, and with an intelligence quite remarkable in a "flatty," he reappeared on the sidewalk just in time to have Pip hurl himself bodily into a pair of brawny arms in blue, where he was proceeding to masticate the claim-check between his yellow teeth when I came panting up. And I lost no time in snatching that somewhat damaged tid-bit from the maw of the voracious Pip.

"Officer," I said as I showed my badge, "arrest this Mercury without shin-pads, on the charge of diamond-stealing, and get him right over to Babbitt's office. But holler to that taxi for me first!"

Sixty seconds later I was speeding for the Statler, no longer interested in Pip Keefer's plea for at least a pair of pants. Time, I knew, was more than ever precious.

I picked up the house-detective as I hurried into the big hotel. It took another minute to explain the situation as we handed over our claim-check. I tried to look cool, but my heart was in my mouth as the clerk duly passed out a numbered envelope.

We tore it open, without speaking. It in we found only a safety-razor box tied with brown cord. My heart went down, but the house-detective at my side proceeded to cut the cord with his pocket-knife. Then he opened the box.

Instead of holding a razor and blade, it was filled by an oblong something wrapped in tissue-paper. The man at my side proceeded to unwrap this unknown something. The next moment I heard him say under his breath, "My God, what a stone!" And my heart started to pound again, for I knew that I was staring down at the Blue Pear itself.

There was a hurried conference in that house-manager's office, a message to Headquarters, and a second message to Mrs. Norman Woodworth announcing that Miss Elsie De Loche was returning to her house with the desired samples of tapestry.

In another two minutes I was back in my taxi. By the time I'd reached the Woodworth mansion I'd worked out my plans. A footman whose face was new to me admitted me.

"Mrs. Woodworth," I said as soon as I was alone with that lady, "where are your jewels?"

"Since that robbery I've had my husband keep practically everything of value in his office vault," she explained.

"And they're down there now, safe at this moment?" I demanded.

She looked at me with rather startled eyes.

"Of course they are," was her reply. "And I've just sent my maid Lucile to bring them back to me."

"That maid, alone?" I gasped.

"No, I had Parsons go with her, as a precaution," she somewhat frigidly informed me.

It made me gulp. The next moment I was on my feet.

"Could they have got down to that office yet?" I demanded.

She glanced at her little ivory clock. "Hardly," she acknowledged, with a frown of hostility. It wouldn't have taken a mind-reader to see that she actively resented my interference with her domestic arrangements.

"Then get your husband, quick!" I commanded.

"Why should I get my husband?" she inquired.

"To tell him you've changed your mind. Ask him to keep those jewels in the vault, to keep 'em there at any cost."

It was plain that she much preferred giving orders to receiving them. I could see her futile little soul coil up like a teased garter-snake.

"When I do ridiculous things," she solemnly announced, "I prefer having a clearly understood reason for doing them."

But I had no time for explanations.

"Well, don't stop for reasons in this," I shot back at her, "or you'll lose the one chance we have left."

"The one chance for what?" she inquired, after a maddeningly prolonged inspection of my face.

"Of keeping from being made a fool of," I none too politely proclaimed. I almost pushed her over to where her boudoir-extension instrument stood. She even became a little excited as she called for her number and talked over the wire.

"They are still there," she told me. "But what excuse shall I give? Lucile and Parsons are waiting in the office."

"Tell your husband to explain to them that you've been called away, called to New York, that you're catching an evening train, and that you want Lucile home to help you pack!"

I stood watching her as after a moment of hesitation she repeated this into the phone.

"My husband is coming back with them," she announced as she hung up the receiver. The drama of the situation was at least beginning to appeal to her mildewed imagination.

"Good," I said as I took her place and called up Babbitt. An officer, I found, had arrived safely with one Pip Keefer, a code wire had just come from New York stating that an English butler named Parsons was quite unknown to the Vandertyl family, and Toosey Attrill had just reported that Curate Sam had given her the slip.

"Now, will you explain this most extraordinary situation to me, if you please," demanded the lady of the house.

"Not until after I've had a look over the room of that maid you called Lucile," I announced, for something told me I had a surprise in store for that haughty-browed lady. "And I'd prefer that you took me there yourself."

She did so. And I asked a question on the way.

"Can you tell me if Parsons, your butler, was away from this house on the same afternoon that the Swartzdorp Star was stolen?"

Mrs. Woodworth stopped short. Parsons, in her mind, was still above suspicion.

"He went to MacMillans' to see about some returned cases of truffles," she finally explained.

"How did he go?" I inquired.

"He had to be back in time to manage dinner, of course, so he went in a taxi. I remember that, because he asked if he might call one, as our own cars were all out and his time was limited."

It was my turn to stop short.

"And the same taxi brought him back?"

"As far as I know, it did."

I explained that I'd have to use the phone again. In another minute I had Babbitt himself on the wire.

"Babbitt, have your office verify that a phone-call went from the Norman Woodworth house to Paddy Moran, on Van Dam Street, who drives a taxicab with the state license number 73918. As soon as you're sure of that get a good reliable man from the city staff, in plain clothes, and the two of you come here to the Woodworth house. And bring a tape-line with you, for you're interior decorators and you've got a couple of walls to measure up. But be here in half an hour, for there's likely to be something doing!"

I hurried back to the maid's room, without the loss of a moment's time, and began my search.

It was a small room, simply furnished, but not without appeal. And Lucile's possessions were not as numerous as I had expected. Mrs. Woodworth, however, watched me with puzzled eyes as I measured a trunk to make sure it had no false bottom, searched every nook and cranny of the room, from the plain white dresser-drawer to the brass electric-light fixtures, examined every garment, and had a look over every toilet article and an especially careful scrutiny of every shoe-heel. Nothing was missed. But all that came from this search, of any use to me, was a Havana lottery ticket from between the pages of a copy of Daudet's *Jack* and a worn menu-card, folded small, from a San Francisco cabaret-cellar. As I worked, however, I had a chance to ask Mrs. Woodworth a number of questions which, I could see, tended to excite even her cold-storage brand of curiosity.

"And now," I announced as I put the last belonging of the dusky Lucile in order, "I'd like to look over Parsons' room."

But this privilege was denied me, for Babbitt and his plain-clothes man had arrived. Two minutes later the Woodworth limousine also rolled up, with Parsons himself beside the chauffeur and the red-lipped maid inside with

Norman Woodworth. By the time they had entered the house, Babbitt and his big plain-clothes man were busy measuring the drawing-room walls. A minute later Mrs. Woodworth was somewhat startling the plainly fretful Lucile by requesting her to pack her bag and precede her mistress to the station to make a drawing-room reservation. And she had only five minutes in which to get ready.

A minute later I followed the panther-footed Lucile up the stairway, with Mrs. Woodworth at my side. Exactly two minutes later, by the watch, Mrs. Woodworth rang frantically for her maid. As the sullen-eyed Lucile stopped in the midst of her preparations to answer that summons, I stood waiting behind the closed door within ten paces of her room. The moment the coast was clear I slipped into that room, turned the key in the lock and caught up the almost completely filled traveling-bag.

My hand was a little unsteady as I turned everything out on the spotless white coverlet. For if Lucile claimed proprietorship over anything especially precious, I had argued, it would surely go in that bag.

But I found nothing beyond those things which any fastidious-minded maid might need and carry. And she was fastidious-minded, I felt, giving much attention to appearances, for her toilet-preparations were both varied and ample. They even included, I noticed, one full jar of a pink-tinted concoction bearing the label of "Ruvina Face Cream." I turned this somewhat peevishly over in my hand, dejected by what was clearly a disappointment to me. Then, as I did so, I noticed that the bottom of this jar, although unused, was stained, as though by the heat of a lamp or gas-flame. And for one brief moment that stain rather puzzled me.

Then, quick as a shot, I caught up a hair-pin, unscrewed the top from the jar of perfumed grease, and sent the pin-points probing down into its pink-tinted center. But that pink-tinted center, I saw, refused to be probed. Something much harder than face-cream stood in the way.

The next moment I'd caught up Lucile's white-handled shoe-horn and was digging down into that little mine of pink-tinted paste. And it was a mine worth prospecting, I discovered with a catch of the breath, as I unearthed a glittering white crystal almost as big as a bantam's egg. For I knew, as I wiped it with my handkerchief and stared down at it, that it was the Swartzdorp Star.

In little more than another minute I had it safely hidden away and Lucile's belongings safely returned to their bag, with the top once more screwed down on the face-cream jar. Then I unlocked the door, slipped out along the hall, and went noiselessly down the stairs.

At the foot of the second stairway I met Mrs. Woodworth and her husband, with the dead-faced Parsons not more than six paces behind them. They all seemed to walk in a slight mist of perplexity.

"The next thing I want to do," I briskly announced, "is measure the library walls. So will you please call the men."

It was Mrs. Woodworth who made the signal to Parsons, and Parsons who threw open the library door and ushered us in, followed by Babbitt and his big officer in plain clothes.

"You," I said, indicating Parsons as Babbitt ran out his tape-line, "please lift that picture down from the wall."

It was a heavy canvas, and I waited until it was free of its hook before I moved. Then, as Parsons stood with both hands above his head, I threw Babbitt and his big-boned confederate the sign they were waiting for.

The butler, naturally, didn't have the ghost of a show, for the big man held him clear of the ground, in a grip like a grizzly's, while Babbitt took his gun away and got out the bracelets. But Parsons fought like a wildcat, and before the cuffs were over his wrists a neat patch of false burnsides had been brushed away from his cheek, revealing a distinct scar just in front of the right ear.

"Scar Parker," I announced, as I heard the tell-tale snap of the bracelets. Then a louder sound filled the room, followed by a spit of plaster that brought us about with a jerk. The French maid stood in the doorway with a smoking revolver in her hand. Her face was white but her hand was steady as she raised the revolver for the second time.

It was Norman Woodworth himself, however, who sprang for her before she could fire. The impact of his body sent her staggering back, and before she could recover her feet he'd wrenched the firearm from her fingers. As he held her there, quite motionless, she stared into his face, and he stared back into hers. It was a not uninteresting tableau. Knowing what I knew, I simply waited.

"Go to your room!" Woodworth finally commanded, as he pushed her, with a show of anger, toward the door.

"No!" I counter-ordered, but I spoke too late. "If this girl gets—"

Then I stopped. There were two persons in that room who knew why. And there were three who didn't. So it was Babbitt, having passed his prisoner over to the plain-clothes man, who broke the silence.

"What d'you want next?" he somewhat testily inquired, for not much of the glory in that case was coming his way.

I stood there facing them for a minute or two. And then I answered Babbitt's question.

"You can wire Sloan that we've got both Scar Parker and the Swartzdorp Star," I told him. "And you might add that I've also recovered the Blue Pear, but that Marie Deschamps, *alias* Maiden Lane Mary, acting as gay-cat for Parker, unfortunately made her escape!"

My glance happened to meet the glance of Norman Woodworth as I said those last words. But he did what I thought he would. He remained silent. The pot, after all, couldn't afford to call the kettle black. And, although my case was ended, I remembered there would be a loose thread or two about that case, as there is a loose thread or two about most things on this tangled-up old earth. It's a way life has. And I meditated over that more than I had intended, on my journey back to the city where Inspector Sloan sat at his down-town squared circle of a desk devising new medicine for my restless soul and Winfred Ealand sat in his up-town laboratory devising a newer way of obtaining pyrogene orange. Instead of thinking of the girl whose heart ached for him, my Winkie was only too plainly thinking of aniline dyes. . . . And when the man you love doesn't think of you, you can't afford to think of him. . . . So a wave of relief went through me, an hour after I was back in New York, when Sloan called me on the telephone and announced that one Shag Fewster had been seen flirting along the fringe of his old underworld and I was the fighting dove who had been delegated to round him up.

CHAPTER V

THE SHADOW FOLLOWS THE SHADOW

IT was odd how I seemed to foreshorten and forget my own troubles in looking into the troubles of Shag Fewster, exactly as one obliterates one's own shadow in walking under a street-lamp. For when Shag, *alias* Chi Funston, had returned to New York, he had come with a heart as light as mine had been heavy. He had, as Toosey put it, taken a high dive from the Windy City and jubilantly come to the surface again just south of Longacre Square, which Shag hadn't promenaded since the ante-subway era when that portion of Broadway was known as the Rialto and the Protective Alliance was in its infancy.

But the Old Town looked good to Shag Fewster, who, having pulled off a highly profitable second-story job in Evanston, was possessed of what his circle usually term a deep heel, to say nothing of a holiday spirit which tempted him to regard Manhattan Island as an oyster and his own humble person as its one and only opener. It was like tumbling head over heels into your Promised Land, since Shag, when it came to slimming his roll, was always a free and easy spender. And in the mazes through which he moved in so lordly a fashion were many friends eager to share in his momentary spirit of revelry.

Yet Shag's new world, thanks to Toosey and me, was not exactly what he imagined it. For nearly two weeks, in fact, that fancy-free holiday-maker was immediately and incessantly under the eye of the law. For nearly two weeks he had been watched, day by day and hour by hour. During every moment that he had spent in the open he had been shadowed. At any time of any particular day he could have been rounded up. But Sloan had ordered otherwise. There was a suspicion in official minds that Shag had friends who might be worth knowing. So Shag was allowed to go his way, reveling in his Fool's Paradise, but never very far from a shadowy watcher who stood ready to report any movement of importance.

It might have disturbed the light-hearted man from the Middle West, for example, to know that the guileless blonde who called herself Bernice Sayette was something more than a mere *habitué* of the Forty-Ninth Street cabaret where he had been duly introduced to her by a sallow-faced "dancing rat." For the fair Bernice was none other than Toosey Attrill, who not only enjoyed dining and dancing with "Mr. Funston of Kansas City," but

combined a clear head with a sedately tempered allurement of manner. I knew all this quite well, for at least once a day Toosey reported to me in person. And as the end of the second week drew near Toosey's reports were able to be more intimate.

"What d'you s'pose that Hoosier tried to hand me last night?" Toosey mildly demanded of me, after she'd slipped quietly up to my rooms for instructions.

"What?" I inquired.

"He'd the nerve to say we were sure made for each other and oughtta get spliced!"

"And what did you tell him?" I asked as I opened a window to blow out some of the Turkish cigarettesmoke with which Toosey was fumigating my furniture.

"I says: 'I sure like to hear you call me your soft-necked li'l' bob-cat, and all that, and if there's anything I cotton to in this hard world it's an easy spender. But I'm used to high livin', and I'm hitchin' up with no gen'l'man who can't keep me goin' the way I was started!'"

"And he said?" I prompted.

"He says: 'You're a real Noo Yawker, ain't you, always losin' sleep about the rhino that ain't rolled round your heel!' And I shoots back at him that old spiel about a rib always havin' to look out for rent-day. And he says: 'Honey-girl, what's troublin' your li'l' bean about me bein' a piker? Ain't I always steered you on to the right side o' them plush ropes?' 'You've sure loosened up like a Cuban sugar-planter,' I acknowledged, 'but there's many a spender in a lobster-palace who kind o' fades out to a tight-wad in a ten-fam'ly flat! And I ain't nailin' the lid down on my freedom, Prince Chawming, until I lamp a guy who's goin' to make it consid'able easier goin' for me.'"

"Then you rather had an inkling that his funds had been running low?" I mildly inquired.

"I *knew* it! When a broad gets to frownin' over the menu-card as though it was a road-map and sayin' his stummick's still knocked out with them Smith Island oysters, instead o' slippin' the head-waiter a ten-spot and sayin' he wants the Casaba melon iced special cold, then you kind o' wake up to the fact he's feelin' thin in the roll and figurin' on how easy he can get off with breakfast in a Hartford beanery! And Shag has been kind o' drorin' in his horns, this last two or three days. But he wouldn't stand for a call-down. 'Child,' he says, 'there's money goin' bad in this burg o' yours, waitin' for somebody to haul it in. And I'm sure goin' to do some haulin'!' Then I says

to him: 'Hully gee, Mister Funston, you ain't tryin' to tell me you're a box-man?' 'Nothin' so crude,' he says to me, 'I'm a suite-renter, and with the right sort o' rib I can work this town for a ten-hundred-dollar haul!' 'You'll have to wise me up on what this game o' suite-huntin' means,' I told him. And seein' I wasn't goin' to be gun-shy, that loosened him up.

"The two of us, he laid out to me, could work that suite-huntin' game to a finish, and then move on to Boston and turn the trick there, for a couple o' weeks, and then swing down to Philadelphia, and take in Brooklyn on our way. And the big idea he's been tryin' to hatch out is something like this: for the last few days he's been lampin' the ad-pages, with his eye peeled for the swell push that beats it south and has a furnished apartment somewheres up on the Drive to sub-let to the right folks, with references and no children. For instance, he points out to me, there's a railway contractor's widow up there named Rutledge who goes around lit up like an all-night rest'rant. To-morrow or the next day Shag wants to doll himself up and drop in and inspect that suite o' hers. He's to carry a phony reference showin' he's a steel car builder and one o' the first families of Pittsburgh. Then I'm to call him up and say the Waldorf office would like to speak to him. That, you see, gives him a chance to unload some big business talk, with the li'l' widow lookin' on. Then he goes back to lookin' over the apartment, sizin' everything up. Then, while he acknowledges the suite is a dream, and just about what he wanted, he says, of course, he'll have to have his wife run up with him that evenin', to have her O.K. his decision.

"When night comes I'm s'posed to let him steer me up there. Seein' he's already inspected that suite, he natchurally waits in the droring-room while the widow shows me over the joint. Then he dives for the chiffonier where she keeps her flash-junk and hock-rocks, stows away everything he can get his hands on, and is back in the droring-room twiddlin' his thumbs and waitin' until we git through lookin' things over. So off we go, sayin' the lease will be signed at ten in the morning. And I could've stood for that ror proposition but it sure got my Nanny when the rough-neck says to me: 'Now, girlie, remember you've gotta cut out the talkin'. You're one grand li'l' dandelion on the dancing-floor, and you wear them rags o' yours as though you'd rolled up and down the North Shore Drive for twenty years, but those cuff-shooter colonies has a line o' talk all their own, and that's where we're goin' to fall down, unless you can keep everything but 'Yes' and 'No' shut up in the car-barns! And—'"

"Wait a minute," I interrupted. "Am I to understand that you've actually agreed to work with Shag Fewster to-morrow night or the next night on this

gem-stealing coup?" For something far more important than Toosey's personal feelings was involved in that proposed campaign of crime.

"That all depends on you and the inspector," was Toosey's placid retort. "But there's one thing I ain't goin' to do, either for Sloan or the whole Alliance, and that's marry the mutt!"

"But this isn't Shag Fewster's usual line of work," I tried to explain, puzzled a little at that sudden new realignment of things.

"Well, whatever his li'l' game, we've sure got the Indian sign hung on that mouse-hound!" was Toosey's listless retort. "He's been rompin' through this town like a three-year-old, havin' the stampede of his life and dreamin' he was puttin' one over on the bulls. But every time he's gone into a corner to shake hands with himself, he's been right there where we could put the wristlets on him if we'd wanted to."

"But does he suspect anything? Are you sure he's not in some way giving us a dose of his own medicine?"

Toosey sent a cloud of smoke contemptuously ceilingward.

"What'd he be achin' to have me rib along with him for, if he thought I was an Alliance slooth?" demanded Toosey, who was plainly almost as proud of her personal subjugations as she was of her official affiliations.

"Then you're sure he's acting alone?"

"Dead sure!" was Toosey's retort.

"Well, whatever he's got up his sleeve, it's still our duty to make sure of every move he tries. So I imagine it's about time I was taking my turn at that trail again."

Toosey looked at her watch.

"His Lordship'll just about now be amblin' down to his breakfast at the Bristol," she announced. "And in half an hour he'll be hittin' the av'noo and dreamin' he's Di'mond John Brodie out for an early airin' along the squab-run. For them city flappers, he says, sure do look good to a gink after the ror eyeful they hand you out in Kansas!"

"Then," I announced as I proceeded to pin on my nifty little Bendel hat, "I'll just follow along and see if I can chaperon our good friend Shag!"

Half an hour later, accordingly, I was following Shag Fewster down Fifth Avenue. He had no more knowledge of this, of course, than he had of my conference with Toosey Attrill, for I had long since learned the trick of "tailing" a man without in any way making myself conspicuous.

When that dapper and debonair figure stopped to gaze in a shop-window, I just as casually lingered a half-block behind and through plate-glass

studied the newer modes. When he turned back to size up some exceptionally striking shopper as she stepped from her sedan or cabriolet, I made it a point to be interested in quite another quarter. Sometimes I drew up close on him, and at other times I lagged discreetly behind. But on no occasion was that blithe promenader with the fawn-colored fedora and the yellow malacca cane hard to follow. For Shag plainly had no suspicion, as he meandered down the sunlit canyon of that seemingly care-free avenue, that he was being shadowed and watched, step by step and block by block. But it was a self-evident fact that Shag was enjoying his morning stroll.

Then Shag did a peculiar and quite unexpected thing. He stopped suddenly at the next corner, and before crossing the street looked studiously to the east and then just as studiously to the west. Then he stopped again, swinging his yellow malacca cane. Something about that movement promptly aroused my suspicion, though look as I might I could discover no one for whom he could be secretly watching and no one to whom he might be surreptitiously signaling. So I veered to one side and studied several sepia-prints, in a photographer's show-case, of Society draped in muslin. But over my shoulder I could see Shag just as carefully studying the street about him. It was not, I finally decided, that he expected to meet some one there. It was more a quiet appraisal of conditions obtaining in that immediate neighborhood, a shrewd measuring of distances, a guarded scrutiny of house-fronts, almost a calculation, I imagined, as to what certain stairs might lead him to and what certain doorways might introduce him to, once they were swung open. Then, still with his swagger of self-contentment, he moved on down the avenue, merely sidling in for a moment before a shop-window where a line of pedestrians like himself had tarried a moment to glance in through the plate-glass.

That window, I noticed as I came up to it, belonged to the firm of Starr & Burton, the jewelers who apparently preferred being austere before being palatial. It was at least always simplicity of the severest sort which had reigned in that cabinet window paneled with Circassian walnut. But their display, on this occasion, may have been impressive to others. To me it was startling. For there, resting on a plaque of black velvet, lay a solitary oblong diamond of exceptional size. The upper portion of it was considerably narrower than the base, and the stone itself, as it flashed back the morning light from its countless facets, was of the most delicate sky-blue tint. It was a jewel which brought a hungrier look into the eyes of watching women, and won a glance of impersonal admiration from the more hurried men. But to me it brought a gasp of amazement, a gasp which I found it hard to control. For that diamond on exhibition in Starr & Burton's window, I knew at a

glance, was the Blue Pear itself—the Blue Pear obviously recovered by its rightful owners, and now, with all its strange adventures over, enthroned on its regal-looking plaque for the passing world to admire.

I couldn't help thinking, as I stared in at it with nothing but a sheet of rolled plate between it and the throngs of Fifth Avenue, that the chains of civilization hung about us much heavier than we ever realized. We were slaves, without quite knowing it. One moment of ignoring those restraints, I told myself, one moment of reversion to the age of force, could have seen that fragile barrier of glass shattered away and a gem worth more than the building that housed it exposed to the first avaricious hand that reached out for it. There, on a little plaque of velvet, lay a fortune, a fortune which twenty men, sweating from their youth until their backs were bowed with age, could never have hoped to earn.

But our twentieth-century respect for property rights, I remembered, had become an instinct with us. Civilization still reigned. That shadowy yet substantial something which leaves man desirous of living at peace with his fellow-man forever insisted on its armistice, stronger than any mere passion for acquisition. Men invariably obeyed that compromising impulse toward order, I told myself—and then I remembered Shag Fewster. And in remembering him I also remembered that civilization still held at least one circle which ignored and overrode that impulse. It is a circle that is known as the criminal class, the circle that still lives by force and could leave plate glass—and laminated steel, for that matters—a mockery.

As I moved on down the avenue, to take up the trail of my quarry again, I couldn't help wondering just what Shag Fewster's thoughts had been as he stared in through that window-glass at a bit of carbon which put to shame all the swag he could gather together in a lifetime working as a suite-renter.

But Shag, I observed, seemed somewhat enamored with the splendors of life that morning, for I noticed that he stopped again in front of Gorham's and studied the show-windows there with great interest. Then he crossed the avenue, sauntered on for a while, and rather startled me by strolling casually into Tiffany's.

I was still standing on the opposite corner, in a quandary, when he came out, dapper and self-confident, swinging his yellow malacca cane. Then, apparently, he tired of respectability. The airs of Fashion seemed suddenly to weigh over-heavily on his spirit, for in five minutes' time he had turned eastward off the avenue and was seeking more sordid byways. Again he turned south, and still once more eastward. He was walking more rapidly by this time, as though led on by some clearly remembered mission. It was no

longer a care-free promenader that I was following, but a wary and circumspect man with a fixed purpose in his movements.

All doubt as to this vanished when I saw him suddenly cross the street and disappear into the side-door of a bootlegger's saloon masquerading as an oyster-bar. I ducked for cover at that move, stepping into one of those nondescript east-side stores that are partly a confectioner's, partly a tobacconist's, and partly a news-agent's emporium.

There I bought a motion-picture magazine and stood behind the unclean window-front, to all intents and purposes deeply engaged in scanning the surpassingly handsome screen-heroes depicted in that publication. But I was, in reality, closely watching a certain street-corner building with a Castle-band in the shape of an obliterated brewery-sign. And as I watched I caught sight of still another figure approaching along the side-street. Then I caught my breath, without quite knowing it, for I knew, at a second glance, that this figure was Curate Sam himself, the same Curate Sam who had so adroitly given me the slip in the City of the Straits.

He walked carelessly on until he came to the corner, glanced casually about him, and then pushed in through the swing-doors of that guileless-looking oyster-bar.

Now, Curate Sam, like any other wayfarer, had a perfect right to quench his thirst in that establishment which existed solely for the purpose of quenching such thirsts. But it was more than an accident, I felt, that he and Shag Fewster should be coming together in those out-of-the-way quarters. And I realized that I wasn't togged out for entering any such place without at once arousing suspicion. So I turned back to the tobacconist, asked for the use of his telephone, and promptly called up the Alliance Offices.

I had the satisfaction of knowing, two minutes later, that Wilkins was speeding toward me in a taxi. Yet fast as Wilkins traveled, I had to buy three other magazines and browse through the title-pages of half a dozen more before Sloan's "strong arm" worker strolled indolently into the store where I stood waiting for him. In another two minutes, however, he was just as indolently strolling across the street and pushing his way in through the ever-welcoming swing-doors.

Not thirty seconds after he had done so a closed car swung up to the curb. At the same moment that it came to a stop the side-door of the saloon opened and two men stepped nimbly out. They lost no time in crossing the sidewalk and tumbling into that waiting car, which was under way before they could have been settled in their seats. But hurried as that transit had been, it gave me time enough to see that the two fugitives were Shag Fewster and Curate Sam. And I knew, as I made for the open, that those two

worthies were in some way acting together. But to follow them was already out of the question. They were out of sight, in fact, before I could reach the middle of the street.

So I waited a precious five minutes for Wilkins to emerge. When he came out he did so at the heels of a thick-shouldered youth who looked like a dance-hall bouncer out of a job. I could see at a glance that Wilkins for some reason or other was intent on shadowing this well-muscled individual, so I managed, apparently by accident, to swing in for a minute or two beside my intent-eyed confederate.

"This man was talking to those two in there, before they ducked," he explained to me out of a corner of his mouth. "So I'm going to tail him and see what turns up."

"Phone what you pick up to the office," I told him as I edged away, for I could see that he preferred being alone at that particular time. And there was nothing for me to do but strike westward again and comb back and forth across the city, circling about like a lost sheep-dog.

There were harder things, I realized, than trying to find a needle in a haystack. Twice I telephoned for Toosey Attrill but without any luck. Twice, too, I called up the Alliance offices in the hope of some report from Wilkins. But no message had come in from him. So I took up my rounds once more, dropping in at every point where I knew an Alliance "stool" to be holding out. It was work that I'd learned to do as quietly and unostentatiously as a fur-hunter makes the round of his traps. But I found nothing to reward my search.

It was three hours later that I stumbled across Toosey in that unsavory sub-cellar known as the Fatima Cabaret. I couldn't hold down an unmistakable wave of resentment as I beheld this same Toosey luxuriously seated before an interdicted silver-fizz and giving her care-free attention to blowing rings from a Turkish cigarette. She reminded me of a house-cat purring on a hearth, with its eyes half-shut.

"I hate to interfere with your little amusements," I somewhat acidly announced, after I'd given Toosey the high sign to emerge from that ill-smelling den of urban night-crawlers. "But we've got a case on our hands that isn't quite settled the way the office wants it settled!"

"Keep your mit on, Balmy," was Toosey's lazy-toned retort. "Keep your mit on! For there's sure something big goin' to break down here in this dump!"

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that I've got a date here with a gink called Chick Eberts. And it's not two hours since Chick was pow-wowin' with that man Pareto."

That name, I found, could still give me a slight chill up and down the backbone.

"Pareto?" I echoed, wondering in what way my olive-skinned friend from Italy could be connected with Shag Fewster and his intrigues.

"Chick spotted me cruisin' round with our friend Shag, and he naturally fell for me bein' one o' that inner circle. So it's up to me to pump Chick before Shag can put him wise. And as things look, he's soon goin' to give me an earful!"

"Then don't forget that we've got Curate Sam to reckon with, as well," I warned her, and I could see her eyes narrow at the mention of that none too soothing name.

"You're sure o' that?" she demanded.

"Shag and Curate Sam had a conference together in an east-side joint, three hours ago," I told her.

"Then," announced Toosey, after a moment or two of thoughtful silence, "that Riverside suite *coup* is nothin' but a blind! And bein' a blind, I'd like to know just where I'm goin' to get off at!"

"You don't get off at all," I explained to Toosey. "I want you to stick to your friend Fewster, and stick to him to the last gasp, remember!"

"And get a knife in the ribs," suggested Toosey, without enthusiasm.

"And get the information we need," I corrected, "whether it's going to come from him or from Chick Eberts. For there's something bigger going to break, as you put it, than we've got any idea of. And it's up to us, Toosey, to find out what that something is."

"You've said it!" agreed the pert-faced Toosey, as she suddenly turned, looked over her shoulder and gave me the code sign to fade away. For a thick-shouldered youth had veered in to the flamboyant entrance of the Fatima, and I knew from Toosey's face that it was none other than her "gink." And I also knew, as I brushed casually past him in that dimly lighted stairway, that it was the same man whom Wilkins had shadowed from the east-side saloon where Shag Fewster and Curate Sam had conferred, earlier in the day.

CHAPTER VI

TEN POUNDS OF TAPIOCA

I WENT TO bed that night weighed down by a nameless sense of defeat, nettled by an undefined feeling of frustration. I'd spent three fruitless hours trying to get some trace of Curate Sam, and another two hours had been wasted trying to find some trail that would lead to the whereabouts of my olive-skinned friend, Pareto.

Nothing whatever had come of those efforts. I still had my broken array of facts, certain detached and meaningless fragments of information. But I could see no way of piecing them together. I could find no cypher-key to give them significance.

Before I was out of bed the next morning, however, I had my desk-telephone in my hand, and was sending out little carrier-pigeons of inquiry into different parts of the city. Wilkins, I found, had duly reported to the Alliance office that Chick Eberts had been in conference with one Nutty Coombs. After that conference, however, Wilkins had lost the trail of both his quarries. Toosey Attrill, on the other hand, had as yet put in no report.

I was, in fact, hurriedly bolting the last of my bed-tray breakfast when Toosey herself appeared on the scene. She was not altogether triumphant. She had both dined and danced with Chick, it was true, but Chick had not been lavish in his information. All she had been able to gather was that Chick and an ex-sparring teacher named Stuffy Evans, now acting as a strong-arm man in a Second Avenue dance-hall, were engaged to participate in a boxing-bout early that morning.

"But if you should ask me what that bout's for, or where they're goin' to pull it off," explained Toosey, as she watched me scramble into my clothes, "you've sure got me stumped! Chick won't crake about it. All he'll say is that it's sure goin' to be some fight, and is sure goin' to have some audience!"

"But bouts like that aren't held in the morning," I pointed out, still again oppressed by some vague sense of hidden conspiracies. There was something mocking about it all, like the hum of unknown shuttles busy weaving an unseen web about us.

"That's why the bone-head is keepin' his trap shut!" announced Toosey as she sat watching me lacing on my gun-holster. That holster was made of light buckskin and laced over the shoulder so that the gun pocket itself hung

against my brassiere, just under the left breast. It hung close to my body, where three snaps in my waist-front concealed the opening through which my right hand could at any moment be thrust to clutch the stock there.

"Some harness, that!" observed the appreciative Toosey, as I dropped a dowdy black skirt over my head, for that morning, I'd decided, it would pay to appear in my plainest apparel. And as I finished dressing I instructed Toosey to do what she could to follow up the elusive Chick, explaining that I myself was off to the region of Chatham Square to pick up anything I could as to the whereabouts and intentions of one Nutty Coombs.

My quest was not altogether a promising one. For Nutty, I found after an hour's hard work, was nothing more than a decrepit old till-tapper who now eked out an existence as a panhandler, varying this with employment as a duly licensed street-peddler, then again as a pup-seller, and still again as a dispenser of dandified English sparrows in little wooden cages and delusive coats of bright yellow dye, duly disposed of to the unsuspecting pedestrian as genuine Hartz-Mountain canaries which would out-sing any nightingale, once they'd got used to their new homes.

But, outside of these mild deceptions of the trade, Nutty of late had preferred keeping within the law, though in his younger days he had made himself conspicuous to the Central office flymen by his manipulation of what was called "the blackstrap trick." This trick, which was worked with a confederate, consisted of invading any of the smaller east-side groceries and there entering into a high-spirited dispute as to whether or not his hat would hold a full quart of barrel-molasses, or blackstrap. A bet was made to settle this dispute, the blackstrap was duly paid for, drawn from the barrel, and poured into the upturned hat. Then the hat was promptly and dexterously clapped on the head of the somewhat forbearing-eyed shop-keeper, who found himself both blinded and stifled by the cascading river of gooey sweetness which so unexpectedly cut him off from the rest of the world. And before either his vision or his wits quite returned to him, the two high-spirited intruders had emptied his till and unceremoniously taken their departure.

But time had robbed that maneuver of its novelty, and Nutty, after numerous visits to the Island, had descended to less adventurous planes of existence.

So, remembering Sloan's advice that in a big case it's always best to clean up the smaller clues as you go along, I sought both actively and earnestly, that morning, for the trail of Master Coombs. And it took me an hour and more to get on the heels of Nutty, who, on this particular occasion, seemed strangely active for a man of his advanced years. Yet my search, I

felt, was not altogether wasted, for once I had come within striking distance of that picturesque and unmistakable figure, I found Nutty to be making his way cautiously and directly up toward the heart of the city where panhandlers are customarily tabooed. And I further found that Nutty indulged in a number of mysterious and at first sight altogether inexplicable movements on his way.

His first digression was to enter a rather melancholy-looking Third Avenue dry-goods store, where he purchased a square yard of Canton flannel. His second was to pick up from beside the curb a small paving-stone, about the size of a brick-bat. This he pushed down into the side-pocket of a voluminous and greasy-looking overcoat which he wore in total disregard of the season. Then he turned westward, shuffled purposefully on for a few blocks, and then turned north and still again west.

Here he entered a humble-looking grocery, where for a moment he seemed to give promise of reverting to old practises by purchasing a pint of barrel-molasses. This molasses, however, he carefully spread out on his square yard of Canton flannel, explaining to the slightly mystified shop-keeper that he'd discovered a new and efficient cure for lumbago. Then he folded his square of flannel together, rolled it up, and tucked it under his arm, after casually helping himself to a few feet of wrapping twine and a sheet of paper.

Since I'd entered the store to make due observation of these movements, I found it necessary to excuse my presence there by also making a purchase, so, with my mind otherwise occupied, I rather absently stared at an open carton of pearl tapioca, and rather stupidly pointed at the carton and said I wanted ten pounds of tapioca. This was duly weighed out for me, put in a brown paper bag, and tied up, with Nutty, in the meantime, shuffling placidly out once more to the open.

That tapioca made a much larger and a much more cumbersome parcel than I had expected. But there was nothing to do but carry it away, once it had been done up and paid for. And I reached the street again just in time to behold Nutty Coombs carefully wrapping the paving-stone up in his sheet of yellow-tinted paper and as carefully tying it with the bit of string which he'd carried away from the shop. Then he shuffled on northward again until he had passed Forty-Second Street for three blocks, turning westward again until he came to Lexington Avenue, where for some purpose I couldn't fathom he suddenly dipped into the post-office sub-station just back of the Grand Central Station.

He was in and out of that office before I could even catch up with him. What happened there, what message he gave out or received, I had no means

of knowing. All I could see was that he was striking determinedly on again, turning north on Madison Avenue at the Biltmore corner, ambling on past the Ritz, and then striking westward again toward Fifth Avenue. But I knew that it must be some business of unusual portent which was bringing Nutty into that neighborhood.

So I shortened the distance that stood between us, lugging my unwieldly package of tapioca first on one arm and then on the other. But all the while I kept that uncouth old figure plainly in sight. When he came to Fifth Avenue he seemed to hesitate. This may have been due to the presence of a traffic-policeman, or it may have been due to Nutty's own uncertainty of mind. At any rate he turned irresolutely northward, crossed to the west side of the avenue, and doubled back southward again. There seemed little reason in those movements; and I could see no clearly defined motive controlling them. But I continued to keep an eye on them, from the distance, and on anything else suspicious that might occur in the neighborhood of my wandering friend in the greasy-looking overcoat.

It was at about this point that a number of things, as extraordinary as they were unexpected, actually did occur in that open and sunlit artery of commerce.

The first thing that came to my notice was Toosey Attrill herself, as she ran out to the middle of the pavement where the traffic-policeman stood. I saw that officer stop for a moment in his work, stare impassively down at Toosey's clearly excited face, and then wave her just as impassively away. I saw her run back to the sidewalk, glance hurriedly over her shoulder down the avenue as she ran, and turn, still running, into the first side-street. There I saw her snatch what must have been a hat-pin from her head and with it deliberately and maliciously stab the back tires of a harmless looking taxicab, standing close beside the curb.

I assumed this taxi to be both empty and deserted, for the sudden hiss and whistle of air from those subsiding tires provoked no demonstration of hostility from any one in the neighborhood. But I had no chance to give much thought to this, for at the instant I heard Toosey's shrill call above the moderated tumult of the avenue's morning traffic, I caught sight of Sloan himself, in a Department car driven by Doyle, coming from the direction of Madison Avenue. When the car shuddered down, almost to a standstill, to keep from colliding with the line shuttling up Fifth Avenue, I called out to Sloan as he stood up in his seat staring ahead of him, called out with all the strength of my lungs. In the excitement I'd clutched my bag of tapioca so tightly that my finger had gone through the paper. And I suppose it was more an unwilled reaction than a conscious effort, but to attract my chief's

attention something prompted me to fling a handful of that tapioca which had dribbled through the hole, fling it straight at Sloan's abstracted figure as he swept past me.

He saw me, I felt sure, but he saw me without quite knowing it, for even as Doyle threaded a path across the avenue a tall and somber figure, emerging apparently from some doorway in the side-street straight ahead, leaped into the waiting taxicab with the flattened tires, threw open the throttle, and started to speed away.

There was at almost the same time, the sharp double crack of two pistol-shots, but I paid scant attention to them, for what most impressed me, at the moment, was the discovery that the man who had leaped into the taxicab was Curate Sam himself. Nor could I stand there watching the flight of Curate Sam westward along that side-street pursued by Sloan's Department car. For already on the avenue, not fifty yards from where I stood, other and equally engrossing things were taking place.

Old Nutty Coombs, wending his way undisturbed, had shuffled along southward, the picture of innocent and self-immured dejection, apparently glad to keep well within the shelter of the buildings. But before one of the shop-fronts he came to a sudden stop, staring at an affair quite arresting enough to excuse his momentary curiosity. At the curb, within fifteen feet of where he stood, the morning crowds of Fifth Avenue were being regaled with the unusual spectacle of an altogether unexpected and explosive fist-fight, a fist-fight between two brawny figures who struck and countered and lunged and uppercut with much of the spectacular adroitness of the prize-ring itself.

That spectacle was as a magnet to those leisurely hurrying crowds, more ready to speculate on the outcome of the affray than on the cause of the quarrel. But it was not this fight that brought me suddenly across the avenue, with the bag of tapioca still in my hand. It was the discovery that Nutty Coombs had come to a stop directly in front of the wide plate-glass window of Starr & Burton, the window that held and sheltered the Blue Pear itself. I knew then that my scattered puzzle-picture of incidents was in some way about to piece itself together.

Yet even before this discovery had made itself quite plain to me, the dejected-eyed old man in the greasy-looking overcoat had quietly unrolled a square of Canton flannel and pulled its two sticky leaves apart. Then, backing still closer against the plate glass, he had pressed this strange plaster against the window, using, not his hands, but his body, for the purpose. All the while, in fact, he seemed to be staring at that quick-moving fight about which a denser and ever denser crowd was collecting. But in his right hand I

could already see a small square parcel wrapped in yellow paper. And as he stood there he calmly swung this hand forward and then back again, with a sharp under-stroke that was as undemonstrative as it was effective.

The sound of that blow of a paper-wrapped cobble-stone against the plate-glass window couldn't have been a loud one. It failed, in fact, to reach my own ears, for the sirup-covered square of flannel, clinging to the glass, both muffled the report of the impact and limited the area of the breakage. But it had done its work. For the next moment Nutty Coombs' long arm had slipped in through the broken glass, unnoticed and unchallenged, and had caught up the Blue Pear from where it rested on its plaque of black velvet. Then, with a stroke of luck for which Nutty himself was plainly unprepared, that ravager of peaceful windows ambled on again down the avenue, quite unmolested and quite unobserved.

Yet at the same moment that Toosey's incredulous traffic-policeman came shouldering through that curbside crowd where Chick Eberts and Stuffy Evans were so boisterously trying to settle their little differences, a dapper figure topped by a fawn fedora, who had been sedulously studying a windowful of marked-down opera-cloaks, moved airily out to the center of the sidewalk and managed to brush by the slower moving old man in the greasy overcoat. As he did so their hands came together.

It was only for a moment, but it was sufficient for their purposes. I was thirty or forty feet away from them, just opposite the strange-looking window with the lumbago-plaster still draggling from its shattered base, when that meeting occurred. But in the clear morning light I could distinctly see the flash of a pale blue object with many glittering facets, as Shag Fewster's hand closed on the coveted treasure. The next moment he had dropped it into the side-pocket of his close-fitting coat, and was sauntering on again, as unconcerned as though he were a Union Club man out for a morning's airing. But it had all happened so quickly, so astoundingly, that for a moment of sheer amazement I must have lost all sense of time and place. I was awakened by a touch on the arm.

"Excuse me, madam," said a kindly-eyed old gentleman in tweeds, "but I'm afraid your parcel is leaking!"

I followed his sympathetic eye and glanced down at my feet, where a steady drip of tapioca was whitening the sidewalk.

"Thank you, sir," I demurely replied, remembering that in the excitement I'd forgotten to keep my hand pressed over the hole in my precious bag. But even to that I could give little thought, for my gaze was already fixed on the passing figure of Shag Fewster as he continued his saunter down the avenue. And I knew it was my duty, whatever happened, to follow that figure. And

follow it I did, demurely yet determinedly, with my big bag of tapioca still on my arm. But there was one thing I still remembered to do: as I threaded my way down the less turbulent reaches of that sunlit morning avenue, I took pains to let a slow but steady stream of little white globes rain down from the perforated bottom of my brown paper bag.

CHAPTER VII

THE TRAIL THAT LED TO TROUBLE

I KNEW I was adding still another strange incident to that morning of strange affairs, as I walked down Fifth Avenue on the trail of Shag Fewster. For that avenue had the privilege of beholding a rather shabbily dressed young woman with an anxious and far-away look in her eyes and a bag of pearl tapioca on her arm. This same anxious-eyed young woman seemed oblivious to the fact that her bag was leaking and leaving a little runway of white globes along the path that she followed. She plainly had more pressing things to think of. A small boy, beholding that spectacle, called shrilly out: "Hey, lady, yuh're losin' your breakfas' food!"

Two minutes later a middle-aged man in black broadcloth stopped in front of me and politely said, "Excuse me, miss, but you seem to be dropping something!" I thanked him for his courtesy and went on my way.

But the little stream of tapioca continued to drip from the bag on my arm. I had no means of knowing which way Shag Fewster would head for. But I knew that it was my duty to stick to him. And as I stuck to him I left that paper-chase runway of white globes behind me, praying all the while that Sloan would be swinging back to the scene of the broken window, hoping against hope that he or Doyle or Toosey Attrill herself would catch at that slender trail and in some way succeed in following it up.

But Shag Fewster was still promenading serenely on, as care-free, to the casual eye, as a sight-seer out for an inspection of the season's styles. At Twenty-Ninth Street he crossed to the east side of the avenue, stopped at a window or two for a guarded look over his shoulder, and again continued southward. A minute later I saw him suddenly swerve and step briskly in through the doorway of Brentano's.

I went after him, without a moment's hesitation, for once under cover, I knew, he could find it easier either to unburden himself of his Blue Pear or throw me completely off the trail. As I followed him down a narrow and somewhat crowded aisle bordered with tables and shelves loaded with the latest books, a store clerk in glasses, with a high and shiny forehead, stopped short.

"Your parcel is broken, madam!" he said in a tone of gentle reproof, as though a figure so humble had scarcely the right to litter up a store so resplendent. So I covered up the hole in the bottom of my bag, not because I

feared ejection, but equally because it came home to me that I must husband my resources. And there was no time for explanations.

I saw my friend Shag turning carelessly down the stairway that led to the periodical-room, in the basement. And I just as carelessly followed him. He was shaking hands with himself, I felt, at the thought of having safely escaped from that avenue of unknown dangers. And he would be in no hurry, I also felt, to emerge from cover.

He paid for two periodicals, then he moved over to a pile of illustrated weeklies, and stood peering down at the colored picture on the cover of one of them.

There must have been at least a dozen persons doing much the same, about the different tables, so Shag felt pretty sure of himself. He even laughed a little, or pretended to laugh, at one of the comic illustrations on the magazine-cover over which he was stooping. Yet I could see that he was wary, very wary. Not a person stepped down into that basement salesroom without his quick appraisal. Not a movement took place there without his being conscious of it. And when I brushed past him, and stood close at his side, intent, apparently, on one of those little mushroom poetry magazines which bloom and die unnoticed amid the tumult of a great city, I did not flatter myself that the movement had escaped his attention.

I knew, in fact, that I was worrying him. Yet it was several minutes before he actually ventured to lift his eyes, and look directly at me. My face, of course, meant nothing to him and I knew, or rather, I felt without really looking at him, that he was once more browsing over his pile of illustrated weeklies. There was one other thing I knew. I knew that in the coat pocket so close to my side reposed a diamond that was worth as much as the building in which we stood. I knew it was there, and I knew it was my duty not only to recover it, but to do what I could do to capture the thief. That thief, of course, was armed. There couldn't be a shadow of doubt as to that. Nor could there be a shadow of doubt as to the quickness with which he'd use his weapon, once he saw danger upon him. Criminals of his type could never afford to take chances.

I'm afraid I am, and always will be, a coward. I had no relish for the thought of being shot through with a large-caliber bullet from a diamond-thief's revolver. On the other hand, I myself was armed. I could even then have slipped out my revolver, pressed it close against his ribs, and pulled the trigger before he could ever suspect my intentions. In that way I would not only make sure of my quarry, but also recover my Blue Pear. Yet the thought of shooting a man, of sending a bullet tearing and rending through the body

of a human being, was more than I could face. I knew that I could never do it.

Yet what, I asked myself, was I to do? My difficulty was solved by Shag Fewster himself. Having, apparently, sized up the situation to his satisfaction and having concluded that the dowdy young woman with the paper bag in her arm was no longer worthy of his passing suspicions, he gave a valedictory touch to his lengthy period of inaction by leisurely purchasing and paying for a copy of *The Masses*. Then he moved jauntily off to the stairway, mounted to the main floor of the crowded book-shop, and pushed his unhurrying way out toward the street-door.

I did the same, not more than twenty paces behind him. Yet as I did so something quite unlooked-for happened to me. Before I reached that street-door I came face to face with my Winkie, with Winfred Ealand himself.

He had an open book in his hand, and he raised his eyes from the page in front of him to stare directly into my somewhat startled face. His jaw and the book dropped at one and the same time; and he moved forward, automatically, and with wonder in his eyes, as though he were making ready to speak to me. But he stopped short, stunned, I suppose, at the discovery that I myself had given no promise of stopping short. I had other things, naturally, to absorb my attention at that particular moment, things too important to be overlooked. I knew I could never explain. I knew it was useless even to try. And Winkie must have seen that barricaded look which fell over my face, like a fire-shutter being pulled down across a shop-front. Or perhaps he even accepted it as a look of hostility. At any rate I could see his eyes narrow, and his face harden, although by this time he was actually saying something to me. What it was I don't know, to this day, just as I can't remember what I murmured back at him. For Shag Fewster had passed out into the street by this time, and I felt that my one hope of happiness in life lay in not losing sight of that jauntily-moving yet elusive figure,—in not letting anything come between me and the work which the Alliance demanded of me.

To follow Shag was not so easy this time, for he was moving eastward at a brisk rate, with the resolute stride of a man who had suddenly remembered an overlooked errand. It wasn't exactly flight; yet something about his movement reminded me of my more and more pressing need of help. It was my duty to be prepared for finalities. I looked right and left for a policeman, as I hurried along, with my little stream of tapioca marking my way. But there wasn't even a "canary" in sight, much less a patrolman. So I did the only thing left for me to do: I followed on at the heels of the hurrying thief in the fawn fedora. I couldn't help feeling, as I did so, that if my quarry was

on the run it would be a run to cover. I wondered, as we crossed into more sordid areas of the city, if Shag was to lead me back to that German street-corner saloon, and just how I was to beard him in a lair like that, and just what chances I would have in territory that would be plainly hostile.

These questions reminded me of my automatic. I felt the need of it in some more accessible position. I had a sort of tremulous ache to clear for action, for I was still burdened by that vague impression of impending trouble.

And instinct, in this, was not altogether wrong, for the next moment I had the satisfaction of seeing Shag Fewster turn sharply to the left and step hurriedly down a flight of basement stairs. At the time that he was doing this I was loosening the snaps in my holster-pocket and dropping my automatic in my all but empty tapioca bag. There I shook it about until I was able to close my fingers on the heavy butt of the gun, hidden behind its covering of crumpled brown paper. It felt like the clasp of a sustaining hand. It may have frightened me a little, but at the same time it fortified me. Yet never for a moment did I slacken my step. I wanted to be close to Shag, in case he was maneuvering for a back-door break-away.

I noticed, as I went hurrying down those time-scarred basement steps, that they led into what was plainly a plumber's shop. For at the foot of the steps stood a galvanized hot-water tank, an array of rusted iron pipe, and the cast-iron fire-bowl of a house-furnace. In the shop itself, where Shag stood with his back to me, I could see three white enamel bath-tubs leaning against the wall, one, larger than the others, on its side, together with a crated hand-bowl and a further litter of galvanized piping. Beside this I saw a sandy-haired and big-boned young Irishman in dungaree, placidly filing a brass fitting in a bench-vise.

I'd long since learned to size up such things at a glance, and I knew, even before I stepped through that scarred and battered door after my debonair friend, just what was going to confront me. And I found something sustaining in the grimly honest face of that sandy-haired young Irishman. But I could hear my own heart beat, all the while, for I knew I was coming closer and closer to some unknown climax.

"Say, can you do a quick job for me?" I heard Shag inquiring of the shop-owner. He hadn't even turned to look at me as I stepped inside.

"What kind of a job?" inquired the apathetic man with the file.

"Soldering a cracked water-pipe," was the prompt reply.

"Where?"

"Three blocks over," and Shag nodded toward the East River.

"Nope," was the none too encouraging reply. "I gotta stick to the shop!"

Shag shrugged, laughed a little, and backed away a step or two.

"Good night, then," he facetiously observed, as he swung about toward me and the open door. He ignored me as though I hadn't been there. He simply refused to see me as he started for the steps.

"Wait!" I said.

I tried to say it calmly, but there was a shake in my voice which I couldn't control. My brown paper bag was empty, for the last of the ten pounds of tapioca had dribbled out. The bag itself was crumpled close about the automatic, and my second finger was thrust through the hole in its bottom, where one crook of a flexor-muscle would bring its fatal pressure against a little flange of steel roughened with a network of criss-cross lines. But I was afraid, terribly afraid.

"Who? Me?" the innocent-eyed Shag was inquiring.

"Yes, you!" I told him, with a sternness which made the man at the vise suddenly stop and look up at us.

"Why?" asked my enemy. A gray shade passed over his face, like a cloud over a field of wheat-stubble. And as I saw it I warned myself to be wary.

"Because you're the man who picked up my pocketbook in Brentano's," I announced. I knew that I could put a bullet singing and rending through his body, tearing triumphantly through bone and flesh. But I clearly wasn't compounded of the stuff of which heroines are made. I didn't have the courage. All I could do was to play for time. Time, I kept telling myself, was the one thing I wanted, time above everything else. For I was still hoping against hope that Doyle or Wilkins or Sloan himself would follow up that tenuous paper-chase trail of mine and in some way come to my deliverance, before it was too late.

"Say, what're you pipe-dreamin' about, anyway?" demanded my studious-eyed enemy, now with something more menacing than mere anger on his face. I knew that he was measuring me, mentally testing me out, artfully weighing and examining every chance, every contingency.

"You know what I mean!" I cried out, only too glad of the chance of an argument. "That purse is there in the side-pocket of your coat, and you can't deny it!"

I could see his face harden. I could also see that the sandy-haired figure in the dungarees had turned away from his vise, and was staring somewhat appraisingly at the other man.

"Say, what's this dame drivin' at?" inquired the man with the file in his hand.

Shag regarded him with a quick and anxious eye.

"You're not goin' to fall for any song and dance like that, are you?" he demanded. The jauntiness had gone out of his voice.

"Then let him show what he's got in his pocket!" I exulted, for I could still see the tell-tale protuberance there over his hip-bone. And that protuberance, I knew, was caused by the Blue Pear itself.

"What've you got in that pocket, anyway?" demanded the man in the dungarees.

"What difference does that make to you?" challenged Shag, with one hand groping behind his hip.

"This dame looks straight, to me," retorted the shop-keeper, by way of explanation. "And you don't!"

He was still remarkably impersonal about it all. But as Shag started to back away I realized that the shop-keeper was with me. He threw his file down on the work-bench, making that trivial movement a strangely final one. Then he advanced slowly toward the other man, with an eager and calculating look in his keen blue eyes. And minute by minute, I knew, time was slipping away.

"What's in that pocket?" demanded my brawny advocate, licking his lips as though the relish of battle was already singing through his turbulent Celtic veins.

Still more time might have been taken up, had not Shag made a movement as though to circle about for the door. That resulted in a startlingly sudden dive and clinch and collision which converted a metal-littered basement shop into a place of tumult. Those two quickly interlocked bodies stamped and swayed and stumbled about the uneven floor. I could hear short grunts, heavy gasps, throaty sounds of animal-like anger—but still I was afraid to do anything. I could see the two bodies go over, with a thud,—and the man in the dungarees was on top.

"You would, would you?" he panted. "You—"

His gasping words of indignation were cut short by a double sound, so close together that one seemed merely an echo of the other. It was a sound that made me think of the double-slap of a driver's whip across a cab-horse's tarpaulin. I couldn't for a moment quite understand what it meant. I saw the thick figure in the dungarees suddenly draw up, tense, and then relax, and then draw up again, in a quavering convulsion that died in mid-air and let him subside limply back on the still prostrate Shag Fewster, whose right hand, I noticed, was a bright red, as though it had been dipped in raspberry-juice.

It wasn't until I saw that widening pool of crimson that I realized what had happened. I had my own automatic in my hand, but still I was afraid. I was so afraid that I stumbled forward on my knees, with my face not three feet away from Shag's frightened eyes as he twisted and writhed and tried to unburden himself of that limp and loathsome weight that was dripping its scarlet warmth, hot like thick tea, on both our hands.

The injustice of it all sent a blind surge of revolt through my body, a drenching wave of self-pity at the thought of being made to face what no woman should have to face. And in equally blind revolt at the thought that I was too cowardly to shoot when I should have shot, to act when I should have acted, I brought the paper-covered automatic which I still held in my hand blindly down on Shag Fewster's head, with its plaintively blinking eyes and its ludicrously gaping mouth.

Then I sat staring at him, with a little sob of terror, wondering why he didn't move, wondering why he lay as still as the other huddled figure which had half fallen away from him. Then a sharper terror shot through me, for I saw that the plaintively blinking eyes had once more opened, and the hand from which the heavy police-revolver with the sawed-off barrel had fallen was groping listlessly about the broken flooring. And I knew that life was sweet, that life was worth fighting for, and that nothing but my own strength and cunning, since I was too craven for the other way, could save me. So I flung myself on Shag Fewster, still stunned from that blow, with a second sort of blind fury. I rolled him over, and over still again, until he lay opposite the long enamel bath-tub that leaned on its side against the wall. Then, exerting all my strength, I let that huge mass of white-lined iron fall top-down on the uneven flooring, cupping under its arching weight the sodden and huddled figure of my enemy.

I sat for what seemed a long time on its red-painted iron bottom, staring dizzily down at a hand that looked as though it had been made of soiled wax, a hand protruding from the sleeve of a dungaree slip-coat. Clutched in that hand I could see something that flashed back the light from its countless facets of tenderest azure. And I was still staring at it, with foolish little sobs of exhaustion, as Doyle and Sloan himself came puffing and tumbling down the basement stairway, with their foreheads wet, and a policeman in brass buttons behind them.

"That tapioca," gasped Sloan, as he saw me sitting there. Then he stopped. He stood gaping down at the floor for a moment.

I watched him as he knelt down and bent back the fingers that looked as though they had been made of dirty wax. I watched him as he took the Blue

Pear, stained with blood, from their clutch. He knelt there for another moment, apparently deep in thought. Then he looked about the room.

"Where is he?" he finally asked.

Doyle was helping to hold me up as I got to my feet. A solitary grain of tapioca dropped from my crumpled-up bag and rolled toward the lip of the overturned bath-tub. I watched it as it came to a stop against the white enamel metal-edge. I was thinking, at the moment, that my inspector had a great deal of faith in me. He felt sure that I hadn't failed him. Yet he seemed unable to find anything to bear out that feeling.

"Where is he?" repeated Sloan, with a worried look in his eye.

I was watching the single grain of tapioca beside the bath-tub.

"He's there," I whispered, pointing toward the overturned tub.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MAN FROM MAIDEN LANE

I WAS ALONE in my room, thinking about Winfred Ealand and how human values vary with human moods. For the sight of a dead man, two days before, had upset me much less than had the sight of a living one. Even the capture of Shag Fewster seemed to dwindle down into insignificance before the fact that I had once more stood face to face with my Winkie. And the question as to what my bewildered Winkie would think of that encounter loomed much more important to me than the problem as to how soon Shag Fewster would go to the electric chair.

I sat there, immured in that Scotch-mist of misery which usually crept over me when I was idle and alone, wondering why I was without the final will to confront Winfred Ealand and make all my past life clear to him. I sat there, oppressed by a ghostly feeling of frustration, as a knock sounded three times on my door. It was a low and distinct knock, and after a moment's interval the three-noted tattoo was repeated.

And that brought me out of my trance. I powdered my nose, got up from my chair, and went to the door. Then I unlocked it and opened it wide enough to command a view of my visitor.

That visitor, I found, was not the person I had expected. For standing there I saw a middle-aged woman in the dove-gray uniform of the Order of Deaconesses. Her loose-caped shoulders were rounded by a slight stoop and a pair of amber-tinted eye-glasses added in some vague way to the dejectedness of her appearance.

"Might I speak with you for a few moments?" she asked, through rather thin lips which were held austerely down at either corner.

"About what?" I inquired without enthusiasm, resenting the manner in which the dove-gray figure had pushed her way forward the moment my hand had dropped from the door-knob.

I stood watching my humble-eyed visitor as she meandered brazenly to the center of the room, surveyed it with a sort of querulous curiosity, and then turned and blinked disapprovingly at me through the amber-tinted glasses. The silence lasted for several seconds.

"What can I do for you?" I finally and none too invitingly demanded. I could see the primly-held mouth-corners relax, the drooping shoulders

become more erect, and the pensively inclined head with its gray-draped hood suddenly thrown back. This was followed by a peal of laughter as light and silvery as it was unexpected.

"Toosey Attrill!" I gasped, still staring at her.

The demure figure in gray settled into one of my wicker club-chairs. The next moment she was busy fumbling under her dun draperies for what I strongly suspected to be a Turkish cigarette.

"You've certainly gotta hand it to me, Balmy," she proudly affirmed.

"For what?" I demanded, as I stood there for a moment or two, continuing to stare rather stupidly at her voluminous draperies until the fact of her identity had worked its way clearly through my brain.

"For pullin' off these make-up stunts on the bob-cat of the whole Alliance crowd!" she triumphantly retorted.

"But I thought you'd hurried off to catch a night train for Chamboro," I said as I closed the door and locked it.

Toosey first consulted a watch and then struck a match.

"I've got over an hour before that train slides out," she calmly explained. "And somebody's gotta wise me up before I lose myself in the tall timber."

"About what?" I inquired as I came and sat down across the table from her.

"About this Polar relief work out into the pie-belt! About this follow-up system the Alliance tries to put over. About how these Maiden Lane diamond-carriers do their work, and about what I'll be bumpin' into when I land out there in that bush-league metropolis o' Chamboro!"

It wasn't an altogether easy task that Toosey was demanding of me. But I could sympathize with her aversion to working in the dark. I'd done enough of that myself. Yet I hesitated a little, wondering where to begin.

"In the first place, Toosey," I told her, "this is more the Protective Union than Alliance work. The diamond business, as you're probably beginning to learn, is one of the biggest businesses in this country. Most of it centers around Maiden Lane. That's headquarters for practically all of the big brokers and dealers and importers. Naturally, they have to send their goods out, out on sale, and out to customers. That's where the diamond-carrier comes in."

"I wasn't disputin' it," acknowledged the girl on the other side of the table.

"Spearman, for example, was a drummer for Loeb & Levin's when he was blackjacked and robbed in Detroit. This man Oldershaw, who's just

wired in his troubles to the Union, is another traveler, or carrier, for the diamond house of Oppenheim & Son. These big houses, as I've said, have to have travelers. They're trusted men, who've all been tried out, but they're not bonded, for there's no American company will bond a salesman against stealing his company's goods, just as there's no company going to insure those goods against embezzlement. And that's where the Protective Union comes in. It says: 'Touch one of our men and see what you get!' By that they mean they're ready to hound the life out of any crook who tries robbing a carrier. The big crooks know that, and step aside—at least they did until this Pareto gang began to get busy."

"Then who turns the trick on him?" inquired Toosey.

"Most of the thieving is done by hotel-sneaks working as bell-boys, by messengers who go bad, or by sleeping-car porters who are willing to take a chance. For a diamond traveler, naturally, has to carry his diamonds with him when he goes on the road. Many a man has started out from Maiden Lane with a hundred thousand dollars' worth of unset stones in his wallet. His heavier stuff he carries in his own special trunk. It has to be checked, of course, the same as any other trunk. It's small, and he usually takes it right with him in a taxicab, checks it a certain time before the train-hour, and personally sees that it gets aboard the baggage-car. At the other end of the trip he has to be equally careful. He claims his trunk, has it put in his taxi beside him, and stays with it until it's carried up to his room at the hotel. There he transfers what he wants to his hand-bag. The other stuff he deposits in the hotel safe. If it's a small city and the hotel hasn't a satisfactory safe, his instructions are to go to his leading customer and use that jeweler's safe for the night. Sometimes, of course, he has to keep his entire stock with him, in his room, but those occasions are rare, and also unwelcome."

"But the gink can always carry a gun?" interposed Toosey.

"He gets a police permit from every state, so if his route is a wide one you'll see him with a wad of revolver permits almost as thick as a pack of cards. But he also has our office protection. If he's a big stone carrier, he regularly wires in a code message to his house, reporting his lodgings for the night and his next day's move. If he scents danger, or thinks he's being followed, he steps into a telegraph office and sends in a code-call. That call at once brings an Alliance officer out to him."

"Such as you and me," interpolated Toosey, "to keep little cutey from gettin' hurt!"

"Then, of course," I went on, "the Alliance itself does what it can to keep tab on him. They can't keep him corraled, of course, the same as the South African miners corral their Kaffirs for three months at a time, but he

can be watched, and is being watched, all the time. A lot of hotel-men, for instance, are really Alliance agents. If they spot a carrier acting suspiciously, or being indiscreet, they at once report him. But the Maiden Lane houses try to pick only reliable men. They're usually quiet-moving and quiet-mannered men, men who don't talk. As a rule you'd take any one of them, on the road, for a middle-class storekeeper from a middle-class town, without imagining the peculiar-looking black bag he carries along with him holds a fortune that often runs into six figures."

"But now and then," again interpolated Toosey, "they naturally pick a lemon!"

"Now and then they pick a lemon," I acknowledged. "But I don't think it's often."

Toosey still seemed to be perplexed.

"But what d'you s'pose could've given this gink Oldershaw a sudden attack o' cold feet?" she inquired.

"That's what the inspector is sending you off to find out. Oldershaw's got a hundred and ten thousand dollars' worth of unmounted stones with him on this trip, and he has to be protected. Something has happened to make him suspicious. He wants help. And Sloan thinks you're the right person to take it to him."

"Some little life-line, ain't I?" remarked Toosey, without enthusiasm.

"The thing to remember," I told her, "is that you're acting for all Maiden Lane. You're protecting one of the biggest enterprises in America. And that ought to give dignity to even the undignified things you sometimes have to do."

"They seem to need protectin', all right," she languidly remarked, "seein' they ain't got the foresight of a push-cart peddler. Why, old Wilkins steered me up into one o' those Lane stone-shops where they'd a pin-head of a boy goin' along a line of safes and pullin' out drawers full o' ten-carat diamonds as careless as though they'd been Mexican kisses. And on the tables behind the railin's they'd enough crown jewels sloppin' around loose to stock a Fifth Avenue store,—lyin' around like so much tin-ware and nobody, as far as I c'd make out, carin' a rip what happened to 'em!"

I had to smile at Toosey's naive tone of protest.

"It may have looked that way, Toosey, but every grain of gold and platinum, every quarter-carat emerald, and every by-water diamond-chip, was being protected as royalty itself is protected. In the first place, there's both the Alliance and the Union, with all its secret agents. Then there's the vault-system itself, with its special electrical alarm apparatus. Then there's

the dead line the city police have thrown around the Maiden Lane district: not a crook known to the law is allowed inside that dead line. And every man working inside that district is secretly under espionage, is being kept under the eye of the Alliance, just as you're going to keep this man Oldershaw and his friends under your eye!"

Toosey languidly consulted her watch.

"Well, I'm not crazy about the job," she announced. "For my idea of excitement ain't stallin' as a church-worker in a back-water town where the musk-rats'll splash you if you wander off Main Street!"

"Things may liven up," I suggested as Toosey stood up and shook out her dove-gray skirts. "And Chamboro may be a busier town than you suspect."

"And I'm to wire you, am I, if I bump into something big?" she casually inquired, as she tamped the fire from her cigarette-end.

"You're to send for me if you need me," I told her as I crossed to the door and unlocked it.

I unlocked that door more quickly than I had intended. I flung it open, startled by the discovery that some one had been standing outside it. I stepped into the hallway just in time to catch sight of a figure vanishing furtively about the first turn.

"What's the riddle?" asked Toosey as she watched me staring intently along that empty hallway.

"It's not a riddle," I told her. "It's a conviction—a conviction that I'd better change these quarters of mine. And by the way, Toosey, when you're busy shadowing the shadow of that man Oldershaw, make it a point to see that somebody isn't shadowing *you*."

But I'd forgotten about Toosey when, two hours later, Sloan called me up from the Alliance offices.

"Balmy," he said over the wire, "I hate to break up your beauty-sleep, but I want you to catch the midnight train for Chamboro. A carrier for the Adelstein house named Brescher has swung off his regular route to camp in that town, and, from Oldershaw's message, I don't like the looks of things."

"But Toosey Attrill's already on her way there."

"I know it. But I want you to get right after her. Go to the Lantry House, and remember a desk-clerk there called MacLean can act for us in a pinch. Brescher matched a string of pearls for his house in Philadelphia and has the goods with him. They're valued at about ninety thousand. The office here isn't altogether satisfied about Brescher. We've had a report that he's been plunging in a Baltimore bucket-shop, and he was twice seen in Philadelphia

with a woman who isn't altogether a Quakeress. And that at least means he's got to be watched."

"But what lines am I to follow?"

"I leave that to you. Get in touch with Toosey and act on the evidence you're able to pick up. That's clear, isn't it? Good night."

I tried to hold the wire, but my connection was already cut off. That was a way of Sloan's, I remembered, and he had to be humored in it. So I scrambled into my clothes, telephoned for my train-time and a taxicab, flung my things together, and started for the door. I was just taking the key from its lock when my telephone rang again.

"This is Fulner, of Inspector Sloan's office," announced the voice over the wire. "The inspector's left word for you not to get off at Chamboro, but to go on to the town of Oakville, the next station. A trustworthy man will be waiting there to motor you back to the Lantry House at Chamboro."

"Who is that speaking?" I inquired.

"Mr. Fulner,—Fulner, of the inspector's office."

"Fulner?" I repeated, for the name was new to me.

"Yes, his secretary," came the somewhat impatient answer.

"Will you kindly put Inspector Sloan on the wire for me," I asked.

"The inspector went home, and to bed, twenty minutes ago. He'll talk with you over long distance in the morning."

"All right," I said as I rang off. But the more I thought over that message from the inspector's office the more troubled in mind I became. So troubled did I become, in fact, that I decided to beard the lion in his den. I accordingly dropped into a pay-station booth before climbing aboard my train and called up Sloan at his house. He answered at once.

"I'm sorry to waken you," I began, knowing his dislike for going into details.

"Who said you wakened me?" he snapped back.

"Fulner did!"

"Fulner?"

"Isn't that the name of your new secretary?"

"What does Fulner know about my movements?" demanded the voice at the other end of the line. My suspicions, apparently, weren't so unreasonable as I had tried to make them seem.

"Didn't you ask Fulner to instruct me to go on to Oakville and motor back to Chamboro, motor back with a man who'd be waiting when I arrived

there?"

"When and how did Fulner give you that message?" demanded the inspector. There was a new note in his voice.

"He gave it from the Alliance offices, over the wire, not more than an hour ago," I explained.

My explanation was followed by a moment or two of unbroken silence.

"That's rather interesting," I hear the inspector's voice saying, "especially as Fulner left the office, for the day, at about five this afternoon!"

"Then you didn't give him those instructions?"

"Of course I didn't. And Fulner never gave them to you. And what's more, I don't like the look of all this. It points to a bigger mix-up than we've imagined, especially when somebody's taken the trouble to tap your wire."

"Then I'm still to act on your first instructions?"

"Yes, get out there to Chamboro, and don't leave any loose ends or let anything slip away from you. In the meantime I'll hurry Wilkins out to Oakville to follow up the ropes from that point."

So I went straight to Chamboro, as I was instructed to do. I made that altogether dreary night-trip still further depressed by a vague consciousness of conspiracies weaving themselves about me, to say nothing of the disappointment at my discovery that Wilkins was to intrude his officious and altogether unwelcome personality into my case. For it was seldom that Wilkins and I could keep step in such work.

Yet when I alighted from my train at Chamboro, instead of finding a sleeping city lying tranquilly under the paling stars, I saw through the faint light of earliest morning a scene of unexpected movement and color. The railway's yards beyond the station, I found, were crowded with strings of gaily painted cars. Eight wrinkled-skinned elephants swayed ponderously along a road already dusty with traffic. Six-teamed tent-wagons went lurching and clattering across one corner of Chamboro to an open "lot" already busy with workmen. Shuttered animal-cages on wheels were being tooled down the ramps from the yellow-painted flats, whips were cracking, men were giving orders, and hastily clad small boys were staring hungrily at a dis-embarking bevy of Shetland ponies. That musky smell which came to me on the morning air took me back twenty years, at a bound. But I had scant time to brood over it, for the next moment I was climbing into a ramshackle old bus emblazoned with the faded yet significant legend of "The Lantry House." My one and only fellow-passenger was a fat drummer with a bulky hand-bag and an even bulkier sample-carrier of papier-mâché known as a "telescope."

We soon left the circus tumult behind us, and went rumbling somnolently up through equally somnolent streets, passing nothing but a truck-gardener high on his wagon-seat, and a lone furnace-room worker with a dinner-pail under his arm.

Chamboro, in fact, looked anything but ominous as its last street-lamps blinked up at the pearl-tinted skies which were slowly turning to pink. There was a reviving smell of freshness in the air. The well-trimmed lawns, I could see, were still wet with dew. Now and then, above the dull rumble of our wagon-wheels, I could hear the song of an awakened bird. And it all seemed to speak of peace, of a peace that was almost oppressive, reminding me as it did how seldom the harried children of great cities were allowed to skirt the fringes of anything so Edenic. It sent a wave of self-pity through my tired body, and made me wonder if Winkie, my poor lost Winkie, ever thought of me and my tangled life during the moments when he walked in that peace which must remain forever foreign to me.

But once I'd been duly installed at the Lantry House I found no time to feel sorry for myself. My first move was to send out feelers for Toosey Attrill. I discovered, to my surprise, that she was under the same roof with me. So in two minutes I was at her door, quietly sounding our code-knock.

There were both wonder and weariness on her face as she opened that door and squinted out at me.

"Look who's here!" she said in a relieved sort of whisper, as she relocked the door and wriggled into a kimono.

"What's happened?" I promptly inquired as she reached for a cigarette. Toosey, without her war-paint, looked disturbingly withered and tired about the eyes. The years, I could see, had left their footprints on that pert young face.

"Nothin's hit this town but a two-ring circus!" she announced as she struck a match.

"Then you've not done anything?" I demanded, wordlessly and foolishly depressed, as I backed discreetly away out of Toosey's smoke cloud.

"There's nothin' I *could* do," she complained, "except sit around and wait f'r the kangaroo to jump!"

I assumed the kangaroo in this case to be Oldershaw, so I demanded particulars as to that gentleman.

"Oh, that boob's as shy as a she-antelope. He hit this town about six hours before I did, and took a room here, but he wouldn't even give a church-worker the glad hand. He got cold feet as soon as he found the house-safe was out of kilter and couldn't hold his stone-trays!"

"Then what did he do?"

"He took 'em back to his room, and double-locked everything. He got his gat out, and ordered his supper sent up. He even sat on that Taylor chest while he fed his face. And when he went down to use long-distance and call on a couple o' his customers, he put the night-porter on the door, with an army-revolver in his side-pocket about the size of a rollin' pin!"

"And that's all?"

"That's all I've been able to lamp," acknowledged Toosey.

I could see that I had considerable work ahead of me. So I slipped back to my room, freshened up with a cold bath, breakfasted in solitude on toast and black coffee, and began to consider my case.

Then I got busy. My first work was with the night-porter, a chambermaid, and two of the bell-boys. The desk-clerk called MacLean I preferred saving until later on. It involved a number of palms to grease, and a good deal of guarded questioning, but it brought in results, trivial as they might seem to the casual eye. Oldershaw, I found, was still in his room. But the startling part of it turned out to be that he was not there alone. Another man had spent the night with him. He and this unknown second man had sat up until morning playing rummy. They had smoked a great deal and had made away with a few bottles of beer. But they had been sober as judges, and very guarded about answering door-knocks, according to the bell-hop who handed me my information. Once, the bell-hop also acknowledged, he'd seen an automatic pistol lying on the card-table. They'd also kept the two windows closed and locked, although the room was pretty smoky.

The second man, I found out from the porter, had come with a hand-bag, but without a trunk. It was true, he also informed me, that the hotel safe was out of order. A tumbler of the combination lock had worked loose and until an expert arrived from New York the house was using a little hand-safe that afforded no room for outside deposits. So Oldershaw had put the porter on guard at his room-door when the former went out with a hand-bag, about five o'clock in the afternoon of the day before. The second man he must have met somewhere outside, but they were both back in the room before seven.

"Did that second man register when he came to the hotel?" I asked.

"Sure he did," was the answer.

"Have you any idea under what name?"

"His own name, the same name Oldershaw used when he spoke to him."

"What was that name?"

"Brescher," was the offhand but somewhat disturbing answer.

CHAPTER IX

A PART LEFT OFF THE PROGRAM

I WENT BACK to my room and stood at an open window, trying to organize the information I'd gathered. Chamboro, lying so tranquil under the slowly mounting sun, gave one the impression that nothing much could ever happen in so calm and orderly a little city. I could see where a slow-moving watering-cart left Main Street freckled with pools of silver light. I could even see where the sparrows were bathing lazily about the fountain-rim in City Hall Park. And somewhere outside my door a maid was humming *Why Should I Cry Over You* as she worked.

But appearances, I knew, weren't always to be depended on. I had my work to do. And my first step in that work, I decided, was to confront Oldershaw himself. So I went straight to his room, and knocked. There was no response. I waited, listened and knocked again. And still there was no response. Then I moved on down the hall, for I saw a bell-boy approaching with a yellow envelope in his hand. He stopped at Oldershaw's door and knocked. But instead of knocking on the panels, with his knuckles, he took a coin from his pocket, and with the edge of this tapped lightly yet distinctly on the door-frame. The door was opened and the boy was admitted.

Two minutes later I returned to that door, and repeated the maneuver of the bell-boy. It was successful. I was standing close in beside the door when it swung back. The man called Oldershaw blinked out at me with startled eyes. His attitude, I could see as he stood there holding the door-knob, was a distinctly hostile one. Nor could I find anything prepossessing in his flaccid and yellowed face.

"Well?" he demanded, with a razor-edge to the word that made it almost a bark.

"You sent for me!" I calmly announced.

He swept me with his openly combative stare.

"I guess you've made a mistake in the room-number!" And he would have shut the door in my face if I hadn't pushed too far forward to prevent any such movement. The man, I could see, was as nervous as a cat.

"I'm afraid it's you who are struggling under a slight misapprehension," I told him, with all the dignity at my command.

"What makes you think that?" he queried.

"Because I'm Miss Rymal of the Protective Alliance, and I've been sent here to cover your case."

"The Alliance doesn't use women agents," he retorted, after a full five seconds of silence.

"Then you'll at least recognize their shield," I ventured as I smilingly exhibited my badge of office.

He inspected both my badge and my person without the slightest degree of enthusiasm. But he was compelled to admit me, though he did so plainly under protest.

"What can I do for you?" he demanded.

"That's precisely the question I came here to ask!" I retorted. The barricaded look that crossed his face did not escape me.

"There's nothing a woman can do in this particular situation," he stolidly announced.

"Then what would you advise?"

"Giving advice isn't my business," he retorted, apparently at the end of his patience.

"Then suppose you give me information instead," I quietly suggested, determined to hold my ground. By this time I'd pretty well sized up both the room and the man. And there were certain other things to be appraised. "You've about a hundred and ten thousand dollars' worth of unmounted stones in that trunk, I believe?"

He merely stood silent, batting his slightly bloodshot eyes down at me.

"And you've complained to the Alliance office about being shadowed. Were you shadowed to this hotel?"

He pondered that simple enough question.

"I've been tailed for three or four days. Whether I was followed right here or not I can't tell."

"What did he look like, the man who was shadowing you?"

Still again Oldershaw hesitated. The values in such talk as ours, I remembered, lay in these apparent trivialities of conduct.

"He was a tall man, clean-shaven, and rather awkward and raw-boned. He made me think of a country minister who'd kind of gone to seed."

I digested this information. It was not what I had expected.

"And when you found you were without the protection of the hotel safe, what did you do?"

"I kept my stuff shut up here," he acknowledged.

"Then you haven't covered your customers in this town?" I prompted.

"No," he replied, after a moment's hesitation. And I knew in a flash that the man had lied to me.

"And Louis Brescher, who has the pearls for the Adelsteins?" I inquired.

"What about him?" was the other's quick and querulous interrogation.

"You called him up in Philadelphia and had him swing over here and join you?"

The man studied me with covert intentness. My knowledge of his movements, apparently, was beginning to make some slight impression on him. He nodded in assent after I'd repeated my question.

"And you know Brescher quite well?"

"Well enough to trust him when I saw trouble ahead."

"And Brescher, of course, reciprocates that confidence?"

"Sufficiently to leave *that* with me!" proclaimed Oldershaw with a significant head-nod toward a professional-looking black hand-bag which stood close beside his own steel-bound trunk.

I made a movement to step over to that bag, but he intercepted me, promptly and bodily. My smile seemed to puzzle him.

"Still holding, among other things, some ninety thousand dollars' worth of unstrung pearls?" I prompted.

Once more the man in front of me nodded his head.

"What time do you start back to New York?" was my next question. Again I noticed his hesitancy, and remembered that a part of his training had been to keep his movements unannounced. But professional instinct, I felt, wasn't operating in this instance.

"That all depends on my house. They're to send me wire instructions some time to-day."

"And in the meantime you propose to stay right here with your valuables?" My accent on that last word seemed to nettle him.

"Can you suggest anything better?"

"I could suggest nothing more sedentary," I retorted, resenting his altogether unnecessary curtness of tone.

"Thanks for the suggestion," he said, showing his teeth.

"And thank you for the information," I added, moving toward the door. For about all I could do now was to withdraw with dignity.

"What information?" he inquired, obviously relieved at my retreat.

"The information you gave me, quite without suspecting it," I announced as I stepped into the hall. And I closed the door and left him to meditate over that Parthian arrow.

The case, I realized as I made my way back to my room, was after all becoming interesting. I spent ten minutes in getting trace of Toosey, who'd been quietly shadowing Brescher while he indulged in the luxury of a shave and hair-cut, and despatched her to Chamboro's telephone exchange to call up Oakville and establish communications with Wilkins there. And I engineered my way down to the Lantry House office and made myself known to MacLean, the desk-clerk. I knew he was on the Alliance list, but I was in doubt as to how far he might be trusted. His smile, however, was a broad one as he motioned me back to the check-room door where we could talk unobserved.

"I guess you haven't made much of a hit with our friend Oldershaw," he surprised me by announcing.

"Why do you say that?"

"Oldershaw's just telephoned to the city authorities to see if a couple of policemen in plain-clothes couldn't be sent up there to keep him company. And he's sent a wire to the Alliance office complaining that he has good reason to believe a woman crook is shadowing him."

"A woman crook?" I echoed.

"Yes; he's got an idea you're the queen of the Chamboro high-binders and are trying to do him out of his stock."

"Why should he think that?"

"Well, my own impression is that the man's kind of lost his nerve. Our house-safe is out of order, you see, and he's had to sit up with a quart or two of diamonds."

"Then why didn't he make use of some jeweler's safe?"

"He *did* call up Landon Brothers, our biggest jewelers here, and got permission to cache his goods with them overnight. But when Brescher turned up he said he felt easier in his mind and called it off."

"Of course he called it off," I concurred.

"I really think it's circus-day that's got his goat," proclaimed my friend the desk-clerk. "For he's sure got the willies if he's sending for a couple of cops to keep the ribs away from his turkey!"

"Perhaps," I ventured, "he wants those cops for an altogether different purpose."

"Such as?" suggested my unofficial confederate.

"I'll tell you that when I pay my bill," I said as I made for the street. I went straight to the jewelry store of Landon Brothers. There the younger member of the firm proved only too willing to vary the tedium of watch-mending with something more exciting.

Oldershaw, I found, had placed a small order with him, but had not deposited any sample-trays in the firm's vault for safe-keeping. He had spoken of doing so over the telephone, it was true, but he had called up later on and explained that a friend of his named Brescher had found a safe without troubling them after hours.

This novel information rather took my breath away, though I tried hard not to show it. For here, somewhere, was still another lie. So I demurely asked for a list of Chamboro's remaining jewelers.

The other store was kept by one Max Kishinger, a sallow and sharp-eyed man of about thirty, with a prematurely bald head and an extremely inhospitable manner. When I innocently informed him that I'd like to look at something in garnet rings, he sized me up with those circuitous Hester-Street eyes of his and announced he wasn't doing any business that day.

"Why not?" I demanded, with a pout of disappointment.

"Because I'm busy taking stock," he bruskly informed me.

"But you're still going to do business here?" I asked, with an assumed artlessness.

"I can't sell you anything, lady, this morning," proclaimed the proprietor of that shop of loudly ticking clocks and gaudy looking plate. I stared vacuously around, notwithstanding the note of finality in the man's voice. I wanted a clear-cut picture of that establishment of his, for something told me that some time in the near future we might be meeting again. Then I made my way, only outwardly disconsolate, back to Main Street. There was at last some slight promise of order in all those accidental and uncoordinated notes of the morning, like an orchestra tuning up. This impression was strengthened when I caught sight of Toosey within a block of the Lantry House and she discreetly motioned me under cover.

"That boob Wilkins is dead to the world over there in Oakville, so I've been tailin' Brescher around town," she explained. "And what's more, you've just handed him the shock of his promisin' young life!"

"When?"

"When you strolled into that Kike gem-shop," she announced.

"You're sure of that?" I demanded, knowing that Toosey could scarcely realize the value of her information.

"Dead sure!" she averred. "And dead sure of still another move. For I've just followed that guy Oldershaw into a drug-store and lamped him buy a two-ounce bottle o' collodion."

I stopped short. For collodion, I had long since learned, was a very valuable asset to the busy workers of the underworld. Both safe-breakers and jewel-thieves use it for varnishing the tips of their fingers. It did away with the danger of finger-print identification. It left no tell-tale marks on any polished surface with which a criminal's hand might come in touch. A finger-coating of it could be worn on occasions where a pair of gloves would have at once excited suspicion. And it was a precaution which only the professional would be apt to exercise.

"Then here, Toosey, is where we get busy!" I announced as we circled back for the Lantry House. Once there I found MacLean, the desk-clerk, throwing me the high sign to drift back to the check-room door.

"Both your men have slipped out," he confided to me, clearly betraying that the mystery of the thing was not altogether repugnant to him.

"Did they take anything with them?"

"Nothing that I could see. And they put the porter back on their door upstairs!"

I looked him right in the eye.

"I want you to take me into that room for five minutes," I told him.

It rather took his breath away and left him silent for a moment or two. But he was game.

"All right," he said, as he began to search for a pass-key.

We went to my own room first, where I took my "spider" from where I kept it hidden in my hand-bag. MacLean, plainly excited, posted the porter at the stair-head, gave a word or two of instructions to the elevator-boy, and unlocked Oldershaw's door with the pass-key. Then we stepped inside.

The next moment my heart went down, for neither the sample-trunk nor the black hand-bag were in the room. But the closet door we found to be locked, and with that discovery our mystery was solved. Two minutes' work with my "spider" had that door open. Another five minutes over the trunk had its lock conquered. It held nothing of value.

Then I tried the hand-bag. My "spider" proved ineffectual, in this case, and a look of concern crossed MacLean's moist face as I deliberately forced the lock. The bag, we soon found, was not exactly empty, but what it held was of comparatively small value. And the Adelstein pearls were not in it.

"I want you to send that porter up to the police-station for a couple of officers," I said to the desk-clerk.

He shook his head.

"Oldershaw tried to get a couple of men, but the chief told him this was circus-day and he was already short-handed for his city work."

I thought this over.

"All right," I said. "But at least get that porter off the door before Oldershaw and Brescher come back. And now tell me what you know about a jeweler here named Kishinger."

We were back in the hall by this time, with the room-door once more locked behind us.

"Kishinger," meditated the desk-clerk. "Why, that's the Main Street jeweler who went bankrupt this week. Max came here about a year ago from Newark."

In two minutes I was down in the booth talking over long-distance to Scullard of Newark. In another five minutes he had given me Kishinger's record, the consolingly unsatisfactory one of two assignments and a safe-robbery within a space of twenty-two months.

My friend the desk-clerk stopped me on the way out. That eagle-beaked bird known as Curiosity was plainly clawing at his vitals.

"What's going to happen?" he inquired with the confidential whisper of a fellow-conspirator.

"It looks as though it was going to be quite a big circus to-day," I casually remarked. But my clerical friend's chance to dig anything pregnant out of that apparently commonplace remark was cut short. A newly arrived guest, powdered with road-dust, was standing before the register and obviously demanding official attention.

I waited until the dusty newcomer had registered, and followed him into the elevator. I continued after him as he proceeded to his duly assigned room-number. When he stepped into the room I somewhat scandalized a crafty-eyed bell-boy by brazenly stepping in after the newly arrived guest. For this arrival was Wilkins of the Alliance office.

"What's happened?" I demanded.

"Well, I've combed out this tangle all right," proclaimed Wilkins as he locked the door. He seemed quite proud of himself.

"What is the tangle?" I meekly inquired.

"I've just followed a yegg and a box-man called Humpy Jansen over here from Oakville. He's laying low in Moran's livery-stable until he can get

in touch with his confederate here. And I'm going to work the ropes around 'em and pull 'em both in!"

"What confederate?" I asked.

"Curate Sam," was Wilkins' reply. I sat down on the edge of the bed and let this sink in.

"So *he's* in this, too!" I ruminated aloud.

"No wonder this man Oldershaw's scared out of a week's growth, with a crook like that shadowing him around the country!" declared the man from Sloan's office.

But I scarcely heard him for a moment or two, for I'd been following my own line of thought.

"Then what are we going to do about Brescher?" I asked.

"I guess those two carriers can take care of themselves," announced Wilkins.

"But who's going to take care of that two hundred thousand dollars' worth of Maiden Lane stones?" I next inquired.

"They'll also take care of themselves, once we've rounded up Humpy and Sam!" retorted the triumphant Wilkins.

"But where *are* those stones?" I somewhat excitedly demanded.

"That's not what's bothering me just now, Balmy. What's interesting me just now is Humpy and Curate Sam."

"But if those stones, nearly a quarter of a million dollars' worth of them, ever get loose, where'll we ever see them again?"

Wilkins looked at me over his shoulder. It was a patronizing sort of look which I couldn't help resenting.

"You've kind of got this doped out a little different to what I've done it," he suggested.

"I have."

"Then we both can't be right."

"I agree with you."

"Then what do you propose doing?"

"I intend to try to save those stones," I told him.

"And who'll help you?" he inquired, with the air of announcing that he at least could be counted out.

"Toosey Attrill!" I said, with sudden decision. His smile broadened. It broadened into almost a grimace of scorn. Then his face grew sober.

"Say, Balmy, this isn't movie stuff we're mixed with; it's serious work!"

"That's what I've been trying to tell you," I said. "And as every minute's precious, here's where I get busy!"

And I did.

A circus ballyhoo was already scattering hand-bills along Main Street as I caught Toosey on the wing at the telephone-booth and sent her up to her room for an empty suit-case and a couple of hand-towels, while I dodged out and duly invested in a cotton clothes-line. I met Toosey on the corner and pushed on through the crowd, for all Chamboro was gathered along Main Street and up and down that carnival curb sped flying rumors as to the procession having already passed the depot.

"Toosey," I said when I was able to talk, "we've got to take this case in our own hands. Wilkins thinks he's working over-time for the Alliance, but we've got to jump in and trump his ace!"

"But where are we beatin' it to?" gasped the somewhat breathless Toosey.

"We're going straight to Max Kishinger's shop. And we're going to get there before certain other parties," I announced. "For there's a man from Maiden Lane, Toosey, who's trying to double-cross his house. He's been waiting for a big clean-up, and he's figured on hitting this town on circus-day with a stock worth well over a hundred thousand dollars. He's even coaxed another carrier to swing in with him, with another ninety thousand dollars' worth of stuff for the haul. They've cached that stock in Kishinger's safe. Kishinger's bankrupt. He sweetens the pot with anything worth while from his own stock. Then Humpy Jansen walks in and makes it a daylight robbery, cleaning out that safe and breaking for the railway yards and hitting for the open on a rattler while that man from Maiden Lane is sitting up with his chum and two cops over at the Lantry to make their alibi clear!"

"For the love o' Mike!" said Toosey, with rounded eyes.

"Now this is no day, Toosey, to let nearly a quarter of a million in Maiden Lane stuff get loose. This is a haystack all around us here, ready for the needle to get lost in, and Oldershaw knows it."

"But what're you goin' to do?" demanded Toosey.

"I'm going to take Humpy's job off his hands," I announced as I took the suit-case from the other's hand and dropped my clothes-line into it.

"Then what d'you want me to do?" was her next question, for we were already within a stone's throw of Kishinger's place of business.

"You've got to be door-man for this little side-show," I told her as I gave my final instructions and then stepped, bag in hand, into the home of ticking clocks, presided over by Max Kishinger.

The latter, I was in no way surprised to discover, remained quite uninterested in the excitement without. He was, in fact, deeply engrossed in a double column of figures as I stepped into his store. He was leaning across the plate-glass top of one of his show-cases as I advanced, with my right hand releasing the three snaps in my waist-front where my gun-holster hung.

If Kishinger actually saw me approaching, he gave no evidence of that fact. Yet he must have known I was there, even though he never once directly looked at me. I saw that he was the only person in the place, and I also saw that Toosey had carried out her instructions and quietly closed the door and locked it with its spring catch. But still the man leaning over the plate-glass show-case betrayed no interest in our quiet invasion.

"You remember me?" I finally inquired, stepping quite close to him.

He looked up slowly, almost abstractedly. But his glance soon became a distinctly hostile one.

"What if I do?" he demanded.

"Mr. Kishinger," I said, speaking as calmly as I could, "I want you to keep cool, and act quickly. Things haven't gone right, and our whole coup depends on the next ten minutes!"

He stared at me with an abstracted sort of disapproval.

"Say, lady, what're you raving about, anyway?" he wearily demanded. He was, I could see, an uncommonly good actor.

"Don't be a fool and waste time," I told him with a sharpness that made his sleepy-looking eyes widen a little. "A New York bull tailed Humpy Jansen to Moran's stable here and has him rounded up. Both Brescher and Oldershaw are being shadowed over there at the Lantry, and Curate Sam had to duck back to Oakville."

"And what's all that to me?"

"It means we've got to put the job through ourselves, and put it through on the run."

"What job?" he asked, still guarded, as he stood there rolling his eyes between me and the shop-front.

"The job of cleaning out that safe and getting away with the stuff," I told him as I rested my right hand on the plate glass of the case-top. "No, don't move!" I warned him as he made an effort to step back along the counter. It was ten to one, I knew, that he had a revolver hidden there.

It wasn't until I spoke that he noticed my automatic pointed across the minutely scratched top of his show-case. "We both know you'd look more

convincing with a hole in your slats, but you don't want it, of course, and you don't need it!"

"What t'hell is this, anyway?" he demanded, squinting at the automatic.

"My Gawd, man, aren't you jerry to what's happened?" I cried with all the coarseness I could command. "Can't you see Brescher and Oldershaw have to depend on their ribs to put this coup through, and that we can't waste time over it?"

I made an impatient signal to Toosey. "Bring that work-chair out from behind the watch-bench there! And you, Mister Kishinger, just step out from behind that counter. Right out, if you please, with your hands up. And sit down in that chair. Right back, please. Now, Toosey, quick, tie him there. The arms behind him first. Then close across his back. That's right; don't let it look like a phony job. Draw your rope tight and double those knots. And now the feet. Each foot to a chair-leg, as close as you can truss 'em. Now knot your towel. No, Toosey, don't put in that gag until we've made sure Brescher was right about the safe-door being left open. . . . Ah, yes; I see he was quite right. So you can give him that nice big knot to bite on. Tie it close behind the ears. It may hurt a little, of course, Mister Kishinger, but we've all got to do our part before we can expect our rake-off. And it's a haul, I see, that will pay us quite handsomely!"

For by this time I had the safe-doors swung back and was on my knees, lifting the orderly pile of stone-trays into my open suit-case beside me. Then came the pearls, Brescher's pearls, in a case of French kid, and several chamois bags, and still another tray or two, and a black velvet fold holding several dozen unmounted diamonds of varying sizes. Dimly, from behind me, through the closed shop-doors, I could hear the braying of a circus-band shot through with the quick pulse of drums and the thin and distant scattering of cheering crowds.

"Toosey," I called out to the girl still on guard, "you slip out and see if you can find a cab, or a taxi, or anything on wheels. Have 'em wait at the first side-street corner, and let me know when you've got 'em!"

I turned back and completed my search, stowed the last of my haul in the waiting suit-case, then swung shut the safe-doors and carefully locked them, for I remembered that during the next few hours I might be regarded as personally responsible for what that safe held or failed to hold. I realized, as I closed my bag and caught it up, that my well-trussed friend on the chair was indulging in frantic but ineffectual efforts to make himself heard.

But I paid scant attention to those guttural and animal-like noises he was making in his throat, for I had other things to worry about. The circus

procession was already lumbering past, and above the sea of heads I could discern gilded floats with heavily clucking wheel-hubs and spangled figures on vermillion-colored wagons, and canopied elephants and tasselled horses and a clown on a trick mule, and bunting and pennons and flags and an all-pervading golden fog of street-dust.

I could smell this dust as I stepped out through the door and quietly closed it after me. But I was not interested in the passing glories which were enthralling the attention of the crowds along the curbs. I wanted to make sure that Toosey had captured a taxi for me. And I wanted to make sure of getting safely away from that store of ticking clocks and rifled safe-drawers.

So I peered cautiously out along the preoccupied street, before daring to venture into the open. I caught sight of a somewhat ramshackle one-horse cab standing at the street corner, and was ready to hurry toward its open and welcoming door when I caught sight of something else.

Standing in the shadow of a doorway half-way between me and the corner was a tall and melancholy figure, intently watching the cab which Toosey had stationed there for my escape. There was no mistaking that figure. It was Curate Sam. And the sight of him sent a little army of mice-feet scampering icily up and down my backbone.

I took a firmer grip of my suit-case handle and sidled away from that tell-tale door, keeping close in under the shadow of the shop-fronts, and at every step watching Curate Sam over my shoulder. If I could only duck in through another shop-door, without being seen, I could, I told myself, either slip away through a back entrance or even persuade the shop-keeper to hide my hand-bag until I could return with proper protection.

But there was no such luck for me. I was within five steps of a pleasant-eyed grocery-man in a white apron, viewing the parade from beside a window-shelf of salted fish, when Curate Sam turned about, squinted up the sunlit street, and caught sight of me. The next moment he started in pursuit. And as he did so I could see his hand swing back to his hip-pocket, with a motion which sent a second army of mice scampering up my spinal-column.

I had to think quickly. And I also had to act quickly. At that moment a Roman chariot was shaking and cluttering along the center of Main Street. It was drawn by four bespangled horses, side by side. It was painted a Pompeian red, with broad gilt stripes that flashed in the dusty sunlight. In the chariot, braced against the double-reins which he held in each muscular hand, stood the driver, in a flowing toga of blue and white cotton and a sort of Castle-band about his well-bronzed brow, with his head quite bare to the sun. There was strength in that face, I promptly concluded, and also honesty. And the sight of him, enthroned there above the populace, gave me an idea.

So I caught my breath and pushed boldly through the street-crowd and through the scattering of small boys who trudged stolidly along beside those cluttering wheels of red and gold. My hair was blowing loose across my face and my hat was on crooked. And a small cheer of derision went up from the crowd as I leaped hurriedly yet determinedly on the open lip of that Pompeian red chariot and pushed in beside the classic figure in the flowing toga.

"Git out o' here!" commanded the statuesque figure in white and blue cotton, without so much as turning a glance in my direction. "Git!" But with one hand I clung to my suit-case and with the other I clung to the lacquered rim of the chariot-box. The four horses, I could see, were spirited animals. It was taking about all of their driver's attention to hold them down to their duly appointed pace in that long line of dust-crowned color. I knew what might happen, at any moment. I could see that tall and ministerial-looking figure as it strode along the fringe of the street-crowd, with its eye always on me. Curate Sam, I remembered, was a man who would never resort to half-measures.

"Git out o' here!" repeated the circus Roman with the Castle-band about his sunburnt forehead.

"Don't let him get me!" I wailed aloud, with a sob which I made no effort to control. "Oh, don't let him get me!"

That preoccupied chariot-driver gave me one quick glance over his shoulder. It startled him a little, plainly, to find a young woman in distress crouching there so close beside him. And the derisive cheers of the street-crowds weren't making his double team any easier to handle.

"Let who git you?" he demanded, bracing himself.

"He'll kill me if he ever catches me," I declared as I stared along that sea of gaping faces in a vain search for Wilkins, for an officer, for anybody who could come to my help.

"Who'll kill you?" demanded the man at my side, with a touch of defiance in his voice.

I had no time and no chance to answer. For a revolver-shot rang out, quick and clear above the street tumult. There were a scattering and scream of women, a shout of men, and at the same time a cascade of red-colored splinters from the curving bowl of the chariot-body itself. Whether it was the shot or the shouting that started the four champing chariot-horses, I am unable to say. Perhaps it was the flying splinters. The horse nearest to me, at any rate, crouched low, like a cat, for a second, and the next moment sprang forward with a lurch that threw the entire harnessed quartette out of line.

That infection of panic spread to them all, and the driver, with his feet well apart, saved a collision with the hyena-wagon in front of him by turning his chariot sharply out over the car-tracks to the right.

There was a scurrying of spectators to one side as the four plunging horses, refusing to answer to the bit, struck out at a tangent from that long line of circus floats. A street-opening luckily stood directly in front of them, for by this time they were out of control and intent on only their own wild way.

It made me think of Cyrus descending on Babylon, toward the end of *Intolerance*. For before me, as I stood there hanging on for dear life, I could see a long and undulating avenue of elms, a placid and wide-paved avenue of green-lawned residences and well-trimmed hedges and neat-looking geranium-beds, flowing past on either side like highly colored ribbon. And we went thundering on, far beyond the sound of braying bands and the shouting street-crowds. But it wasn't long before another sound smote on my ears and caused me to look back quickly. Then I shouted to the driver who still sawed on his reins.

"They're after us!" I called as I crowded closer to his swaying body. "They're coming—in a car! Don't try to stop! Don't—don't stop!"

I don't know what he really intended to do. But at that moment a bullet whined overhead, not three feet above us. And that must have settled his doubts. For he gave those galloping horses their heads. He let them race like wild-fire up the long slope of a suburban hill, scattering dust and gravel as we went, nearly shaking and jiggling the life out of me. Again I saw a puff of smoke from the pursuing car, but this time the shot fell short, for I couldn't even hear the sound of the bullet. And then I remembered that two could play at that little game. Before we'd reached the hill-top and the open country I'd my automatic out and was taking pot shots at the car-front thundering and swaying and careening after us.

I shot sparingly, for I couldn't have hit a barn from a platform with Saint Vitus Dance like that, and besides, I had no ammunition to waste. The only result of those shots, in fact, was to add to the terror of the flying squadron in harness ahead of me. Eliza on the ice, I began to feel, had rather easy going compared to traveling in a circus chariot without springs. And we must have made little more than a splash of red along that country road, for the pursuing motor-car failed to gain on us, during the next few minutes. A hay-tosser or two past whom we thundered stood transfixed, with eyes and mouth agape. But my brain was beginning to work again, by this time. We couldn't, I realized, hold our lead for long. The second slope up which we were careening was already beginning to tell on the horses, and there was no

saying what might happen, once that motor-car overhauled us. On the other hand, I knew, a chariot and four flashily caparisoned horses couldn't clear away from a circus without leaving a well advertised trail, and without slightly disturbing somebody's peace of mind. There must have been still other pursuers on the heels of our pursuers. But the one thing I didn't want to happen could, I knew, only too easily occur before any outsiders might interfere. So I acted with promptness, if not altogether with dignity.

I dropped to the dusty floor of that swaying chariot, clinging all the while to my suit-case. Then, as we went swaying over the brow of the hill, momentarily cut off from a view of the car behind, I slipped off the edge of the dancing and jiggling and cluttering platform. The force of that fall caused me to do an unexpected Annette-Kellerman dive into the road-ditch, along which I pirouetted and rolled like a top. I came to a stop, still clinging to my precious bag, within four feet of a wire fence. Under this I wormed my way, like a wood-chuck, crawling into the underbrush on all fours.

Once under cover I scrambled to my feet, stooped low, and scurried on. I could hear the pulse of the pursuing motor-car and I paused only long enough to make sure that it had kept on its way.

The underbrush deepened into heavier timber, until I found myself in a thick woodland, but even the fear of snakes didn't keep me back. I pushed on right through those whispering and echoing woods, skirted a meadow whose proprietorship I had no wish to dispute with the half-dozen cows grazing therein, climbed a barbed-wire fence, and on again through a field of corn until I caught sight of a distant farm-house, when I paused to make myself presentable before once more facing civilization. I straightened my hat, brushed the dust from my clothes, and mopped some of the perspiration from my over-heated face. I still had three wide fields to cross before reaching that farm-house. There I found a somewhat slatternly-looking woman drawing a pail of water from a curb-well. Her eyes seemed very tired but they rounded with wonder as I stepped up and asked for a drink. She studied me in utter silence as I gulped down a half-pint of that cool well-water.

"Do I look like a respectable woman to you?" I asked her, as coolly as I could.

"I guess so," she finally acknowledged.

"Then will you be willing to help me, without bothering to ask questions, if I pay you well for it?"

"The men folks is all to town," she finally and somewhat irrelevantly explained.

"Could you take *me* there?" I asked, as I opened my purse. The tired eyes grew still rounder as she stared down at the bill I held out to her.

"I want something to eat," I explained to her. "And five dollars' worth of old clothes, and somebody to drive me back to Chamboro. Can you do it?"

"It's circus day t' Chamboro," she said, with a hungry look in her tired eyes.

"So I've just discovered!" I acknowledged, not without a touch of bitterness. But the toil-wearied woman at the well responded to that unexpected call of adventure, and while she caught and harnessed a pluggy gray mare I dined on a wide slice of apple pie washed down with a glass of milk, arrayed myself in a well-worn Paisley shawl, a black straw bonnet and a pair of spectacles, and expressed my willingness to hold the woman's two-year-old child on the return trip to Chamboro, by way of what my guide and savior called the "Back Road."

"You can drive me straight to the police-station," I announced, as we approached the city, without either accident or interference.

There I found a fat man in shirt-sleeves and blue trousers, laboriously penning entries in a blotter. He was using a very scratchy pen. He reminded me of a hospital probationer trying to make out her first chart.

"Well?" he finally demanded, viewing me with open disfavor.

"Kishinger's safe has been robbed of nearly a quarter of a million dollars' worth of jewels," I announced as I stood there hanging on to my precious suit-case.

"I know it!" he promptly and placidly acknowledged.

"Then please lock me up," I requested, "for I'm the person who stole that stuff!"

"Oh, no, you didn't!" ponderously and unexpectedly countered the fat man at the desk. "We've *got* the guy who pulled off that job!"

"Got him?" I echoed. "Got him where?"

"Right here behind the bars where he belongs," was that officer-of-the-law's announcement.

"You mean Curate Sam?" I gasped.

"They say he calls hi'self Humpy Jansen," was the second altogether unexpected reply.

I sat down on a wooden bench that stood on one side of the room. I still had my dust-covered suit-case in my hand.

"And who arrested him?" I asked.

The man at the desk chuckled abstractedly to himself, like a hen investigating a straw-stack for a nest hole.

"A slick she-slooth from Noo York," he announced between scratches of his pen, "and got him right as he was slopin' out of Kishinger's shop!"

"A woman named Toosey Attrill?" I demanded.

The officer at the desk lifted his head and swung slowly about in his chair.

"Say, who *air* you, anyhow?" he pointedly inquired.

But I had no chance to answer that question, for the next moment the room was invaded by two uniformed policemen and three men in plain clothes. One of the men, who stood just behind the officers, was Wilkins himself. The other two were Oldershaw and Brescher. They all looked tired, and they all looked troubled. And all of them, intent on their own ends, seemed to ignore the rather dowdy-looking old woman in the Paisley shawl on the wooden bench.

"Where's the chief?" demanded Wilkins.

"Chief's took his family to the circus," blithely announced the man at the desk.

"Well, these two men have got to get back to New York to-night, and want to make a deposition. Who is there around here to take care of them?"

The man in his shirt-sleeves rose with ponderous briskness to his feet. "Just a minute, gentlemen, and I'll get Colonel Lowrie f'r you," he announced as he toddled away. In the doorway he turned back. "I s'pose there's no trace of them diamonds that yegg got out o' Kishinger's safe?"

"None!" was Wilkins' morosely impatient retort. And the fat figure shuffled out into the hall, clicking his tongue against his teeth as he went. As he went I slipped from my bench and moved over to the doorway he had so recently vacated. I didn't even bother to keep my shawl on. I was afraid it might interfere with my right hand, in which I held my automatic, balanced and ready.

"Wilkins," I shrilled out, "watch your two men there, for they're both armed!"

The five heads turned in my direction. But not one of the men moved from where he stood. It was Wilkins who spoke first.

"What're you barking about, anyway, Balmy?" he demanded in a tone of heavy reproof. "These two men aren't my prisoners!"

"No," I said with decision. "*But they're mine!*"

And it was a good quarter of an hour before it could all filter in through Wilkins' fat head. So depressed was he, in fact, that the dust of battle had settled down and we were back in the office of the Lantry House before he remembered a message for me.

"Here's a wire from the chief," he announced as he handed me a sheet of yellow paper.

"When Balmy closes present case," I read, "tell her to stay on and get sunburnt. Instructions follow."

I thought, for a minute or two, that there had been a mistake in the decoding of that despatch. But my doubts vanished, three hours later, when I received Sloan's personal message of explanation. For my next duty to the Alliance, I learned, was a neatly blistered nose.

CHAPTER X

THE BOOB FROM THE BURDOCK-PATCH

THEY must have thought I had a screw loose. They must have taken me for a nut, the natives of that adjoining hamlet where I hung over the line-fences and let the solar heat of noonday fresco my impassive features. And I can't quite blame them, when I come to think it over. For it doesn't altogether look like sanity to see a bareheaded woman lying flat on her back, blinking up at the blue dome of heaven as though she were a she-Swami holding converse with the Infinite.

But it wasn't converse I was after. It was two much simpler things, the freckles and tan which Inspector Sloan had ordered. He ordered them, and gave me only three days in which to get them. But I got them. I got them so strong that the end of my nose looked like a Richmond cherry every time I squinted cross-eyed at it, and my hands looked as though I'd been runner-up in a hay-fest for female pitch-forkers. I looked like something that ought to have taken a high dive into a vat of cucumber-cream. And before that sunburn showed any signs of softening down into a good old bucolic tan I pranced into Chamboro and purchased a pair of nifty white cotton gloves, a gingham dress of watery blue that hung with a hike, a split-straw "Sailor" encircled with forget-me-nots that perched on the back of my head like a last year's bird's nest, and a dollar suit-case of rattan, trimmed with imitation sheepskin, that wasn't even waterproof. Then I darkened two of my front teeth with repeated applications of tincture of iron, braided my hair up in a bob so close and tight that it seemed to pull my eyes out of focus, and adorned my feet with a pair of broad-toed "easies" whose half-inch heels made me walk as though I'd been born with fallen arches. And thus equipped, I made my way back to the land of my birth.

I went back to the city looking so much like the queen of the rubes that the adenoid-exercisers who dispense extras in front of the Grand-Central Terminal gave each other the fraternal eye as I pushed out among them. A one-legged small boy even leaned against the subway kiosk and called aloud to the world: "Say, Dutch, did youse pipe the boob from the burdock-patch?"

But this didn't disturb me, not for a moment. I knew what I knew. I remembered that I was back in the land of my birth. I may have looked like a simp from the snake-fence region, but I knew my city of cement and steel

and sandstone as well as any rural mail-driver ever knew his county route. And as I trundled my grass-woven suit-case laboriously down Fourth Avenue, with my jaw hanging appropriately loose at the sight the sky-scrapers, and with a stare of worried innocence at the gentle strangers who accosted me, I had the consolation of recognizing Sergeant Gorman in the blue-clad figure just below the Belmont corner, to say nothing of the further satisfaction of placing the yellow-faced idler in the green fedora, at the corner of Thirty-Eighth Street, as Chink Coppinger, the leather-dip and sneak-thief in general. I had, too, the final consolation of knowing that my destination was a rooming-house at a certain number in East Twenty-Fourth Street, where my arrival had been casually yet laboriously prepared for. The portly wife of Wilkins himself had told a Mrs. Jaeckel that she had an up-state niece who was crazy to get to the city for work. And Mrs. Jaeckel had duly imparted to Mrs. Munger, who operated the aforementioned rooming-house, the information that she knew of a country girl named "Bessie Laurie" who would work hard and cheap to get a start in the city. Mrs. Munger, being frugal by both training and instinct, had consented to give the up-state girl a trial, at one half regular wages.

Under ordinary circumstances, of course, the prospect of being a slavey in an east-side rooming-house would have proved anything but appealing to me. But in this case the circumstances were far from ordinary. Inspector Sloan, in fact, had announced that this same Twenty-Fourth Street rooming-house held a certain old German who answered to the name of Otto Schoenfeld, and that while nothing definite as yet was known as to Schoenfeld's activities, there seemed to be certain substantial reasons for investigating the old gentleman and his manner of life. And the inspector had listened to my plea about doing that investigating alone, without Wilkins and Doyle hanging around to drape the Indian sign on my humble endeavors.

That was all I knew. But it was enough. Mrs. Munger, I soon found, was not the type of woman to make my task an over-luxuriously easy one. Under her soft and billowy form, I soon discovered, resided a heart of granite. My first day in that rooming-house, indeed, convinced me that a month of it would give me both Alpine fever and house-maid's knee all at once. For besides four long flights of stairs to climb, there were beds to make, halls to be swept, washings to be carried to the roof, towels to be ironed, bells to be answered, and a hundred and one other errands to be run. For this I was to receive the lordly sum of three dollars a week, with the privilege of sharing the company of a morose, middle-aged and mysteriously silent Irish woman known as "Bridgy," who at unexpected times was addicted to fits and at all

times to the use of any available stimulant. I was installed in a sulphur-colored cubby-hole on the top-floor front, an attic-room that stood next to Bridgy's, our limited abode when off duty. It was a room that could be as stifling, on a hot summer night, as any stoke-hole.

To this, however, I offered no objection, for before the end of my second day I'd discovered that the one other occupant of that top floor, besides Bridgy, was a mild-mannered old German oculist by the name of Shoenfeld. And it was, of course, encouraging to know that I was to be stationed, in my hours of ease, so satisfactorily close to the man I had been sent to investigate.

But this antique Otto Shoenfeld, I soon found, wasn't quite as easy to investigate as I had imagined. In the first place, the hours of ease I've just spoken of proved to be few and far between. Mrs. Munger, who openly acknowledged that she found me to be both short-sighted and stupid, apparently did not believe in tempting her help with idleness. For Bridgy's newly arrived assistant, in fact, she devised ingenious and unlooked-for tasks, all the way from kalsomining the basement kitchen ceiling to scrubbing and holystoning the broken old brownstone house-steps—and my heart came up in my mouth at the sudden thought of Winkie himself happening along and beholding me, *me*, Balmy Rymal, down on my knees scrubbing the front steps of an east-side rooming-house!

As for Otto Shoenfeld himself, he gave every promise of proving about as shy as a springbok. He vanished like a shadow, I found, at the first sign of my approach. It wasn't until my third day as a slavey, in fact, that I got a good look at him. And that look rather disturbed some of my preconceived ideas as to the man. In the first place, he wasn't as old as I expected. He at once reminded me of David Warfield in *The Music Master*, although he was more fragile looking than old Anton Von Barwig and walked with more of a stoop. He struck me, indeed, as nothing more than a benevolent-eyed and absent-minded workman who was content to mind his own business as long as you minded yours. He was visibly startled, when he first confronted me in the hall, and I knew that he stopped and studied me as I went stumbling and trudging up the dusty stairway. He could have found nothing very disconcerting about me, I felt sure, for besides my general air of stupidity I was maintaining a pretense of being short-sighted. For the rooms in Mrs. Munger's house were methodically numbered, and a short-sighted girl had a chance to overhear things, occasionally, when squinting up to make sure of a door-number.

That bespectacled old German still continued to study me, during the next few days, but he did it more indirectly. As I've already said, he

occupied the entire rear of the top floor where Bridgy and I had our sleeping quarters. There, I found, he did practically all of his own cooking and housekeeping, to say nothing of looking after three canaries of which he was inordinately proud. He lived very frugally, so far as I could judge, but was regarded as a good tenant, by Mrs. Munger, always paying his rent in advance and bestowing a dollar a week on the taciturn Bridgy for washing his flannels, which, apparently, he wore winter and summer. He was a very busy man, I also learned, and apparently a prosperous one, getting even more work than he could handle as a manufacturing optician. In other words, he had a large room next to his living-and sleeping-room, shut off from the rest of the house, and there he worked all day long at cutting and grinding lenses.

It wasn't until the fourth day that I had a chance to visit his quarters, climbing three long flights with a frugal parcel of laundry for which I was instructed to collect thirty-two cents. I could hear the hum of machinery as I repeated my knock on his door. I could also hear the sound of a bolt being withdrawn as old Otto answered that knock. He studied me with abstracted suspicion, stared at the laundry, and listened with his head on one side, like an old robin, while I stammered out my instructions about the thirty-two cents.

I was aching to have a look at the inside of that room, but it would pay me, I remembered, not to appear either too intelligent or too inquisitive. So I counted over the change he dropped into my hand, ponderously, scratched my head in doubt, and recounted it, even more slowly. He was smiling a little as I backed away, but I could feel his eyes still on me as I stumbled back to the stair-head and went thumping down in my broad-toed "easies." He was beginning to see, of course, that I wasn't the sort of person to interfere with the activities of a benevolent-minded old lens-grinder whose only wish in life was to be left alone with his work.

This work of his, I soon discovered, involved the continuous receipt and despatch of carefully boxed spectacle-lenses. Sometimes they came by messenger, and sometimes they came by registered special delivery. But always they were delivered personally at Otto Shoenfeld's door. It was impressed on me, from the first, that all such packages were to go at once to that top-floor optician. Several times, in fact, I had occasion to knock on his door, but each time, I noticed, the guarding bolt had to be withdrawn and the old German stood between me and his precious room of mysteries.

But I showed no interest in either, and day by day, I could see, his natural suspicions were subsiding. He even sent me out to a Third Avenue drug-store for a six-ounce bottle of turpentine, munificently rewarding me

with a nickel for my own abandoned use. I hung my head, and made awkward efforts at declining it, but he patted me on the shoulder and abstractedly waved me away.

A few nights later, after he'd had a visitor, he came shuffling into my room in his German felt slippers and found me stooped over my tattered blue skirt, apparently dividing my attention between chewing gum and doing my best to mend a frayed-out hem. He studied me impersonally, which made me blink and squint all the harder at the hem, and then asked me if my eyes didn't trouble me. I pretended to be afraid of him, and stammered out an admission that I'd always been short-sighted, whereupon he lifted my chin and stared straight into my eyes. It was a movement which embarrassed me not a little, and I think I blushed visibly, even under my coat of departing tan. That blush seemed to reassure him, however, for he blithely announced that some day when he wasn't so busy he'd fit me with a new pair of spectacles. And then he turned and shuffled back to his room, before I had time to thank him.

But I felt that he was no longer hostile to the new arrival. He even stopped me in the hall, and asked me my name, facetiously remarking that he'd often heard of what must have been my older sister "Annie."

"Maybe, some day you would like to learn to play pinochle, eh?" he companionably inquired. And I hung my head and reminded him that even the taciturn Bridgy openly acknowledged that I wasn't very smart. That seemed to start him thinking.

"Vould you be smardt enough to do mendings mit my shirts, and mit the holes in my sox?" he somewhat plaintively inquired. Seeing unlooked-for chances in any such undertaking, I promptly yet timidly announced that I was very fond of working with a needle. And so our compact was duly entered into.

That canny-eyed old optician, however, remained as shy as ever. He still persisted in shutting himself away from the little world of the Munger household, and I had two days of toil, crowned with a fit from Bridgy, before I found myself presented with a chance of even so much as penetrating the enemy's intrenchments. My chance came with a curt order, from the mountainous Mrs. Munger, to wash Otto Shoenfeld's windows. I was hoping that Otto would be absent, during this operation. But it was the old German himself who answered my knock and unlocked the door to his Bluebeardy chambers. He seemed, in fact, rather unwilling to admit me, mildly protesting that he oughtn't to be disturbed. Yet when I went stumbling away with my pail of hot water, showing nothing but bovine indifference, he called me back. He held out a coin to me and asked if I'd first run out to a

Third Avenue grocery and buy some cuttle-bone for his canaries. He'd been too busy, he explained, and his birds were hungry.

The boob from the burdock-patch prided herself on seeing through that ruse, but she went without a murmur.

On my return with the cuttle-bone Otto Shoenfeld was all ready to receive me. He even slipped a dime into my hand and announced that it was mine to buy hokey-pokey with. Then he locked me inside, pointed out that he wanted me to be especially careful of his photograph-plates on the window-sills, and seated himself at a huge work-bench which ran along one wall of his room. But as I rubbed away at my window-panes, singing in a cracked voice that would probably have sent Toosey Attrill into convulsions, I was able to make a covert yet careful study of his room.

It proved to be a remarkably untidy room, but at the same time a remarkably interesting one. Along one wall, as I've already said, ran a wide work-bench. Installed under this bench was an electric dynamo, a huge galvanized can with a funnel in its top, obviously to catch drip, and a lidless tin bread-box as a receptacle for glass-chips and the bench refuse in general. On the bench was a large smooth-rimmed grindstone, connected with the dynamo, with a small drip-can adjusted above it. This was plainly an automatic grinding-wheel for shaping and polishing lenses. Beside it was a lens-drill with a diamond-pointed shaft and next to this again was an instrument of many cogs and adjusting wheels, which I thought I recognized as a lens-cutter. About the bench-top, which was stained with oil, stood a scattering of topless cigar-boxes filled with lenses of different shapes and colors and weights, a number of bottles which apparently held cutting-mixtures, a cabinet of small pliers, a couple of magnifying glasses, and a tobacco-tin half filled with what seemed to be eye-glasses spoiled in the cutting.

Against the opposite wall stood a cabinet of stock lenses, the different drawers, I later discovered, carrying such inscriptions as "Plane Prisms," "Crooke's Assorted," "Segments Edged," "Flat Minus," "Flat Plus" and "Toric," some of the descriptive epithets being followed by different numerals or combinations of numerals. About the wall were hung highly complex charts of the human eye and two calendars bearing the name of manufacturing opticians, together with an advertising sign announcing: "*The Shoenfeld Toric Will Save Your Eyes*."

It was an innocent enough looking work-room, and the sedentary old figure grinding spectacle-lenses at his humble work-bench impressed me as anything but ominous. And when I shifted to the windows of his living-room, and carefully inspected that equally unpretentious quarter a distinct

sense of disappointment crept through me. From the singing canaries to the little gas-stove beside the sink, it held nothing that did not speak of innocent frugality, of a preoccupied old workman intent only on relieving the eye-strain of his unknown patrons. And when later in the day I communicated this information to Sloan himself, he retorted with a characteristically laconic message: "Get his finger-prints."

Another two days slipped by, however, before I had a chance to obtain the finger-prints demanded by the inspector's office. The chance, in fact, was one of my own making. It presented itself when Mrs. Munger sent me up to the second floor back with a box of collars to be delivered to the vaudeville acrobat residing therein. But instead of taking that box to the second floor back, I climbed to the top of the house and knocked on Otto Shoenfeld's door. I could hear the hum of the machinery come to a stop, the shuffling feet cross the floor, and the key turn in the lock.

"I guess them's for you!" I announced as the door was cautiously opened a foot or two and the old German peered out at me.

He took the parcel in his hand and turned it over. Then he shook his head and called me back. His fingers, I could see, were stained with oil.

"Not for me, leedle girl," he said with good-natured forbearance, as he handed the parcel back to me. I gaped at him, gratefully, mumbled something about being sorry, and backed away. But once that door was relocked I had the satisfaction of seeing the wrapping paper about the collar-box clearly impressed with the loops and whirls of a thumb and fore-finger slightly stained with oil. And before I presented the box to its rightful owner I'd torn away the necessary portion of wrapping paper.

By noon this was on its way down to the inspector's office. Before night an answering message had reached me. It was a brief message, but it was not exactly what I had expected. The word that came back from Sloan, however, was very much to the point. Or perhaps I ought to say the six words were, for they read: "Watch that man like a hawk."

CHAPTER XI

THE PORT OF LOST JEWELS

I WATCHED OTTO SHOENFELD closely during the next few days. In doing so I made a number of discoveries. One was that the old German had a habit of slipping out late at night and staying away for an hour or two. Another was that the various plate-holders he kept in a row on his window-ledge were not there for the printing of photographs. The order of their arrangement, in fact, was altered day by day, and my final inference was that they were being used as an ingenious sort of signaling to the back window of some room or office on the north side of Twenty-Third Street. I also discovered that certain messengers repeated their calls on Shoenfeld, and in doing so, I noticed they showed every evidence of a desire to avoid undue observation.

But my most urgent need, I began to realize, was to obtain admission to that old German's work-room. This, I knew, could never be done with his knowledge and consent. It could never be done, I also discovered, by means of my "spider," since an especially intricate spring-lock guarded that precious door from unlawful entry. Even Mrs. Munger, I found, was not in possession of a pass-key. So I was compelled to resort to strategy. I first tried to get a ward-impression on a wax-covered blank, for the cutting of a new key. But the nature of the lock made this impossible. It wasn't until I carried the old fox's fresh bed-linen up to him—for he preferred to do his own bed-making—and stood waiting to carry away his soiled sheets and pillow-slips, that I caught sight of his key-ring on the littered work-table. I was once more chewing gum, at the time. I knew I had only a moment or two, before the old man came from the bedroom. But I sidled over to the table, turned over the key-ring, picked out what I knew to be the key I wanted, and promptly took a gum-impression of it against the palm of my hand.

I was gawking dreamily at his grinding-wheel when he stepped back into the room. I took the soiled linen from him with sheepish absent-mindedness and went stumbling down-stairs with my left hand carefully cupped over its precious imprint. Then I hardened that imprint by holding it against a piece of ice, cut it away from my hand with a paring-knife, and stowed it carefully away in a hair-pin box. And before noon of the next day I was in possession of a carefully cut pass-key for that old German's precious door-lock.

With that key in my possession I felt myself more nearly master of the situation. And that night when I listened and watched behind my partly closed door and heard Otto Shoenfeld stealing quietly down to the street, my heart was beating like a trip-hammer as I crept toward his chamber of mysteries. Then occurred one of those sudden disappointments which can never be foreseen. My key refused to work. There was a flange or two which bit too closely against the ward-edges, and I wasn't ready to exert much pressure, for fear of injuring the lock. So, early the next morning, I bought a ten-cent saw-file, noted the bruised edges of my key-flange, and cut away a minute fragment of the metal. And two nights later, when Otto Shoenfeld again left on one of his mysterious midnight errands, I tried my key, found that it fitted, and slipped into the forbidden room, bolting the door behind me.

I first groped my way to the windows, and carefully drew the blinds. Then I turned on the lights and began a methodic yet hurried inspection. Everything I found tended to confirm my earlier impression that the occupant of the room was nothing more than a lens-grinder engaged in the ordinary pursuits of a manufacturing optician. A search of the old German's living-room was equally without result. I was unable to unearth anything of a suspicious nature. There was something almost pathetic, in fact, in the old workman's transparent little resources of economy that lay all about me. And I went back to the work-room again, both troubled in mind and depressed in spirit. There I sat down on his leather-covered work-stool and studied the littered bench in front of me. I studied it carefully and minutely. And suddenly I made a discovery.

It wasn't an important one, apparently, but it added to my perplexity of mind. On the oil-stained edge of the work-table in front of me I noticed a dark-colored globule sticking firmly to the wood. I pried it loose with the point of an awl, and found it to be nothing more than a drop of fixing wax. But the discovery of it there left me suddenly more alert. I looked more carefully over the grinding-wheel, studied out its connection with the dynamo-shaft and discovered a connection which I couldn't quite account for. So I got down on my hands and knees, peered under the table, and found a swivel-shelf adjusted there, hidden from the casual eye by a fringe of pinked oil-cloth. This shelf, I next discovered, swung outward and revealed an auxiliary shaft and bevel-gearing which connected with the dynamo on the one hand and on the other with a second grinding-wheel. This second wheel was much smaller than the one above the table. But the most important feature about it, I saw, lay in the fact that it didn't operate in a vertical position, as did the wheel on the table-top. It was geared

horizontally. It was also geared to revolve at a very high rate of speed. And this was the sort of wheel, I knew, that was used by diamond-cutters, just as the fixing-wax was used for embedding a stone, and thus holding it firmly while its facets were being ground.

I sat there for a moment or two, as excited as a prospector who has suddenly stumbled on pay-dirt, on a minute speck of "color" after countless hours of pan-rocking. Otto Shoenfeld's vocation as a lens-grinder was merely a blind. He was a diamond-cutter working in secret. And working in secret at such a calling plainly implied that his work was illicit. And I saw, in a breath, what it all meant. He was a "fence" for diamond thieves. He was maintaining a carefully organized agency for the receipt of stolen jewels. The lenses which were almost daily coming to him by mail and messenger were not lenses at all, but stolen diamonds pried out of their settings, forwarded to an expert who examined them under a microscope, removed all distinguishing marks from them, probably split them if they were of a suspiciously large size, completely disguised them by recutting, and sent them out into the world again, to be sold as freely and fearlessly as though they were the latest shipment from Amsterdam duly passed by the Board of Appraisers. The Alliance office had been right. That mild-eyed old German had been a man well worth watching. He was the king-pin, apparently, of a gang which might be operating across every state in the Union, a sort of hopper toward which converged perhaps millions of dollars' worth of stolen stones, the center of a confederation of outlawry which had been able to defy not only our own Protective Alliance but also the Bureau of Lost Property officials down at police headquarters. He was quietly depriving jewel-thieving of nine-tenths of its dangers and rewarding the thieves themselves with prices which no pawn-shop dealer could dare to pay. Every jewel passing through that work-room came out with a new face. Its trail ended, forever, no matter what its history or its earlier features. It was for all time lost to its owners. It could never be traced, and never reclaimed. And it could be bartered without fear, sold from state to state with all the dignity of a Maiden Lane shipment, without the slightest danger of identification.

I woke up to the fact that it was my duty to search those quarters more thoroughly than I'd yet done. But I'd lost all track of time, and the vague fear that Shoenfeld might at any moment return persuaded me to postpone my researches. So I returned everything to its place, switched out the lights, put up the blinds again, and carefully unbolted the door. As I stepped out, after making sure the coast was clear, I caught the sound of heavy steps ascending the stairs. It sent me scurrying in a panic to my room, where I promptly tumbled into bed, clothes and all.

I could hear the old German unlock his door and move cautiously about his room. I could hear him step out into the narrow hallway again and apparently stop at the stair-head to listen. Then he moved stealthily toward my own door, which was without a lock, and pushed it an inch or two farther open. I knew he was listening. His heavy breathing, in fact, was an advertisement, not only of some secret excitement, but also of the fact that he had climbed the stairs at a rate of speed which was exceptional with him. So I satisfied his straining ears by producing as regular and sonorous an imitation of snoring as I was able.

It seemed to satisfy him that all was well in my particular direction, for he finally withdrew, shuffling stealthily along the hallway until his own room swallowed him up again. But the next morning I demanded some sort of door-fastening from Mrs. Munger, proclaiming that I had plainly heard somebody in my room during the night. That mountainous and impassive autocrat pooh-poohed my fears, but finally compromised by giving me a screw-hook and eye off a dish-cupboard. It was not much of a protection, but it would at least serve as a warning, I felt, in case any one tried to force that faded old door of mine open. The report of an intruder, I felt, would also serve to cloud the issue in case Otto Shoenfeld might register a complaint about his quarters being invaded.

The next night Shoenfeld went out earlier than usual. I noticed that he carried a hand-bag with him. No particular significance could be attached to this, however, as he quite often carried the same bag when doing his household shopping. But I felt that my chance had come, and proceeded to act on that conviction. Yet some sixth sense, which to this day I'm unable to define, prompted me to hold back. I listened at the stair-head, returned to my room, hooked my door shut, and stood there again, irresolutely listening. Then I crossed to my little front window up under the eaves and stared down at the street. As I did so I caught sight of Otto Shoenfeld quietly turning in at Mrs. Munger's house-steps. Two minutes later I could hear him creeping stealthily up the musty stairways. I could hear him unlock his door and step inside. But he stayed there only a moment or two. Then he slipped as quietly down the stairs again, out into the street, and turned south, as well as I could tell in the uncertain light, at the corner of Madison Avenue. There was a chance, of course, that he had forgotten something and had come back for it. But there was a greater chance, I remembered, that something had awakened his suspicion and prompted him to drop back unexpectedly, in case that unknown intruder was taking too prompt advantage of his absence.

That unknown intruder, however, was not ignorant of the fact that time was a factor in her work, and once the old German was well out of sight she

was bolted in his room and renewing her search of his possessions. And nothing presented itself to reward that search until from under a white-enameled iron bed she unearthed an iron-bound box about the size of a steamer-trunk. It was made of oak, with handwrought hinges and corner-irons, and looked a great deal like a carpenter's chest. Its huge wrought-iron lock was a formidable-looking one, but so old-fashioned in its simplicity that five minutes' work with my "spider" conquered it and I was able to lift the heavy lid.

The first thing I encountered was a tray, filled with small card-board mailing boxes, a few packages of Toric lenses, a text-book on Optometry, a collection of smoking-pipes, and a shallow biscuit-tin nearly full of unused Special Delivery and ordinary postage stamps.

All this, I acknowledged to myself as I lifted away the tray, was distinctly disappointing. But I made it a point to disturb nothing unnecessarily, putting everything back in its former position. And it was not until I delved below the tray that I discovered anything of importance. Then things began to happen.

I first unearthed an automatic pistol with a box of cartridges beside it. Then came a small pair of jeweler's scales and a diamond-gauge. Then rows of small manila envelopes, dozens and dozens of them, each one dated and bearing a number and an inscription which I was unable to decipher. But I carefully lifted out one of these envelopes and peeked into it. It held, I found, a beautifully cut diamond of the first water, about three carats in weight. And each envelope I looked into contained one or more of these stones. Beside them I saw an old cigar box, a much handled box with faded labels and a dog-eared revenue stamp encircling it. It was a humble enough looking container. But I blinked, involuntarily, as I lifted the lid, for it flashed back the light in a thousand broken prisms and I realized as I stared down at it that I was looking at several hundred cut diamonds, diamonds of all shapes and sizes, some of them pure white, some a canary yellow, some faintly tinged with blue and pink, some cut rose and double-rose, with two or three cut Briolette. Among them was an especially large stone, slightly feathered, and so plainly chipped on one side that it announced its physical injury to even the naked eye.

Then I delved deeper. Below the envelopes I found two card-board boxes, one holding a number of emeralds carefully wrapped in tissue-paper, and the other almost filled with mixed stones, a few pigeon-blood rubies, a handful of garnets and turquoises, and an especially large and beautiful amethyst which had been broken and showed evidences of having been put

on the wheel to be recut, though this recutting, for some unknown reason, had never been carried very far.

But I was unable to give all the time I wanted to that little Aladdin's Cave of wealth, for it was my duty to know what the rest of the trunk contained. So I prospected still deeper, moving everything with the utmost care, to the end that no evidence of my intrusion might be left behind me. And it was under a German text-book on high explosives that I stumbled across something which brought a catch in my breath and a little tingle of triumph up and down my backbone.

My discovery was nothing more than a neatly kept pocket note-book. But on its orderly pages were entered lists of stones received, with dates and addresses to which they had been in turn delivered. And among those addresses I found such names as Angelo Pareto, Samuel Everson, August Zwack, Fidelo Focarino, Marie Deschamps, and William Rellstab, each established as a trafficker in stolen jewels and each with his present whereabouts duly revealed. There, before me, were the names that Sloan and his agents had spent fruitless weeks in trying to find. There they were, authentic, convincing, unequivocal, thrown into my hand by a single turn of the cards.

Yet my thrill of delight at that discovery merged suddenly into an after-mood of perplexity. I wanted that book, and that list, more than anything else. But would it be safe for me to carry it away? The labor of making a faithful copy of it was out of the question, for I was already skirting the margin of peril in remaining longer in that room. Any moment might bring Otto Schoenfeld back to his quarters. And the awakening of that old German's suspicions would very promptly and very effectively put an end to all my plans.

I thought it over, there on my knees beside the open trunk, and decided to restore the book to where I had found it. I carefully replaced the tray, relocked the trunk, and pushed it back to its earlier position beneath the white-enameled bed. Then I quite as carefully inspected the room, to make sure everything was in its place, readjusted the blinds, put out the lights, and relocked the door behind me. I breathed more freely when I was safely back in my own room. There I made ready for the street, for I realized that I had important business ahead of me that night.

I carried my slab-sided old sailor hat in my hand, remembering that the adamantine Mrs. Munger would resent an excursion at any such time of night. And I made my descent down her many-odored stairs as noiseless as I could, with my hat under my arm and my face peering over every turn of the banister.

I had reached the second floor when I made a discovery that was disturbing in its suddenness. I found that another person was coming up those stairs and coming almost as noiselessly as I was trying to go down them. This other person was a man but I had been unable to catch sight of his face. So I did the only thing that was left for me to do. I stepped quietly in through the partly opened door of the second floor bathroom and swung it shut after me. I stood there listening as the stealthy steps went past my door, as they mounted the staircase, as they rounded the landing and continued on their way toward the top of the house.

That mysterious visitor was too much for my curiosity. I slipped out of the bathroom and crept up a complete flight of stairs without hearing a sound. So I decided to try another flight.

I was three-quarters of the way up these stairs when I found a stranger intently regarding me over the banister rail. His face was in shadow, but I knew at a glance he was not one of Mrs. Munger's roomers. And I knew quite as well that it would be both foolish and useless to do what I wanted to do, which was to turn about and bolt for all I was worth. So I decided to face it out, and saunter on to my room.

But the man at the stair-head didn't intend that this should happen. He moved along the banister so that he stood directly in front of me on the top step. I noticed, for the first time, that he carried a parcel in his hand. Then he spoke to me.

"Excusa, mees, but you know ol' man call' Schoenfeld?"

I remained silent for a moment, and then nodded my head in assent. I did this because I wasn't able to speak. For as I heard that suave and full-toned voice ask its question I knew even before I saw the outlines of the olive-skinned face in the clearer light from the hall-bracket that I stood once more in the presence of Angelo Pareto. I could feel my heart jump like a frog and nearly choke off my breathing in trying to get out through my throat.

"Then where mus' I go to finda heem?" he asked as I came to a stop. He was smiling, smiling with that unctuous and ingratiating smile, so essentially Latin, as he put that second question to me. Then he suddenly drew himself up, and the smile died away from his lips. He looked at me long and earnestly, with a cogitative intentness that seemed to darken his seal-brown eyes until they looked black in the strong side-light. Then he backed slowly away, until his groping hand came into contact with the wall at his side. And I knew that he knew.

I also knew that he stood on higher ground than I did, and this, I remembered, would always be a disadvantage. So instinctively I moved up

the remaining three steps of the stairway, clinging to the banister and watching him at each step. It wasn't until I reached the hall floor that he either moved or spoke.

"Excusa, please," he said in his full-voweled Latin intonation. "I maka one beeg meestak', I t'ink!"

There was a note of irony, of mockery, I'm sure, in that apology of his. But it wasn't this that caught my attention. It was more the soft and panther-like quickness with which he stepped past me and with a celerity that in some way didn't seem a sacrifice of dignity, descended the stairs, took the turn, and continued on his way to the street.

I knew, as I heard the street-door close, that the cat was out of the bag. I could no longer pose in that house as the boob from the burdock-patch. I was discovered. Pareto and Schoenfeld were working together, hand and glove, and anything that was to be done would have to be done before those two came together.

Perhaps, I told myself as I hurried back to my room, they were already together. It was at least ten to one that I would not be allowed to escape from that house unobserved. And it was equally important that I should know what movements might be essayed that night on Mrs. Munger's top floor.

I made a pretense of preparing for bed, but it was a pretense and nothing more. Then I unearthed my revolver from the dog-eared old suit-case, slipped it under my pillow, hooked my door shut, switched out the light, and peered from my open front window along the light-spangled quietness of Twenty-Fourth Street. I could see nothing of importance there. Sleep, I knew, was out of the question, but I sat on my hard little bed with its hundred and one bumps and waited for the unexpected.

And the unexpected came. It came in the form of a stealthy step at my door. It was a mysteriously studied step, a step that sent a little shiver along my spine. The next moment I knew that some one was quietly yet cautiously trying to open the door. And my first thought was of Pareto, my second was of the door itself. For nothing more than a slender hook-eye held it shut. A child of twelve, once set on any such end, could force it open. And I was in the land of the enemy. So I groped quietly under the pillow at the head of my bed, for the revolver I had hidden there. Then I stood up, scarcely breathing, wondering what the next movement would be.

That next movement took the form of a knock on my door, a carefully moderated and yet a distinct knock. It became louder, and more determined, as it was repeated. And I could hear an anxious and somewhat guttural voice say "Leetle one!" twice over, as though to announce to me in my drowsiness

that it was a friend and not an enemy disturbing me at such an unseemly hour.

I stood there for a moment, wondering just what I ought to do. Then I slipped my revolver back under my pillow and stepped slowly across the narrow room. I stood for one hesitating moment with my hand on the door-knob, and then, as the knock was repeated still again, I asked aloud: "What is it?"

I was answered only by another tattoo of knocking, lower in tone, more intimate in its quietness. So I freed the hook and peered out through an inch or two of door-crack.

I could see the figure of the old German there at my door. And the discovery didn't altogether add to my peace of mind.

"What is it?" I repeated, assuming the vacuous drawl which I always practised when addressing him. I could see, in the uncertain light, that he was crowding his heavy face in close to the door-crack between us.

"What do you want?" I demanded in the tones of timorous innocence.

"I vant to speak mit you, please," retorted the somber figure so close to me. The next moment he was pushing bodily into my room. I didn't actually try to bar his way, for I realized that any such opposition would be useless. But I hesitated sufficiently to make it necessary for him to force the door back out of my clutch. He turned about and groped his way after me as I shrank back at his approach. He seemed a little bewildered by the darkness.

"Listen, leetle one," he said as his groping hand came in contact with my bare forearm. "Vill you helpt an oldt man in trouble?"

It was scarcely what I expected. But I schooled myself to calmness.

"What can I do?" I asked.

"I haf vorked hardt, leetle one, vorked many years, and I haf saved vat I could. To-night, I belief, somebody vill come to rob me of vat I haf!"

"But how can they?" I temporized, frantically pondering the tenor and end of his stratagem.

"Vat leetle I haf is in a troonk, in my room. Somebody vill come to rob me of dat leetle."

"But you can lock them out! You can send for a policeman!" I vaguely suggested. The old German shook his head. And the surprising part of it all was that he seemed to be in earnest about it.

"Dey vill stop at nodding," he protested.

"Then what can I do?" I protested, letting my arm shake in the close grasp of his long fingers. But all the while I was warning myself to keep my

wits about me, and see that no misstep was made.

"One ding," he said in a sort of confidential whisper which obliquely served to bracket me as a fellow conspirator with him. "One ding you can do. You can keep dat troonk of mine here, mit you. Here, under your bedt, it vill be safe. And den I vill not be robbed!"

It took a moment or two for this to sink in. The only trunk I had caught sight of in Otto Schoenfeld's rooms had been the iron-bound chest of oak. And that iron-bound chest held everything which had brought me as a spy into that household.

"But they would come and kill me," I cried, with a show of purely rustic terror at the undefined perils of urban existence.

"Dey vill nefer know," he argued. "Dey vill look only for vat iss mine, in dat room of mine!"

"But I haven't even a lock on my door," I still contended.

"I vill put one on," was his prompt and somewhat unexpected reply.

"When?" I demanded, still trying to fence for time.

"To-night," he calmly informed me.

"But something might happen to your money when I had it, and then you would blame me," I still equivocated. I could see him shake his head in the half-light.

"Nodding vill happen," he said with a cold assurance which made me feel rather uncomfortable.

"But how can you tell?" I persisted.

"Because I vill be here, I vill vatch. But efery minute vat you talk, leetle one, is a minute lost. And dere vas danger, efery minute ve vait!"

I backed away from him a little.

"I wish I was home," I said with a well simulated sob of distress.

"I vill help you go dere, ven dis trouble is ofer," he announced in his heavy and intimate whisper.

"But there's Mrs. Munger," I still pointed out. "She will send me away without my wages."

"You vill haf more from me, ven dis is ofer, dan Mrs. Munger vill efer gif you." He shuffled back toward the door, as though the entire matter were finally settled. "So now I vill bring de troonk and fix dat lock-bolt on dis door of yours!"

I stood there listening as his quiet yet heavy tread passed along the little hallway. I could hear the clink of metal as he unlocked his door. I stood

wondering what my course of action ought to be. Then I heard him shuffling back along the hall and whispering for me to turn on the light.

He had come in through the narrow door sidewise, for he was carrying the oak chest by its two iron handles. He was breathing hard and I could see that it was heavy, as heavy as my own heart was suddenly light. He toddled across the room to my iron bed, put down the chest, and carefully pushed it under the bed. He seemed to know just what he intended to do. Then he reached into his coat pocket and lifted out a screw-driver and a wrought-iron draw-bolt. From another pocket, he took out some screw-nails, held the bolt against the edge of my door, and proceeded to fasten it there. On the frame of the door he screwed a loop of iron into which this bolt could slide. Then he closed the door and slid the bolt back and forth several times, to make sure that it worked.

"Lock yourself in—so—and it vill be all right," he said with a reassuring smile. Then he perked his head on one side a little, in an attitude of sudden listening. And before I could say another word to him he had slipped out and disappeared within his own quarters, leaving me listening at my own door for some echo of the sound that had caused his sudden retreat.

But I heard nothing. So I promptly closed and bolted my door, crossed to the bed, and cautiously pulled the mysterious chest a little out from its hiding-place. The first discovery I made was that it was securely locked. My second discovery was that the key-hole of the huge lock had been filled with black sealing-wax and stamped while still fluid with a seal of oddly intermingled initials. That old German, in other words, had made sure that his trunk was not to be opened without his knowledge.

I sat down on the edge of my bed, trying to think out just what I ought to do. My first impulse was to drop the trunk out of my window to the street, and then bolt for the open by way of the stairs. But such a fall, I felt, would surely smash that box of wood and probably send what it held scattering along half a city block. Then it occurred to me that I might tie my scanty bed-clothes together, and by this means lower the trunk to the sidewalk. But two sheets and a coverlet, I soon saw, would never reach the pavement.

My next idea was to steal quietly down to the street, and get help as quickly as I could, even a patrolman from the corner, followed by a hurried telephone-message to Sloan himself.

But old Otto Schoenfeld, I remembered, was on guard there, and would regard such a movement with prompt suspicion. The trunk itself, too, would remain exposed, as I had no way of locking my door from the outside.

Then I thought of the roof. I wondered if there might not be a chance of slipping up there and dodging down through some other house farther along the block. And the more I thought of it, the more possible it seemed. But whichever course I should take, I remembered, I'd have to get the rest of my clothes on. So I proceeded to dress, with haste and yet with thoroughness, for there was no knowing what that night might still have in store for me. And as I dressed I felt somewhat depressed at the thought of my blindness in essaying that adventure alone. After all, I was only a woman. And there were times and situations, I began to realize, when one stalwart man might be worth a whole houseful of petticoats.

As I dressed I decided on exactly what my plan of action would be. I'd go to the roof, but I'd take the trunk with me. It would be too heavy for me to carry up that steep little stairway, but I'd untie the clothes-line from the roof-stanchions up above, double it, and by this means drag the heavy trunk up to the housetop, to wait there until the coast was clear.

I moved the trunk out, to test its weight. As I did so a sudden question crossed my mind. How was I to be certain that it really held what I thought it held? I didn't know, of course. The fact that its lock had been so carefully sealed may have been only a trick—the man against whom I was campaigning had shown himself extremely resourceful. So I didn't hesitate. I saw my Rubicon, and crossed it. I remembered a pair of nail-scissors in my suit-case, got them out, and with them cut and gouged away the sealing-wax that covered the lock-front. Once that key-hole was cleaned out I got busy with my spider. In two minutes I had the lid open, and the tray of lenses and mailing-boxes lifted away. Then I thanked my stars I'd had the courage to do what I'd done. For the automatic pistol was gone, the rows of manila envelopes were gone, the boxes of precious stones were gone, and the note-book with its orderly rows of addresses was also gone. That tricky old scoundrel had duped me, had fooled me to the queen's taste. And it was ten to one that I'd lost all chance of redeeming the situation.

But I at least lost no more time in meditation. I hurriedly closed and relocked the trunk, pushed it under my bed, and switched out my light. Then I crept to my door and unlocked it. There wasn't a sound, or a sign of movement, in the hallways outside. So I crept on to the old German's door, cautiously tried it, and found it still locked. Then I stood at the head of the stairs, listening.

As I did so I heard a sound, like that of the street door being opened and closed. And at almost the same time I heard a second sound, only this one came from behind Otto Schoenfeld's door.

I backed away, instinctively, until I came to the foot of the stairs that led to the roof-hatch, for here the shadow was deepest and a way to the open stood closest. Then I took advantage of that avenue of escape. I went up those narrow stairs, step by step, holding my breath, for at the same time that my straining ears caught the sounds of steps advancing up through the house, I heard Otto Schoenfeld's door open and the snap of the spring-lock which told me it had been swung shut again. I recognized that stealthy shuffle as the old German crossed to the head of the stairs and listened there for a moment or two. But I took advantage of that diversion to scurry up the remaining steps to the roof and slip out through the door which I had come to know tolerably well in my daily activities with Mrs. Munger's clothes-basket.

My attention, as I did so, was attracted by the winking of a flash-light from one of the windows of the Twenty-Third Street office-building facing me. This reminded me of Schoenfeld's window-sill arrangement of plate-frames and of the fact that even in that uncertain light I might be visible to some unknown accomplice signaling from that office-building. So I crouched behind a sheltering chimney tier, in the shadow of a wall-coping, and watched that repeated and mysterious wink of light. I had no means of reading the message of luminous dots and dashes, but I had sense enough to make sure of the quarter from which they came. It was, I found, from what would be the fourth floor of the building, and from the window that was plainly the third from its most westerly wall. And I was busy repeating that discovery, to impress itself on my mind, "Third window from the west on the fourth floor," when my attention was suddenly engaged elsewhere.

My eyes had got more used to the darkness, by this time, and uncertain as was the light along that broken tier of roofs, I could make out what was taking place so close to where I lay hidden. I could see the roof-deck swing slowly back and a heavy figure as slowly shoulder out through it. I knew at a glance that it was Otto Schoenfeld himself. From his left hand hung a long and narrow laundry-bag, tied at the top. In his right hand, which was doubled up close to his chest, he held an automatic, and as he backed stealthily out through the narrow door his attention was directed toward some person or persons who seemed to be threatening him from within the house. But that threatened interference, apparently, was something only of the instant. For the next moment he dropped the bag to the roof, swung the door shut, and wedged it in that position with a screw-driver which he took from one of his pockets. Then, after pressing his ear against the door for several moments, in an attitude of listening, he caught up the laundry-bag again and crept along the roof until he came to where the clothes-line

swayed in the night breeze. The next moment I saw him cut this clothes-line away from its staunchions. It occurred to me, as I watched him tie one end of the line to his bag, that he was about to repeat my own contemplated maneuver and lower that precious bag of his over the edge of the roof. But in this I was mistaken. He crept back to a row of three chimneys in one that stood at the easterly edge of the house-roof, pushed the bag down inside the middle chimney and let it hang there by the clothes-line, after wedging the upper end of the cotton rope in between two chimney bricks where the mortar had been abraded away. Then I saw him cut off the few inches of rope that protruded, so that even in daylight small evidence would remain to show the spot where he had so ingeniously but involuntarily repeated a device which is supposed to be peculiar to Santa Claus only.

Then my heavy-footed friend felt his way carefully to the back of the roof. There I saw him reach into his pocket and lift something out. For a moment I thought he was going to bombard the back of Twenty-Third Street with his automatic. But I soon discovered my mistake. What he now held in his right hand was a pocket flash-light, and with it he was plainly signaling to the window of his unknown confederate. The next minute, in fact, I could see the answering wink of a corresponding light in the fourth floor window. Then the series of flashes suddenly stopped and Otto Schoenfeld himself crept cautiously back to the roof-door and leaned forward with his ear pressed against its surface. For below stairs certain more or less interesting things were plainly taking place. I could hear the sound of sudden and shattering blows, like those an ax would make in smashing in a door, followed by shouts and calls, and the thump of hurrying feet. It sounded to me remarkably like a police-raid. But the heavy-bodied German seemed no longer interested in those movements. He was, in fact, sitting on the roof engaged in solemnly removing his shoes. This done, he pulled his screw-driver wedge away from where it had held the door shut, picked up his shoes, and pussyfooted cautiously across the roof until he came to the very wall-coping against which I lay, nothing more than a huddled shade. He clambered gruntingly over the coping, within ten feet of where I held my breath. I could see him, in the vague starlight, standing behind this three-foot screen of masonry, staring intently toward the roof-door. Then, with his gaze still fixed, he reached into a pocket and took out his automatic, which he placed carefully on the top of the wall-coping. The sight of that firearm gave me a rather disagreeable feeling just under the breast-bone. But I knew better than to move. It was the man on the other side of the wall, in fact, who did the moving. He had caught up his shoes in one hand, and his pistol in the other, and was apparently about to adventure farther along those uneven

housetops, when the roof-door swung open with a thump, and a flash-light exploded on the darkness. It wavered and danced inquiringly about the empty roof for a moment or two and then went out as suddenly as it had appeared. And still again I lay in my sheltering shadow, scarcely daring to breathe. I lay there for what must have been a very long time. Then I was startled by a small sound that was disturbing only because it was so unexpectedly close to me. It brought home the fact that Otto Schoenfeld had sought shelter from that inquisitive light by dropping down behind the same wall-coping that shielded my own body, only on the opposite side of it.

The sound which had startled me, in fact, was that made by a pair of heavy shoes being placed on the wall directly over my head. By raising on one elbow I could just see the tops of them. And I was hoping against hope that the automatic would be placed there beside them. But the seconds slipped away and no such movement took place. So I quietly reached up and lifted one of the shoes from its resting place. Sinking down again, I threw that shoe lightly and silently out over the house-cornice. A few seconds later I could hear the faint thud of sound as it struck the street-pavement. Then I reached up and took possession of the second shoe. I was about to repeat the process with this, remembering that whatever happened a shoeless man would always be an easy quarry to follow, when a grunt of surprise, a throaty grunt of incredible astonishment, sounded from the wall-top not three feet away from my head. I could hear the interrogative pawing of a hand along the coping-tiles and the crackle of the tin roof as the body on the other side of the bricks scrambled to an upright position. To reach that position it was necessary for the none too limber-jointed German to grasp the edge of the coping-tile. About this movement itself, of course, there was nothing extraordinary. The extraordinary feature of the whole thing was the fact that the hand which pawed for a clutch along the glazed corner of the tile held an automatic pistol in its fingers. I could not see it clearly, but I could see it clearly enough to understand what it was. And in my own right hand I still held that empty shoe. But instead of flinging it out into space, as I had at first intended, I did something quite different. Holding it by the toe, I brought its heavy heel down with all my power on the fingers clustered about the pistol-stock. These fingers, it so happened, rested on the thick coping-tile as the blow fell. Now, a number-nine shoe could never be reckoned as a deadly weapon, but when the well-pegged heel of it descends on a cluster of phalanges resting on a coping-tile, as a horse-shoe rests on an anvil, it can deliver a blow not altogether without benumbing effect. For as I struck the second time, in a panicky little frenzy of desperation, I had the satisfaction of seeing the automatic knocked free of the relaxed fingers. That

side-blow was strong enough, in fact, to send it rattling to the roof-tin, where it skidded along the gentle slope and dropped out of sight.

But I wasn't giving much attention to that acrobatic firearm, at the moment. I was giving my attention to the much more acrobatic man from whose hand I had knocked it. For our next movement was a prompt even though an essentially ludicrous one. We each rose to our feet, facing each other across that narrow wall-top which came scarcely to my waist. And we each eagerly and immediately reached out for the other. To an impartial and unenlightened observer that housetop encounter would have looked like the clandestine meeting of two lovers, of two hungrily affectionate lovers, who struggled to draw each other close, whose clasp became so passionate that the coping-tiles themselves were displaced and the body of the yielding girl was drawn forcibly to the bosom of the conquering man.

But the girl, in this case, didn't happen to be a yielding one. She was struggling and fighting, every moment of the time, against those bear-like arms that encompassed her. For I knew there could and would be no half-measures in that housetop fight with Otto Schoenfeld. I knew what to expect. And my knowledge keyed me up to keep on fighting, fighting like a wildcat, even after we had fallen to the roof together and the old scoundrel was doing his best to get a strangle-hold on my throat. I became dimly conscious that we were rolling over and over, like two wrestlers who have gone to the mat. I dimly remembered that we were on a house-roof, some five stories above the street-level. Then I shut my eyes, and gave up all effort, for I could feel my revolving body roll off the edge of things and drop into space.

It dropped into space, but, luckily, it was only four or five feet into space, as far as the level of the next roof. But I was uppermost when we struck that roof, and I rolled free of my opponent without coming to a stop.

Then I sat up, dazed, a little puzzled by the fact that this opponent of mine did not start in pursuit of me. I sat there for several moments, gaping through the uncertain light at his huddled figure, lying face up on the level roof. He had got the brunt of the fall, I suddenly realized, and was emitting guttural and helpless little moans of pain. But I must have been quite merciless by this time, for those cries of pain completely failed to awaken any feeling of compassion in me. Instead of going to him, I scrambled to my feet, groped my way to where I saw a clothes-line swaying on the roof, and fumblingly untied the line with trembling fingers. With this I crept over to my enemy and tied first his feet, and then his hands, together behind his back. Then I clambered back across the roof which I had so recently and so convulsively traversed, climbed the wall-coping, crossed to the chimney that

held the laundry-bag, and drew it, soot-covered, from its hiding-place, staggered in through the roof-door and down the narrow steps, where I found Mrs. Munger wrapped in grief and a thin cotton night-gown. She was, in fact, seated on the top step of the house-stairs, looking more mountainous than ever in her diaphanous apparel, weeping over the wreckage of her top floor rear, which looked strangely as though a cyclone had swept through it.

The strong light made me blink a little as I came to a stop. But I must have proved an unlooked-for apparition to the over-wrought Mrs. Munger, who, the moment she clapped eyes on me, threw her hands above her head and vanished precipitately down the stairs, shouting as she went: "Police! Come back! Police!"

But I was more interested, just then, in my laundry-bag, so I promptly sat down on the step recently vacated by the incoherent Mrs. Munger, and investigated. It held, I found, dozens and dozens of small manila envelopes, a worn cigar-box filled with small stones which glittered and shone in the bald electric light, two card-board boxes of equally iridescent pebbles, and a note-book filled with orderly rows of names and addresses. And I knew, as I dropped these back in the soot-covered bag, that my night hadn't been altogether wasted. I had won. I had obtained what I had been sent after.

Then I became conscious of something more immediately personal than mere professional triumph. I noticed that I was a rather sorry looking heroine. My hands were scratched and bleeding, my watery blue skirt was torn, my hair was down, I was generously powdered with roof-dust and chimney-soot, and an unmistakable bruise on my lower lip was minute by minute making itself more conspicuous to both sight and touch. What was more, I seemed to fit into my immediate surroundings. For Otto Schoenfeld's door lay a battered wreck along the side-wall against which I leaned, a showering of broken lenses glistened along the floor, bedding and boxes and clothing lay scattered about, and, as though to give articulation to that scene of ruin and disorder, Mrs. Munger's lugubrious wails rose louder than ever from below stairs.

"Yuh come batterin' down the doors of a decent woman," she lamented aloud, "who's always tried to keep a decent house! Yuh come raidin' the rooms of the quietest old gen'l'man I ever had under my roof, and makin' uproar and vi'lence when there was no call for it! Yuh call you'self officers, but instead of insultin' my decent roomers yuh'd be officerin' more to the point if yuh'd arrest that young girl up there who's stealin' and pickin' her fill of other folks' belongings! That's what you'd be doin'!"

"What girl?" demanded a voice which made me suddenly sit up. For I knew it was the voice of Sloan himself. I knew, also, that he didn't even wait

for an answer. He mounted those stairs two steps at a time.

I was still sitting there when he drew up, a little short of breath, with both weariness and disgust on his heavy-lined face. He didn't look his best during his moments of defeat. He was the type of man who always needed triumph to crown his acidulated sogginess, the same as lemon-pie always needs its airier dash of meringue. "Well, this is a fine night's work, isn't it?" he demanded, in a tone of wearied and unadulterated disgust.

I merely sat there grinning down at him.

"What's wrong with it?" I inquired, as soft and dreamy as any bulbul-bird.

"Nothing, of course," he retorted with heavy scorn, "except that you bungled your whole job here, and Wilkins bungled his raid, and Schoenfeld got away, and this whole bunch of diamond thieves has given the Alliance the all-night laugh again! That's the only thing that's wrong with it!"

"Aren't you leaving something out?" I quietly asked of him.

"What?" he barked.

"This," I said as I swung the laundry-bag toward him. "And Otto Schoenfeld, who's tied down up there on the second roof. And if you can trust Wilkins and Doyle to go to the third office-door on the fourth floor of the Twenty-Third Street office-building backing on this dump you'll probably gather in a stick-up or two who've been gay-catting there for our German friend! And I wish you'd order me a taxi, for I feel like a welter-weight who's taken the count and am rather longing to get into something loose!"

CHAPTER XII

A PAGLIACCI IN PUMPS

IT'S odd, when you're in love, how even trivialities can turn your thoughts back to the man you long for. I had asked Sloan for work, for ceaseless work, to keep me from thinking. And he had not been backward in his efforts to maintain a smoke-screen between me and my morbid self-questionings. I was rather like a fire-horse kept too busy on third-alarm runs to chew long on its stall-planks. But with all that hectic round into which the Alliance office coerced me I was never quite able to obliterate Winfred Ealand from my thoughts.

My mind swung back to him, even when I was knee-deep in a case, as it did when I sat back in my secluded alcove seat of that unsavory Broadway "trottery" where Sloan had planted me like a pointer in a rabbit-run. The woman I was watching was a bad woman. And this reminded me that they had tried to make my Winkie believe that I was a bad woman. It took my thoughts back to the scene in the chart room at St. Andrew's when that worldly-wise married sister of Winkie's had first etherized me with kindness and had then taken my true love out of my life about as they take a wisdom-tooth out of your jaw. That adroit Mrs. Lauriston had gently but firmly told me that Winkie and I were not of the same world. She had explained to me that Winfred had a wonderful future and was soon to go back to his work, after a month in Arizona had healed up his wounded lung. And he was to marry such a nice New York girl. And she smiled with a motherly sort of graciousness and said she knew I was too noble to take advantage of his weakness and too sensible not to realize what was best for his happiness. She performed a major operation, before I quite knew it, and removed Winkie from my life. She hadn't cared, I remembered, how much it was going to hurt me. And she had connived with the eagle-eyed Miss Primpett to keep me from catching a glimpse of my hollow-cheeked Winkie before they whisked him triumphantly off to the West. And if they were that clever and cruel in wafting him away from me they must have been equally clever and cruel in the things they had told him to *keep* him away from me. For there was no blinking the fact that Winkie had long since written me down as a very wicked woman. I must have been as bad, in his eyes, as the woman I sat watching. And to save myself from that self-pity which is the hand-maiden of destruction I fixed my attention once more on my quarry. I

watched my woman and her partner with the same impersonal intentness with which from a theater-seat I've watched the passing acts of an underworld play. And it seemed a play which was slowly but surely approaching its climax.

But my inspection of that play suddenly became much less impersonal. The gestures and little amorous intimacies of my odd couple no longer engrossed me. For the man had reached smilingly into his pocket, and, still smiling, had dropped something into the clustered fingers of that meditative blond beauty across the table from him. As he did so, I caught a flash of light. And that flash was to me what aniseed is to a beagle, what red is to a bull, what the fly is to the greyling, for there was no mistaking that flash. Into the woman's hand the man had quietly and calmly slipped a diamond, a diamond flanked by green, and as big as a salted almond.

I saw the woman look at the diamond. As she did so I, too, had a better chance of inspecting it. And it was as extraordinary, I saw, as the woman herself, about whom the vapors of tea-cup comedy seemed to deepen into the more sinister shadows of another "Easiest Way." For there was a sense of latent climax about her intent face, a feeling of culmination which her careless pose could not disguise, a misted atmosphere of surrender and sharp readjustment that made me think still again of melodrama that had dropped out of its frame. And the jewel which she held so studiously in her gently cupped hand provided me with a ringed and central target on which to focus my attention.

It was not the sort of diamond that is passed from hand to hand about midnight trotteries, as a rule. It was, I saw, a canary-colored stone set between two emeralds. To make it more remarkable, it was cut in the shape of a heart. It would have looked cheap or gross, I think, if its tinting had been anything but the tenderest of buttercup yellows, without that sublimated essence of sunlight to soften its glitter it would surely have looked as blatant as the diamond alligator which the lady herself wore on her well-calcimined and opulent bosom. You can't take fifteen or twenty carats of living and flashing sunset and frame it in grass-green and hope for anything much less conspicuous than a Broadway sky-sign. Even from where I sat I could see it sparkle and glint, in the pink-tinted hollow cupped so avariciously and yet so abstractedly about it. For every one of those thousand sparkles, I told myself, some one had doubtlessly paid a tear—or somebody, in time to come, would pay his tear.

Then I looked more closely at the woman herself. I looked at her, persuaded that she was taking part in a play a little more impressively than any she had ever acted in on any stage along the Great White Way. She sat a

trifle back from the damask-draped table, with her knees crossed, with her left elbow resting on her knee and her well powdered chin resting on her left hand. The black brim of her picture-hat shadowed her face, cut her off, as a screen might, from the greater part of that crowded room. Yet the light from the imitation candles, filtered through red shades, gave a faint rose-color to her face itself. Her right arm, bare and rounded and mysteriously voluptuous in its unmuscled softness, lay stretched out on the table with the canary-colored diamond resting between the slightly prehensile fingers like a harbor-light at the end of a mole. She studied that diamond as closely and as abstractedly as I was studying her. She looked at it with brooding eyes. She impressed me, even in that hardening moment of appraisal, as being lovely, even if, in the same breath, I was compelled to admit that she was also metallic. She had what you might call a hard glaze, but a wonderful one. There was something superlative about her. She *had* to be superlative, I remembered, to succeed in a field where rivals were so numerous and competition so razor-edged in its keenness.

For Verlyn Vachell was a Broadway actress, the kind who are after their fifth Bronx apt to talk of what they could do with Ibsen or Brieux but continue to adorn musical comedy and invade the legitimate only in distinctly minor parts which they both over-dress and over-act. Whether there was something more than saw-dust under the enamel I couldn't quite tell. But Verlyn Vachell was not a great actress, even though a tumult, a tiny tumult, of imitation greatness always followed in her wake. I had been taught to accept her as ranging in with that army, by no means a small one, which accepted the stage as a sort of auction-block, where paraded beauty may be duly assessed and duly bestowed upon the highest bidder. And as she sat there studying the jewel in her hand, the jewel which had just been given to her by the man who quite as easily could have given her a million dollars, I was still again disturbed by a latent sense of drama. The idea of the auction-block kept coming back to me, again and again. For I felt that a compact had been entered into, a price had been set and paid, a trophy had been sought and won. I couldn't help thinking of that diamond as a badge of capitulation. But it was plainly and unmistakably beautiful.

This caused me to glance back at the man again, the man who in all such things is of distinctly minor importance. To fit into the picture, I know, he should have looked like something between a satyr and a basilisk. He should have been coarse and puffy-eyed and adorned with the paunch of gluttony. But one of the disadvantages of beholding drama in real life is the discovery that your characters don't always carry the right make-up. "Cappie" Cairns, I suppose, was even better known on Fifth Avenue than he was on the

Rialto. But along the one or the other he must have been known affectionately, since there was that absurd diminutive of "Cappie," as applied to a man of over fifty, to attest to the fact. He was known, not only for the millions which he rolled into about the same time that he rolled in a perambulator, but more for the manner in which he disposed of adequately generous slices of that same fortune. Yet he trod softly along the serried cotes of adventure, always giving an air of legitimacy to those excursions. He "backed" an occasional musical comedy, which gave him, his enemies proclaimed, an excuse for being interested in its daughters of song. He mixed with the motion-picture producers, for that trim and newer avenue, explained the same enemies, led into the outlands of arrogant and self-exploiting beauty where big game fell only to the express rifle of millions. He also had a weakness for studio-dances with exotic backgrounds, and accosted cabaret managers by their first names, and exchanged Wall Street tips in copper for rail-table options on holiday nights. And all the while the upper layer of Cappie Cairns' associates asserted him to be the finest of fellows, a family-man who believed in a bit of fun to keep the rust off, but open-handed to the needy and easy-going with the unfortunate, and always ready to help along any young struggler in the field of Art. If these strugglers chanced to be nearly always of the frailer sex, it could be claimed that it was the frailer sex that stood most frequently in need of help.

As for the lower layer of Cappie Cairns' friends, their comments were more restricted, since they had only themselves, and the police, to talk to. It probably paid them to remember the legend of the goose and the golden egg. But I hadn't been long with the Alliance before I learned that in every great city there are a few big men whom the officials of the law kind of nurse along, men who, without money and influence, would be legging it across the Bridge of Sighs quicker than a beanery-cook could turn a wheat-cake. I had, accordingly, heard of the ambidextrous Cappie long before Toosey Attrill had fully enlightened me on the subject. And knowing what I knew, I remembered it was only on the stage that character keeps to its type and runs true to form.

For the man who sat across the table from Verlyn Vachell, so leisurely supping on ruddy duck, looked anything but an ogre who ate Beauty almost as raw as he could eat canvas-back. He looked rather urbane, in fact, and exceptionally well-groomed, and a trifle paternal. His face wore a set air of pensiveness touched with humor, as though while begging with one hand he remembered he carried a sword in the other. About the trim-cut line of his shoulders was an almost military rigidity, making me think of a West Point boy who'd taken to posing as a Rip Van Winkle. And his waist-line was

surprisingly meager, for a millionaire *bon vivant* who could never hope to see fifty again. I'd somewhere heard that he spent two frantic hours every day in a squash-court, followed by an equally frantic hour with a Swedish rubber. I'd also been told that he both drank and smoked with scrupulous care, living austerely in the small things of life to the end that he might expend prodigally in what he accepted as the big things.

It was the memory of this that made him suddenly odious to me. It made him seem to professionalize animal passion, just as the woman across the table from him exploited and professionalized her appeal of face and beauty of body. And the two forces had met, apparently, had contended and wavered and finally fused. The badge and seal of that union lay there in front of my eyes, as clearly defined as the flame of an oxo-acetylene torch, lay there in the form of a canary-colored diamond set between two emeralds. For in the warfare of the sexes, I'd long since learned, from the first Queen of Sheba to the latest queen of the Follies chorus, precious stones had always played the part of the big guns in that never-ending campaign.

The next moment the woman, obviously awakening to the fact that she was in a public place where all display of private emotion was taboo, closed her hand on the pendant and with a ghost of a shrug dropped it into her highly ornate little hand-bag. I noticed one eyebrow of Cappie Cairns unconsciously elevate itself as she did so. That eyebrow seemed to go up, not altogether interrogatively and not altogether quizzically, but quite as mechanically as the brow of an old dog when disturbed at his dinner. There was triumph in it, and there was cynicism in it, but it seemed to escape her, for the next moment her hand, already glinting with many rings, reached out across the table, and the man's hand took possession of it, closed about it and retained it.

It was a love-scene, but I could find nothing idyllic about it, only their version of the sordid old drama which suddenly became so repugnant to me that I was glad to turn away to another quarter of that midnight cabaret.

As I did so my gaze fell on what Toosey was in the habit of calling a "tango-rat," a white-faced man-thing paid to caper while other people ate, giving an exhibition-dance on the highly polished floor. He was doing this with what must have been his professional partner. About the pair, too, there seemed something abnormal, something hectic and unhealthy, something which left a vague ache for the sanities of open air and sunlight. The face of that two-legged dancing rodent was almost cadaverous in its leanness, his waist looked as though it were corseted, and his mouse-colored hair, slicked straight back from his high and narrow forehead, made me think of grass that had been trying to grow up under a board. His face, bleached out by too

many midnights in smoke-poisoned air, was the color of a billiard-ball, white faintly tinged with yellow. His feet, in their narrow-toed patent-leather pumps, looked mincing and under-sized. His hands, too, were white, white as a barber's, and as he posed and gyrated and pranced, he smiled down at his partner in chiffon with a smile so fixed that it became a leer.

I prided myself on knowing the type, and I further prided myself on loathing and abhorring it. I abhorred, in fact, the whole scene.

They called it The Byzantian Room, I remembered. And it was barbaric enough for its name. I was on the point of making an effort to escape from Byzantium back into modern New York by migrating into the Annex, whose simpler walls of white and green I could see through the open windows beside me, when a movement in another part of the room caught and held my attention.

A uniformed page pushed his way through to the table where Cappie Cairns sat watching the bare shoulders of the woman across the table from him. I couldn't hear what took place, but I could see that the man had been called to the telephone. He came back, in a minute or two, looking serious. The vague proprietary smile had completely gone from his face. There was even a frown of disappointment on his previously pensive brow. I could see, as plain as print, that, having been called away, he was adjusting himself to a hope deferred, that he was explaining and expostulating and doing his best to soften a misfortune which gave no promise of crushing the lady confronting him. He went hurriedly, yet reluctantly, after giving certain orders to the head-waiter, orders, I felt sure, associated with the welfare of the companion he was deserting. And once he had passed out of the room, I noticed, Verlyn Vachell went on with her supper, putting her hand-bag up on the wide black and gold Byzantium window-ledge beside her when the waiter brought her a steaming casserole enclosed in a silver band. Her desolated spirit had in no way affected her appetite.

Then I noticed something which promptly took my thoughts away from that pictorial lady and her appetite. What I saw was merely a hand. Yet it startled me as much as the sight of a snake would have startled me. It was a white hand, and a thin one, and I saw it slip quietly along the filigreed black and gold window-ledge where Verlyn Vachell's hand-bag lay.

The owner of the hand was nowhere in sight. This gave that white member, as it groped and moved along the dark window-ledge, the appearance of being disembodied, of being complete in itself, of floating in space. Yet the owner of that hand was plainly crouched somewhere on the Annex side of that parterre of indoor amusements.

The next moment I saw the lean and ghost-like fingers close about the bag and withdraw it.

I looked at the owner of the bag, holding my breath, wondering if a movement taking place so close beside her could possibly escape her attention. But the lady in question was eating her supper with a sort of *dammer-schlaft* of preoccupation, apparently in no way annoyed at the thought of being left alone in such a place and at such an hour. So, remembering just who and what I was, I saw that it was time to interfere.

I got quietly but quickly up from my table and stepped over toward where Verlyn Vachell was sitting. I was within three feet of her table-corner when I saw the same white hand appear once more at the window-ledge. I saw it return the bag to where it had been resting. At almost the same time she too seemed to remember that this flimsy reticule held much newly acquired wealth, for she turned quickly, looked at the bag, and then lifted it down and placed it in her lap.

Instead of stopping at her table, as I had intended to do, I moved on until I came to the palm-bordered archway opening into the Annex. I had to shoulder my way forward, since the orchestra had struck up a one-step and an army of half-fed tarantics suddenly gravitated out toward the dancing-floor. I had done little more than pass through the doorway when I met the white-faced tango-rat coming out of the all but empty Annex.

I quickly but covertly studied his face as he came toward me. And I knew, as I saw that face, that he was the man who had taken the hand-bag from the window-ledge. I knew it as clearly as though he had told me so with his own tongue. And I likewise felt positive that he had made away with a canary-colored diamond set between two emeralds.

"Will you try this one-step with me?" I brazenly yet lispingly asked of him as I blocked his way back to the floor. It took him a moment or two to come down from the clouds. But he had been off his post, without reason, and stood glad enough of the chance for a graceful re-entry.

"It would be a pleasure," he answered with his purely commercial politeness as he swung the spotlight of his purely commercial smile in my direction. For part of his duty, obviously, was to entertain unattached women with a hunger for Castleing along those polished floor-cracks.

"You dance well," I told him, almost against my will, for I despised both him and his kind.

"May I return the compliment," he said with his obsequiously commercial smile. He was clearly trying to do what the right sort did, and was missing it by a mile, and always would miss it.

"You like it, of course?" I went on as we wove our way airily in and out amid those rhythmic waves of undulating men and women. I could see an occasional eye look at me enviously, as we drifted along the outer edge of the tables. Yet it was loathsome having that dancing-rat so close to me, although I had to admit to myself that it was easy to do the steps with him. He seemed able to put the pulse of the music into your feet. There were moments, in fact, when that Babylonian pastime over which I had been frowning a few moments before, made me almost forget the more serious business in hand. So I repeated my question.

"Who wouldn't like it?" he said with another of his purely mercantile grimaces of mirth. He may have been a vapid and chicken-hearted young fop, but he had no intention of permitting a stranger to scratch through his veneer of impersonality. So I continued to study him in silence as we danced. And I made several discoveries.

I discovered, in the first place, that his hornet-waisted dress-suit with the impossible jet buttons was just a trifle threadbare along the edges. His shirt-studs, too, were merely plated—though, as Toosey once said of one of her beaux, what difference could that make so long as his heart was true! Even his carefully waxed pumps of patent-leather, when viewed with a critical eye, showed worn and dowdy and slightly run over at the heels. And about his eyes, which were made up like a chorus-man's, there was a luster that was not altogether healthy, with bluish shadows under the temple-bones that made me think of an underfed horse. He coughed now and then as he danced, a dry little bark of a cough which took my mind back to the T. B. ward in St. Andrew's and left me wondering why he had so little trouble with his breathing after dancing so steadily.

It came home to me, suddenly, that there was something pathetic about the man, that his nimble gaiety was nothing but a mask, that I had inspected him through the colored glass of my prejudices and probably done him an injustice. Then I remembered the incident of the hand-bag and at the same time recalled something which Inspector Sloan had said only a day or two before. "You can't afford, Balmy, ever to bubble over in this business!" By that, of course, he meant that people in our particular walk of life couldn't afford to allow sympathy to interfere with their professional activities. And Sloan had been through the mill. So I then and there decided to let no sentiment sway me one way or the other in this strange new case which had been thrust so unexpectedly under my very nose.

"Will you take me to my table, please?" I asked my partner as the dance came to an end. For I had certain things to find out from that tired-looking

young man in the narrow-toed pumps. And the sooner I did so, I felt, the better.

It wasn't until he had piloted me in between those close-set little islands of intimacies, known as tables, that I noticed the excitement about the spot where Verlyn Vachell had been sitting. That excitement was a purely local one, for it behooved the management of a palace of pleasure to permit no untimely accidents to interrupt the steady flow of their patrons' merriment. But I could see at a glance that the owner of the canary-colored diamond had suddenly discovered that she had been robbed. Close beside her was the house-manager himself, and his detective, and the head-waiter, and the table-waiter. The startled and indignant actress, in the meantime, stood the center of a small circle of onlookers who held back even from a hesitation-waltz to witness the more exciting diversion of a jewel-robbery.

"I wonder what's wrong over there?" languidly inquired the tango-rat as he seated himself at my table. The waiter had for the third time got down on all fours and was again prospecting the neighborhood of Verlyn Vachell's table for the missing jewel.

"What do *you* think it is?" I indolently parried, as I sat back watching him. I was wondering in which pocket he might possibly be carrying the canary-colored diamond.

"The lady seems to have lost something," he said, apparently with only the slightest interest in the subject. He was at least much more intelligent, that tango-rat, than I had been ready to admit.

"Who is she?" I inquired. He looked at me with real wonder in his eyes.

"That's Verlyn Vachell," he said, seeming to think that the mere mention of the name was enough.

"What is she?" I persisted.

"She's an actress, over at the Asteroid," he told me, with a vague note of disdain in his voice.

"A good actress?" I innocently inquired.

"Rotten!" he said with Rialto directness.

"Then why is she over at the Asteroid?" I asked, with a bucolic stare at the lady in question.

"She's the brand of rib who brings Wall Street money into the house," retorted the lank-limbed youth, with what was plainly a note of bitterness in his voice. "Just the same as she brings it into this hop chow hall!"

"How?" I demanded, persisting in my up-state innocence.

"Look at her!" was his only comment. The lady about whom we were speaking, at that precise moment, swept out across the floor, flanked on one side by a still explanatory head-waiter and on the other by a profusely apologetic house-manager. She made a picture, all right. And what was more, she knew it. There was something arresting, something provocative, something almost institutional, in that resplendent blonde beauty which seemed fashioned expressly for the bearing of bright stones and soft silks and beaten gold. There was insolence in her movements, although, I suppose, she really meant them to be imperious. She knew that every nine men out of ten in that crowded room were looking after her, were looking after her with appraising and covetous eyes. But she repaid none of them for their stares of adoration. She'd found and lost a fortune, that night, and anger whitened her face as she still parleyed with that apologetic yet helpless house-manager who persuasively edged her toward the door, where her barbarically uniformed "tiger" awaited her with a rug over his arm and her private sedan of royal purple already purred at the end of the striped awning. There was a murmur of talk as she swept from sight.

"I wonder what happened over there?" remarked the tango-rat across the table from me.

I resented the forced indifference of his question, resented it almost as much as I'd resented the callithumpian splendor of the Broadway adventuress he'd so recently deprived of her property.

"Don't you know?" I said, deciding to give him one straight from the shoulder.

"No," he replied, doing his best to put on a bold face. But he looked pitiful to me as I held back my answer until his wandering eye, arrested by the prolonged pause, finally stared me straight in the face.

"That woman," I told him, "has just been robbed of a canary-colored diamond set between two emeralds!"

His face did not change. I don't think there was a single movement in a single feature. Only, somewhere behind the face itself, a light seemed to go slowly out, leaving an ashy colorlessness in the listlessly staring eyes. Then he looked down at his hands, rather heavily, as though faintly puzzled by the fact that they weren't so steady as they ought to have been.

"But who could have stolen it?" he inquired with a forlorn sort of bravado, yet apparently without the courage to look me in the eye as he asked the question.

"It was stolen by somebody who went into the Annex and reached up on the ledge there beside her table, where she'd put her hand-bag. And the

pendant was taken out, of course, before the hand-bag was put back on the ledge!"

He was staring into my face by this time. He even tried to smile, but that smile was nothing more than the mechanical movement of his bucco-labial flaps. He looked very narrow and white and invertebrate. As he sat in the center of that chamber of mirth, in his frugally festive apparel, the ironic pathos of all the ages seemed to cluster about his anemic young head with the colorless temple-bones bastioned in blue shadows. In him I suddenly saw the sick clown, the sad-eyed court fool, the Pierrot with a heavy heart. And I hadn't been adding to his happiness.

"You mean you saw it?" he finally asked, though it seemed terribly hard for him to articulate the words.

"I saw it," I told him with quiet conviction. And again he looked at me long and silently.

Then he laughed. He laughed deeply, and defensively, for his courage, apparently, had had time to catch its second wind. And it was plain that he didn't intend to succumb without a struggle.

"But who could separate a she-vamp like that from any of her loot?" he half facetiously demanded. He was collected enough now, I saw, to indulge in a side-sweep of inspection to determine whether or not any one was hearing our talk.

"*You did!*" I softly but deliberately retorted.

It wasn't exactly a wince that came to his face. It was more an arresting of each slightest movement at the suddenness of my challenge. And the frantic trouble of his eyes seemed to warn me, the next moment, of the need of speaking even more quietly, of the danger of being overheard. But he didn't open his own lips.

He sat there quite silent, for a long time. Then his haggard eyes lifted and searched my face.

"And what do you intend doing about it?" he asked in a voice that carried a quavering chest-tone of broken and crushed manfulness somewhere deep down in its under-currents. Sloan had said there was no excuse for bubbling over in work like ours. But I suddenly wondered if Sloan wasn't sometimes wrong about such things and if the life he had thrust me into wasn't slowly but surely indurating my natural feelings, wringing the goodly human sympathy out of my heart?

"What would you do?" I asked, fencing for time. I didn't want any slightest jot of pity for that dejected tango-rat to complicate the clear-cut issue of justice.

He sat pondering my question, pondering it deeply.

"I wouldn't do anything," he finally said, and he said it with an earnestness that surprised me. "I wouldn't do anything, until I understood every side of the case."

It was an oblique yet obvious petition for mercy. It left me comfortably conscious of my own power. It was incense to the crypts of vanity. And I even began to wonder if, after all, I hadn't been too hard on the boy.

"What's your name?" I suddenly inquired.

"Willie Whiteway," he just as promptly replied.

"You mean William Whiteway," I corrected. It brought the ghost of a smile about his lean chaps.

"Don't you think the 'Willie' is better suited to this wax-hound business?" he asked with his vinegary smile.

"But you like dancing, of course?"

He looked at me with widened eyes.

"I *hate* it!" he said with a prompt and passionate grimace of disgust.

I sat thinking this over. We live and learn, as Toosey Attrill had the habit of saying. But there were still other things I was anxious to learn.

"What would you take me for?" I asked him. The question seemed to surprise him. Yet he studied me with his shrewd and troubled eyes.

"That's what I've been wondering," he admitted. Then he stopped.

"Go on," I prompted.

"You're not the Park Avenue kind looking for night-life. You're too intelligent for that. You're not the stage type. You're not—" He stopped a moment, to cough into his handkerchief. "You're not the out-of-towner wandering around for White Light stuff to write home about. You're too—well, too wise for that. But you're not married. You're not used to this sort of place. And yet you've got a big pile of confidence. And I guess plenty of courage to back it up. But you're not in business, and—"

"On the contrary," I corrected him as I raised a revere and exhibited my little silver badge to his suddenly steadying eyes. "I'm engaged in a very serious sort of business!"

He leaned forward across the table and studied my shield, reading and rereading the embossed inscription thereon. It clearly took some time for the meaning of it to filter through to his brain.

"Holy smoke!" he said at last, as he sat limply in his chair. I waited until the situation had made itself perfectly clear to him, until there could be no

shadow of doubt as to his knowing just who and what I was. Then I decided it was about time to get down to cases.

"So what are we going to do about it?" I prompted.

He lifted and then dropped again a very gaunt pair of shoulders. It seemed a movement of both helplessness and hopelessness.

"It's up to you, I suppose," he said in a dead sort of voice. Then he suddenly started and looked over his shoulder, squinting apprehensively toward the orchestra-platform. "That's Adolph signaling for me. I've—I've got to do one of my exhibition stunts with that girl in blue there. It's still my work, you see. Could you possibly—possibly let me go?"

"Let you go?" I repeated.

"Yes, won't you please wait here until I come back at the end of my dance?"

"But supposing I can't wait?" I said to him, in spite of the note of pleading in his voice.

"Can't you do that much for me?" he demanded. And although it was a request, I admired him for keeping the whimper out of his voice. "If I don't get out and do that dance they'll—they'll surely suspect something. Can't you do that much?"

"On one condition," I said, remembering how easy it would be for him to pass his haul on to the guileless Columbine in blue, in case that spangled-skirted young lady should be a confederate of his.

"What condition?" he asked, already on his feet.

"That you leave that silk handkerchief with me," I told him. "And that you leave it with that pendant wrapped up in it!"

He sat down again, blinking thoughtfully across the table at me. Then, without a word, he slipped a finger into his waistcoat pocket, took something out, and wrapped it up in his handkerchief. I caught the flash of light and color as he did so, and knew it was the canary-tinted diamond with the emerald on each side of it. Then, as he stood up again, he left the handkerchief lying in the center of the table, between us. He smiled and bowed like an automaton as he backed away, reverting to his dancing-floor manner, for the room was waiting and many eyes were upon him.

I watched him as he hurried, with a ludicrously light and skipping step, over to where his partner in blue stood awaiting him.

Then I casually reached out and took possession of the handkerchief and the stolen jewel, at the same moment that the music struck up and the dance began. I got that pendant out of sight as carefully as I could, for I wanted to

give the boy his chance, if any such chance promised to come his way. Then I sat back and watched Willie Whiteway and his partner as they wheeled and dipped and raced. They danced well, superlatively well. There was no denying that fact. They fluttered and drifted like wind-blown butterflies up and down the polished floor. They wavered and wheeled and circled like mating humming-birds through the smoke-blue air. And all the while Willie Whiteway smiled his automatic smile down at his partner in chiffon and silk. That partner seemed to abandon herself to the music, hanging back on his sustaining arm with a pensive up-thrust of her pointed chin as she smiled dreamily up at the youth directing her course. But knowing what I knew, there seemed something tragic in that forced gaiety, something ironic and disquieting in that pagan surrender to sound and movement. It made me think of performing dogs doing a vaudeville act, with the trainer and his whip waiting hidden in the wings.

"Some dancer, eh, that Willie of ours?" remarked a red-faced man with three chins, lolling back at a table on my right. The faded blonde across the table from him did not answer; she was too stout for that perilous floor, and was busy eating her cherry-stone clams. The dance ended in a little tumult of applause, a perfunctory clapping of hands, a preoccupied tinkling of forks against glass-rims. I noticed, with a sense of relief, that the white-faced tango-rat was making his way back to my table.

"Why do you hate it?" I asked as he took his chair. He made me think of a prisoner taking his seat in the dock after a court recess.

"Because I've always wanted to do a man's work."

"What kind of work?" I inquired.

He was silent a moment. I thought at first that he was offended by the curtness of my tone, for I didn't want him to imagine my natural sympathies were already enlisted on his side.

"I was running an upholstery business, up at Oleon, before I came down to this burg," he finally explained. "I liked it. I was proud of it, and there was a decent living in it. And I'd worked up a plan for making still bigger money out of a rustic furniture factory, rockers of willow and old hickory, and swamp-cedar porch-chairs, and all that sort of thing."

"Then why did you leave it?" I demanded.

He hesitated for a moment. Then he let his eye meet mine.

"There was a girl I—I cared about."

"And?" I prompted.

"I came down here to take her back. She'd promised to marry me."

He seemed a little ashamed of his feelings. So I waited until he was ready to go on.

"She'd got tired of Oleon, she said, and had always wanted to see the city. She intended studying at the Art League and then getting into the Tiffany Studios, if she could, or with one of the big Fifth Avenue houses, so that she could follow up interior decorating when she got back home. Those two lines of work, we'd figured out, would go well together, hers and mine. But after her first week or two down here she got a chance to do some extra work over at Fort Lee, in one of the big studios there, the movie studios. That left her kind of crazy about picture-work. She got a regular job with the Live Wire Company, and she's stuck to it. And that kind of made her lose her taste for Oleon."

His face reminded me of one of those tragic masks they paint up at the top of proscenium-arches.

"And for you?" I asked.

"Yes, for me too," he admitted.

"And she's successful?"

"She thinks she is, but it's only because she can't see things as she ought to."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean any success she's had has been ladled out to her by one of the backers of that Live Wire Company."

He spoke with open bitterness. And my imagination promptly got busy carpentering together the forlorn romance of the young lover unable to take his bride back to their home-town and capering night after night to the strains of rag-time while his heart was as heavy as his heels were light.

"But if she's got her start, surely—"

He cut me short.

"No girl can get anything from that old he-wolf without having to pay for it," he declared with what seemed a sudden and uncontrolled flare of passion.

"You mean you're afraid—" I began, and then broke off. For there was plainly a plank or two I'd been leaving out of my carpenter work.

He leaned closer across the table toward me.

"Would you be that way, if you saw the one girl you wanted being webbed up by that type of moll-dip?" he demanded.

"But I don't know the type," I explained, trying to shoulder back the inevitable. "I don't even know the man."

"Yes, you do," retorted the white-faced youth. "You saw him in here tonight, at that table over there."

I looked at him without speaking. But I suppose the unspoken question was there staring at him out of my eyes.

"I mean Cappie Cairns," he said with quiet hate in his voice. And although I had expected that statement, just as you expect to hear the boat-whistle after seeing the steam-cloud beside her funnel, it still rather tended to take my breath away.

"But Mr. Carpenter Cairns seemed to be—well, rather occupied in other quarters," I parried.

The unhappy youth brushed that equivocation aside.

"If you know his name, you know what I mean well enough. All that old squab-hound does is prowl up and down the Way gathering scalps. He's not satisfied with one. He's got to have a new one about every ten days, or there's nothing left in life. And it's not the scalps he wants; it's merely the unholy joy of gathering them."

"Aren't we getting just a little away from our problem?" I somewhat icily inquired.

"But don't you understand—he's just finished his round-up of that Vachell woman, getting her roped and branded, after loading her down with enough rings on her fingers to make you think she was eating cracked ice every time she sits at a table in this dump! Oh, Gawd, but I hate that man!"

I was beginning to see a little light.

"And since she had so much, you thought it was only fair to lighten her load a little?"

"Please, not so loud," he requested, with a quick glance about him. But that half-ironic question of mine seemed to puzzle him. He continued to regard me with slightly knitted brows.

"Or should I say it was a fine, a fine levied on Cappie Cairns, after the manner of old friend Robin Hood, for leading the sort of life you couldn't quite approve of?" I continued.

The heavy look went out of his face. It was almost as though I had given him an idea. At least, that was what I thought, for a moment. Yet when he spoke I saw that I had guessed wrong.

"I want nothing of that old rounder's. But he's not going to drag Barbara Hilton into that aviary of his so long as I'm above ground!"

"Who's Barbara Hilton?" I demanded, again impressed by the fact that I had failed sufficiently to assess my companion's cleverness.

"That's the girl I intend to marry, the girl I've been trying to tell you about."

"How do you intend to stop it?"

I could see his fingers shut up into a ball.

"I'll make her get away from all this muck. I'll take her back to Oleon."

"But how?" I persisted, feeling a little like an unfair teacher who was deliberately prompting a favored pupil.

The old look of dejection returned to my tango-rat's rather cavernous eyes.

"I don't know—now. But an hour ago I thought it would be easy!" And as I listened I secretly rejoiced at that dawning promise of extenuation. "She's always been coming back with the taunt that I couldn't take care of her, that I haven't the money even to make a start up there in the old town. And when I saw that over-decked Vachell woman—and it's anything for a splash with that dame—brooding over that big yellow diamond I knew it was worth thousands. It couldn't be small stuff that'd pass between her and Cappie Cairns. I knew, as I saw her cache it in her hand-bag, that she didn't need it—and *I* did. It came over me, in a flash, that I'd found my way out. I'd never stolen anything before, that I can remember, in all my life. But to-night I simply didn't seem to care. I knew things had about come to the turning-point. And I thought I saw my chance. And I jumped at it!"

I didn't intend to melt down like a sugar-lump in a coffee-spoon. I wanted to be sure of my ground, every step.

"But, my dear young man, what could you do with a diamond like that? You couldn't possibly pawn it. And you couldn't sell it, any more than you could sell a Fifth Avenue bus. It would be as easy to trace as a white elephant—unless, of course, you handed it over to a fence, who might possibly give you fifty dollars for it."

He sat looking at me, seeming to find me, I fancy, disturbingly practical-minded.

"Then I guess it's just as well you butted in," he finally admitted.

"But we still have our problem of what to do with it," I reminded him. That problem, however, suddenly seemed something of only minor interest to my young friend in pumps. He was once more looking toward the orchestra-dais and the dancing-floor. He coughed into his handkerchief as a violin-string was scraped in tuning.

"I've got to dance," he said in gloomy desperation. "Can you wait again?"

I told him I could. So he got up and danced. He danced smilingly with a fat woman who should have been home with her husband, if she had one, or home with a Whiteley's Exerciser, if she hadn't. When it was over he came back to my table.

"Well?" I asked him.

"What had we better do?" he said, thereby adroitly tying me up with himself as a fellow-conspirator. I thought the thing over.

"About the best thing to do," I told him, "is simply to find that lost pendant, pick it up from the floor, and take it, say to the head-waiter."

"Who is to find it?" he promptly asked.

"Supposing I do?" I suggested, anticipating a possible objection to his own agency in the matter.

He shook his head.

"Do you know that head-waiter?"

"Naturally, or I shouldn't be enjoying the advantages of solitude under a roof where it's reckoned as criminal for a woman to come alone!"

"Then it wouldn't be fair to you," he maintained. "And in a case like this that cad wouldn't even know how to treat you fairly. He'd cause you all sorts of embarrassments. And besides, he's seen me here at your table, pow-wowing for the last half-hour."

"What difference does that make?"

He didn't find this an easy question to answer. But he shattered my momentary doubts by a sudden suggestion of his own.

"Why couldn't you take the thing back to Cappie Cairns yourself?"

I required a moment or two for the proper digestion of this.

"When?" I asked.

"The sooner the better, I suppose."

Again I turned the problem over in my mind.

"All right," I announced. "I'll go right up to Cairns' home and see him."

This seemed to astonish my young friend across the table a little.

"You won't find him at his home about this particular time," he explained.

"Then where will he be found?"

"In that den of his on the top floor of the Asteroid Building, in that Oriental studio just above the raiding-line," was Willie Whiteway's somewhat embittered response.

"So much the better," I retorted. And the young tango-rat stared at me with an expression which I couldn't quite understand.

But I at least understood the task that lay before me, and I wanted no further empty explanations. In five minutes I was out of that smoke-hazed restaurant and breathing in the cool air of midnight as I made my way to the Asteroid Building.

So preoccupied was I with my purpose, in fact, that I'd hurried along three or four city blocks before I became disagreeably impressed with the discovery that I was being followed. I carried with me, I remembered, a jewel that must easily have been worth twenty thousand dollars. So I decided to run no risks. I promptly hailed a passing taxicab, hopped in, and continued my way to the Asteroid on wheels, instructing my driver to wait until I came down again. A second taxicab, I noticed, stopped a little farther along the silent street. But I had other things to think of.

A gigantic negro servant in a gold-braided burnoose and turban answered my ring. He was still arguing about the impossibility of admitting me when Cappie Cairns himself appeared on the scene. He wore a sort of dark orange-colored dressing-gown faced with burgundy red silk. It made him look like a Baltimore oriole. I noticed he was also adorned in Turkish slippers, and that he smelt faintly of perfumed cigarettes. But he himself was not smoking.

"What can I do for you?" he demanded with a Chesterfieldian purr of politeness, but with an abstracted eye, in the corners of which I could detect the unreal deposits of old age. It made his high-colored regalia look suddenly absurd.

"I have every reason to believe that a diamond and emerald pendant which you gave to Miss Verlyn Vachell was stolen from her in a certain restaurant to-night," I said, deciding to give it to him without any beating about the bush.

He took it more coolly than I had expected. The half-narcotized cat-like look, nevertheless, went slowly out of his eyes.

"You are entirely mistaken," he said with quiet dignity. "For I have given the lady you mention no such jewel."

I could afford to laugh.

"Would you care to have me describe it?" I inquired.

"It would be interesting, perhaps," he blandly acknowledged, "but altogether superfluous. And I'm going to ask you to pardon my absence for a moment."

He left me standing there, like a peddler, a little taken aback by his sudden movement. But I knew, in my bones, that he was already busy at the telephone.

It was three or four minutes before he reappeared. His face was more mask-like than ever. He was plainly waiting for me to speak.

"Then I'm to infer that you're not interested in the recovery of this jewel?" I asked.

"Not in the least," and his stare was plainly an unspoken dismissal. "Particularly since I have never been aware of its existence."

"Then," I said with an imitation of his own mock politeness, "the mistake has been altogether mine."

"Undoubtedly," he cut back. "Good night."

"Good night," I retorted, realizing that I despised Cappie Cairns quite as much as Willie Whiteway did.

I went down to my waiting taxi, climbed in and drove home. It was halfway between midnight and morning, and the city was very quiet. I noticed, as I alighted, that a second taxi had again followed me to my own door. If Cappie Cairns was not interested in that canary-colored diamond, there was accumulating evidence that somebody else happened to be. But I wasted small time on this incident, for I was tired and sleepy, and too old a bird at the shadowing game to let it interfere with my circulation. I went to bed and slept soundly, with the stolen pendant under my pillow and a number of unanswered questions at the back of my head.

It was almost noon when I wakened. I wakened, in fact, to the shrill of my call-bell, and found Sloan himself at the other end of the wire. A Fifth Avenue jeweler, he told me, had just reported the theft of a canary-colored diamond and two emeralds from one of his clients.

"That client, Balmy, is a Broadway actress named Vachell, and they were lifted in the Byzantian Room of that trottery you were telling me about last week. So you'd better get busy on the case."

"All right," I said as I hung up the receiver.

I bathed and breakfasted and dressed leisurely, thinking things over. Then I decided what to do.

I began by taking a taxicab to that resplendently foyered duplex apartment-house on the south side of Central Park where Verlyn Vachell held forth in state. It was two o'clock in the afternoon by this time. I had to be announced, handed on from one factotum to another, and finally found myself in a Jacobean room, confronted by a mulatto maid in a lawn cap and

apron, with a King Charles spaniel snapping peevishly at my skirts. It didn't take me long to recognize the props.

I explained that the matter of my visit was an urgent one. There was a prolonged colloquy behind closed doors, and I was finally admitted to the royal presence.

Miss Verlyn Vachell, notwithstanding the hour, was still in bed when she received me, quite plainly resenting an intrusion at that unseemly time of day. She didn't even smile when I nearly fell over a florist's box of American Beauties almost as long as a coffin. For there was a voluptuous disarray about that chamber which for a moment almost over-awed me.

The lady herself was in a flesh-pink night-dress of wash satin with a bolero-fashioned arrangement of hand-made lace and hazy blue ribbon draw-strings. Beside her sumptuous and billowy four-poster stood a *chaise longue* in Adam design and shadow-cloth of ivory-white spangled with mauve and pale-green. It made me feel that I was confronting a toiler in the urban vineyard who was not missing quite all the good things of life. But the beauty on the regal bed put a stop to those meditations.

"Are you a newspaper woman?" she sharply and suspiciously demanded.

"Not altogether," I temporized.

"You're the photographer?" she suggested, almost hopefully, I thought. She must have suspected there was trouble in the wind.

"Not even that," I acknowledged, "though I spend most of my time in gathering proofs."

This quite uncalled-for sally of mine seemed to puzzle her. In fact, I could see her face visibly harden. And I knew that I disliked the woman more than ever. She seemed fraudulent. She was meretricious. Yet her name, I remembered, was worth money to a Broadway manager. I tried to tell myself that she might have come by her palatial setting more honestly than I had been willing to admit. Yet even as I tried to do so, I found myself resenting her paraded magnificence, her theatricalities, her imperiousness that graded down into a sort of insolence, her eternal "show pidgin," as they'd say in Chinatown. Yet this was doubtlessly making her feel like a second Empress Josephine as she posed against her two damask pillows in front of me. And the impatience born of all this parade, I suppose, made me a little more brutally frank than I'd intended to be.

"Miss Vachell, last night Carpenter Cairns gave you a canary-colored diamond, set between two emeralds."

She looked at me for a moment or two out of wonderfully steady eyes.

"You are entirely mistaken," she said with a superior and commiserative sort of smile.

"But that pendant was stolen last night from your hand-bag," I argued.

Again she studied my face.

"My press-agent is not always discreet, apparently," she finally ventured.

"Your press-agent has had nothing whatever to do with this," I promptly corrected.

"Did *you*?" she just as promptly corrected.

I realized, as I stood there trying to hold in my temper, that we weren't making much headway.

"No; but I'd like to have something to do with its recovery," I replied with forced quietness.

"When I lose any of my things like that," the empress on the Adam bed announced with large unconcern, "I usually recover them through my jewelers."

It hurt like a lash, of course. But I did my best to keep from showing it.

"It's quite plain that you've talked this over with Cappie," I softly informed her.

"With whom?" she snapped out. It reminded me of the King Charles spaniel.

"With Mr. Cairns," I amended.

"I know Mr. Cairns only in a business way," she frigidly announced.

"Yes, I suppose one might call it business. But am I to understand that you deny he gave you a heart-shaped yellow diamond and that it was stolen from you half an hour after you received it from his hands?"

There was almost pity in her smile. She was acting better on that bed than she ever did on a stage.

"Why shouldn't I deny it?" she languidly demanded. "And it's all so—so awfully absurd!" She even tried to laugh, but the effort wasn't quite a success.

"Then you can't be interested in its recovery?"

It didn't take her long to become quite sober again.

"Not in the least. But I *am* rather interested in knowing just what business it might be of yours."

It was my turn to smile. The situation had actually become humorous. The irony of the thing was almost theatrical. She was afraid, just as Cappie Cairns had been afraid, and I knew it. The two people most interested in an

incomparably fine diamond were denying all knowledge of its existence and all desire for its recovery. It was another case of "show pidgin." A flawless reputation, after all, had to be counted even before a flawless stone. And the one thing to do, I then and there decided, was to take them at their own word.

"I don't suppose it's any business of mine," I acknowledged as I moved toward the door and for the second time nearly fell over the coffin of roses, "for naturally, if the pendant was never stolen you can't make a story out of it. And of course you don't want the story."

"Then you *are* a newspaper woman?" she half declared and half demanded. I stopped for a moment in the doorway.

"I'm afraid I'll never be a successful one," I announced as I bowed myself out. And I went down to the world of realities with a new resolution giving balm to my battered feelings.

I found myself hailed by a taxi-driver standing beside his cab. But it was not the driver I had instructed to wait for me.

"Your shoffer, ma'm, ran out o' gas and cut for the garodge, to save his fine," explained this placid-eyed chauffeur as he swung the door open for me. "Told me to wait and finish out your trip."

"You'll do," I assured him. But before I could step into that taxi a pale-faced girl in a blue serge suit, who'd been standing at the edge of the sidewalk, stepped over in front of me.

"I've *got* to talk to you!" she declared, with a note of desperation in her voice.

"About what?" I demanded, studying her pallid face. It struck me as being an appealing one, one which touched your sympathy in spite of yourself.

"About this terrible thing that Will has done," she brokenly replied.

"Will who?"

"Will Whiteway. I'm the girl who—I'm Barbara Hilton. And I've just got to—"

"We'd better not talk here," I suggested.

"Then let me ride with you," she pleaded, "for only ten minutes in the park, or I'll never be able to face him again."

I told my driver to take us up through Central Park somewhere. Then I climbed into the cab after the wan-faced girl.

"Now tell me about it," I said as we left the roar of the city behind us.

"I—I don't think I can," she whispered with tremulous lips.

"Then why are you here?" I asked.

"I wanted to make sure you weren't going to be hard on Will, for—for what he did on the impulse of the moment. I know you don't understand. You couldn't. And I'm more to blame than he is. It's been me, me, who's kept him on at that work he hates so. For months and months now he's wanted me to go back to Oleon with him. He's begged and begged me. But I thought I could make a living down here, and I was afraid things mightn't turn out well if we went back. Will found it so hard to save, to get anything ahead. And he seemed moody and suspicious of my friends, of the friends I'd made in my work. And that made me harder on him than I ought to have been."

"And you care for him?" I asked, picturing the gaunt and sallow face of that young Pagliacci who capered daily and nightly to the strains of an orchestra, capered while his heart was heavy and his thoughts were far afield.

"Yes," said the girl, with a choke in her voice. "I care for him more than anything else in the world."

"But you know, of course, that he crocked the lady's Kimberley?" I had to speak lightly, to keep from making a monkey of myself and putting a motherly arm about that poor girl's drooping shoulder. For notwithstanding Sloan and his cynical barks about life, I felt an absurd and undeniable ache of sympathy for Willie Whiteway and the sweetheart he wanted to take back to Oleon.

"Yes, I know he took that diamond," acknowledged the girl at my side, her face rather white with humiliation. "He's told me everything."

"And what do you expect me to do?"

I could see her shaking shoulders square with sudden resolution.

"I want to take it back to its owner," she said.

My silence seemed to mystify her. She didn't realize it was a silence of amazement.

"Then let *him*?" she implored, looking up into my face. It was my smile now that was puzzling her.

"That's impossible," I told her.

"Why?" she demanded, her voice going flat.

I was about to explain to her the extraordinary fact that its owner had declined to be interested in it. But I had no chance to do this, for the taxicab suddenly came to a stop.

Our driver, I could see, had been hailed by a slender-bodied youth who stepped out from between the shrubbery that lined the driveway. He was almost beside the taxi door before I awakened to the fact that it was Willie Whiteway himself.

He opened that door with his own hand. He didn't speak to me, but stood there looking into the eyes of the girl at my side.

What unuttered interrogation he put to her, and what unspoken answer she in turn sent back to him, I had no means at the time of knowing. But he suddenly leaned closer into the cab, staring at me with a determined ferocity which startled me from that sleek and sallow young face.

"I want that diamond," he said with a masterfulness which I rather admired in him.

"Why?" I asked as I reached for my hand-bag.

He hesitated for a moment.

"Because I've got to start over again," he announced. "And that's the only way I can see to do it."

"I *want* you to start over!" I startled him by saying as I opened my bag.

"What?" he gasped.

"I say I want you two young people to take your chance, now it's here. And if you haven't as much right to this pendant as that sweet-scented pair who've been afraid to touch it with a ten-foot pole, then it's not for me to make myself into a judge and jury!"

And I was about to add "And bless you, my children!" as I handed the canary-colored diamond nestling between its two emeralds out to him. But something stopped me. For it wasn't until my Pagliacci reached out and took the pendant with his left hand that I noticed what he already held in his right hand.

What he held was a very snub-nosed-looking revolver, a police revolver with a sawed-off barrel. It was the kind of firearm, I remembered, much affected by the yegg and the professional hold-up man. And at almost the same moment that I realized this I saw a look pass between the youth with the revolver and the girl sitting so close at my side. It struck me as being a foolish look, a look of utter amazement touched with incredulity, the sort of look you're apt to wear when you suddenly find that you've been accepting a friend's unaffected straightforwardness for simple irony.

It was that look much more than the sight of the sawed-off revolver that sent all my benignant impulses suddenly scattering, about the same as meal scatters when a horse coughs into a nose-bag.

"Driver," I called out sharply, as I started to my feet. And the person addressed, I discovered, had to all appearances lapsed into a slumber of blissful unconcern.

"Driver!" I shouted, now in genuine alarm, not yet fully realizing that his indifference was a collusory one. I scarcely know what I intended to do, for my whole apple-cart of valuations had suddenly gone over, I merely knew that something was wrong, that everything was wrong. There was no longer a beleaguering look of pathos on the lean face of the lean young tango-rat beside me. It wore a wicked look now, and a furtive one. And it perplexed me to see him suddenly stoop low close in beside the running-board. At the same moment the lithe-limbed young girl at my left, realizing better than I the full intent of that posture of humiliation, came into unexpected action. With one quick push she bunted me bodily and ignominiously out through the open door of that taxicab.

The result was what Toosey Attrill would have called doing a row of flips. I cascaded out over that obstructing body and rolled without grace or dignity along the well-oiled surface of an uncommonly hard macadamized driveway. I went over like a circus-tumbler doing a somersault. I went over, in fact, more than once, stunned in mind as well as hurt and bruised in body. And as I struggled into a sitting posture I distinctly heard the crisp and business-like voice of Willie Whiteway say: "Let 'er out now, Steve, out to the limit!"

I sat there dazedly watching that taxicab sway out of sight beyond a turn in the driveway. Then I slowly and dejectedly gathered myself together, recovered my hand-bag, found my dust-covered gloves, and made my way to a park bench, where I sat long and deep in thought.

Half an hour later I hailed an empty taxicab and ordered the driver to take me straight down to the Alliance offices. There Inspector Sloan looked up at me with a meditative and impersonal eye.

"By the way, Balmy, I guess we've got a clue to that canary diamond that belonged to your beautiful blonde friend," he said as he reached for a scratch-pad.

"A clue?" I echoed without enthusiasm.

"Wilkins reports a leather-dip and gem-thief called Bronchial Billy stalling as an exhibition-dancer up at that Byzantium trottery. And I've just found out they've had seven jewel-thefts there inside of five weeks."

I backed up until I came to a chair. Then I sat down in it.

"He tries to pull the con stuff, and works with a chicken-stall who goes under the name of Baby Hilton, or sometimes Barbara Hilton," continued

the chief.

It gave me a decidedly queer feeling, but I did my best to keep my face straight.

"What name did you say that exhibition-dancer worked under?" I inquired.

"Willie Whiteway," was Sloan's preoccupied reply. "And it's up to you to get the cuffs on him before he breaks for cover."

"*La comedia e fineta*," I slowly and thoughtfully repeated to myself.

"Oh, no, it isn't!" snapped back my busy inspector, whom I never suspected of being familiar with Italian opera. "It's just beginning."

"But our Willie," I reminded him, "has already flown the coop."

He favored me with one of his cut-steel stares.

"*A la* Pareto?" he finally inquired.

I did not answer him. I had troubles enough, without bidding for more. And it was the chief, slamming shut one of his desk-drawers, who brought me back to my senses.

"I don't want to interfere with your meditations," said Sloan with his roweling half-ironical sharpness of voice. "But if you insist on brooding over your past sins, Balmy, I wish you'd do it up in front of the Holshaw house in Madison Avenue. For something is going to break up in that quarter and I'd like you to back up Toosey in keeping it under observation."

"All right," I replied listlessly, realizing that my chief was presenting me with another case.

CHAPTER XIII

THE HOUSE OF MYSTERY

SLOWLY TOOSEY ATTRILL moved along the street until she came to the Ritz corner. Then she turned about, and just as slowly and just as decorously moved in the opposite direction.

She seemed a subdued Toosey, a tamed and softened Toosey, and at the same time a very captivating Toosey. She made me think of peaches and cream. The peaches-and-cream effect may have come out of a box, but not one man in a hundred would have known it. She had on chamoisette gloves, and an English-looking blue cape, and a coy-looking nurse's bonnet with white strings. And, to cap the climax, she was solemnly wheeling a French wicker baby-carriage adorned with a pink satin carriage-robe.

It set Toosey off, that make-up, in an altogether unexpected way. More observers than one, I noticed, became aware of her demure appeal. For as she moved slowly past the carriage-entrance of the Ritz, a line of waiting chauffeurs turned and viewed her with open admiration. One of them, I could even see from a distance, went so far as to speak to her. But that blue-caped pilot of French wicker-work went grimly on her way, with her lips set and her lids lowered, looking neither to the right nor to the left.

She kept on her way until she caught sight of me crossing the street. Thereupon she pushed her perambulator in before the window of an antique-shop and stooped solicitously over the end of the quilted pink robe, inspecting, to all intents and purposes, a purely imaginary infant beneath several swathings of pink veiling.

I myself at about the same moment stopped to admire a spindly-legged Heppelwhite gate-table in the window of the antique-shop.

"What's wrong, Toosey?" I asked over my shoulder, without so much as a direct look at her. For I knew by the black cloud of discontent on that customarily pert young face that all was not well with the guardian of infancy.

"Oh, that nut gives me a pain in the neck!" she said with explosive disgust. Her tender little finger-dabs as she tucked in the pale silk coverlet only seemed to make her anger the more virulent.

"What nut?" I promptly demanded.

"That wall-eyed inspector who's makin' a monkey o' me in open daylight," was Toosey's response. "That office wop who's hangin' the Indian sign on me for life, instead o' givin' me the decent sloothin' work he's always promised!"

"But you've got to watch that house," I reminded her, with a discreet look up and down the avenue.

"Oh, I'm watchin' that house all right," she retorted as she adjusted the hood of her perambulator. "But what's the good o' puttin' me in this Kensington Garden get-up and wishin' a matrimonial fruit-basket like this on a girl who's never even nibbled the edge of a marriage-license?"

"The people in that house," I patiently explained to her, "must never suspect we are watching them."

"Then why didn't your bone-head friend down to the office get a hand-organ and put me on a chain? Why didn't he gimme a red cap and a tin cup and say right out that I was one o' the anthropoids? For I'm sure weary o' this park fountain governess business. Every he-thing that happens along b'tween the avenue and the Grand Central seems to think this is the open season for nurse-maids and tries to get busy gunnin' for my life-hist'ry. And if they happen to be over fifty they fall in line behind me and this basket-work Lizzie and start handin' the mush. Why, one old walkin' graveyard of about eighty who was so wheezy with the asthma you could hear him comin' like a fire-wagon, tried to get me into a pearl-colored sedan to go joy-ridin' up to the Clairemont. The only way I could shake 'im was to explain that the traffic-cop on the next corner was my husband. And another old lace-inspector of about four hundred pounds tried to chuck me under the chin and call me Pinky-Winky. He explained that his health was failin' rapid and he wanted a practical-lookin' girl like me to kind o' look after him down to Palm Beach. He said my eyes told him I was consid'rate and kind-hearted. So I swung round and let 'im read 'em again. And in case he wasn't gettin' it straight I handed it to him also by word o' mouth. 'No South for me, grandpaw, wit' any quarter ton o' tallow that ain't had the yellow streak melted out of it yet!' And I left him leanin' against the Biltmore stonework gurglin' for a doctor quick!"

I did my best not to smile. For Toosey's face was still serious.

"Say, Balmy, what is it about these pink-and-white pusherettes that kind o' gives the old Willies a flareback o' wasted affection? For there's been a spavined old Brummel in a top-hat edgin' up to me for the last two days. He's been hangin' round here by the hour at a time, and I'll bet a nickel he'll bob back ten minutes after I'm on my way again. He started to coo about the *beyewteefvl* cheeild I had in under that lap-robe and I had to bump him into

a water-hydrant or he'd 'a' had my plant uncovered to the world. And I tell you, Balmy, this whole baby-nurse business is sourin' my nature. It's crabbin' my joy in life. It's warpin' me. It ain't leavin' me enough self-respeck to slip into a United and buy a box o' Turks. Why, even that doctor in the whiskerettes from the Holshaw house turned round and tried to stop me yesterday."

"The doctor?" I said at this unlooked-for information. "How do you know he was a doctor?"

"Well, he sure wasn't no plumber," asserted Toosey as she stood jiggling her perambulator up and down on its slender "S" springs. "He looked like a doctor, and he smelt like a doctor, and he carried a little black bag like a doctor. But o' course he may have been a steam-fitter, or a mattress-maker with an hour off fr'm the factory. You never can tell in the sloothin' business! 'Young woman,' he says to me as he tries to squint in under that double-folded veil there, 'young woman, you oughtta give that infant more air!' Just like that, straight out, same as Sloan himself would say it. 'You mind your own business, and leave a lady alone, or I'll call a cop quicker 'n hell c'n scorch a feather,' I told him, right off the bat. And he kind o' backed away sideways as though he'd been stung by a rattlesnake."

But I was no longer interested in Toosey Attrill and her petty little sidewalk romances. I could see somewhat bigger issues looming faintly up along the line of the horizon.

"You say you saw this man who looked like a doctor come out of the Holshaw house?" I demanded.

"Twice a day, reg'ler," announced Toosey. "And I guess mebbe that one best bet o' mine about him bein' a doctor ain't so far wrong. For I sure seen him leadin' back a trained nurse."

"How do you know she was a trained nurse?"

"For one thing, b'cause I lamped her wearin' her uniform."

"When?"

"When she come to the door while that doctor guy was helpin' a truck-driver carry in two tanks of oxygen."

"Oxygen?" I echoed.

"Yes, oxygen, Missus District Attorney. For I drifted by with my squeal-cart just close enough to see the label on the second tank as they were carryin' it in."

"Have you reported this to Sloan?" I promptly inquired. For it was plain that a very ill person was being harbored in that house of mystery.

"Nope," retorted the diffident Toosey. "Seein' I was posted here to locate a couple o' gem-thieves I kind o' thought the Alliance office wouldn't keep awake all night over knowin' I'd barked my shin on a pneumonia-case. And what's more, I don't believe there's any more mystery about that Holshaw house than there is about a peanut-stand. It may look kind o' blank and leery to the street-front, but any house's likely to be blank-lookin' when there's sick folks inside. And Sloan's turned me into a cross between a suff-picket and a merry-go-round to watch a dump that nothin' 's happenin' in; and nothin' 's ever goin' to happen!"

"Then you've told me practically everything that's come to your notice?"

Toosey, as she bent over her perambulator, pondered this question.

"You've had the whole program, I guess, except that a couple o' mornin's ago a parcel was delivered there. But that needn't give you no chill down the backbone, for I had a good look at that parcel, and it wasn't anything more than two or three dozen ordinary hemp bags. They were tied together without even bein' wrapped up and covered. And the butler was even set on not lettin' 'em in, until the boy who brought 'em seemed able to show the address was right."

"What did that butler look like?"

"He looked like a Jesse Willard who'd gone into the undertakin' business and got so dignified he felt his face'd crack if he forgot himself and smiled. He was so stiff in the neck, of course, he'd never in the world lamp himself in them knee-pants o' his, or he'd sure have laffed himself to death!"

"Was that the only time you ever saw him?"

"I saw him speak to the nurse before she left the door last night. And the night before, too. At exactly five she melts off the map for an hour or two. She beats it down to the Forty-Second Street subway."

"You're sure of this?"

"Dead sure. I even lamped her as she loped back last night."

"Did she ring?" I asked, remembering that Toosey's information had to be picked out of her, like bones out of a shad. "I mean, how did she get into the house?"

"She had her own key," Toosey replied after a moment or two of thought. "I remember her stoopin' down, as though she was studyin' out the lock."

"And that's everything?" I persisted, after a moment or two of thought on my own part.

Toosey replied that it was everything.

"And me leggin' it up and down this dead-eyed slice o' the island until I've got writer's cramp in the knee-caps and not enough happenin' to keep a traffic-cop from failin' asleep on fixed-post! What I like to see, now and then, is a little excitement. Somethin' doin'. But this quietude sure takes me back to the old days on the Schuykill. It makes me think o' Brooklyn on a rainy Sunday. I tell you, Balmy, if this go-go wagon plant ain't took away from me inside another six hours I'm goin' stark mad and bite the corners off 'n that grand new grocery o' Charles's!"

"Sloan, of course, gave you his instructions?"

It was said more as a reminder than as an interrogation.

"He gimme instructions, all right. But what I want is a little seasonin' of explanation. Why doesn't he tell me why I'm watchin' that house? Why is he leavin' me to amble up and down here without even knowin' what I'm perambulatin' for? Why is he so scared o' his operatives that he can't take 'em into his confidence for five minutes and show 'em what they're likely to run up against?"

"Sloan, of course, has his own way of carrying on his own business," I said with a quietness which was intended to carry its note of reproof.

"Well, he's goin' to carry me on to something more strenuous 'n this here bla-bla wagon, or you'll see me beatin' it away from your high-toned hotel-section straight back to little old Chatham Square, where there's more doin', and less zooin'!"

"Then what am I to report to him when I see him?"

"How soon is that goin' to happen?"

"Right away."

Toosey gave her French wicker perambulator a vicious swing about into the channel of traffic.

"Then tell him for me that he's barkin' up the wrong tree. And the sooner he incorporates that pearl o' wisdom into his system, the better. And I would also add, that the next old chaser who rumbles up and tries handin' me the mash-line is goin' to get a pavin'-stone bent over his coco!"

But Inspector Sloan's estimate of the Holshaw house, I soon found, differed materially from Toosey's. It was plain to see that he was puzzled by what I had to tell him. It was equally evident that he intended to keep his teeth shut on the bone of that mystery.

"We'll just let Toosey grouch along there for a day or two," he quietly announced. "As for you, Balmy, I think I'll swing over to another plan."

It was easy enough to say. But to carry it out was a much more complicated matter than one might imagine.

It began with the trained nurse, who, at five o'clock every afternoon, was supposed to go to the Forty-Second Street subway station. And it began that same afternoon. For as this same nurse pushed her preoccupied way in toward the crowded kiosk, she collided violently, and apparently by accident, with an unknown man.

This man the next moment raised his voice in loud lamentation, ran indignantly after the nurse, and caught her by the arm. He then announced to the assembling crowd that his pocket had been picked. The nurse naturally denied any interest in this event. But during their altercation a pocketbook fell to the ground, and the man pounced on it with a cry of triumph. It was his, of course. She had tried, he protested, to get rid of it. This she denied.

Their dispute was ended by the appearance of an officer in plain clothes, who, after showing his shield, asked the man if he was ready to lay a charge. The man was most decidedly ready. So the indignant young Florence Nightingale was haled to the nearest precinct station, was re-examined, and was searched by the matron who there awaited her. The raglan coat which she wore was taken from her. The Holshaw pass-key was also slipped quietly and unostentatiously off her ring.

Sloan, in the meantime, had me waiting in the next room, in a nurse's uniform, an exact duplicate of the prisoner's. He helped me into the raglan, saw it fitted to a turn, and sighed with relief.

"Now, Balmy, here's the pass-key to that house. The windows are wired, but the front door isn't. Get inside that door as quietly as you can, and find out as much as you can. We'll hold this woman till morning. We may be able to hold her longer, but we mustn't count on much more than one night. You're taking a chance, of course, but I know you're not a squealer. And remember that Wilkins will be waiting in a taxi about twenty yards from the Madison Avenue corner. If he hears or sees anything suspicious, he'll be ready to break in with a couple of flatties. But that, of course, is what we want to avoid. So have your look through and get away if you can, without any noise."

"And if I don't come out?" I mildly inquired. For I knew it was no ordinary house he was so nonchalantly asking me to invade.

"If you're not out by midnight I'll be inside there myself," he said, squaring that heavy mouth of his in a way that made him look like a museum bust of one of the Caesars. And nervous as I was beneath all my pose of indifference, I found something reassuring in remembering I had this

man of power behind me, and that he, in turn, had the even more ponderous machinery of the law behind him.

Twenty minutes later I emerged from the Grand Central Subway, walked north a few blocks along Madison, and then turned west.

My heart was beating a little faster, in spite of myself, as I went up the wide brownstone steps of the Holshaw house. But it relieved me to see that the street in that neighborhood was almost empty. I found something fortifying, too, in the decorous appearance of that part of the city, in the nearness of Fifth Avenue with its evening up-surge of life, in the highly respectable shop-fronts which here and there freckled the canyon-walls of quiet homes. But from the front of the older brownstone house before which I stood not a light or sign of life showed itself.

I fitted the key to the Yale lock, took a deep breath, and silently swung back the door. I just as silently stepped inside. Then I swung the door shut again, without making a sound, and stood there with my back to it. I stood there inspecting what lay before me and waiting for my pulse to settle down to normal again.

It took some time. But I found no one there to challenge my entrance, and as no sound or sign of life came to me from the heavy-shadowed hallway, I felt that I had at least begun by having luck with me. So I advanced slowly into that unknown house of unknown possibilities, thinking, for some undecipherable reason, of Eleakim Grosset as I did so.

The first thing that struck me was the bareness of the place. It seemed almost empty of furniture. The second thing that impressed me was the heaviness of the air. It smelt like a cellar. It carried a taint of must and confinement and was by no means the atmosphere any decent doctor would want about his patient. I couldn't help feeling that if the trained nurse whose coat I was wearing had been worth her salt she would have made a pilgrimage through that abode of mustiness opening windows and letting in a little sunshine. But I wasn't a health-officer, I reminded myself as I moved forward into the shadows, and I had come there to investigate more substantial things than house-odors.

My investigations, however, weren't destined to be made quite so easily as I had hoped.

I had reached the foot of the stairway, and even had one hand on a newel-post, when I distinctly heard the sound of footsteps on the uncarpeted floor above me.

I promptly shrank back and sidled about the newel-post, edging cautiously backward along the shadows of the inner hall. For those steps, I

could see, were turning about the stair-head and descending to the floor on which I stood. So I continued my retreat, step by stealthy step, until a half-opened door on my left showed me a second stairway, leading to what must have been a basement. Rather than run the risk of being confronted by that unknown newcomer, I slipped through this partly opened door, closed it behind me, and ran lightly down the carpeted treads.

I hesitated, for one brief moment, at the bottom of the stairway. But a quick glance about showed me no sign of life below-stairs, so I scurried noiselessly along a darkened hallway for some twenty steps. This brought me to what was plainly a kitchen, an extremely disordered kitchen that held a littered gas-range, a table piled high with used dishes, and the remains of a hurried meal. One burner of the range, I noticed, was alight. This persuaded me that the front of the house would be more preferable, for strategic purposes. So I stood listening for a moment, and then deliberately retraced my steps, feeling along the wall as I went.

When I came to a door I opened it, without making a sound, and peered into a room lighted by one large electric-bulb. This room, I saw, must have been recently occupied by workmen, for an opening had been cut in the wall opposite the doorway in which I stood. Through this ragged wound of broken plaster and lath and brick-ends ran a black rubber hose, like a snake twining into a cave. This thought of a snake was further accentuated by a distant hissing sound which stopped suddenly, and for no reason that I could marshal. Yet there was no light beyond that break in the wall, so what it led to I had no way of judging. But I stepped into the room and closed the door behind me.

I stood there, puzzling over what confronted me. I could see a coil of heavily insulated wire, a scattering of tools, a second heavy hose wound with steel wire lying beside a handleless pick-ax, a pair of dust-covered overalls on which were laid out a row of chisels and drill-bits, and an unlighted electric-bulb guarded by a little caging of wire. Over everything in the room was a powdering of dust.

But what most held my attention was an array of hemp bags, several dozens of them, all filled and piled in an orderly row along the side-wall of the room. From these my gaze went on to the opening in front of me, and as I studied it I advanced slowly into the room. On the floor across this opening I discovered a metal mat about two feet by three in size. The position of that mat struck me as interesting. So I dropped on one knee and stooped over it. Then I lifted one corner of it, ever so little, to find out whether or not it was wired. I found, all right. For the moment I lifted that mat-end I was startled

to hear the muffled tinkle of a bell somewhere deep beyond the wall-opening. It made my blood run cold.

"Get off that mat!" cried an angry voice out of the blackness in front of me. And the next moment I heard the sound of heavy breathing. And my blood ran colder than ever, for I realized that this heavy breathing was advancing upon me out of the darkness.

I had no time to rise to my feet. So, rather than meet that advancing figure face to face, I swung about where I still knelt on the floor and stooped low over two steel drums that lay there close to the wall. I stooped over them in a pretense of examining the labels wired on the pressure-gauges adjusted to their ends. They were very much like the drums used in soda-water fountains, but one, I noticed, bore the word "Oxygen" on it, and the other, "Acetylene." But I wasn't in the least interested in those drums. I was naturally much more interested in the man who pushed his way crouchingly out of the hole in the wall.

"Why in the name of Mike can't you keep off that mat?" was his peevish demand as he stepped past my still stooping figure.

I didn't answer him. I didn't even look up at him. But as he stepped across the room and lifted a pail of near-beer that stood on the disordered window-sill to his dirt-stained mouth, I saw that he wore a suit of dust-colored blue-jeans and a pair of heavy goggles very much like those used by motorists. His face was stubbled with a russet beard and moist with sweat. I knew that I had never seen him before. And I wished that I wasn't seeing him at that particular moment. For his movements announced that he was both angry and petulant.

"Ain't I got troubles enough without you throwin' a scare into me ev'ry dam' time you get down into this room?" he demanded between drinks, "And it's goin' to take us a good ten hours to get through that blank-blank party-wall and round that elevator-shaft base," he further announced.

Still I kept my silence. Yet I knew, without even looking at him, just when he pulled the sweat-misted goggles from his eyes. He was, apparently, staring about for something to wipe them on when his roving eye fell on my still stooping figure. I was thinking hard and fast, but for the life of me I couldn't decide on any move that held out a decent promise of success.

"Where's Bud?" he demanded, taking up the empty pail and peering rather regretfully at its tilted tin bottom.

I was afraid to speak, for I knew that my voice would betray me. My silence, I suppose, must have surprised him a little, for he suddenly turned away from the shaded window and looked at me. I wheeled about, with my

back to the wall, at almost the same instant. As I did so I reached forward and caught up the mud-stained handle of a pick. It scarcely occurred to me to make use of this as a weapon of offense. What I really intended was to fling it straight against the big electric-bulb and by smashing it into smithereens leave the room in darkness.

But the man in the blue-jeans must have thought otherwise, as he saw me slowly rise to my feet with that weapon in my hand. He must also have realized that the familiar-looking raglan wasn't covering the woman he had expected it to cover. He didn't cry out. He didn't even speak. But I could see the change that crept over his sweat-stained face as he moved slowly toward me. There was a light in his close-set eyes that sent the last shred of hope out of my heart. It told me that mere words would be wasted on him. It forewarned me that he was terribly afraid of what was confronting him through my presence there, so terribly afraid that fear was going to leave him quite without mercy.

It was then that I forlornly and foolishly started to edge along the wall, watching only that stubble-jowled enemy as I raised the pick-handle above my head. But it didn't for a moment keep him back. I could see his small leer of scorn as I brought that club of mine down, with all my force. But he warded off the blow with what seemed to be almost ease, throwing one hand suddenly above his quick-ducked head and receiving the force of it on his well-padded left forearm. Still he did not speak. But his right hand shot out like a flash. I could feel his dust-stained fingers entangling themselves in my clothing, for by this time my one thought was of flight and I was frantically trying to circle out of his reach. He swung me up, short, so that I almost catapulted into the clutch of his arms. But still he never uttered a sound. He lifted me clear of the lime-covered floor, and shook me from side to side, in a silent ecstasy of rage. He shook me the same as a terrier shakes a rat. He shook me until my hair came down and I screamed in terror, without quite knowing I had done so.

At that he jerked me in close to his side again, in a clutch like a grizzly's, and tried to cover my mouth with his great hand. I bit that hand, bit it until the blood oozed warm against my own face. He uttered his first sound, at that, and with a spasmodic movement of pain flung me bodily from him. He sent me flat against the solid wall, with an impact that knocked the breath out of my body. And with almost the same movement he stooped and caught up the pick handle which had fallen from my grasp.

I saw him do so, and I knew what it meant. But I didn't seem to be greatly disturbed by it. My collision with the wall, in fact, must have stunned me a little, for I wasn't at first conscious of the second man entering

the room. About all I knew was that the first man was balancing on his toes, with the solid ash handle-club above his head. He would bring it down, I impersonally cogitated, with all the strength and precision of a practised hand. And I—I was the tent-peg he intended driving a foot deep into forgetfulness.

I don't know how or when the second man caught the ash handle and wrested it away from him. But my enemy was too drunk with the dizziness of rage to give much attention to that interruption. For the next moment I realized that he was kicking at me with his heavy and mud-stained boot. I was on my knees again, by this time, and as I swayed there from side to side I caught at that dust-covered leg in blue-jeans and hugged it, hugged it for all I was worth. And that made him try to hit me on the head with his fist. He would have succeeded in this, if the second man hadn't taken a prompt and more active part in that encounter. He had been shouting at the other man all along, but what he said had fallen on unhearing ears. So now he tried the pick-handle.

He swung it back and brought it down on the other man's head, just behind the ear. It was a blow that seemed heavy enough to floor a stock-yard steer. But it merely sent the man in blue-jeans staggering backward, with a stare of heavy expostulation on his face.

"Oh, you bull-head! You *bull-head*!" shouted the newcomer, from some higher plane of authority which I couldn't understand. "You bone-head, gumming the whole game at a time like this! Get out o' here! Get out o' my sight! Get out, or by the living God I'll pound you to a pulp!"

The other man, backing away, still tried to argue, brokenly, thickly, but he continued his retreat before the repeated threat of the pick-handle.

"That's what we get for trying to work with rough-necks," announced my deliverer as he kicked the array of drill-bits to one side and with a second kick sent the empty beer-pail into a far corner of the room.

I kept my handkerchief over my face, and viewed him through two straggly strands of fallen hair.

"Did he hurt you much?" he impersonally inquired. There was more annoyance than anything else in his voice.

"I'm all right," I said in a stifled voice. I spoke through the handkerchief, which was slightly stained with red, and spoke in little more than a whisper, for I didn't want that man of authority to hear my voice too well. It would betray me, I knew, while my fallen hair, my gory hankie, and the brave showing of blood which I'd managed to mop pretty well over my face, gave good promise of leaving me masked from his preoccupied eyes.

"It's a clip on the nose, isn't it?" he inquired as he stepped to the door and then moved back into the room again until he came opposite the broken-edged wall-opening.

I gurgled and nodded. I was thinking of that door and how I was going to get on the other side of it. I stood watching my chance. For reason was once more on her throne. I even weighed the chances of getting out my automatic, if the worst came to the worst.

"I guess you'd better get up-stairs and explain this to Pareto," the newcomer morosely announced.

That newcomer was still the victim of a preoccupation which I couldn't comprehend, otherwise he would have noticed my altogether involuntary start at the sound of that well-known name. It gave me a chilly feeling somewhere close about the heart. And it gave me a sinking feeling a little higher up to discover that my olive-skinned Sicilian was in that plot, whatever the plot might be. But it disturbed me even more to realize that Pareto was there under the same roof with me. Any house that held Pareto, I very well knew, was not big enough to hold me.

So I edged away, and moved toward the door, without waiting for any second bidding. As I did so I held my handkerchief over my face, so that the worried-looking man by the wall-opening couldn't see too much of me.

I got to the door and went through it. At every step I half-expected to be called back. But I reached that unlighted basement hall without interruption. Once there, I moved with less deliberation. I first darted toward the front of the house, in the hope I might find a door leading to the open. But there was none. So I slipped back through the shadows, found the stairway down which I had come, and mounted it with all the speed I could command.

At the top of this stairway I came to a sudden stop and my whole circulatory system did a sort of pirouette, like a circus-horse with the band playing. For in the wide hall that stood between me and freedom, I beheld a huge-limbed man slowly denuding himself of a butler's waistcoat and knickerbockers. Then he methodically and gruntingly pulled on a suit of dust-stained dungarees. Below me, at the same time, I could distinctly hear the sound of steps. So I stood there a moment, wondering what to do.

The dismantled butler was just buttoning the faded blue cross-straps over his shoulder when he looked up and saw me. I could hear my own heart beating.

"Hey, Pareto wants you!" he announced as he sat down on the bottom step beside the newel-post and shook off a pair of patent-leather pumps with silver buckles. Then he felt his feet ruefully, as though they had been

pinched in sundry tender places. I could see him reach out for a pair of heavy shoes caked with mud and plaster. And I remembered that a man without shoes was not likely to venture far from that house, even in pursuit of a possible enemy.

"All right," I said with the handkerchief still over my mouth, as I sauntered calmly forward. I even got past him, and half-way to the street-door itself, before he became really conscious of my movement.

"He's up at the 'phone," called out the man sitting on the stair-tread, at last plainly aware that I was moving in the wrong direction.

But I neither turned back nor hesitated. I sauntered casually on toward the door, reached it, and shot a hand out toward the spring-lock that held it shut.

"Don't open that!" commanded the man beside the newel-post. There was anger in his voice, and also a touch of bewilderment. I was clearly breaking some fixed rule of the house. But I disregarded that command. I preferred breaking a rule to having some one between those walls break my head. And when I found that I was able to swing the door back I gave a great gulp of relief.

I closed it after me, quickly, and ran down the broad brownstone steps, facing the decorous twilight of an orderly and tranquil-noted city. Then I tucked away my blood-stained handkerchief and sauntered hurriedly yet sedately toward Madison Avenue, where I saw a taxicab standing.

Wilkins had the door open even before I reached the side of the car.

"Are you all right?" he asked with unqualified concern, as he threw away the end of his cigar.

"Of course I'm all right," I retorted, mysteriously irritated at the sight of that big hulk of a man peacefully seated in the cushions of a taxi while more than one over-tender portion of my body advertised the fact that it had been none too gently dealt with.

"What did you get?" he anxiously inquired as he swung the cab-door shut.

"A biff on the snoot!" I retorted in the Chatham Square lingo of Toosey Attrill, deciding to hold my own counsel.

CHAPTER XIV

THE BUG IN THE RUG

WHEN I made my report to Inspector Sloan that night he ran true to form by showing neither surprise nor excess of sympathy. But he was plainly just a little bit perplexed.

"I had a feeling, Balmy, that you were going to find a gangster with a gun-shot wound up there," he acknowledged. "But it looks to me as though you'd bumped into a bunch of subway workers who're getting ready to tap something in that avenue cable-gallery."

"But what good would that do 'em?" I asked.

"It would do 'em rafts of good, depending on whether they were out for a pool-room killing, or something bigger in Wall Street. So I'm going to hunt up that superintendent of telegraphs over at police headquarters and see what help he can give me in raveling out the snarl. And in the meantime I want you and Toosey to keep on at the same line. Have a good night's sleep and then get up somewhere in the neighborhood of that Holshaw house again. Watch it close, and report to me by phone every two hours or so."

I got up to go. I had refrained, for certain reasons of my own, from saying anything about Pareto. As I stood looking down at Sloan, with his heavy body leaning forward across his desk and any thought of me already apparently out of his head, I couldn't help feeling that I was nothing more to him than a meek-eyed beagle is to a mounted huntsman. And I found a femininely wayward solace in remembering that I nursed a fact or two quite unknown to my superior officer.

"By the way, Balmy," said Sloan, arresting me at the door, "two or three of those people up there seem to have had a look at you. So you'll have to can that nurse outfit, of course, and get into something different. You'd better make it a gray wig and tinted specs. And don't be afraid of appearing a little dowdy."

So the next morning, as I made my way up Madison Avenue, I was arrayed in faded poplin, an iron-gray wig, amber spectacles, and a widow's bonnet that looked like a loser in a two hours' catch-as-catch-can. I had laboriously lined my face, tanning it with a carefully blended over-tint that seemed to leave me ten years older and two shades darker.

It was, in fact, a highly satisfactory make-up. It was also a successful one. For as I ambled along between Forty-Second and Forty-Third Streets I came face to face with Winfred Ealand himself.

He looked at me as he passed, and brought my heart up into my mouth. He looked at me closely, and rather curiously, as though I carried a vague suggestion of some one with whom he must at one time have been acquainted. I could feel my pulse quicken as I twisted my face up into a querulous sort of one-sided frown. But my poor lost Winkie never knew me. He neither stopped nor spoke. He never dreamed he had passed within two feet of a heavy-hearted young woman who found her clouded morning just a little darker because of that unlooked-for and quite accidental meeting.

But I hadn't traveled many blocks before the luxury of feeling sorry for myself was swept aside by the sterner issues of the day's work. For on the opposite side of the avenue I caught sight of Toosey Attrill and her baby-carriage, already out for their matutinal airing. It was a rosy-cheeked and demure-eyed Toosey that I beheld, sedately sauntering along with her sedately gloved fingers on the handle of her French perambulator. But beside her, and just a step or two in the rear, I noticed that she was being followed by a carefully tailored but somewhat doddering old Beau Brummel of at least sixty summers. She was plainly ignoring the advances of this discreetly persistent old *roue* in a top-hat with a wide mourning band. So preoccupied was she, in fact, that I had to throw her the high sign for the second time before she recognized me under my make-up. Then she promptly crossed the street, icily ignored the old Beau Brummel's proffered assistance in lifting the perambulator-wheels up over the curb-edge and pushed her way leisurely in to where I stood waiting for her before the plate-glass window of one of those nifty little jewelry shops which look as though they'd been modeled in the *Place-Vendome*. They're the kind that usually nest in the shadow of our more palatial hotels, to arrest the itinerant millionaire and his wife before the maw of Fifth Avenue can assimilate them and their pin-money. But I was more interested in Toosey Attrill, just then, than in the narrow-fronted shop that faced me.

"Look what's still tryin to freeze on to me!" announced Toosey, *sotto voce*, as she paused in front of the shop-window and indulged in the familiar exercise of jiggling the arrested perambulator. "He wants to buy me the Biltmore this mornin'. And he says he's perfectly serious about legally adoptin' me and makin' all life a bed o' roses, if I'd only be reasonable and listen to argument!"

The aged protector of youth, I noticed, had suspended his promenade before a chocolate shop which looked as though it had just stepped out of

the *rue de la Paix*, not twenty paces away from where we stood. For one brief moment it struck me that he might be in some way connected with the Holshaw house and its temporary occupants. But a second glance at the fatuous old face persuaded me that this was out of the question.

"Is that old idiot interfering with your work?" I inquired of Toosey, after telling her what I had to tell her, without once glancing directly at her. There was something almost ridiculous, in fact, in the way in which the two of us stood staring into space, without either seeing or being interested in the window-front within two feet of our noses.

"No, he's not interferin' with my sloothin,' and he hadn't better. But he kind o' gets on my nerves. The whole bunch o' them get on my nerves. I think they're drivin' me bugs. For ev'ry now and then I kind o' feel that *I'm* bugs, and *he's* bugs, and the whole wide *world* is turnin' bugs!"

Then Toosey stopped speaking. We stood side by side, silent, staring into the shop-window, for her gaily decrepit old persecutor was sauntering slowly past us, to come to a stop before yet another shop-window some twenty paces up Madison Avenue.

I stood staring in through the plate-glass, and for the first time my inspection became something more than a pretense. I awakened to the fact that this imitation *Place-Vendome* gem-shop was a very finished product. Its predominating notes were compactness and simplicity. Like so many of its Continental forerunners, it was so small that it looked more like a quiet-toned consulting-room than a place of business. One could easily infer that its sales would not be numerous, but that they would involve figures that would never be insignificant. Even the window-dressing itself was the last word in simplicity. Behind the plate-glass was a window-cabinet which I could recognize as being steel, though it was colored and grained and varnished to look like Circassian walnut, very much after the manner of our newer Pullmans, where they encage you in solid metal while you imagine you're merely encased in inlaid mahogany.

That window-cabinet, I remembered, was as strong as a safe. But what caught my eye, as I actually looked into it, was its contents.

It held only one thing on display. This was a string of black pearls, nestling on a pale-toned prayer rug of the finest silk. I don't know what make of rug it was. I don't know whether it came from Paterson, New Jersey, or Persia. But I do know that it was an uncommonly artful background for that particular window-display. For that silky pale rug, with the great string of dusky pearls tossed carelessly across it, made a seemingly accidental contrast in tones and lines which challenged the eye as much as it could have been challenged by a cobra coiled across a Scotch plaid.

The pearls themselves were magnificent. Half a hundred Old-World markets must have been scoured for that little brotherhood of perfectly matched Orientals, so alike in size, so alike in luster, and so alike in color. The mere assembling of such a string, I knew, gave them a vastly added value, even though each stone, by itself, might once have cost as much as a decent motor-car. But displayed as they were against that exotic-looking rug, they took on an atmosphere of mystery. They carried a tang of far-away countries. They seemed crowned with an air of sinister yet lavish splendor.

As I've said, they looked as though they'd been tossed there, carelessly, and yet they were so placed, that once spotted, it was impossible for the eye not to center on them. The luster of the rug both mingled with and contrasted with the luster of the gems. Yet there seemed something almost malevolent in their very darkness. A black pearl seems so different from the mild and innocent milkiness of its white sister. Black makes you think of the Pit; white, of the angels. And as I stared in at them through the plate window I couldn't help thinking, for the second time, of a lazily coiled cobra, of a somnolent "S" of venom which it would always be best to leave undisturbed.

Toosey, I saw, was quite as impressed by that string as myself. I could even detect a slight frown come into her face as she studied them.

"Some flash-junk!" she said with a hungry sigh. Her eyes took on that hard look which invariably and involuntarily overtakes a woman when she studies precious stones belonging to another. "And I heard a gink say the other afternoon that them beads was worth over seventy thousand bones!"

I glanced in at the shop itself. Every night, I knew, that seventy thousand dollars' worth of what Toosey called "flash-junk" would repose in a vanadium-steel vault fully protected by electric wiring. And every morning it would be carried to the window-cabinet and would be carefully locked therein, and the day would come when some copper king's wife, drifting down from the Ritz or up from the Biltmore, would see the bait and be caught on the hook of grandeur.

Then I forgot about the copper king's wife, and looked sharply at Toosey, who was staring just as sharply at the coil of black pearls.

"My Gawd!" she gasped, with widening eyes.

"What is it?" I demanded.

She turned away, and smiled rather sheepishly. Then she moved her head slowly up and down, with conviction.

"I gotta cut 'em out!" she firmly announced.

"Cut what out?" I asked, still bewildered by her antics.

Instead of answering me, she stood staring in at the pearls again.

"We all gotta come to it," she averred, with an odd little shoulder-movement of distress.

"Toosey, what's the matter with you?"

"I guess I've been hittin' the coffin-nails a little too hard," was her altogether unsatisfactory response.

"Why do you say that?"

"Too many cigaroots is makin' me see things."

"See things?" I echoed.

She shrugged a shoulder, almost defiantly. Then the one-sided smile died suddenly from her face and she just as suddenly caught me by the arm.

"My Gawd, Balmy, *they're alive*!"

The horror in her tones sent a little thrill up and down my spinal column, in spite of myself.

"What's alive?"

"Them pearls!" cried Toosey. "I saw 'em move!"

I stared in at the dusky coil. But I could detect no sign of movement about them.

"You imagined it," I told the girl beside me.

Toosey finally and reluctantly agreed with me.

"It's a bug, all right," she dolorously acknowledged, "and it's *mine*!"

I was still smiling as I stood there studying the mottled tones of the rug and persuading myself one could easily imagine movement, against such a background, where no movement had occurred and where no movement possibly could occur.

Then it was my turn to gasp a little. And also gape. For distinctly, as I stared at those lustrous spheres of blackness on their slender wire of platinum, one end of the string lifted and moved a little. It lifted and moved exactly as the tail of a sleepy snake might move.

It was my turn to clutch at Toosey's arm under the blue fold of her service-uniform. My eyes, I suppose, were about the size of saucers. I could hear Toosey's quick snort.

"So it's your bug too!" she triumphed.

"Wait!" I commanded.

"And now *you've* got 'em!" she exulted. "We've all got 'em!"

But I was paying scant attention to Toosey. I was watching that coil of black pearls, which were once more motionless.

"What does it mean?" I said with a gasp of bewilderment.

"It means we've both got a bug!" was Toosey's grim response.

Again I caught Toosey's arm, for again that negroid coil lifted, moved slightly from side to side with a snaky and undulatory restlessness, and subsided.

Then I straightened up before the commonplace plate-glass window behind which such uncommonplace things were taking place, and compelled myself to smile. It was a smile of gentle contempt for our momentary credulity.

"You are right, Toosey. What you said about it being a bug is doubtlessly quite correct. But the bug doesn't happen to be in our heads. By some means or other the bug has got under the rug. And when it moves or struggles under there, it naturally causes the pearls to move a little too!"

Toosey seemed to find much consolation in this. She even came sufficiently back to earth to reach out an arm and start jiggling her empty perambulator. She also cocked an eye momentarily up the avenue, where her persistent old Beau Brummel was patiently reviewing the contents of a florist's window. Then she stared once more through the plate-glass.

"Seems to be some little jumper, doesn't he?" she pensively remarked. "A reg'lar little North American *ukelele*!"

"Keep still a moment!" I commanded. For I was once more trying to be a sane and reasonable human being, warning myself that getting goose-flesh at ten o'clock in the morning along the sedatest stretch of Madison Avenue, wasn't going to solve the problem of even a shop-keeper's trick window.

So I leaned forward and watched the movement beneath that rug of mottled tones, watched it closely. And I saw that the movement was no trick and no illusion. It was actually taking place. I also saw that it was taking place at pretty regularly repeated intervals, so that there was a certain rhythm to the rise and fall of the rug beneath the string of pearls. And there was yet another point which I was able to notice. The movements, although repeated, were not repeated in exactly the same place. In fact, as I watched intently, I was able to determine that the line of their progress was describing the clear-cut arc of a circle. In time, I could see, they would mark a complete circle.

But why?

Why? I repeated to myself, as I re-surveyed the window-cabinet, remembered what Toosey had remarked as to the value of the jewels, and again noticed the upward thrust of the rug. This time the movement was more accentuated than usual. And when it was at its highest point, making a

little pyramid of the surface of the soft-fibered rug, the apex of that uplifted portion of the fabric suddenly glistened in one bright point of light, as though a diamond had erupted through it only to vanish the next moment as the rug subsided and once more lay motionless along the bottom of the cabinet.

Toosey spoke to me, but I was too preoccupied to hear what she said. Even the phrase that went through my head, "the bottom of the cabinet," brought me up short. Where was that bottom? And what was it? And what was below that again. And why should it jet up through a rug into a twinkling little point of light, as bright almost as a diamond-point, as bright as a bead of cut steel on a shoe-buckle. And I shied and stopped short at still another of my own phrases. This time it was the "cut steel." What was there disturbing about those two words? What did they mean? What did they seem to be leading me toward? What did the whole thing mean? What was some unknown Something, beyond a wall over which I couldn't see, trying to make it mean?

I could feel my distracted brain paw at its floor-boards, like a village fire-horse when a stall-gong rings. I could feel that I was on the brink of a discovery that would make the unreasonable suddenly reasonable, if only the veil of one little mental mist could be ruptured.

Then I saw.

In one sudden flash I saw and understood.

I saw it all, as plain as though a voice had trumpeted it through a megaphone from the topmost roof of the Grand Central Terminal. At one flash it explained the Holshaw house and its mystery. It explained the tanks and the drills, the picks and the party-walls, the lime and the dust, the invalid and the guarded doors, the tunneling and the hemp bags—everything.

It simply meant, I told myself, that Pareto and his gang were ground-hogging for a haul. It meant that my crafty-eyed friend had realized the value of that string of black pearls and had deliberately set out to capture them. He had studied his ground and counted his chances. He had assembled his agents and rented the nearest available house. He had realized it would have to be a daylight job, since the gems were locked by night in a vault where no one dare attack and disturb the burglar-alarm system. So he had submarined for his prey. He had dipped down into the earth, tunneling through cellar-walls and lot-ends and cement. He had carried in the apparatus for an oxo-acetylene torch, to cut through any obstructing steel, and had disguised his gas tanks as oxygen for a pneumonia patient. He had worked like a mole, with scant fear of interruption, carrying back his dirt

and *debris* and bagging it and piling it in orderly rows where it would lie undiscovered until after his *coup* had been effected.

Even as I stood there with these sudden deductions flashing like heat-lightning through my mind, I remembered that the movement had already reached its climax. It was no bug that I had seen moving so methodically about under that pale-toned prayer-rug. It was nothing more than the end of a busy workman's brace and bit as he labored unseen and almost noiselessly under the heavy flooring of the window-cabinet, boring a circular row of holes so that he could lift out a section of that flooring big enough to let his hand slip through and capture what he was after. And at any time now that hand might appear mysteriously out of space and seize the pearls and quite as mysteriously disappear again.

"What is it?" cried Toosey rather shrilly. I suppose she must have been watching my face.

"Keep still!" I commanded as quietly as I could. Already I was trying to reason out how we could work at both ends of the line, without giving an alarm to the people it was our duty to round up. But before everything else, I saw, that precious string of pearls had to be saved, and saved at once.

There was no time to summon help. And it would be foolish for either a nurse-maid or a dowdy old woman in a faded poplin to wander in before that haughty-eyed gem-dealer and try to persuade him of the expediency of taking a rope of pearls out of his show-window in the middle of the morning and locking them up in his vault. He would naturally scent a "plant" in any such procedure.

"Toosey," I said sharply, watching the rug as it once more moved up and down.

"Yes," answered Toosey as she stood there beside me in her foolish-looking make-up, with one hand on her equally foolish-looking perambulator.

"That pompous old chaser of yours! Quick—get him into this shop. He looks the part. Have him ask to see those pearls at once. Have him price them, talk them over, anything, anything, only to get them out of that window."

"But what's the game?" demanded the slightly bewildered Toosey.

"The game is that they're going to be stolen inside of five minutes, if we don't get them off that rug and out of that window. I can't explain. But do what I've told you to—quick!"

I watched Toosey as she moved casually yet briskly off along the avenue. I watched her as she drifted closer in to the rubicund old Beau

Brummel who was still hovering so providentially about the neighborhood. He had been hovering there, in fact, with very much the same sort of timorous audacity that you see in a robin as it hovers about a threatened nest. I could see Toosey's demure smile as she stopped hesitatingly before him, and the beam of joy on the other's satyr-like old face at a conquest so unexpected and so complete.

What passed between them I had no way of knowing. I was willing to leave that to Toosey. For I was busy, just then, with a movement or two of my own. One was to watch the rug in the show-window. The other was to unsnap my waist and reach in to the gun-holster laced close under my left breast. It was not as easy to do as it sounds, under the circumstances. But once done I moved with apparent aimlessness on to the next shop-window, slipping the automatic under a fold of my faded poplin.

I had the satisfaction, the next minute, of seeing Toosey's old admirer toddle briskly into the gem-shop and the door close behind him. Toosey herself brushed by me, with a look of interrogation on her averted face.

"Quick," I told her, "phone Sloan. Tell him, straight to that Holshaw house with at least a dozen reserves. Then send a cop, that traffic-cop, any cop, right here to where I'll be waiting. But get Sloan and those reserves first!"

I noticed, in an abstracted sort of way, that Toosey's abandoned and forgotten perambulator was gliding of its own sweet will down the slope of the sidewalk pavement. When it reached the curb it lurched, balanced, and went slowly over on its side, to the accompaniment of a sudden scream of alarm from a stout woman in a passing limousine. But I gave this calamity no further attention, for I was busy watching the gem-dealer's window, waiting impatiently to see the cabinet unlocked and the string of pearls lifted away from their place of peril.

I waited for some time, oppressed by that ominous lull which always seems to precede catastrophic moments. I waited with mounting alarm, wondering as to the reason for such dangerous delay. Then the inner voice of Instinct told me that something was wrong.

A panic of impatience took possession of me, followed by a feeling of helplessness in my isolation. For Toosey was no longer in sight and I could see no sign of the patrolman who was to be sent to my assistance. So, in desperation, I decided to investigate, to take things in my own hands, if need be.

I walked resolutely into that small and sumptuous shop. There I found my rubicund Beau Brummel blandly and leisurely looking over an array of

diamond rings set out on a plaque of black velvet. He was attended by a foppish-looking man of about forty-five or fifty, a dandified and rather lady-like figure wearing a Prince Albert, a *pince-nez*, and a fixed expression of patronizing boredom.

His high-arching eyebrows went even higher when he beheld me and my dowdiness invading that scrupulously aristocratic domain of his. He viewed me with silent and hostile interrogation. And everything combined tended to choke the last Chesterfieldian amenity out of life. In other words, I was as hot as a hornet, and I didn't care who knew it.

"*Get your pearls out of that window!*" I called out in a sudden and angry, and, I suppose, altogether ridiculous shout of warning.

The man started at that uncouth and unexpected command, started as though he had been stung by a bee. But, after his one gasp of surprise, he in no way threatened to move.

"I say somebody's stealing your string of black pearls!" I hissed out at him as I leaned in across his glimmering show-case.

But movement, when it came, did not come from the owner of the shop. It was the rubicund old Beau Brummel who suddenly jumped to his feet and ran for the door. He was out before the gem-dealer could even get behind his counter, for his first care, I could see, was to audit and replace his scattering of diamond rings. And he lost still more time by reaching for a push-button just behind a wall-case and then by leaning over his desk-railing and taking up what looked like an English police whistle. But I didn't even wait for him.

By the time I had reached the street again Toosey's immaculate and decrepit old admirer was no longer in the immediate neighborhood of that shop-front. He was, in fact, hastening northward along Madison Avenue with a celerity which was rather startling in one of such advanced years. Yet when he beheld Toosey Attrill and a uniformed officer advancing toward him from the opposite direction he came abruptly to a stop, hesitated and doubled back along the avenue.

My attention, however, was centered more on the shop-window. The prayer-rug was still there, and on it the coil of black pearls still reposed. This much the gem-dealer himself could see at a glance. But what he could not see or understand was that at any moment they might disappear. His stupidity seemed maddening.

"Take those things out of that window!" I once more frantically commanded. For by this time I could see the rug lifting, lifting ominously, lifting as though a blindly groping hand moved about beneath its silky folds.

The idiot in the *pince-nez* made no slightest effort to carry out my command. Instead of doing so, in fact, he raised the police whistle to his lips, blew on it, and then promptly stepped backward and locked himself in his own shop, where I could see him vigorously working the contact-switch of his burglar-alarm circuit. A police-car full of blue-coats at the same time clanged across the avenue. I had only time to wonder if it was Sloan and his men headed for the Holshaw house. For I realized, at last, that I had to face the music alone.

I did the thing that came easiest. I leveled my automatic at the window of that gem-shop and fired. I was standing pretty close to it, and the bullet, at short range, cut through the heavy plate as though it had gone through a sheet of rolled lead. It perforated the glass without a break of its surface, leaving a hole as round and clean-cut as the point of a diamond drill might have made.

So with my next movement I flung the heavy automatic flat against the window, flung it with all my strength. There was a crash and shatter of glass, a chorus of startled shouts from behind me, and a bleat like a banshee-wail from the shop-keeper himself as I leaned in through the broken window and snatched up his string of dusky globes on their wire of platinum.

As I did so I was vaguely conscious of Toosey's perturbed old reprobate in the silk hat running like a pelted hound along Madison Avenue and turning the first corner toward the west, memory of his misdirected amours apparently lending wings to his flight. But I was intent on a little sprinting of my own. I ran straight toward Toosey and her policeman, with my hands held high above my head, for that officer, I could see, already had his service revolver out. I wasn't anxious for any sudden misunderstanding, in case he stood in doubt as to which side of the fence I was on.

"Keep those pearls," I gasped as I thrust the dangling rope of midnight duskiness into his huge hand. He blinked down at them with ox-like and puzzled eyes. Then, with his gaze already back on the shattered plate-front, he took possession of me.

"Yuh bruk that window!" he said with damning and phlegmatic conviction as the big hand clamped like a vise on my arm.

I knew that I was under arrest, and I knew there was no use arguing about it. Yet the next moment, through the gathering crowd, I could see Sloan bearing down on us with one of his prisoners.

It surprised me a little to see that this prisoner was Toosey's Chesterfieldian old admirer. But it surprised me still more to see our wrathy inspector suddenly swat the silk tile from the head of that pompous old rake,

who was still apparently resenting his capture. Even Toosey turned to watch the rather breathless Sloan as he pushed and bunted his prisoner unceremoniously to where we stood.

"What's the good o' man-handlin' that harmless old nut?" demanded the romantic and somewhat indignant Toosey.

"Harmless?" echoed the irate Sloan, still a little out of breath as he reached up and jerked a white wig off his captive's pink-fleshed skull. "Harmless? Why, he's Sapphire Sam of the Pareto gang! And he's the stick-up who just tipped off that gang and let two-thirds o' them get away over the roofs!"

Then Sloan's troubled face suddenly relaxed, for he had caught sight of the string of pearls dangling from the young patrolman's right hand. He blinked at the jewels for several seconds. Then he turned to me.

"You're sure making the grade, Balmy!" he announced with a grudging sort of pride.

But I couldn't share in his enthusiasm.

"I wish that grade didn't lead into the sort of life it does," I said out of my weariness of body and soul.

"Are you tired of honest work?" he demanded.

"I'm tired," I told him, "of work that always seems to lead me into violence and vileness. I've had about all of it that I can stand. And if I don't get out of it soon I'm going to lose my faith in life. And my faith in myself! And my faith in you!"

He studied me for a silent moment. Then he laughed a little.

"I guess we'll have to get you a little closer to the Four Hundred," he said with a curt kindliness which did not altogether relieve my soul of its rancor.

CHAPTER XV

THE STRANGER IN THE HOUSE

I SAT LANGUIDLY back in a lilac-colored chair, in a lilac-colored room, waiting for the fifth wealthiest woman in America. For Inspector Sloan, true to his word, was most unmistakably ushering me into society.

Through the open French windows I could see a terraced lawn, a garden-canopy, tan with green trimmings, and two Russian deerhounds lying half-way between a Tuscan urn and a round tower tea-seat of willow. The lawn was a very big one. It seemed almost endless, in the slanting afternoon sunlight. Yet in a break of the trees beyond a parterre of tea-roses I could see the blue-green waters of the sound.

Miramar, I had to acknowledge, was a very beautiful home. But I wasn't especially interested in its beauties. I was more interested in myself. For I was ill-at-ease, and indignant, and confronted with the final humiliation of having nothing on which to vent an honestly begotten bad temper. And I sat there on my lilac-colored chair awaiting Mrs. Obden-Belpont, the aforementioned fifth wealthiest woman in America, for exactly thirty-five minutes.

I watched a wine-colored limousine thread its way along the winding gravel drive between the endless Venetian-green acres of lawn, and decided to wait another five minutes, and no more. I was still sitting there with my watch in my hand, like a time-keeper at a track-side, when a quick rustle of silk made me look up.

I saw myself being inspected by a thin and nervous woman with narrow cheek-bones and an Iron Duke nose. She was at least fifty. There was authority in her movements, just as there was power in the flat line of her mouth, puckered at the ends like a winter-apple. And I knew at once, I knew instinctively, that I was face to face with Mrs. Obden-Belpont.

"You're the young lady from the Police Department?" she demanded. She spoke briskly and impersonally, pausing only a moment, apparently, to digest her shock at finding a hireling of the law in a Duff-Gordon frock and a Tappe hat.

"Scarcely," I amended, screening my real feelings behind a rather languid smile. The moment she showed signs of getting top-lofty, I had decided, I'd pay her back for the ignominies of the last two hours. But this wasn't going to be so easy as I had imagined, for that impersonality of hers,

which seemed to have already marked me as a mere side-issue in her busy life, gave every promise of proving both as impalpable and as impenetrable as a sound-fog.

"Then who?" she began, slightly elevating her thinly penciled eyebrows.

"I'm Miss Rymal," I said, buckling on my professional air as though it were armor-plate. "And I was sent here from the Protective Alliance offices."

She seemed to see light.

"But you were to come out on the two fifty-five train," she announced with a note of latent reproof.

"I *did* come out on the two fifty-five train," I just as decisively replied.

"And Hoskins was sent to meet you."

"Yes," I smilingly retorted. "But, you see, it was with the servants' carry-all. And I rather fancied you'd overlooked that I might be crowding the new second cook and the car wiper. At least I *think* he was a car wiper."

I had the satisfaction of seeing her start, as I had intended to make her start, at that none too muffled rebuke of mine. But in a moment's time she was plainly and completely mistress of herself.

"Miss Blanchan attends to these things," she explained, with the minutest compression of the winter-apple lips.

"Who," I inquired, "is Miss Blanchan?"

"She is my secretary," answered the mistress of Miramar as she duplicated my own gesture by glancing down at her tiny gold time-piece.

"Then she ought to be dismissed," I promptly announced.

"I can give you precisely fifteen minutes," was the polar yet unruffled statement of Mrs. Obden-Belpont, studiously ignoring my airy invasion of her household administrations.

"That will be sufficient, I think," I told her, still smiling. Having scored a point, I could afford to be magnanimous. It wasn't every day in the week, I remembered, that one could scratch back at the fifth wealthiest woman in America.

"Then how did you get here from the station?" asked the still abstracted-eyed woman, apparently following her own busy line of thought.

"A very kind old gentleman in flannels seemed to waken to the humor of the situation and brought me here in a tan-colored canoe-roadster. That, I might add, was exactly three-quarters of an hour ago!"

She did not start, this time. She seemed more than ever preoccupied. But she appeared to take a page out of my own book, finally, and smiled a

serenely detached and far-away smile.

"That must have been Ferrie," she meditatively observed.

"Ferrie?" I echoed.

"Merely Admiral Trevor Ferris," she explained with acidulated sweetness. "And crowding a rear admiral *must* have seemed more of a novelty than a cook in a wagonette!"

I had the qualified satisfaction of knowing I'd forced the claws through the velvet.

"He seemed rather a silly old man," I casually explained. I did this with malice aforethought and in defiance of truth, for that brisk old gentleman had chattered like a magpie all the way out to Miramar. I had liked that chattering. And even more I had liked the kindliness of that flannel-clad old idler with the high-powered roadster and the humorous eyes.

"But this isn't exactly what we're here to talk over, is it?" suggested my hostess, with another look down at her watch. "So will you be good enough to tell me what you know of this case?"

The rebuff was gentle, but unmistakable.

"I'd prefer that you told *me*," I countered. And for the second time I had the satisfaction of knowing that I had drawn her up short. But she was too much a woman of the world, I suppose, to nurse her annoyance. Or perhaps I was too small game to bother about gunning after.

"I'll explain it very briefly. My daughter Natalie is to be married here at Miramar next Friday at high noon. She is to marry Captain Lloyd Sherwin—one of the Sussex Sherwins—who was attached to the British Embassy at Washington before the war, but is now with the Angora Commission. We are not opening up the city house for the ceremony, because Captain Sherwin's furlough is short. The arrangements, of course, are not simple. We're rather upset here, as you may have noticed."

"Outside workers and the danger of theft, of course, quite often coincide," I observed.

"Please don't let that mislead you," sharply amended my companion. "Any workman or decorator who has been at Miramar during the last week has been most carefully supervised, and has been here only during the day. My own servants are all old and trusted family retainers, if you'll pardon the word. And that is what makes the robbery such a mystery."

"Then the robbery has already occurred?" I interpolated.

"*One* robbery has already occurred," replied my hostess.

"Then you are anticipating another?"

"That is scarcely how I should phrase it," corrected the lady with the dominant cheek-bones. "I'd prefer stating that I'm extremely anxious to prevent any such occurrence being repeated. I should have much preferred having a reliable man here, an officer from your Police Department. But I can't insult my guests by planting policemen about my rooms; and what's more important, I can't have Natalie worried by knowing about this."

"Why not?" I inquired.

"Natalie is an extremely delicate girl, a nervous girl, and she is already under what I regard as quite sufficient strain."

"Then she knows nothing of this robbery?"

"Nothing."

"Then who knows about it?"

"My husband, of course, and Miss Blanchan, and Admiral Trevor Ferris, and Benchley my butler."

"And nobody else?"

"Nobody that I know of. But I must hurry along, if you will permit me. The wedding gifts, of course, have been coming here. Earlier in the week, I'm afraid, we were more careless than we should have been. A number of the things had been laid out on the top of a grand piano, in the music room. They were even left alone there for a few moments. When I went to ask Benchley and Miss Blanchan to restore them to the wall-safe, the Medici diamond was missing."

"What was its value?"

The thin eyebrows went up a little.

"It's value to a thief would be merely a few hundred dollars, at the most. But its historical value is quite another matter. It was an antique Florentine ring, once in the possession of Lorenzo de Medici."

"An antique ring which in itself was not particularly beautiful?" I queried.

"The ring was not, in a way, but the diamond itself, I understand, was a rather wonderful stone."

"And there were other articles of jewelry on that piano-top when this one ring was stolen? Other jewels quite as valuable?"

"A number which were, intrinsically, much more valuable. But these were untouched."

"Who first discovered the theft?"

"I did."

"Whom do you suspect?"

The question seemed to startle her.

"I have fixed my suspicions on no particular person, as yet," she announced with quite unnecessary dignity.

"Then what do you want me to do?"

"I expect you to do what you were sent here to do," answered Mrs. Obden-Belpont with obvious asperity.

"Of course," I agreed, realizing that we weren't hitting it off any too well. "But what, after all, does that imply—the discovery of the thief? Or merely the recovery of the stolen ring?"

"Both—and more," was the other's prompt reply.

"What more?" I asked, for I'd already done a bit of thinking of my own.

"The safe-guarding of the other things, the valuables that are already under this roof."

"I see. And you are willing to let me go about that in my own way?"

She was a woman of prompt decisions. But she hesitated for a moment or two.

"I'd prefer having some slight inkling of what that particular way is to be," she finally averred.

"There are details, of course, which I can't foresee. But it would make my work much easier, and the case much simpler, if, for instance, no one in this house knew why I was here."

This seemed to stick in her craw.

"Then you already have a suspicion as to—as to who the guilty person is?"

"I have already concluded that it's what we generally call an inside job."

"You mean one of the servants?"

Instead of answering that question, I asked another.

"How many have you here?"

She did a quick sum in mental arithmetic.

"Seventeen of my own. Then there's Gwendolyn De Haven's maid, and Hallie Raleigh's, and Ferrie's man. That makes twenty, not counting the chauffeurs and seven men Mr. Obden-Belpont keeps on the yacht."

"But we need scarcely count the chauffeurs and the yacht-crew. They haven't, of course, the *entree* of the house."

"I have already told you that all of my servants are above suspicion," asserted the mistress of that manorial retinue.

I was tempted to remark, with a sigh, that they always *were* above suspicion, in cases like this, until the jewel was stolen and the case reported. But I felt the uselessness of argument.

"Then that leaves only the guests," I said in my most matter-of-fact manner.

"I'm afraid they, too, will have to be included in my list of exemptions," she said with icy yet forbearing patience.

I was about to inquire if the two Russian deerhounds were also ruled out. But I remembered, in time, that I couldn't profitably continue to indulge in the luxury of personal antipathies. If I was about to enter society, it wasn't going to make things any easier for me by doing so with a chip on my shoulder. So I decided to become serious.

"You're willing to leave this case entirely in my hands?" I asked.

"Of course, provided I agree with your line of procedure," was the none too ingratiating response.

"Then I'd like nothing whatever said about the theft. I'd also like no one to know the purpose of my presence here."

"Then how am I to explain you to my friends?" she demanded. And I had to smile a little at the note of perturbation in her voice.

"I think I can make the end justify the means," I told her, as coolly as I could. "I may not be always liked, you know, but I'm usually trusted."

"And?" she prompted.

"I'd like to be free to move about without embarrassment. So I'll telephone for my maid to be here some time before the dinner hour, which is about eight, is it not?"

"And you mean to say, you—"

"I mean to say," I cut in, for I knew we might as well face the issue right there and then, "that I propose staying at Miramar as your guest, until this case is completely cleared up, if you choose to have it cleared up."

I could see her fine old face harden, and even while I recognized the hostility in that face I was compelled to acknowledge its power.

"Really, you know—"

But that was as far as she got. Her speech was cut short by a sudden and quite unlooked-for interruption.

"Mother, what did you do with Uncle Gwynne's emerald?" asked a reedy young voice from the doorway. The next moment a girl of about twenty entered the room. She was an extremely thin girl, almost fragile looking, with a fretful brow and a thinly chiseled nose which she plainly

inherited from her mother. She made me think of what china-collectors call a cabinet piece, something to be always kept behind glass.

"I did nothing with it," answered the older woman.

"But it's—it's gone!" protested the Dresden-china young lady, without so much as a look in my direction.

"Gone?" echoed her mother, oddly elongating the word as a look of worry crept over her sharp-featured face. She had, for the moment, completely forgotten me. "What do you mean by gone?" she demanded, as she stood looking at her daughter.

"Why, I had Miss Blanchan bring me the emerald and the Morgans' lavalliere that just came this morning, out to the sun room to show Gwendolyn. I put them both on the round willow table there. And when we came back, in two or three minutes, after speaking to Reggie Wharton as he got out of his car, there was only the lavalliere left."

Mrs. Obden-Belpont's eye met mine. Then she turned back to the slender girl, who was surveying my unfamiliar person with merely a passing and preoccupied curiosity.

"Have you spoken to Miss Blanchan about this?"

"Yes. She hadn't even been near the sun room."

"Who has been?"

"Not a soul, that I can remember!"

The look of concern on the older woman's face deepened into one of actual alarm.

"Then you've spoken to the servants about this?"

The girl shook her head.

"I spoke to Benchley, mother. But he's been busy telephoning your lists to the caterers, for the last forty minutes. He knows absolutely nothing about it."

The older woman stood for a moment or two deep in thought. It was evident that she was struggling to rationalize the unreasonable.

"But emeralds don't walk away like guinea-pigs. It's been mislaid by you, or Gwendolyn. Or possibly it's fallen off the table, or rolled under something."

Still again the girl shook her head.

"We've been down on our hands and knees for the last ten minutes. And there's not a trace of it in that sun room. And besides, mother, I distinctly remember putting it down next to the lavalliere. I *know* I left it there on that table! And I know somebody must have come in and taken it!"

Mrs. Obden-Belpont, for the first time, turned to me without that opaque look of antagonism in her eye. Her daughter's gaze also turned in my direction. There was a moment of silence. It struck me as being almost dramatic.

Then the older woman stepped across the room and touched an electric-bell.

"This is my daughter, Miss Rymal," she said with a smile which, I'm afraid, was just a little forced, as I answered the girl's qualified movement of the head with a bow quite as Arctic as her own. "Miss Rymal is to be our guest during the next few days, Natalie, and while I'm sure she'll understand that we can't give her a great deal of our time, under the circumstances, I *do* hope we can make her visit a pleasant one."

"And a successful one," I added.

"That will be charming, of course," said the abstracted young bride-to-be, with her perfunctory and quite impersonal rising inflection. She was altogether at sea, of course, as to the situation about which she was pirouetting. She was, in fact, already turning away when a maid in service cap and apron entered the room.

"Hortense, will you please show Miss Rymal to her room, the first room in the Lorrilard wing," said the mistress of Miramar with her suave yet Wellingtonian smile. "And tea is being served on the terrace, Miss Rymal, in half an hour. I do hope you'll be able to join us there."

"I'll be there," I said as impassively as I could. But it took an effort to achieve that glacial serenity which seemed to be the order of the day in my new surroundings.

"And, Hortense," added Mrs. Obden-Belpont, "connect the extension there so that Miss Rymal can telephone in to the city for her maid." And if I smiled, it was not altogether in triumph, but more at the thought of Toosey Attrill, late of Chatham Square, being installed under that stately and solemn roof.

CHAPTER XVI

DURING TEA ON THE TERRACE

As I stepped out on the terrace, to join that gay-colored group in flannel and Shantung silk clustered about the willow tower-table and the green-trimmed garden-canopy, my pulse-count was just about one hundred and twenty. For I really believe I was more afraid of that cluster of amiable men and women, grouped peacefully about a tea-wagon and two foot-men in uniform, than I would have been of a collection of gangsters awaiting me in the darkest corner of Hell's Kitchen. So, with the eternal camouflage of the intruder not yet sure of her ground, I dissembled my nervousness beneath a mask of exaggerated nonchalance as I sauntered across that close-clipped turf, stopping to pat one of the undulatory deerhounds which trotted confidently up beside me. So very much, I remembered, depended upon one's entrance. And stage-fright is never an easy thing to conquer.

"Fine animals, eh?" remarked a man who promptly arose from one of the wicker club-chairs in front of me. I at once saw that it was my old friend of the tan-colored roadster. And a minute or two later I devoutly thanked my stars, not only for that walking canine skeleton known as a deerhound, but even more for that russet-skinned old knight in flannels. For the two of them combined, I found, had given me a bridge across which I had tripped from the world of ordinary mortals into the world of millionairedom.

It seemed natural enough for Admiral Trevor Ferris to give me his chair and ask Jenkins to fetch him another, and then explain that a deerhound was ornamental but not overly intelligent. "And I miss my guess," he added, "if you don't join me in putting intelligence before anything else." And that made me blush a little, I know, but a younger man on my right began enlarging on the intelligence of the Zeigler pointers, and a fat man still farther around the circle spoke of the cleverness of the Elmview scout-dogs, and that reminded me of what I'd seen the dogs in the New York police department do, for more than once I'd watched Lieutenant Bolton putting his four-footed "rookies" through their turns. So before I quite knew it I had that entire circle listening to my description of how a German police dog could be trained to make an arrest by overtaking a prisoner and holding him, or even do "roof work" in the tenement districts when a criminal tried to break away *via* the sky-line.

Then the talk ambled on to animals in general, about which that group of idlers conversed easily, abundantly and unaffectedly, from the "points" of Mansfield bull bitches to the breeding qualities of Guernsey cattle. Then Mrs. Obden-Belpont herself joined the circle, and tea was served, and the talk went on to marlin-fishing and power boats and pirate bridge. And as I sat there lazily listening to it, but with my ears and eyes very much open, I found myself tucking several little discoveries carefully away in their mental pigeon-holes.

In the first place, there had been no introductions. Everybody in that group, apparently, was supposed to take everybody else for granted. In the second place, I found the men as a whole much more amiable than the women. It was in the women, and only in the women, that I could detect any trace of that latent hostility, that quietly challenging antagonism, which seems to be the royal prerogative of our sex. In the third place, they all seemed much more offhanded and easy-mannered and matter-of-fact than I had expected. They didn't talk a bit like Mrs. Humphrey Ward's men and women. They reminded me, in fact, of a cluster of healthy and sun-burned and rather lazy-living children who'd grown up and even grown old without quite knowing it—until I overheard the man they spoke of as "Ferrie" casually discussing magnetic declinations and geodetic survey statistics with a brick-colored Apollo whom they invariably called The Commodore. And I sat there, quite at my ease, rather flattered that the brick-colored Apollo was all the while trying to talk to me around the corner of Ferrie's shoulder, at the same time that the young man who liked Zeigler pointers kept forestalling the footman in balancing lumps of sugar on my saucer rim. This seemed to annoy a languid-eyed young lady in organdy, who drifted over in our direction and meltingly yet pointedly asked me how I'd ever come to know so much about police dogs.

It was Ferrie who spoke, even before I had time to answer that question myself, when for one perilous moment I was tempted to announce that I was merely head gymnast of a bunch of Greek dancers who'd promised to prance in cheese-cloth around the MacMonnies fountain-rim. "Didn't you tell me driving out from town, Miss Rymal, that you once tried your hand at settlement work?" he blandly interposed.

"Only as an amateur," I just as glibly fabricated. I awakened to the fact, though, that for the second time that russet-faced old gentleman had stepped in between me and disaster. Just why he should do this puzzled me a little, but I had only time to register a vague impression, whispered to me by instinct, that this woman whose name I later found to be Gwendolyn De Haven was in some way my enemy and would be well worth watching. For

just then I glanced up and saw yet another figure advancing toward us across the close-cropped turf.

It was a very dapper figure, for all its height, a figure in soft gray flannel, with a comfortable-looking cheviot shirt and white buckskin shoes tipped with brown. Under his arm he carried a rather crushed looking Panama hat, thereby, I suppose, unconsciously advertising its superior fiber. But it wasn't this that made me stare at our new arrival. What made me suddenly sit up, with my last speech to Ferrie trailing away into thin air, was the fact that the newcomer was Winfred Ealand himself.

There, not more than ten steps away from me, stood my Winkie, my long-lost Winkie, calmly shaking hands with three summery looking girls who cooed about him like wood-pigeons. Then he moved on and said something to Mrs. Obden-Belpont which brought a metallic smile to her angular face, a momentary smile which made me think of a spark struck from a flint. He nodded to two or three of the men and moved on again to the brick-red Apollo. Then he stopped short, as though he had been shot. For his eyes had most unmistakably fallen on me.

I was just wondering what to do, to waken my poor bewildered Winkie out of that tell-tale state of coma, when Admiral Ferris threw a caviar sandwich to one of the deerhounds, and apparently quite by accident sent it against Winkie's immaculate gray flannel jacket.

"Don't blame me, Ealand," he said as he got up out of his club-chair and swung that still stupid-eyed newcomer about by the elbow, "but sit down here and talk to Miss Rymal while I go and get my bird-glasses. You know Miss Rymal, of course—well, if you don't, it's time you did!"

And Winkie very woodenly and very clumsily shook hands with me. He felt for his chair, still fixing me with a sort of half-inquiring and half-accusatory what-in-the-name-of-God-is-the-meaning-of-all-this look. And I swallowed the lump in my throat and tranquilly told him how Admiral Ferris had just been saying that deerhounds were ornamental but not very intelligent. Then I asked if *he* didn't think intelligence was to be rated far above physical grandeur.

But that gentle reminder didn't strike within a mile of him.

"Where did you come from?" he huskily demanded.

"From the wicked city," I said with the lightest smile I could manage, while he still blinked at me as though I were a ghost on stilts.

"I want to see you," he solemnly proclaimed.

"You *are*," I just as solemnly retorted. And I had to rattle on until I'd scarcely breath enough left to tell the young man on my right that my

saucer-rim really couldn't hold any more lumps. I had to packet my own feelings and hold poor Winkie at arm's length until a rather faded and obliterated-looking spinster bore down on him and announced that she'd just been reading about his wonderful new dye-invention in the *Times*. This woman, I found, was Miss Blanchan, the social secretary at Miramar, the quartermaster in petticoats who'd so tactfully tried to relegate me to the servants' wagonette. She was English, in spite of her name, and spoke with beautiful broad vowels just as though she had a potato in her mouth. Instead of a potato there, however, she carried the most extraordinarily big teeth I'd ever seen. And she had a face like a horse. And I disliked her for casting demure yet adoring glances at my Winkie, even more than I disliked her for the wagonette.

But my slow-witted Winkie had by this time recovered his composure, and spoke to me now and then with a stiff politeness which rather reminded me of the tone in which one addresses the recently bereaved. So as I sat there watching him with the little shell of a tea-cup balanced in his thin brown hand I couldn't help remembering that that was the same hand which had once clung so forlornly to mine. I couldn't help recalling that I had once put ice-bags on that same madura-tinted forehead, and that once those same lips had whispered up to me through a veil of ether: "Are you staying close, you girl with the gray eyes?" And when he was convalescing in the St. Andrew's sun room, before that masterful married sister of his had whisked him off to Arizona, he'd even lifted my hand (just a little bleached with bichloride) up to his lips and said: "I don't see, Gray Eyes, how I can ever live without you!"

But that seemed a long, long time ago. And many things had happened since then. And the world, after all, is a crazy old jumble of cross threads, a tangled ball of yarn tossed about by the paws of a terribly playful destiny. For there was my Winkie once more, sitting within five feet of me. He was sitting within five feet of me, but I couldn't help feeling the unbridged and the unbridgable chasms that yawned between us. He was as far away from me as though he had been sitting in a club-chair on the brink of Mars, conversing with the seventh sister of that rather extensive and unlucky family known as the Pleiades. Yet from time to time, I noticed, he looked at me out of narrowed and troubled eyes. I could see the unspoken question on his face. And I could see something more. It wasn't exactly incredulity, I decided, and it wasn't exactly bewilderment. It was something more like distrust. My Winkie, I could see, was suspicious of me. He no longer believed in me. And I remembered that I wasn't in a position to explain things to him, that he'd have to go on thinking whatever he may have been

thinking, no matter what happened. If it hurt me a little, to feel that he couldn't at least give me the benefit of the doubt, no matter how much appearances might have been against me, I still wrung a sort of black joy out of his bewilderment. It was a wilful joy, but it was a human one. And my cake of satisfaction was iced with triumph when the brick-red Apollo and the sugar-lump youth carried me off between them to look over the former's seventy-footer with the Craig-Diesel engines.

I didn't see Winkie again until that night, when I rustled down in a feverishly altered Paquin dinner-gown—and Toosey had all but died of heart-failure getting it out to Miramar in time—together with a rope of pearls, resplendent real pearls, that Sloan himself had borrowed from a Maiden Lane importer who wasn't averse to having a friendly word or two passed on to the Appraisers' Staff. Then I saw Winkie at a slightly closer range than I had expected, for it so happened I was seated that night at dinner between him and Rear Admiral Trevor Ferris. I'd thought, for one foolish moment, that Winkie might like me in my unexpected Queen-of-Sheba get-up. But in that I made the mistake of my life. Instead of melting with admiration, he looked me over with a cold and scoriac eye, relapsing into a morose and troubled silence from which the fluffy débutante on his left made repeated but ineffectual efforts to drag him.

That rope of pearls, for some reason or other, seemed to be worrying him. He inspected them covertly when he was taking his first sip of sauterne, and he studied them again when he was nibbling at a *pannequet suzette*. They'd served champagne through practically all that dinner, and I suppose I'd sipped enough to give me Dutch courage, for I felt very much at home and talked coolly back across the table at a plump dowager whose bust was so bejeweled that I kept expecting to see her revolve slowly about on a pivot, and laughed at Ferrie's jokes, and promised to dress up as Marie Antoinette to somebody else's Louis the Sixteenth at the costume *fete* on Thursday night.

Yet that dinner was far from being all play to me, for I kept going up and down that double line of prattling grandees, pondering which one of them could possibly be a gem-thief and what reason that particular person could have for purloining a poor little Dresden-china heiress's wedding gifts. I was still without anything to work on, as Sloan would have put it. But again and still again my attention went back to the self-obliterating Miss Blanchan, and I decided, as I sat there, to find out a little more about that long-jawed maiden-lady. I also felt rather interested in Gwendolyn De Haven. And I also decided to telephone in to Sloan's office that night for two or three dictaphones and a field-bridge for listening in on the house-wires. For this

was not the age of miracles, and no case could be run down, I remembered, without at least a clue.

It wasn't until dinner was almost over that Winkie swung about and faced me. And that reappearance from Greenland seemed to take an effort on his part.

"What are you doing here?" he said quietly yet with a note of finality that was anything but pleasant.

"Exactly what you're doing," I told him with the lightest smile I could muster up.

"What do you mean by that?" he demanded with a heaviness which promptly trumpeted every challenging impulse into line. And still again I laughed in my place along that double rank of laughter and talk.

"I mean that I'm doing what everybody else here seems to be doing—enjoying myself," was all the satisfaction that I would give him.

"I can't quite believe that," he was ungracious enough to retort.

"Why not?" I inquired.

"Because," he said, looking me square in the eyes, "you are not happy."

"Perhaps I haven't a great deal to make me that way," I retorted, thinking more about the lights in his mahogany-brown pupils than the words on my tongue.

"I've a feeling, at any rate," he contended, "that you're in a difficult position. I don't know how or why, but the feeling is there. And I'm wondering if there's any way I could really help you."

"You failed me once," I reminded him.

"But they told me such absurd things about you," he protested, looking down at his shoe-tips.

"What?"

"No matter, now," he replied.

"Did you believe them?"

"A number of things seemed to confirm them," he none too happily acknowledged. "But I can see, now, how wrong it all was. And I want to believe in you. I want to, tremendously!"

I could feel my heart pound. But I couldn't afford to show my hand.

"Then we'll have to wait until a certain bigger mystery is cleared away," I announced. And that was all I found myself able to say to him.

CHAPTER XVII

THE THIEF WHO LIKED GLITTER

TWO mornings later, as I lay in bed reviewing the entire Miramar situation, Toosey came in with my matutinal cup of coffee. This scheme of leaving the guest alone until noon suited me, having much to think over, better than I had expected. For the last two days had been anything but idle days for Toosey and me. I'd made a camera-inspection for finger-prints, and attached my field-bridge to the house-circuit, and, using the decorators as a screen, had craftily planted three dictaphones where I thought they'd do the most good. I'd also had Wilkins put on the gate, in the guise of an assistant-gardener, where he fumed and said wicked words like a harness-bull delegated to the patrolling of the dustiest of circus lots. And I'd also most thoroughly looked over the wall-safe, which proved a portly enough vault for which a Tudor fire-place had been sacrificed. The entrance to this, protected by a four-tumbler combination lock, was rather cleverly concealed. But after I'd persuaded Mrs. Obden-Belpont to stow the jewelry away in that safe, and keep it stowed there, I secretly wired a mat in front of the safe-door and had it connected with a buzzer beside my own bed.

Besides all this, while I was busy at my end of the line, Toosey was correspondingly occupied in a surreptitious inspection and appraisal of the forces below stairs. We had worked carefully and inconspicuously, and we had worked thoroughly. But we had also worked fruitlessly. Not a thing out of the ordinary had occurred. And not a clue had been unearthed.

For that reason, probably, Toosey was not in the most amiable of moods as she lighted a cigarette and filled her hungry lungs with the smoke thereof.

"Old mutton-chops won't stand for this," she murmured as she blew a rebellious cloud ceilingward. Then she came over and seated herself on the edge of the bed. "Say, Balmy, this isn't a house. It's a penal colony. What you can't do 'round this dump'd fill a book the size o' that shoe-trunk!"

"Then supposing you get those gray and white calf oxfords," I interrupted, recognizing the premonitory symptoms of revolution.

Toosey did what she was told, but she did it sullenly, and a trifle abstractedly. For Toosey possessed what she always claimed was a one-ring brain.

"And I ain't so stuck on the splendor o' this here pen. There ain't a palm under the roof. Why, I've seen Hudson River day-boats with a darned sight

showier finishin's. After readin' about a place in the Sunday papers for five years you kind o' look for something satisfyin'."

"I think I'll have my pussy-willow taffeta," I interposed in as far-away a voice as I could manage. Toosey rose slowly from her posture of ease on the bedside.

"But honest to Gawd, Balmy, I thought I'd bump into furbelows and finishin's here that'd put a Pullman car on the blink, bird's-eye maple with a seed-pearl set in every bird's-eye, and plush carpets a half-foot thick, and gold plate all fussed up with fam'ly crests. I was lookin' for *tone*. But this joint ain't even up to the Turkish room at the Fatima. And them poor ginks down below, them toilers and oilers and stokers under old Benchley, they are sure ruled with a rod of iron. Gee, you'd better gimme a pulmotor if I gotta go back to them quarters again!"

"Toosey!" I called out to her.

"But I mean it. And if it wasn't for Evans, the second man, I'd be leggin' it back to the Big Burg. Evans is the only half-alive Annie down in that walkin' mausoleum."

It wasn't altogether impossible for me to get Toosey's point of view as to that household. It had astonished me to find how complex life could become, how ruled by procedure and system and convention. Toosey and I had been free, like most nonentities, abandonedly and abundantly free, without even knowing it. And all that morning, as I stood a preoccupied spectator of the household's activities, I couldn't escape a certain vague intimidation before a mechanism too complicated for comprehension. The thing was too big for me. It tended to subjugate me, to leave me as obliterated as Miss Blanchan herself had become. I couldn't help feeling, as I caught fleeting glimpses of Mrs. Obden-Belpont, that she was in some way not the captain, but the slave, of her environment. Her four duly appointed places of abode, her seasonal migrations, her obligations and engagements, her servants and supplies, her tribal prerogatives and prohibitions, combined to make up a machinery, terrible in its complicatedness, which she could neither control nor escape. And as the time of that much talked about and much written about Sherwin-Obden-Belpont wedding drew nearer I more and more realized how barbaric the mating-rites of a he- and she-thing of the human tribe could become, once you looked at it through the cool light of reason.

The making ready for those rites was still converting certain parts of Miramar into a cross between a greenhouse and an oriental bazaar, and below stairs was a humming beehive of activity. But the house itself seemed rather empty of guests, that day, and luncheon proved an extremely dreary affair. Ferrie, I found, had flitted off to Newport the night before, to inquire

into the welfare of an old crony of his in the Navy Hospital there. So it was with considerable surprise that I ran across him under a clump of maples late that afternoon. He was dressed in knickerbockers, and had a field-glass in his hand, and seemed intent on a study of the azure heavens above him when I interrupted the seance.

I had hoped that he would be glad to see me, and would be Chesterfieldian enough to show it. But he stood for quite a long time staring off through the heavy foliage.

"That's most remarkable," he said as he slowly put down his glasses. "I'm sure that was a Canada jay I saw there—*Perisoreus canadensis*, you know."

"A bird?" I asked as I sat down on a rustic bench past which a tiny brook gurgled and danced.

"Yes, a bird," he said, and helped himself to a collapsible camp-stool of steel and canvas. "Sometimes called the Whisky-Jack, or the Venison Heron, or the Moose-Bird, or several other names. You've detected my weakness, Miss Rymal. For I love to study God's innocent little feathered creatures. And a place like Miramar gives them such splendid harborage. It's as good as wandering into an aviary. And somewhere through the thicker cover here you may run across a Hungarian pheasant or two I brought over myself for Mrs. Obden-Belpont."

The sound of that name seemed to cause him to lapse into silence. He sat for a minute or two in deep thought. Then he turned to me.

"Who did it?" he abruptly demanded.

"Did what?" I asked.

"Carried off that De Medici ring," was the answer.

"The same person," I ventured, "who stole the emerald from the sun room."

The handsome old face grew suddenly furrowed. It reminded me of water, deep water, riffled by wind.

"Then there have been two thefts?" he said.

"I thought you knew that."

"Candidly, I didn't. The first one, of course, I knew about. Circumstances were such that Mrs. Obden-Belpont was compelled to make me a partner in her secret."

"Are any features of that secret being withheld from me?" I asked as I outlined to him what had already been told me of the case.

"No; that's all we know; positively. And I wasn't told, of course, about the second theft. That makes things more serious. But at the same time it obviously leaves the case an easier one to handle."

"Why easier?"

"It removes it, don't you see, from the region of the episodic. It lifts everything above mere accident, caprice, and all that sort of thing. It should help toward establishing motive, for with two points to work from, you get the possibility of triangulation, so to speak."

I had to hold my kindly old mentor up and ask him just what he meant by this.

"But we've a case here," I told him after his explanations, "where motive doesn't seem to count. And it's clearly not professional work."

He looked at me with rather a wry smile.

"Which leaves only *us*," he said, "or the help."

"How about us?" I inquired.

"Which?" he countered.

"Any possible one of us?"

He shook his head.

"Tell me about Gwendolyn De Haven," I ventured. He turned and looked at me.

"Impossible," he said with the utmost decision. And I had to ask myself why I was putting such faith in his purely personal impressions.

"Then Miss Blanchan?" I continued.

Again he shook his head.

"More impossible!"

"But are you sure?"

He thought that question over.

"Yes; I'm sure," he finally declared.

"Then how about Benchley?"

He smiled, almost commiseratively.

"It's quite clear that you don't know the redoubtable Benchley as—as we've come to know him. Benchley, my dear young lady, is a man of affairs, a ruler, an administrator. And it would be a bit absurd to sacrifice a forty-year record for honesty, a life slate of absolute integrity, for a three- or four-hundred dollar trinket."

"That's what I've felt, all along," I agreed. "And at the same time that's why it has impressed me as an inside job. Yet, as I've already said, it isn't

the work of a professional. The haul, in both cases, was too inconsequential for the risks. It's more the sort of snatch-pretty sneak-thieving that a weakling, or a mental defective, might be guilty of."

Still again the man known to his friends as Ferrie indulged in a quiet little laugh.

"Mrs. Obden-Belpont has no weaklings in *her* retinue!" he proclaimed.

"That's what I've been at considerable pains to verify," I acknowledged.

"Then that takes us back to the guests, after all," he said with a chuckle.

"But what is there to work on, there?"

He wrinkled his well-tanned brow. He seemed unwilling to say what he was about to say.

"You're naturally averse to carrying tales," I suggested.

"I've been wondering about young Ealand," he finally ventured, in a hesitating sort of way. And it was a second or two before I became quite conscious of the fact that he was talking about Winkie, my Winkie.

"How do you mean?" I languidly inquired, dissembling an astonishment which gave me a rather creepy feeling just along the nape of the neck.

"Hasn't it struck you that he's rather—well, rather morose? Rather worried-looking and ill-at-ease?"

I had indeed been struck by certain things, but, knowing something of their cause, I couldn't afford to acknowledge them.

"That may be due to his liver," I ventured with a weak attempt at levity.

"Or his conscience," solemnly suggested my companion. Then he looked at me out of the corner of his shrewd old eye. "How well do you know him?"

I couldn't help hesitating a little. We were, I remembered, on what might prove unexpectedly thin ice.

"I don't think I know him at all," I finally acknowledged. I tried to speak coolly. But the torch had been set, and I saw my world going up in flames. It was absurd, of course, but there are times when life seems made up of absurdities. So I turned and asked, point-blank: "Do you think he stole those jewels?"

I don't know how well I succeeded in controlling my face. But Ferrie made me suspicious. For I noticed that he stooped and picked a couple of burrs from his Scotch-wool stockings.

"I know that he knows they were stolen," he averred.

"Do you think he stole them?" I repeated.

"I'm sorry to have to say it," he muttered without looking at me, "but I know of something he *has* stolen."

"What?" I demanded.

But Rear Admiral Trevor Ferris didn't answer that question. Instead, he caught up his field-glasses and leveled them through the sun-filtering leafage.

"By gad, ma'am, that's a myrtle warbler—breast black, throat white, yellow patch on head and side of breast, two white wing-bars and white-spotted tail-quills. The myrtle bird, as sure as I'm alive!"

I wasn't interested in birds and tail-spots, just at that moment, and I was about to inform Rear Admiral Trevor Ferris of the fact. But he silenced me by a motion of the hand. I thought, at first, that he'd merely spotted another dicky bird, but as I stared out along the leafy aisle that led down toward the sound I saw two figures approaching. One was Winfred Ealand. The other proved to be the fluffy débutante, whose name I'd taken the trouble to find out the night before. It was Tabbie Winthrop, and the "Tabbie" struck me as being especially appropriate. They wandered on, side by side, with an easy familiarity, and they seemed to be enjoying each other's company. I don't know whether it was the stricken look on my face that brought kind-hearted old Ferrie to my side, or whether it was because those light-hearted intruders had frightened away the last of his precious birds. At any rate he closed his glasses, folded his camp-stool and said with an unmistakable sigh: "Let's go back!"

I went back, wondering what had taken all the color out of the sunlight. For the thing that had hurt most of all was that Winkie and his bit of fluff had seen me, had distinctly seen me, and had coolly circled away in another direction. Ferrie himself seemed to feel that something was troubling me, for he respected my silence, and slipped away on the pretext of asking the old Scotch gardener about the new Princess Pat roses.

I went dispiritedly on across the glowing green terrace. Under the cool shadow of the carriage-entrance I saw a big plum-colored sedan ornamented by two human caryatids in plum-colored uniforms. One of these monumental figures suddenly wakened into life, circled the car, and swung open the plum-colored door. At the same moment Mrs. Obden-Belpont herself stepped out to the sedan. She was a busy woman that week, and her magisterial face bore every evidence of the fact. But she stopped short as she caught sight of me.

"You haven't succeeded very well, have you?" she remarked. Her tone was very quiet. It made me think of a knife-blade buried in rose-leaves.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because a diamond bar-pin, I find, has just been stolen from my daughter's room," quietly retorted that magisterial figure. And the plum-colored factotum swung shut the plum-colored door and left me staring after that glistening equipage as it wove its purring way out along the winding gravel drive.

But about this third jewel-robbery at Miramar, I soon found, there was little that was novel and still less that was known. Nor was my appeal to Natalie Obden-Belpont for information altogether satisfactory. That hollow-eyed young lady, quite worn out with fittings and plannings and consultations, to say nothing of a full-fledged bridesmaids' rehearsal, refused point-blank to talk about an episode so disturbing. It threatened, in fact, to push her over the sheer precipice of hysteria. And I myself, that night, felt a little too miserable to go down to dinner. So I sent Toosey forth with the report of a severe headache, occupying myself with a pretense of being busy at the dictaphone receivers. But it was only a pretense.

The night brought nothing new, nor did the next morning. Miramar, in fact, was preoccupied with a bigger movement than the one that had ushered me in through its cobble-stone gate-pillars. And all day long that ever-shifting army of preparation came and went.

"Say, Balmy," Toosey remarked after an observation of certain of these activities, "a three-ring hippodrome ain't got anything on this weddin' business in the Four Hundred, has it? And I lose my best bet if a' African chief wouldn't turn apple green with envy at all this big medicine over a splice that six high-balls and a motor-trip into Jersey used to be grub-stake enough for in *my* set!"

But Toosey's blithe comments on life in general rather failed to interest me, and when I sent her off on a quite unnecessary errand she went unwillingly, still voicing her disapproval of Miramar and its pretensions. Yet in less than half an hour she was back, with a solemn face and an accusatory look in her eye.

"It sure never fails!" she said with calm conviction. "You can't have *everything*!"

"What never fails?" I asked her.

"I wouldn't be that bride," she said instead of answering my question, "for all the flash-junk that ever came out of the Kimberley Mines."

"Toosey, what's the matter with you?"

"It isn't me. It's this house."

"What's going to happen to this house?"

"There's goin' to be a death in it," was her solemn-noted reply. "A death here—as sure as you stand on two legs."

There were times, of course, when Toosey was impossible.

"What makes you say absurd things like that?" was my none too patient inquiry.

"Oh, not so absurd," she contended. "And I'm goin' to get out of it, while the goin's good!"

"Well, you might at least leave a reason for your flight."

My sarcasm didn't seem to reach her.

"Balmy, when a bird flies into a house, *that means a death*! It never fails. And a bird flew into this house. And what's more, I saw it."

She wavered a little before my stare of unqualified disgust.

"What utter nonsense!"

"You don't believe that bird stuff?"

"No," I told her. "It's too stupid, too utterly stupid. I neither believe in your omen, in fact, nor approve of your attitude. You may perhaps recall we were sent here to do certain work, and before we leave, that work must be done!"

Toosey stared out over the lordly acres that lay between her and the sound.

"Well, I won't weep none when they gimme the wire to pull my freight," she stubbornly contended. So I left her there to wrestle it out with her own gods of superstition. I wanted to pull my own freight, for a time at least, from both Toosey and that house of tumult. I was glad to slip away into the consoling quietness of the leafy woodland beyond the shimmering-roofed greenhouses and rose-gardens. I was homesick for something which I couldn't define even to my own heart. And I wanted to be alone.

Yet to be alone, apparently, was the one luxury denied me, for as I struck deeper into that wooded solitude I found myself confronted by at least two unmistakable signs of human intrusion. One was a steel-rodded collapsible camp-stool, and the other was a pair of field-glasses. I looked about for their owner, but could see nobody. And I was glad of it, for the one thing I still wanted was desolation. As I advanced deeper into the woodland, however, I spotted a walking-stick standing upright in the ground. On it hung a brown Norfolk jacket. I stooped and looked the jacket over. It plainly belonged to Rear Admiral Trevor Ferris. But there was no Ferrie in sight.

I had taken that jacket up, during my inspection, and fully intended to hang it back over the walking-stick just as I had found it. But this wasn't so

easy as it seemed. The cane, stuck in the ground by its ferrule, went slowly over with its weight of cloth. For the second time I bayoneted the ground with that ferrule and watched coat and stick go down together like a dying soldier. Then I gathered up the coat, shook the dust and leaf-mold from it, and stopped to pick up a linen handkerchief which had fallen from one of its pockets during these activities.

I stood there a long time with that linen handkerchief in my hand. For as I had picked it up I discovered three things carefully wrapped up in it. One was a diamond bar-pin. The other was an emerald in a platinum setting. And the third was an antique Florentine ring.

I stared down at them in a sort of trance, for several seconds, then I came back to earth, back to an earth that didn't seem to have much reason or honesty left on it. But I had my work to do—and work, in one's hours of darkness, sometimes steps up to one's side and takes one's arm like an old and unfailing friend.

I tucked that handkerchief back in its pocket, took possession of the three bits of jewelry, and looked carefully about. Then I started for the gray-green gables of Miramar.

I'd crossed the empty golf course and turned into a long pergola draped with wistaria vines when I came face to face with the one man I should have preferred avoiding—Winfred Ealand.

He stood looking at me with morosely questioning eyes that made me think of the second act of *Hamlet*. That look naturally embarrassed me, embarrassed me almost as much as the memory of what I was carrying in my right hand. And in trying to conceal that embarrassment I did what one usually does: I exaggerated it.

"What is it?" he asked, staring quite pointedly at my tightly closed fist.

"Nothing," I airily replied.

"*What is it?*" he repeated.

The black joy of hurting him surged through me at that brusk and proprietory command. What was I to Hecuba, or Hecuba to me! I opened my hand and disclosed the three stolen pieces of jewelry. And I knew by his face that he understood exactly what they were.

"Where did you get those?" he asked, after a full minute of silence.

"I stole them," I said, looking him straight in the eye. We stood there, in fact, in the yellow-green light filtered through the wistaria-leaves, staring at each other like a couple of paper-weights.

"Hadn't I better take these?" he asked after that long armistice of silence. The iron, I noticed, had gone out of his voice.

"Why?"

"It would make it easier, wouldn't it?"

"For whom?" I inquired.

"For you—for all of us."

I laughed a little. But poor old Winkie couldn't see the humor of the situation.

"Just what do you intend to do?" I demanded.

"Return them to their owner, of course," was my Melancholy Dane's melancholy answer.

"Return them, of course," I echoed. And I watched him in silence as his thin brown fingers took possession of them. It was in silence, too, that I went along at his side as he emerged from the pergola, skirted a parterre of tea-roses, stepped out on the close-clipped terrace, and started across the lawn.

About the tan duck garden-canopy, I noticed, tea was being served. A truce, apparently, had been declared in that house of tumult, for they were all there, from Mrs. Obden-Belpont herself to Miss Blanchan and her teeth. I could see Winkie cross over to Natalie and draw her a little to one side.

There was wonder on her pallid little shell-white face, and the three stolen jewels in the cup of her hand, as she turned to the canopy and its company.

"Mother," she cried, her reedy young voice a little shrill with excitement. "They've been found!"

I sat down in an empty club-chair and watched their faces. Most of that company, it was plain, had no key to the situation.

"Natalie," gasped Gwendolyn De Haven, "who *was it*?"

"They have been returned," announced Winkie with a face like a mask, "strictly on the understanding that no questions are to be asked."

"But, my dear young man," announced the mistress of Miramar as she fixed my Winkie with her Wellingtonian eye, "questions certainly will and must be asked."

I was watching poor Winkie's face so closely that I failed to notice Ferrie as he joined the group.

"What's all this?" he demanded as he took a tea-cup from the obsequious Jenkins and looked about for a chair.

"We've found the thief," explained Gwendolyn De Haven with a nod toward her friend Natalie, who still stood with the three trinkets in her bony little hand.

"Have you now?" remarked the russet-faced old admiral as he blinked at the bits of jewelry flashing in the afternoon sunlight. "And just who *was* the thief?"

A dozen pair of eyes were turned interrogatively toward Winkie. He stood it much better than I had expected he would.

"You can say *I* was," he carelessly announced.

"Not by a long shot," promptly interpolated my old friend the rear admiral. "I come first there, my boy!"

"Come first?" questioned the dazed Mrs. Obden-Belpont.

"Well, an accomplice of mine," he contended as he subsided into the chair Jenkins had placed for him.

"What accomplice?" demanded Winkie, plainly perplexed by the tranquillity of my face.

"A gentleman who bears the name of Whisky John," retorted Ferrie. "But known to Adirondack guides and lumbermen as the Canada Jay, and sometimes as the Camp Robber, the boldest marauder, sir, of all the jay family, whom I've often enough seen stealing from canoes and wigwams, in the North Woods. And having entered society, he seems to have decided to outdo that jay of Mark Twain's that tried to fill a miner's cabin with acorns through a knot-hole in the roof. Only in this case he showed a weakness for flashier tid-bits!"

"You mean it was a *bird*?" demanded the empty-headed Gwendolyn De Haven.

"Exactly," replied Rear Admiral Trevor Ferris, crowning me with his kindly old smile of complete understanding.

And for the second time that day Winkie and I looked at each other long and thoughtfully. It wasn't until we were going in to dinner, however, that he had a chance to speak to me alone.

"Can't you tell me yet?" he said as he caught at my hand in one corner of the conservatory.

There was no use pretending I didn't know what he meant. And the pleading in his eyes almost made me forget the past that yawned between us. But I got a glimpse of Mrs. Obden-Belpont glittering like an iceberg under her tiara of diamonds set in platinum—and that reminded me of other things.

"Not yet," I said to the man who was still trying to hold my hand.

"But I'm never going to give you up!" he announced as we turned and walked decorously in to dinner.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE ASSAULT ON THE WALL-SAFE

FOR the essential oil of *ennui*, commend me to a combination of country house, faded decorations, and guests awaiting the down train the day after a big wedding. Excitement, keyed immoderately high, brings its inevitable back-swing of dullness. The busy ripples of color run out, leaving only the mud-flats of lethargy—like a beer-glass, the morning after, as Toosey inelegantly expressed it.

Miramar after the Obden-Belpont wedding, at any rate, reminded me that excessive glory is only too apt to be followed by excessive weariness. "Ichabod!" I had whispered to Ferrie as the last motor rolled away. For that stately pile of desolation made me think of New Orleans the morning after *Mardi Gras*, or a Broadway theater about the time the ushers begin to thump up the orchestra-chairs. We were a small but a plainly bored group who after dinner that night sat about the big windows of the *Salon de Terrasses* which boasted of direct ancestry from the Chateau de Brugieres.

Winkie was there, and Rear Admiral Trevor Ferris was there, and Gwendolyn De Haven and Miss Blanchan and the taciturn Obden-Belpont himself, with reserve written across his front as plainly as Miramar was written across his gate-pillar. They all seemed rather tired and self-immured and just a little relieved. And I shared that feeling, for my work, I knew, was over. Mrs. Obden-Belpont, finally released from the calls of generalship, had taken a bromide and a hot bath and gone to bed, though a few remaining workmen, both out on the terrace and in the house itself, were quietly yet industriously removing the last of the decorations. They made me think of tent-men busy under their gasoline flares on a circus-lot at midnight.

The only occupied person in our own group, I noticed as I sat back and studied them, was the cumbersomely expeditious Miss Blanchan. From the city afternoon papers she was carefully clipping and pinning together sensationally labeled photographs and ingeniously elaborated descriptions of the great wedding and the gifts, descriptions, by the way, which had appeared in print a considerable time before the ceremony itself had even begun. These extracts, which obviously were to be perused later by the triumphant mistress of Miramar, read like a Tiffany blue-book. Indeed, as I sat there idly watching the woman with those garnered sheaves of recorded glory I couldn't help speculating as to what other eyes might be perusing

those same unabashed exploitations of splendor. Among them, I told myself, there would be some that were covetous, and some that were designing, and some that were rebellious, for as one woman reporter had expressed it, "Never, since the days of the Romanoffs and the Durbars of India, had jewels been so showered on a young and beautiful daughter of earth's nobility!" I wasn't quite sure what this meant, but I knew that it sounded well. It sounded too well, in a way, since I couldn't help remembering that the gentry who make a profession of jewel stealing had the habit of watching the society pages as closely as the latest climber trying to enfilade the Social Register. I couldn't help wondering if this stood as an explanation of why the reticent William Obden-Belpont had suggested that I stay over for a day or two. For I remembered that these same jewels had yet to be transferred from Miramar to the safety deposit vaults where they would be duly stored to await the return of their owner.

I had plenty of time to do my thinking, since there was little else to do. So I sat there, as impersonally idle as the rest of them, a victim of that ebb-tide of lassitude which made the huge stone house an unbroken gray pall of ennui.

Then, all of a sudden, the universal gray blankness of things was shot through by one bewildering stroke of light. It came suddenly, and it came unexpectedly, as sharp as a pistol shot in the quietness of midnight, as conspicuous as a splash of blood across a sheet of virginal white. For as I sat there wrapped in my own thoughts, looking idly out on a world that had neither interest nor appeal to me, I had made a discovery.

Watching indifferently the last of the workmen dismantling the glories of that noonday spectacle, I let my eyes dwell on what I had accepted as a florist's assistant quietly engaged in removing the last of a bank of orchid-tinted hydrangeas and winding up the ultimate yards of what had once seemed endless bolts of cream-colored ribbon. He worked silently, and he worked methodically. But it wasn't this that suddenly attracted my attention to him. It was some vaguely reminiscent line about the drooping shoulders, some undefined familiarity about the pensive and funereal figure so frugally occupied in gathering up the relics of another world's vanished merrymaking. As he crossed the terrace and stepped into the house itself his face was suddenly turned toward me. It was at the exact moment I caught a glimpse of those features, lit up by the bunch-light swung out over the close-clipped turf, that the flash had struck out of the grayness of things, like a *minniewafer* over a No-Man's Land, sending a tingle along my nerve-ends and a warning message back from the observation-posts of instinct. For in

that sedentary workman, so monotonously winding up the last of his weary day's work, I saw Curate Sam, *alias* Sad Sam Everson.

I sat still, doing my best to digest that discovery. Then I tried to tell myself that it was impossible, absurd, a trick of the imagination. I even abandoned my first quick impulse to take the rest of that solemn company into my confidence. Such a move would only serve to make me look ridiculous. I had merely imagined Curate Sam there under the roof of the fifth wealthiest woman in all America. No such enemy could ever have penetrated that walled and terraced citadel of respectability. No thief would ever take such a risk. And I glanced reassuringly about that tranquil assembly, trying to persuade myself that outlawry could never invade so orderly a circle. Yet I was disturbed, though I hated to admit the fact to my own mind. But when this silent inward debate had come to an end I felt the need for action of any kind.

So I got up languidly from my chair, crossed the huge room, and began a surreptitious survey of the ground floor of the house.

I carried out that reconnaissance with a fine parade of leisureliness. I wandered on, with apparent aimlessness, until I came to the private study of Obden-Belpont, at one end of which the wall-safe stood. There I came to a stop, listening for a moment or two. Then I switched on the lights, looked carefully about, and crossed to the panel of heavily carved mahogany which screened the front of the wall-safe itself. I released this panel by the secret spring which held it in place, swung it back, and examined the safe-front.

Everything there was in order. It wasn't until I stooped down and looked over the contact-mat which I had wired and connected with the buzzer in my bedroom that anything in any way disconcerting presented itself. Then I made the somewhat disturbing discovery that this mat had been cut loose from its carefully hidden wires.

I stood for some time, pondering this discovery. Then I crossed to the bell-button and pushed it. I waited two full minutes, and rang again. As there was still no answer to that summons, I finally concluded that the circuit leading to the servants' quarters had also been tampered with. This prompted me to try the ground floor telephones—only to find the wires dead. And that persuaded me it was about time to get busy.

But I still kept perfect control of my movements. I sauntered leisurely back to the *Salon de Terrasses*. There I found Evans, the footman, quietly closing and locking the long French windows.

"Where is Mr. Obden-Belpont?" I asked as the man in uniform crossed the room to switch out the lights.

"He has retired, madam," was the servant's answer.

"For the night?"

"Yes, madam."

"And where are the others?" I demanded, doing my best to combat a wayward sense of desolation.

"They have retired, madam," was that dead-eyed servitor's punctiliously impersonal reply.

I hesitated a moment before putting the next question to him.

"Are there any strangers in the house to-night?" I casually inquired.

"Strangers, madam?" It was obvious that he didn't quite understand my question.

"Is there any outsider sleeping in the house who didn't sleep here last night? Is there any new servant, I mean, or even a workman?"

"None whatever, madam," he said with decision.

I must have stood there for some time, trying to carpenter together a plan of action.

"Will that be all, madam?" asked the plainly wearied Evans, still mechanically polite.

"That will be all," I said as I turned and left him to switch out the lights. But I went straight up through the silent house to my room, where I locked myself in. There I first tried my extension-phone, but, as I had expected, was unable to get any answer. This in some way increased my earlier feeling of desolation to one of desertion. I would have given a great deal even to have had the loquacious Toosey Attrill there with me. So remembering I might have to act alone, I unearthed my automatic service-pistol from its hiding-place in my walrus hand-bag, and made sure that the clip was full. Then I crossed to the bed and pulled one of the heavily monogrammed pillow-slips from its pillow. At this point I stopped to survey myself in that absurdly decollete dinner-gown of mine, and realized that it would never do. So I scrambled out of my clothes, slipped on a night-dress, even as Lady Macbeth had done before me, and poked my toes into my heliotrope-tinted bedroom-slippers. Then I laced on my chamois gun-holster and nested the cold-metalled automatic in its hiding-place close in against my floating ribs. Then over the night-dress I flung my accordion-pleated *negligee* of briar-rose pink *crepe de chine* hanging from a sleeveless yoke-body with a kimono cape of Georgette crepe. For this, I realized, was more to the purpose. In the first place, it carried an air of innocent unpreparedness. And in the second place, its ample folds made an altogether satisfactory screen for anything I might wish to carry in the pillow-slip. Then I folded that same

pillow-slip up, tucked it under my arm, switched out my lights again, and crept forth on my soft-soled slippers to the hallway, closed the door, and made my way silently down through the deserted house.

I didn't stop until I came to the study that held the wall-safe. Once there, I closed the door, threw on the lights, swung back the carved mahogany panel, and spun the dial of the combination lock which held shut the ponderous inner door of the vault.

Everything there, I saw as soon as the safe was open, remained still undisturbed. Benchley, I remembered, had taken charge of the bulkier wedding gifts, the more cumbersome silver and cut glass and plate. But the jewels were still in the wall-safe. They were stored there in as orderly rows as though they had been put away in a Pharaoh's tomb to await the trump of doom, instead of merely resting over night at Miramar until William Obden-Belpont could motor them in to their safety deposit vault in the city.

But if Curate Sam had entered the house, I knew, he had entered it for only one purpose. Remembering his purpose, I knew it would be this same wall-safe to which he would direct his attentions. And the very meaning of the word "safe," before a cracksman of his skill and experience, faded almost into a mockery.

So I carefully and silently lifted those orderly jewels, one by one, and case by case, out of the vault and dropped them into my pillow-slip. When the safe was quite empty I closed and locked the door again, and swung shut the carved panel. Then, with one hand on the cool-feeling stock of my firearm, I made my way silently and guardedly back through those ghostly rooms of stillness. Once I had safely reached the stairway that cascaded like a white waterfall down into the main hallway I felt easier in mind. And once I had piloted my way to the hall of the guest wing I felt still surer of myself, for at the end of this hall I could see the relieving soft glow of the night-light.

That night-light, I remembered, would serve as a buoy to guide me back to the refuge of my own door. My gaze, in fact, was on that door as I started down the shadowy hall, on it about the same as a sailor's eye is on a mole-light at his journey's end. Then something occurred which took the sustaining thought of refuge out of my head.

For as I stared down the half-lighted hallway I saw that door of mine quietly open and the figure of a man, crouching low, essay to step out. But without even lifting his head, as far as I could see, he became conscious of my advance. So just as quietly and just as stealthily he withdrew again, softly closing the door after him.

I had not seen his face. I hadn't seen enough of him to make sure of his identity. But I knew that no honest man comes out of a room in any such manner, nor slinks back under cover when seen, as this man had slunk back. And, what proved even more disturbing, I remembered the value of what I was carrying in that pillow-slip which swung under my kimono cape of Georgette crepe.

But I had no intention of standing there and letting the grass grow under my feet. When I acted, I did so without hesitation. Why I did as I did, I don't exactly know, for I had the choice of at least two courses, before me. On my left, I remembered, was Winfred Ealand's room, not twenty steps away. I knew it was his. Even though I had been uncertain of that fact, I could have verified it by the white buckskin oxfords tipped with Russian calf which he'd put outside his door, after the manner of the English, since my Winkie had no valet of his own.

On my right, almost opposite Winkie's door, was Admiral Trevor Ferris's. And I knew it was his, for my earlier investigations of that house had pretty thoroughly acquainted me with the disposition of its inmates. Instinct, in such a moment of peril, should have driven me straight to my Winkie. But it didn't. It didn't even make me hesitate. For without stopping a minute I stepped silently to Ferrie's bedroom door, quietly turned the knob, and stepped inside.

I stood there for a second or two, staring through the darkness.

Then I closed the door behind me. This, apparently, was not accomplished in utter silence, for the next moment I found myself challenged by a voice from the bed.

"What's that?"

I stood there, wondering how to explain.

"It's me!" I finally and weakly admitted, thanking my stars I'd decided on that silver-haired old officer, fortified with the tone of time, instead of breaking in on poor strait-laced, heavy-headed Winkie and probably shocking him out of a year's growth.

"Who are you?" a none too gracious voice was demanding. And I had to take a deep breath before I could quite make the words come out.

"I'm Miss Rymal," I answered in a very timorous and childish sort of pipe. This reply, I noticed, was followed by several moments of silence. They gave every evidence of being deeply cogitative moments.

"What's wrong?" was the next question through the darkness. But it was the sort of question I could afford to feel very grateful for. It brought things down to brass tacks, as the saying is.

"Something very serious," I replied, as steadily as I could. I heard the faint squeak of the box-springs and then the sharp click of a button-switch. The next moment I found myself blinking at the unexpected light. And in the center of that light, sitting up in bed with a cream-colored suit of pajamas making his ruddy face look ruddier than ever, was Ferrie himself, blinking back at me with rather solemn eyes. It was some time before he had taken me entirely in. Then he asked a sudden question.

"What have you got there?" he demanded, for he had plainly caught sight of the pillow-slip dangling down beneath my kimono cape.

"About half a million dollars' worth of jewelry," I told him, without turning a hair.

"Whose?"

"The bride's, of course."

"The bride's?" he repeated. He plainly wasn't quite himself yet.

"Yes, her wedding gifts, from the wall-safe down-stairs."

"And what are you doing with them?"

"Trying to take care of them," was my answer.

"Why?"

It was easier than I had imagined it would be. That is one of the advantages of turning to a man of sixty who is also a man of affairs, when you're in trouble. He's able to keep down to the point at issue.

"Because one of the cleverest gem-thieves in America is planning to carry them off!"

"Eh!" he piped, incredulous.

So I repeated my statement.

"How do you know that?" demanded the old officer.

I told him about catching sight of Curate Sam, about the phone wires being dead, about finding my contact-mat circuit disconnected, and about the stranger who'd just tried to steal out of my room.

Ferrie slipped out of bed, as I talked, and wriggled into a rather worn-looking dressing-gown of pleated flannel. It made him look like a sorrel pony ready to be taken out to the horse-ring.

"But what do you intend doing?" he asked as he tied his waist-girdle in a sailorly-looking knot.

"That's what I wanted to ask you. Hadn't we better get Mrs. Obden-Belpont up?"

He thought this over. Then he shook his head.

"That poor woman has earned a decent night's sleep," he asserted. "And there's the two of us now, you know," he added as he crossed to a dresser-drawer and pulled it open. I could see him taking out a business-looking six-shooter with an ebony handle. His glance was very matter-of-fact as he looked it over.

"Are you—you used to handling firearms?"

"My dear girl," he said as he slipped the revolver into the side pocket of his pleated flannel gown, "handling firearms has been my main business in life for just about thirty years."

And then I remembered.

"But what are you going to do?" I asked him. I was still standing with my back to the door, but it was no longer timidity that kept me in that position. For I had a colleague, I saw, who was both clear-headed and courageous.

"I'm going back to your room with you," he declared. And the discovery that he stood ready to help me, without hesitation, without unnecessary fussing over trivialities, gave me the courage to turn quietly about and open the door a foot or two, for the purpose of investigating the lay of the land.

As I did so I gulped, gulped audibly. For there, immediately across from the doorway through which I'd directed that cautious peek, stood a man. It wasn't Curate Sam. It wasn't even a confederate of Curate Sam's. It was my Winkie.

And it made me gape, like a gray Dorkin on a hot afternoon. For Winfred Ealand stood there, staring straight at me, in a John Barrymore sort of stage attitude of silent accusation. He was in sky-blue pajamas of china silk with big frogs of ultramarine down the front. Over these he wore a rather bob-tailed dressing-gown of old rose, which had plainly been tied together in a hurry, so that it didn't quite meet in front, and hung with a hike. On his feet he had matting bath-slippers. His hair was rumpled up on one side, which made him look ridiculous, and his arms were folded across his chest, which would have made him look magisterial if it hadn't been for the hair.

But that was all I had time to take in, for as soon as I was able to catch my breath I promptly and silently swung that door shut again. I shut it on Winkie and his stern Napoleonic frown so suggestive of "The Sleeping Sentry." Why, oh, why, some second-self at the very back of my brain was asking as I shut that door, can't God give the good men of this earth always a reasonable and workable sense of humor?

"What is it?" asked the uncomprehending Ferrie, naturally enough a little puzzled by my unexpected right-about-face.

"I've just had an idea," I desperately explained as I got my back once more against those cream-colored panels.

"What?" demanded the courageous old knight who looked for all the world like a sorrel cob at the Horse Show.

"I want you to keep these jewels here, in this room," I informed him.

"Here?" he queried.

"Yes; they're safer here, with you."

"And what are you going to do?" he asked as I stepped over and put my pillow-slip on the bed beside him.

"I'm going to get Curate Sam," I told him with a big show of bravery. "Curate Sam and that other thief he's got working here with him!"

He shook his head.

"By gad, ma'am, that's no work for a girl!"

"It's the work I'm here to do," I told him.

But still he shook his head.

"I know it, and still I say it's no work for a woman!"

But I couldn't overlook the necessity of keeping him there in his room.

"I'm leaving *you* the important work," I argued. "If you stay here and protect what's in this pillow-slip, you're doing far more than I'll ever be able to do. I may never even see the thief again."

"But you intend to try?" queried Ferrie, looking at me with suddenly studious eyes.

"It's my duty," I told him. But I was wondering, all the while, if Winkie was still standing out there in the hall with his arms folded across his chest and the accusatory light in his eye.

"Then you've got to take this revolver," announced Ferrie as he stepped closer to me.

That made me laugh a little. I thrust my hand in under the kimono cape and drew out my official and ugly-looking automatic. He stood staring at it with rather a funny look on his face.

"Of course," he acknowledged, as it dawned on him that an officer of the law naturally didn't go about unarmed.

"So you see it's quite needless to worry," I told him. "I'm sorry, in fact, that I ever disturbed you."

"Disturbed me?" he echoed. "By gad, ma'am, this is work that appeals to me!"

"Then I must go," I said in little more than a whisper, as I reached for the door-knob and made a little sign to him for quietness.

He snapped out his lights, and I had the door partly opened, when in a loud stage-whisper he called across the darkness: "*You'll come back?*"

Instead of answering that altogether ambiguous-sounding question I said: "Sssssh!" and slipped out through the door and closed it sharply after me. And as I had feared, had dreaded, there stood my monumental Winkie in his grand and gloomy pose of outraged propriety and shattered faith. He stood there viewing with a scathing eye my uncompromisingly intimate attire. And I screwed up sufficient courage to stare back at him, for his own attire, when I came to think of it, was quite as unconventional as mine. And for the first time in his life Winfred Ealand impressed me as being inadequate, as lacking in bigness.

"*Fiddlesticks!*" I hissed at him. But that only made him look more tragic than ever. That humorless solemnity of his, in fact, was a spur in the flank of my audacity. For I wasn't the timid doe I once had been. I'd seen too much of the seamy side of life, of late, to let any man's stare of suspicion give me goose-flesh down the spine.

"Would you mind coming to my room with me?" I asked, with as quiet a smile as I could command.

His answer was both decisive and explosive.

"No!" he shouted, like the good little Joseph in pajamas that he was.

"Are you afraid?" I mockingly demanded.

"I prefer people who keep to their own rooms," he said in an altogether unmodulated tone of scorn. But before I had time to retort to that challenge Ferrie's door swung open and that silvery-haired old officer stepped out into the hall.

"You bone-headed young cub," I heard the older man slowly intone to the younger, in a voice of steel cold rage which I scarcely thought him capable of. But I had no desire to take part in that argument or remain a witness of that encounter. I simply gathered up my fluted skirts and scurried down the hall toward my own door. And I strode into my room, as hot as a hornet. If in any shadowy corner of it I'd encountered Curate Sam, just then, I feel sure I'd have filled him so full of holes that he'd have looked like a kitchen colander. But there was no Curate Sam there, nor any confederate of Curate Sam's.

CHAPTER XIX

A MIDNIGHT INTRUSION

I WAS STILL pink and prickly with an after-glow of anger as I unearthed a coil of insulated wire from one of the locked drawers of my bureau-trunk and the nickel pliers which I'd used while installing my dictaphone circuits. I intended to do my own work in my own way. So I slipped out along the hall toward the back of the wing and tiptoed down the second stairway at its farther end. I'd decided to rewire my contact-mat in the study before the wall-safe. But this time I intended to conceal that mat under a rug, across the doorway, so that my bedside buzzer would announce the entrance of any prowler into that room.

But this wasn't as easy as I'd at first imagined. The house, in the first place, was a huge one. The darkness, in the second place, interfered with my freedom of movement. And from the gloom of any door, I remembered, an enemy might confront me. So it was only after a great deal of circling about, and barking of shins on furniture corners, and padding along cool walls and carved woodwork, that I made my way to the room that held the hidden strong-box. I stood at the door, listening intently, for several minutes, before I even ventured to step in. Then, finding myself enveloped in absolute silence, I crept inside and swung the door shut. A moment later I switched on the light.

Then I discovered something that brought me up with a start. It prompted my right hand to slip in under my kimono cape at the same time that my body instinctively sought shelter by crouching low behind the heavy Florentine reading-table beside which I stood. For instead of seeing a panel of carved mahogany, where the wall-safe faced me, I saw something quite different. It was an oddly constructed little canopy of blankets covering the entire front of the safe screen. Running under it were two insulated wires which twined along the base of the book-shelves flanking the room. They had been connected, as far as I could judge, with the house-circuit in some obscure corner of the study. And I at once understood what they implied.

For I knew that the strange-looking little tent of blankets was nothing more nor less than a box-man's sound-killer. An expert safe-breaker was preparing, or had prepared, to drill through the dial-face, insert a charge of "soup," and detonate a sufficiently powerful explosion to crumple up the inner lock.

I had my automatic in my hand as I advanced step by step toward that tent which, I saw, was big enough to conceal a man behind its heavy folds. Yet neither light nor movement came from its depths, although I could actually hear my heart beat as I cautiously lifted a drape of the doubled blankets.

No one was beneath them. But I could see that the mahogany panel had been removed from its hinges. I could also see the glitter of an electric drill that lay on the floor, and an extension-light on a Chaki chair beside it. On the safe-front, too, I could make out a number of chalk marks, put there to act as a guide, apparently, for its prospective ravisher. That intruder, it was reasonable to believe, had either been disturbed in his midnight activities, or, what was more probable, had found that the tapped house-circuit was not of sufficient strength for his drill-work. Or I myself, I suddenly remembered, might have been the cause of disturbance. There was a ponderable chance that even at that moment I stood under his eye. He might even then be watching me, protected by the darkness from which he could strike at his leisure.

It was not a pleasant feeling, as any one who has stood in a midnight house, knowing a burglar to be hidden therein, very well knows. And the burglar, in this case, was not a man to be trifled with. Curate Sam was something more than a mere porch-climber. He was an adventurer in crime who knew just what risks he was taking. He would never be a quibbler, if it came to anything that looked like a tight corner. He'd strike at any moment, and strike without mercy, to save his own scalp. And he was already my enemy, in every sense of the word.

I knew then that there was no more time to be lost. I was face to face with a situation much too serious for half measures. I couldn't even afford to act alone. I wanted help, immediate and substantial help. Reluctant as I was to rouse that whole household, I knew that even Ferrie and I were inadequate for this newer situation. So I then and there decided to call on Benchley—on Benchley and all his staff. That dependable old butler, I knew, would lose little time in marshalling his forces from the servants' quarters, from the gardeners' cottage, from the garage itself, if need be.

To call on Benchley, however, implied a knowledge of his whereabouts. And my first task was to find him, for the investigating of the servants' quarters had been left mostly to Toosey. So, the moment I'd switched out the study lights, I began a cautious exploration of those silent lower regions of the house, remembering only too well that any step might bring me into touch with a hidden enemy. But I made my progress as silent as I could, feeling my way on from room to room, from stairway to stairway, from one

area of unbroken darkness to another. I became absurdly muddled, so muddled, in fact, that my imagination began to run away with me and I fancied myself imprisoned in an endless maze of rooms weighed down by an impenetrable pall of darkness. But still I went groping and padding my way forward.

Then I came to a sudden stop, for I found the enveloping blackness cut by a faint streak of light. I stood studying this narrow yellow streak for some time before I realized that it was a crack along the bottom of a door behind which a light was shining. But, once convinced of this, I made my way noiselessly toward that door and placed an ear against its paneled surface. I could detect no sound from within the room. So I carefully explored the door and found the knob. Then I quietly and softly turned the knob and just as quietly swung the door back from its frame. I swung it back an inch or two and no more, but it was enough to give me a view of the interior.

What I saw there caused me to hold my breath for a moment. The room, I realized, was a bedroom. The bed, in fact, stood directly in front of me. On the far side of the bed was a man, carefully dressed all but his shoes. He was a stranger to me. He was a neutral-tinted man, of rather meager proportions, but his face, even before I fully awakened to what he was doing, impressed me as an evil one. Yet I soon lost all interest in his mere appearance, since his activities proved much more arresting. He was engaged in a movement which for a second or two I couldn't understand. I saw him cross softly to a white-topped dresser and from it take up a bronze alcohol-lamp. He carried this back to the bedside, took off the top, and bent over the bed. I could see him carefully draw back the coverings, exposing the end of the heavy hair mattress. Then over the end of this mattress he inverted his alcohol-lamp, watching the fluid intently as it ran down in a scattering little torrent and soaked into the padded fabric. He even shook the lamp to make sure it was empty. Then he tiptoed his way back to the dresser, replaced the lamp, and returned to the bed. There he looked carefully and studiously about him, reached into his pocket, and took out a match.

At the same moment that he struck this match by rubbing it along his trousers leg I reached for my automatic and continued to push the door noiselessly open. He did not hear my advance as I stepped into the room, for he was stooping low and watching the flame of the match-end. Then I saw the hand that held the lighted sliver of wood move slowly down toward the alcohol-soaked corner of the bedding.

"*Wait!*"

I said it as short and stern as I was able to bark out that single word.

He waited, all right. There was something ludicrous, in fact, about his sudden recoil. The match dropped from his hand and he backed quickly away until the wall stopped him. Then he straightened up slowly, like a man with lumbago. He stood there studying me, with round and stupid eyes.

"Put up your hands," I told him. And I said it in a way that meant business. He at once raised his hands above his shoulders, with the palms facing me. But instead of watching me he was now watching my automatic.

"For the love o' Gawd, lady, be careful o' that thing!" he said a little thickly. I answered that bleat of terror with an audible snort. I knew his kind. It was not the kind to be gentle with. I had caught him red-handed in the old-time trick of trying to screen house-robbery by setting a fire. And it was only reasonable to assume that a man who wasn't above arson wouldn't stand much above murder.

"Where's Curate Sam?" I asked him, as calmly as I could.

"Hey?" he said in a rather vacuous squeak of surprise.

"Where's Curate Sam?" I snapped out at him for the second time. He could see, I think, that I wasn't to be trifled with. And that discovery was causing him considerable mental distress, for he stood there slowly opening and shutting his round little eyes, for all the world like a dying dog-fish. Yet it wasn't until I'd put my question to him for the third time that he ventured a reply.

"I dunno any guy by that name," was his altogether unsatisfactory reply.

"Oh, yes, you do," I announced, stepping a little closer to him. "You know him, and you know just where he is. And I'm going to give you exactly twenty seconds to tell me."

He stared at me with a sullen sort of inarticulate enmity. I'd counted twelve, and was vaguely wondering just what I was going to do after I'd covered the remaining eight figures, when he spoke up.

"And s'posin' I still say I don't?" he questioned, with a touch of audacity that rather startled me. He could see, I suppose, that I was getting tired of holding that heavy pistol up in the air. So I leveled it deliberately at the left-hand breast pocket of his somewhat threadbare coat of blue serge. That pocket covered his heart, and he knew it. He shifted a little along the wall, in fact, still holding his hands above his head. But as he shuffled to one side the pistol-end followed him.

"*You* talk, or this does!" I announced to him. I tried to say it ferociously. I resented his passiveness. I wanted opposition from him, something to awaken my indignation, something to stand as an extenuation for any extreme to which I might have to go. For as he stood there, in what was

almost the attitude of a supplicant, he took on a ridiculous atmosphere of pathos which disturbed me even against my will.

"Aw, lady, you wouldn't do that?" he said in a sort of wheedling plaintiveness. And still again something about him disturbed me. What it was I couldn't exactly determine. But as I looked at him steadily I made a discovery. His blinking eyes weren't directed on me; they were staring past me. I tried to argue with myself that this was merely some trick of expression, some nervous reaction from the strain under which that low-calibered mind of his had been placed. So I scrutinized him still more closely. And for the second time I distinctly saw that he wasn't looking at me, but *was looking past me*. And still I ignored that expression, quickly weighing in my own mind whether or not it could be a trick to divert my attention.

In doing so I lost my chance. For before I could turn, before I could move, a long arm was suddenly crooked about my neck, jerking my head up and back, at the same moment that a sinewy hand struck at my right forearm and brought my pistol sharply down against my side, pinning it there before I could even understand what it all meant. At that the man against the wall darted forward and jerked the firearm from my fingers.

I was still unable to see my captor. But the moment I heard his voice I knew it was Curate Sam.

"Shut the door," he said in a sharp whisper. At the same moment his liberated right hand closed on my mouth, for instinct had told him, I suppose, that I was gathering my strength for one long scream. That hand closed over my mouth cruelly, heartlessly, gathering the lips and cheek-flaps together and straining them across my clenched teeth until my eyes watered. It shut off my scream the same as a miller shuts off a leaking bag, by gathering up the slack and twisting it together. Only in this case the slack happened to be the flesh of my face. Yet it was the uncouth profanation of my person more than the actual pain of the thing that sent a wave of rebellious anger through me.

The smaller man in blue serge seemed to understand just what was expected of him, for without being told to do so he busied himself tearing a hand-towel into strips and knotting it up in a gag. I could see him hand that gag to Curate Sam. And I took it between my teeth the same as a work-horse takes the bit, so grateful was I to find that gross hand relax its clutch on my tortured face. Then he twisted me about, jerked my two hands behind my waist, and tied them there with more strands of toweling. Having done this, he held me out at arm's length and coolly surveyed me. I could see satisfaction on his lean and melancholy face. I could also see hate, cold hate.

But I returned his stare without flinching, although that towel had my face drawn up into a sort of leer and my eyes were still watering.

"Just once too often my girl!" he said with a quiet venom that disturbed me even more than the noisiest outburst of passion could have done.

"What're you goin' to do wit' her?" inquired the smaller man, as impersonally as though he were inquiring as to the disposal of a market-fowl.

"I'm going to cook her goose for her," announced Curate Sam, as he half flung and half pushed me face down on the bed, rolled me over, and, still holding me there, motioned to his confederate for the rest of the toweling. Before I was quite aware of what he was doing he had me tied to the bed. He made such a good job of it that my conscious mind told me it was useless to struggle. But that part of me which isn't ruled by reason couldn't resist tugging at the thongs that held me like a coyote-skin on a stable-door.

Curate Sam even grunted with satisfaction as he saw how futile those struggles were. Then he picked up the bronze alcohol-lamp and shook it. He seemed disappointed to find it empty.

"Any more of this stuff round here?" he demanded of the smaller man.

That smaller man didn't answer him in words. But he sidled quickly and cautiously through a door, opening into what must have been a bathroom, and a moment later returned with a quart bottle of what I assumed to be alcohol.

It wasn't until Curate Sam stooped over the bed with that bottle in his hand that the real meaning of his threat about cooking my goose came home to me. Yet even as every nerve-end prickled like an electric-shock with the sheer horror of that discovery I tried to tell myself that the whole thing was too inhuman, too barbaric. It was a trick, and nothing more, a trick to terrify me. We had outgrown the Joan of Arc era and the tortures of the Inquisition. I remembered that I was in one of the most luxurious of our twentieth-century homes, surrounded by the most artfully contrived machinery of civilization that man had been able to devise. I had friends under that roof, friends ready and willing to see that no harm should overtake me. Yet even as I lay there arguing against the inevitable I could feel the running alcohol cool against my skin, where Curate Sam bent over the bed, saturating me and the clothing about me with the contents of the round glass bottle.

I realized, as I saw him take a match from the hand of the smaller man, that I was to go out like a Christmas pudding, in blue flames. And poor Winkie would find me trussed and toasted like one of those cold-storage chickens you see in the windows of the Sixth Avenue *rotisseries*. The full

voltage of it all kept going through me in a series of shocks, wave after wave of terror, as I saw Curate Sam strike that match. And it wasn't a trick, after all. I, Balmy Rymal, had come to the end of things. I was about to be made into a Welsh rarebit by this calm-eyed and lean-jowled criminal whose ends I'd interfered with! Alcohol, I remembered, burned with a very hot flame. It would begin at my feet, and burn upward. It would be—but all thought suddenly stopped. For I saw that the match had gone out.

I could see Curate Sam motion half angrily for another. It was as the smaller man went to hand him this match that he hesitated, ran to the door, slipped out, and just as mysteriously slipped in again. Once he was back at the bedside he pushed his foolish-looking face close to Curate Sam's lean-jawed one, whispering something in his leader's ear.

I could see Curate Sam straighten up, with the match still between his fingers, and stare down at me in studious silence.

Then he put the match in his pocket. From another pocket, at the same moment that the little man again disappeared from the room, he drew out a revolver with a sawed-off barrel. Then he leaned over me again.

"D'you want to live?" he dispassionately inquired.

I *did* want to live. I wanted to live very much. Above everything else I wanted to live. But beyond a curtailed nodding of the head I had no means of conveying this information to Curate Sam.

He seemed to understand, however. He stood studying me for another minute or two. Then he moved noiselessly over to the hall door, opened it, looked out and returned to the bedside.

"Then come down and open that wall-safe," he told me as he took out a pocket-knife and with his left hand began clumsily cutting away the strands of toweling that bound my ankles. The sawed-off revolver, all the while, was balanced in his right hand. The nerve of the man rather astounded me. He was as calm as a store-clerk working about his counter, as he completed the task of liberating me. And with the power of movement restored, my spirits rose. I seemed less ignominious even in my own eyes, after regaining my human prerogative of action. And with every chance of action, I remembered, there was the collateral chance of interference, if not of escape. Every new movement, I knew, would bring a new situation, and at some unlooked-for moment the unexpected itself might happen.

Curate Sam himself wasn't altogether ignorant of this fact, for once he'd prodded me to my feet he became very wary and watchful. When I made a sign for him to take that odious gag out of my mouth, for by this time I felt

like a patient who'd been a half-day in a dentist's chair, he merely emitted a sniff of scorn.

"Not on your life," he announced with calm conviction as he reached in under his coat and took out a pocket flash-light. "You're going to do this the way I say. You're going to walk ahead of me to the room where that wall-safe is. When I need to, I'll show a light. But whether it's light or dark, it'll pay you to remember that this gun of mine is within three feet of your ribs. You get that?"

I nodded. But I was watching him, every moment of the time.

"And get this too," he said as he turned and faced me. "I know just what chances I'm taking in this house. And you know it as well as I do. This isn't state fair sloughing, or any Harlem-flat work. I know what it means, all right. And if anybody thinks they can stop me, they're going to pay the price. The price—you understand?" he repeated as he once more fixed me with his cold and fishy eye.

Still again I nodded my comprehension.

"And if it comes to a show-down," he went on, "*I'll drop you first!* I'll let you have it through the back as quick as I'd kill a fly, for there's one too many of us in this game, and I'm not counting on getting out of it until I gather in what I'm after. That's all I've got to say. I'm telling you this for your own good. And I've told you. If there's any talking, from now on, this gat of mine is going to do it!"

I believed him. I believed what he said because I had come to know his type. When an armed man enters a house to rob it he knows, in a way, that he is taking his life in his hands. And rather than lose his own, in case of being cornered, he'll take another's. I was dealing with a professional thief, a real thief, and not the sentimentalized gentleman-outlaws of screen and stage. I knew the brand. They were without honor, without chivalry, without truth or decency. They were tricky, in their blind and animal-like way, and they were brutal. They were also cowards, outside the narrow field of physical violence, and it was this cowardice more than anything else that left them so dangerous, since it tended to exile their actions from the realm of the reasonable. They flew into a funk, and in the midst of that funk they did murder, blind, unreasoning, unimaginative murder. And a potential murderer, standing there beside me with a gun in his hand, now held me in his power. There was no choice left to me. What he told me to do, I was compelled to do.

"Now get into that safe," was his curt command, "and down by the back way!"

I hesitated, for once more I wanted him to take that odious gag out of my mouth. But I had no way of explaining this to him, and I could see by his face that he was already resenting the delay. I knew better than to cross him.

So I turned and walked steadily toward the door with Curate Sam three paces behind me, his flash-light in one hand and his revolver in the other. I watched carefully to see which hand he used in closing the door, for if it proved to be his right hand, I'd decided, I'd take a chance on the resultant second or two of grace, and bolt for it. But he was cautious enough to use his left hand, keeping the hand that held the revolver always in position for immediate use. It had occurred to me, too, that instead of turning to the right, I might turn to the left, and if luck were with me, succeed in leading him into the presence of Ferrie, or even of Winkie himself. But this, I remembered, would mean immediate danger to either of those two men. And that, I realized, was the one thing to be avoided. It also occurred to me to reach up, now that my hands were free, and untie the gag that was knotted so tight against my tortured cheek-flaps. That would leave me free to use my voice. But it would also give my captor an excuse for the show of violence which I dreaded. It seemed as futile, on second thought, as the persistent temptation to stampede blindly off through the blackness confronting me. For it was only now and then, as we made our silent way onward, that Curate Sam let the light in his left hand wink interrogatively along our path. But I knew he was there close behind me. And I knew that the revolver with the sawed-off barrel was held always in his right hand, poised and ready.

So distracting was that knowledge, in fact, that I found it hard to keep track of my steps as we moved silently forward through that ominously silent house. Then all knowledge of my whereabouts suddenly vanished and Curate Sam's light no longer winked behind me. Through the darkness I could distinctly hear the sound of approaching steps. I stopped instinctively, pressing close in against the wall at my side. As I did so I could feel something hard and small press against my back, just between the shoulder-blades. It was, I knew, the barrel of Curate Sam's revolver. I could even hear his quiet breathing as he stood there, close to me, waiting. But louder than that I could hear the steps as they came closer. They were a man's steps, and that man, whoever he was, must have known the house through which he could walk so resolutely in utter darkness. And that, I told myself, meant a friend, possibly a deliverer.

But I couldn't be sure. I could arrest those steps, I knew, by reaching out a hand in the darkness. But what, I asked myself, could be gained? For that ever-menacing revolver-barrel was still held in between my shoulder-blades, and the thought of a bullet through the lungs, tearing and rending as it went,

kept me crouched closer than ever to the wall. Then a second and still stronger fear shot through me. Suppose this unknown man, so close to me in the darkness, should by sheer accident grope or stumble against my crouching body? And I flattened myself still closer against that shielding wall, holding my breath, for that sure-footed stranger was already close to us. I knew when he was abreast of us. I knew when he had passed us. He went by in the darkness little dreaming of what he had approached and left behind him, little knowing how closely he had brushed the skirts of peril.

"Go on!" whispered Curate Sam after the steps had died away. And I went forward again, feeling along the wall for guidance. I was surer of my territory by this time. I was also a little surer of myself. I even found the nerve to toy a trifle with danger and try out my persecutor. For instead of turning to the left into the passageway that would open into the breakfast-room, I turned to the right, remembering that this would in time lead me into the conservatory abutting the south flank of the house. Amid those more novel surroundings, I felt, there was a greater chance for the unexpected to happen. But my plot was nipped in the bud.

"Not that way!" was Curate Sam's unexpectedly quick and curt command, attesting to the fact that he knew his ground much better than I had imagined. So I came to a stop, with a pretense of confusion. My captor, however, cut those hesitations short by flashing his search-light ahead of me and catching me by the arm. Thus holding me, he piloted me on through the darkness, over polished hardwood floors and cushioning rugs, until we came to a door which he opened with the utmost caution. He pushed me through this door, closed it after him, and felt along the wall for a light-switch.

The moment the light was on he dropped his hand from my arm. I edged away until his curtly warning gesture brought me to a stop. As I had surmised, he ventured a survey of the room. It was the sort of survey that a highholder busy on an ant-hill gives to his surroundings. Every two or three seconds, I noticed, his eye returned to me. Yet even with that periodic diversion he completed his inspection of the room, made sure it was empty, and peremptorily signaled me toward the wall-safe.

Before he had done this, however, I had made certain observations of my own. I noticed that the blinds of shirred casement-cloth covered both the windows and that over them hung the drawn curtains. I also noticed that the blanket sound-muffler still stood in front of the safe and that the wire from the tapped house-circuit still lay across the floor. But even more than this I noticed that Curate Sam himself was nervous as to possible interruptions. He had intended, I observed, to lock the door in front of which he stood. I could see him back up against it and with his left hand feel behind him for the key.

But the key, for some reason, was not there. So he was compelled to stand with his own shoulder-blades against the door while he maintained a scrutiny of me and my movements. His right hand, all the while, held the revolver, as this revolver was most unhesitatingly pointed in my direction. I was, in a way, becoming inured to this unending threat. I could think now, think clearly, even with that round black "O" of death staring me in the eye. It no longer left me panicky. But both the peril and the unpleasantness of the thing persisted. I was still terribly afraid of that extraordinary little mechanism of steel and nickel which at the twitch of a finger could spit Death into my body. And if you are in doubt as to the disturbing features of this, some idle midnight put a six-shooter into the hand of your best friend, a loaded six-shooter, and request him to point it directly at you for five or ten minutes. Merely try it. The operation, you will find, may involve slightly more tension than you imagined. But picture that same fully loaded six-shooter, not in the hands of a friend, but in the hands of an enemy, and an enemy who had already proved himself to be a virulent one, as audacious as he was determined, as evil as he was crafty. Picture him there, as complete master of the situation, standing ready to give that fatal finger-twitch at the first movement from me which in any way threatened his safety. Then perhaps you will understand why, when Curate Sam commanded me to cross to that wall-safe and open it, I meekly stepped across the room and prepared to carry out his orders.

Yet I did so with a difference. I knew the combination of that lock, and, armed with this information, there would be no difficulty in opening it. I also knew that the treasure which he expected to find within that safe would not be there. What he would do when this discovery was made, I could only surmise. But there were other things that I remembered. Every moment of time that I gained, I knew, was to my advantage. There were other people in that house, many others, and already the alarm of burglary had been sounded. Ferrie himself must be doing something. And word had surely been passed on to Winkie. And at the darkest moment, I argued, help might come, help *must* come.

So as I crouched before that steel door with its polished nickel dial, I didn't give all my attention to the working out of its tumbler permutations. My figure, of course, was partly screened by the blankets hung over the safe-front, though never for a moment, I knew, did Curate Sam's eye or his revolver waver from my direction. I remembered this, and remembering it, I carried out every side-movement with the greatest possible caution. My first digression, while my right hand rattled the lock-dial, was to reach with my left hand for the abandoned electric-drill which lay at my feet. It was a

compact little instrument with a small steel-encased motor at the head of its drill-shaft. It must have weighed eight or ten pounds, and was mace-shaped. But as a weapon, I realized, it had one draw-back. This lay in the fact that it was still connected with its insulated wires. And I had no chance for disconnecting them. But as I looped it up over my arm I felt the sharp drill-point swing and scratch against my hip. And that gave me an idea. I caught up the drill, placed the steel point against my chin, and by pressing upward and backward easily perforated the strand of cloth holding that odious gag in place. After fumbling again with the lock-combination, I repeated the maneuver. I repeated it, in fact, until only a few threads held that gag in place. But I didn't eject it. It was sodden with saliva; it was making my jaws ache and my throat burn. But I decided it was better to leave it where it was. There was satisfaction enough in knowing that it could be tossed aside when I cared to do so.

But all this took time, and it occurred to me that I couldn't much longer postpone the opening of the wall-safe door. And at about the same moment that I awakened to this fact I awakened to still another. This was that although Curate Sam still stood with his back to the door, watching me, he was making no effort to hurry my movement. Time, under ordinary circumstances, is a very vital factor with a burglar. But here was one, I suddenly realized, who had already let me waste several precious minutes. This sent a query flashing back into the central office of intelligence. *Was my enemy playing the same game that I was trying to play?* Was he himself maneuvering for time, jockeying for delay? Had he already stumbled across the knowledge that the wall-safe was empty, and while his unknown confederate busied himself in some more profitable portion of that house, persuaded himself that it would be best simply to hold me there? But my self-questioning on this point was cut short by Curate Sam himself.

"You're not trying to open that safe," he announced in a tone of voice which was disturbing in its quietness. To answer him was out of the question. But I turned and looked protestingly out from under my improvised canopy. I stared at him over my shoulder, not only to let him know that I was still there in my helplessness, but also to make sure of his position. At almost the same moment I caught the hum, low and muffled through the closed windows, of a motor-car engine somewhere outside in the grounds. My captor straightened up at that sound, listening intently. Then he wheeled suddenly about, with his ear to the door-panel. And as he did so I realized that he was no longer looking at me.

The moment I made that discovery I acted. I first tore the gag from my head. Then I jerked on the insulated wire which held my steel mace a

prisoner. I made it a quick jerk, but a strong one. And the result was most unexpected. For the moment I jerked the lights went out. Darkness enveloped me. I had scarcely time to realize that at some place this wire had been cunningly attached to the house-circuit. In thus forcibly breaking it away I had ruptured the current feeding life to the shaded bulbs glowing about me. I had, in fact, no time for thought, for at the same moment that I completed my move by dropping flat on the floor, in case my enemy's little machine of death should bark out its leaden message at me, the library door itself was flung open. It was opened so vigorously that it went back full swing and thudded against the wall-stop. Then the darkness was cut by a voice. It was a man's voice, clear-noted and authoritative, even while a little throaty with deliberately restrained excitement.

"*Is anybody in this room?*"

I knew, the moment that question cut through the silence, that it was William Obden-Belpont himself speaking. I knew too that Curate Sam must have slipped back from that door, or to one side of it. I remembered that he must be crouching there somewhere in the surrounding blackness, with his sawed-off revolver in his hand. And that prompted me to action once more. When I moved, it was more like a cat, I think, than a human being, for I knew that now, as never before in my life, time was precious.

"Who is in here?" I heard the newcomer once more demanding. I could also hear his footsteps and knew he was groping along the wall for the useless light-switch. I felt sorry for him. I dimly resented his unfair helplessness, his pathetic ignorance of his peril. So I darted cat-like across the room, carrying the steel drill with its wires dragging after it.

I was fully half-way across that room when I stopped short. For between me and the scarcely discernible oblong of gray which marked the position of the open door I could make out the vague outline of a man. It was a tall man, and a gaunt one. And I didn't need to see the misty silhouette of the blunt-nosed revolver in the outstretched hand to know it was Curate Sam. It was Curate Sam waiting to let that blunt-nosed thing deliver its quick message of death. And I knew that nothing would stop him, once he had confirmed the quarter into which that message should be delivered.

So I breathed deep and tilted upward on my toes as I swung my mace on the end of its wires as David once swung his sling. I was still holding my breath as I brought that swinging steel drill obliquely down on the tensely poised hand with its fingers clustered about the heavy revolver-stock. It was a sledge-hammer blow. Yet I knew, even as I struck, that it would have been immeasurably better if the blow could have fallen on the enemy's head instead of his hand. But I'd had no time to deliberate on my choice.

I could see the short stab of flame, spitting floorward, as the revolver went off. I don't remember hearing the shot, but I do remember hearing the relieving sound as the suddenly smitten firearm went rattling across the polished hardwood floor. The force of that swing of the drill, however, carried me around in a circle. I had intended with a second swing to reach my enemy's body, to strike again before he could strike back. But that iron-weighted mace on the end of its wire slipped out of my grasp and wound, as a whip-lash winds about a buggy-shaft, completely about Curate Sam's gaunt legs just below the knees.

At the same moment that he struck blindly at me, with that benumbed and bruised right hand of his, I had the presence of mind to jerk on the wire which still trailed through my fingers. That jerk sent him over like a nine-pin.

The fall must have stunned him a little, for I had the wire looped and twisted about his feet before he actually began to struggle again. It wasn't until I got his hands in chancery and wired his bony wrists tightly together, with another dozen loops of the insulated metal, that I noticed Obden-Belpont calling lustily for lights.

It was Evans the footman who answered that call. But before that wild-eyed and half-clad servant arrived with two tall candle-sticks in his shaking hands I'd pawed about and recovered Curate Sam's fallen revolver with the sawed-off barrel. Then I went back to my captive.

Obden-Belpont took one of the tall candles and stooped over us. His face was very pale and the hand that held the candle-stick of chased silver was shaking a little. It seemed to take him several moments to come into anything like a full understanding of the situation. Then he took a deep breath.

"That man," he announced with a sort of child-like simplicity, "that man would have *shot me*!"

"Of course he would," I assented as the ruffled old butler came wheezing into the room. "Here, Benchley," I said as I held out the revolver to him, "guard this prisoner!"

"P-p-prisoner?" he stammered.

"Guard this burglar," I told him, "for there's still another of the same breed somewhere in this house."

"You 'ad best not mix up in this, sir," ventured Benchley to his master.

William Obden-Belpont, however, was still staring at me.

"You are a brave girl," he said as I moved toward the door, I started to call back deprecatingly that I was still a busy one. But my speech was cut

short by the advent of Ferrie, a little crestfallen and a little out of breath.

"I thought I had him," he announced, "but—"

"Had who?" demanded the master of the house. The whole thing was clearly proving too much for him.

"Had our burglar," explained the old knight in the pleated dressing-gown. "But the little beggar dropped from an up-stairs window and ran for it!"

"Then we must get after him," I said as I started for the front of the house.

"It's no use," protested Ferrie.

"But are you sure?" I demanded, awakening to the fact that my victory, after all, was only half a victory.

"Positive," asserted the old officer as he ducked out of sight into the *Salon de Terrasses*.

I stopped short and stared after him, for I'd got to the main hallway by this time, and this main hallway was fully lighted. Then I stared at something else. Instead of watching Rear Admiral Trevor Ferris's vanishing dressing-gown I stared at Winfred Ealand. I stared at him as he stood tied to the enameled iron rail where the stairway cascaded down to the ground floor, in the full flowing line of a twisted dress-train. He stood in silence, for almost half a portière seemed to have been crammed into his mouth as a gag. And close beside him was his adoring Miss Blanchan, in a severely plain long-sleeved night-gown that made her look like a cross between a scare-crow and a Carmelite abbess. She kept emitting faint and periodic blats deep down in her throat, for two-thirds of a cashmere stocking had been wedged in between her large and equine teeth. And, what made things much worse, I noticed that she was tied there with strips from Winkie's ridiculous old-rose dressing gown.

Winkie himself was arrayed in nothing more than his pajamas. The attire of both of them, in fact, struck me as being shockingly intimate and shockingly inadequate, though neither of them, I imagine, was giving much thought to the matter. But seven wayward little devils of retaliation leaped up in me as I beheld them tied there side by side. I fixed poor Winkie with a cold and challenging stare.

"So *that's* the kind of a man you are!" I deliberately said to him, with as good an imitation of his own manner as I was able to manage. And I could see his writhe of disgust as he rolled his eyes from me to the bony lady on his right. But I had no time to explain or even sympathize with him, for

Ferrie, re-emerging from the darkness, caught me by the arm and hurried me on. He seemed to be having trouble with his breathing.

"*I did it!*" he announced in his strident stage-whisper.

"You did?" I echoed.

"Yes, I sent 'em down together! Told 'em there was a burglar somewhere in the front of the house! And they rather seem to have bumped into him, don't they?"

It didn't seem so funny to me as Ferrie expected. There were too many other things to think about.

"But the jewels," I reminded him, "You're sure they are safe?"

He stopped and stared at me.

"Safe? Of course they're safe."

"But where are they?"

"Up in my room, of course," he retorted.

"You're certain of that?"

Again he looked at me with that abstracted stare of his. Then a faint shade of trouble crept slowly up into his eyes.

"Well, we can very soon make sure," he said. And off we scurried for his room, passing the still wheezing Benchley on the way. The old butler tried to stop us, but there was too much at stake just then.

I followed Ferrie into his room. I saw him cross to the bed and throw his two big pillows aside. He stood there a second or two without moving. Then he turned to me.

"Good God," he gasped. "*They're gone!*"

I stopped short, buffeted cold by that sudden breaker of disappointment. So the trick had been turned, after all. We had been duped and outgeneraled. We had lost our fight.

"Gone?" I repeated, so sharply that even old Benchley came to a stop in the doorway.

"I put 'em under my pillow here," explained Ferrie. "I never—never dreamed any one would think of looking for 'em in such a place. Never dreamed it!"

"Begging your pardon, sir," ventured the baggy-eyed Benchley.

"Hey?" snapped Ferrie, the picture of blanketed woe.

"Begging your pardon, sir, I be'eld that slip of jools there on your bed, and seeing there was burglars about, I took the liberty of removing them," solemnly intoned Benchley.

“Removing them?” repeated the benumbed Ferrie.

“I took the liberty of ’iding them, sir, in the fire-box of the ’ouse-furnace. And they’re down there, sir, ’eaped over with clinkers, sir, as safe as though they was in the Bank of England. And I think it would be best if we didn’t ’appen to waken Mrs. Obden-Belpont, as she’s fair done out with what she’s ’ad to go through to-day!”

“You are quite right, Benchley,” I said, as solemn as a judge.

CHAPTER XX

ONE NIGHT AT TIERNAN'S

THE capture of Curate Sam left me with the impression that the long trail was at last approaching its end. Pareto alone remained. And when Inspector Sloan grimly announced that he had certain reasons for believing our mysteriously-moving young Italian was to keep a rendezvous in Buck Tiernan's "ink-pot," I none too willingly agreed to sit out the final chapter.

So I found myself waiting in Tiernan's slum-palace, that was half hootch-hall and half flop-joint, waiting for midnight and Pareto. And while I waited I looked about me, studying that human cess-pool and remembering it was conditions such as these that made my work more and more unendurable to me. I could study those surroundings at my leisure, for I had come early. And I could do so with a reasonable sense of security, for somewhere amid that crowd of big-mitters and damp-getters and doss-housers and hysters sat Doyle of the Alliance offices, fitly disguised as a schlaum-worker, while at another table Toosey Attrill conversed over her bootlegger's gin with that ever watchful stool, Ooley Bey, the hokey-pokey man. And later in the evening, I remembered, Wilkins and Sloan himself were to appear on the scene.

Tiernan's "ink-pot," Toosey had given me to understand, was the worst of its kind, probably the worst in all New York. This, of course, was only a momentary distinction, for the bad spots of the city shift, and must always continue to shift. From Shinbone Alley, for instance, the glory has long since departed. Suicide Hall is no longer the fester-spot of offense it once was. Nor is Minetta Lane any more the harborage of murderers, while the Bowery itself has declined into an artery of trade and commerce.

But Tiernan's, I realized as I stared about me, was at the acme of its glory. There was a time when I'd never have believed a lordly city could nurse under its opulent plumage such a louse-nest of depravity. For they swarmed thick about me, in that ill-odored inn of incompetents, schlaum-workers and coke-peddlers from the water-front, scoopers and till-tappers and flimflammers from the lower fringes of the Tenderloin, lush-dips and pocket-slashers and porch-climbers from the city at large. They were all there, in a putrescent brotherhood of abomination, with faces that were the faces of rat and vulture, with language that seemed the language of a sewer given tongue, leprous youths with crafty eyes, unclean mouths heavy with

lip-rouge, unsteady hands indicative of needle-pumping, still youthful breasts wet with spilled alcohol.

It made me suddenly sick of low life, in all its forms and phases. It left me hating the work I was ordained to follow. I was tired of thievery and craft. I resented being chained to a tread-mill of crime. I hungered for the final sanities of fresh air and honesty. And I was, at the moment, thinking more about where and how I could get out of it all, when at a beer-stained table not six feet away from me I noticed a woman more youthful than the others. She was also more interesting.

She sat silent and alone at her table, with a face as white as chalk. Her pallor, if it did not make her appealing, at least left her arresting. The thin cheeks, so futilely powdered and rouged, the rebellious mouth with its full under-lip, the gray-blue eyes that looked over-large and lustrous in the restless face, all combined to mark the type, even while holding her apart from her more sodden sisters. She hadn't touched, I noticed, the glass of "suds" that stood in front of her. She sat staring out across the smoky room, the picture of preoccupied misery.

"Pipe the sad-eyed party!" gurgled a flaccid blonde whose second glass of fusel-oil whisky had served as a tongue-loosener. The staring girl neither moved nor answered. I felt vaguely sorry for her in her grief, in her grief that could know no secrecy, but must writhe naked before every casual or questioning eye. And I saw, as I re-surveyed her, that she had beauty, beauty of a bold and lawless sort, made piquant, to her kind, by its touch of recklessness.

"What're yuh flashin' that sour map for, Aggie?" asked a cancerous-looking bouncer as he strolled absently past her table.

The girl did not answer him. She seemed to be watching the door. Then I saw a sort of spasm pass over her body. Her restless hand suddenly pushed back the beer-glass. She sat looking at it with empty eyes, for several minutes. Then she began to cry, noiselessly, bitterly, abandonedly.

Some power which I didn't stop to understand prompted me to slip out of my chair and cross to that white-faced girl's table. There I dropped into the chair opposite to her.

"What's the matter?" I found the courage to ask.

But the girl didn't answer me. Instead, she poignarded me with a quick look of aversion.

"What's the matter?" I repeated, wondering if those sophisticated young eyes of hers would see through the thin veneer of the disguise with which I'd tried to fit myself out as an *habitué* of Tiernan's.

Still she didn't answer me. She merely turned and stared at an over-dressed "mackerel," fast asleep. Two mulattoes, at the next table, were solemnly and quietly throwing dice.

"What's wrong, anyway?" I persisted, struck by that nameless something on her thin face which now impressed me as more fear than misery. It would have been hard to say whether she was a mere girl or a woman. Life had at least written its knowledge large across that powdered face now streaked with tears. Yet, in some way, she wasn't so pathetic as the tearless and hardened women all about me, the women who had achieved the tragedy of indifference.

"Lea' me alone!" she said listlessly, between her stifled little sobs.

"But I hate to see you feel that way," I tried to tell her. She didn't even look at me.

"It's nothin' to eat *yuh*!" was her sullen retort.

"But how do you know I can't help you?"

I saw her look suddenly up, with a new aversion on her face. She was accepting me, I saw, as some sort of charity agent in a new guise. And I remembered the East Sider's abhorrence of institutional relief. I was a "Mission Stiff," to her, or a "tug-skirt" for a "Galway."

"No, I'm not one of 'em," I retorted, reading her thoughts. "I've been up against it just as hard as you are to-night."

"Aw, cut that out!" she wearily and impersonally sighed, with another of her half-furtive glances toward the door.

But having gone that far, I had no intention of cutting it out.

"I want to talk to you," I told her.

"So I see!" was her curt response.

"But I want to help you," I persisted.

"Yuh can't!" she replied.

"Why can't I?" I demanded.

"B'cause yuh can't!" was her moodily stubborn answer.

"But why can't you get it off your chest?" It paid, I knew, not to be too pompous.

"I can't!" she said, averting her body.

"But you haven't shown me why."

She suddenly swung about on me.

"D'yuh want to know why?" she demanded with a quick touch of passion.

I nodded, watching her eyes. She laughed, with the tear-marks still streaking her face.

"Because this is the night I get *mine*!" she announced in the *patois* of her circle. The phrasing carried with it a note of flippancy, but tragedy still crowned that troubled young face. She leaned forward across the table, staring at me and yet not seeming to see me. "I'm goin' to get what's comin to me—and get it good! That's what's the matter wit' me!"

"But what are you going to get?" I demanded.

She leaned forward a little and spoke in almost a whisper.

"I'm going to get croaked!" was her amazing and altogether unexpected reply.

I tried to laugh at her, but it wasn't much of a success.

"And who'll do the croaking?" I asked, wondering, for a moment, if this could be some new and ingenious form of the ancient tricks of the dummy-chucker.

"The guy I gave the throw-down," was her answer.

"What guy?"

She hesitated a moment, and when she spoke, her eyes evaded mine.

"Me husband!"

"Your hus— Why, I thought you girls never—"

She cut me short.

"Well, you thought wrong!"

"Tell me about it," I prompted.

She eyed me up and down, with a sort of Indian summer of suspicion.

"This is *my* funer'l!" she announced, with a grimace of resignation.

"But why have it *anybody's* funeral?"

She drew a deep breath and stared at the table-top.

"Yuh'd never get wise to this mix-up."

"Try me," I retorted.

Nothing succeeds like sincerity. She looked up at me slowly yet with a new interest. And when she spoke it was with a flat listnessness, without gesture and without expression.

"Yuh ever hear o' Dook Callahan?" she asked.

My knowledge of the underworld was extensive, but I was compelled to admit that the name was new to me.

"Well, that's the guy I hitched up with. We hitched f'r business reasons, but it was a real hitch. Then they sent him up the river f'r pump-handlin' Pip Siegel, who welched on the Gas-House Gang."

"Then Duke was a gunman?"

Even fear did not altogether obliterate the absurd and unreasonable clan-pride in her eyes.

"Sure he was! And he still is. He killed two men in New Mexico. And he shot a strike-picket in St. Louis. And Gawds knows how many others. And now he's comin' down here to get me!"

"You don't mean he's coming down here to this dump to try to take your life?" I repeated, incredulous.

"He's comin' to kill me," she listlessly told me across the beer-stained table.

"Coming from where?"

"From stir. He got out to-day. And he sent back word he'd have an ounce o' lead through me b'fore twelve hours were up."

"Then why are you sitting here waiting for it?" I demanded with a not unnatural impatience.

"There's nuttin' to do," was her listless retort. "If I went in hidin', he'd dig me out. If I got on the run, he'd keep after me. He'd keep on until he'd hauled me down. He'd keep on, until he got me, in the end. He'd never give up."

"But why should he want to do a thing like this?"

She sat looking at her hands. So I had to repeat my question.

"When they sent him t' the Big House, for life, he sent back word he had influence and a swell mouthpiece at work pullin' the strings. He said politics'd get him a pardon inside of a year. So I tolt him I'd wait. He'd fed me up on what he'd do for me, sayin' all the time he was nuts about me. I meant to wait. I wanted to wait. I *did* wait. But his swell friends didn't come across wit' any spring. He's only got his parole from that pardon-board to-day. And a woman can't always do what she wants to. There was another guy got hangin' round and handin' out the soft stuff. And I—I forgot about Dook!"

I began to see light. With a girl of that circle, I remembered, a court-sentence was habitually accepted as a formal divorce. The "moll" moves on to another mate.

"Then why can't that other guy take care of you?" I demanded.

She smiled her one-sided little smile of cynicism.

"That guy's got trouble of his own," was her enigmatic reply.

"Then why did you ever fall for a man who couldn't put up a fight for you?" I inquired out of my indignation.

"He was pretty good to me, that guy, when I was down on my luck. He kind o' shilled in b'fore I woke up to what was happenin'. Not that I wasn't wise to what men are. But he was a willin' spender, and he'd a way o' handin' out the soft talk that made yuh forget he was a guinney. And when he had me waverin', and wonderin' if Dook hadn't forgotten I was still on earth, he started loadin' me down wit' jew'lry until I was lit up like a switch-yard at eleven P. M."

"With jewelry?" I echoed, with a minute yet unmistakable tingle through my apparently indolent body.

"Sure," was the girl's retort.

"And you say that man was a guinney, a Dago?"

"Sure," she again assented.

"What was his name?"

That question, I at once saw, had been shot at her much too abruptly. A ghost called discretion reached out and closed a door between us.

"His name's nuttin' to outsiders," was her guarded response. And I knew that little was to be gained by pressing the point.

"But surely," I went on by way of a diversion, "surely you knew there'd be a come-back from a man like Duke Callahan!"

Still again the girl moved her head up and down.

"Oh, I knew it, all right, all right. But I weakened and let that guinney talk me into believin' something diff'rent. He told me Dook'd never get out o' clink in a century. He claimed the bulls had it on him f'r an old guy he croaked up the avenoo. He knew Dook had done that job, but there was a twist to it he wouldn't talk about."

"Who wouldn't?"

"Me friend."

"And what was the job up the avenue?" I casually inquired.

"A nutty old millionaire caught Dook in his museum, one night. And Dook put his light out, by accident."

"In his museum?" I echoed.

"He'd a collection o' mine-junk in glass cases, and Dook was beatin' a certain party up there f'r a haul. But when old Grosset walked in on him his only chanct—"

"*Grosset?*" I said with a gasp. I think I caught hold of the table, for my whole world seemed trying to turn a somersault.

"Say, what's wrong wit' yuh?" asked the white-faced girl confronting me.

I couldn't answer her, for the very machinery of thought came to a stop, like a watch hit by a sledge. I sat staring blankly through the smoke-stained air of Tiernan's dump. I saw a door open, and a man step into the room, glance about and step out again. I don't think I could have moved or spoken, if that man had been Angelo Pareto himself. I sat there staring at the blank door until the girl repeated her question.

"There was a bull standing in that door," I heard my own voice trying to explain. "I—I thought he was coming in after me."

The girl turned slowly toward the door and said something, but her words fell on deaf ears. I was a thousand miles away. I remembered the mysterious note that had fallen at my feet on the night of Eleakim Grosset's murder. I recalled the scene in the gem-room, and the gray-faced man on the bed, and the talk in the inspector's office. I thought of the tread-mill of underworld activities to which the events of that night had chained me. And wave after wave of overwhelming bitterness swept through my soul, the infinite bitterness of betrayal.

The one man who had proclaimed himself my friend had in reality proved my darkest enemy. The man who had mouthed so eternally about helping me up in the world had actually been holding me down. Eleakim Grosset had been killed by a gunman named Duke Callahan. And I had been free without knowing it. All the while that I had chafed at my so-called captivity I could have been mistress of my own movements, of my own life, if I'd only had the sense to know it. And in my bitterness I remembered how a lion had once escaped from a circus-wagon, years before, in my home town, and was found the next day pacing back and forth in front of the pickets of an iron fence. Behind that lion was open country, all North America to roam through. But those iron pickets had spelled cage-bars and captivity to him, and he had been too foolish to look over his shoulder at freedom. I remembered, too, that some one had said that a bee would starve to death in an open bottle with its neck turned away from the light. And I had been like that bee, fighting for light without understanding why I was a prisoner.

But now I knew the difference. Now nothing much mattered. Now the smoke-wreathed *habitués* of that slum rookery seemed denizens of another world, of a world infinitely far away. I was not one of them. I had been

thrust into them by a frame-up. *It was Duke Callahan who had killed Eleakim Grosset*.

What cases the Alliance lost or won suddenly became as phantasmal as something that might have happened in the Pliocene Age. What good fortune or ill awaited the feline Pareto merged into something as remote as an episode on the planet Mars. I was out of it all. And I was not only out of it, but I was above it. The death of Eleakim Grosset could not be laid at my door. The law was no longer a Moloch, demanding sacrifice.

That thought caused the bitterness to merge into a consciousness of relief, of release. My hands were clean. I was free. Then I looked back at the girl across the table from me. Her face was still clouded with its share of listless tragedy, with its animal-like and only half-inarticulate fear. She at least was very real. She still stood a bridge between my new world and my old one, a child-minded gun-moll whose sordid circle of destiny had so unexpectedly impinged on my own. And she sat there confronted by a peril that was both imminent and ominous. So I turned back to her, reminding myself that I still had a part to play between those unclean walls.

"Say, kid," I said with an effort at sub-cellar *camaraderie*, "I want to straighten this thing out. Does that Dago friend of yours know you're here?"

Her hesitancy didn't escape me.

"He knows more than most feebs imagine," she equivocated.

"Then if he knows what's on to-night, why isn't he sticking around?"

For a moment she seemed reluctant to answer.

"Aw, he's nursin' a grouch," she finally admitted.

"Why?" I inquired, promptly suspicious of that time-worn subterfuge.

"He had to beat it across the river, a few days back, and some Mafia mutt tipped him off I'd been ridin' in Jumbo Feeney's fire-wagon!"

For the second time that night my circulation stopped short. That part of my make-up which did the thinking for me went to the floor and took the count, stunned by the impact of a blow it wasn't prepared to meet. I'd often enough heard people say, when startled by the unexpected fisticuffs of coincidence, that this is a small world. In the field of crime, indeed, I'd found it a doubly small world. But I'd scarcely looked for it to circle back on itself as it did this night at Tiernan's. It was Pareto she was talking about. *He* had been across the river, engineering the *coup* that had led to Curate Sam's fall. And Pareto was the man the Alliance office was angling for.

My interest in the underworld Helen of Troy sitting across the beer-table from me suddenly became subsidiary. She seemed of importance now only in so far as she was related to the soft-voiced young Sicilian who had so

often and so adroitly slipped through the fingers of the law. She claimed the distinction of being Pareto's "rib." It was a dubious distinction, and far from a reassuring one, for I couldn't help remembering the man's record. I couldn't, in fact, get the thought of Pareto out of my head. He was forever contradicting himself. My first contact with him had come about through a crime of passion on his part, yet I had never thought of him as a moll-buzzer. I had never stopped to realize that this soft-eyed and soft-spoken son of Sicily could be a lady-killer. Life, I remembered, is always surprising us by proving shallow where we thought it deep, and suddenly and abysmally deep where we imagined it merely a shoal.

"Would you mind telling me just what business that friend of yours follows?" I casually inquired.

"He handed me an earful about bein' a lemon importer—but he's a liar."

"And instead of being a lemon importer he's only a stone-getter?"

"How d'yuh know that?" she asked, forgetting her listlessness.

"Didn't you say he lit you up with them till you looked like a switch-yard?"

A barricaded look crept into her eyes.

"I ain't worryin' about that guy. I'm thinkin' about what's goin' to happen b'tween now and midnight!"

I watched her as she watched the door.

"But if you feel sure you're in danger," I tried to argue with her, "why don't you go to the police? That's what they're for."

She laughed, but quite without mirth. And I found I liked her least in her moments of flippancy.

"And have 'em gi' me the laugh and turn me loose! And the desk-guy bawl me out for shootin' the bug! Say, I ain't runnin' away wit' the idear I'm important enough for a double shift o' bodyguards. And nothin' short o' state militia is goin' to keep Dook Callahan from gettin' what he's after."

I stared at her as she sat there in her listless impotence. She was beyond my reach, beyond my power to change or move. Yet in that half-empty little head of hers, with all its dwarfed and crooked processes of thought, she nursed, like a diamond wrapped in a soiled handkerchief, a point of knowledge that was doubly precious to the Alliance. She knew where Angelo Pareto was and just why he was absenting himself from Tiernan's "ink-pot" at a time when his natural impulses should have brought him there on the run. For a moment, as I stared at her with an outward parade of indifference, I wondered if she was merely a decoy planted there to further the unknown ends of Pareto and his associates. Was her story, I found

myself suddenly demanding, merely a well-baited hook to snare an enemy already intent on watching his own carefully set lines? Was it a subtly planned counter-attack to forestall my own studiously planned tactics?

I looked back at the girl's face, and as I did so that momentary suspicion melted away. I felt sure of her. The shallow misery on that listless-eyed face was too genuine for doubt. It was something more than studied make-believe. Instinct told me that, as plain as words. Yet there was too much at stake, I remembered, to depend solely on instinct. Sloan's training had taught me the necessity of always making sure, of never taking a chance when it was possible to translate chance into actuality. That, he was forever proclaiming, was what the Alliance and its system was for. So I remembered the system, and decided to fall back on my supports. I was still a cog in that machinery of accumulated knowledge and power, no matter what motive or what mistake had brought me there. And if the events of that night were of vital interest to the girl across the table from me, they were not without importance in my own tangled-up destiny.

"Well," I announced as I gathered up my skirts, "I guess I can't do any good by butting in on this family meeting. So I'm going to breeze out before the mix-up comes along!"

She said nothing to this. She merely sat watching me with an oddly detached glance as I drifted away through the crowd. But I directed my course so that it brought me in contact with Toosey and her table.

"Gimme a gasper!" Toosey commanded of Ooley Bey, without so much as a smile of welcome to me as she took the cigarette.

"Toosey," I guardedly inquired, "did you ever see the girl I was talking to at that table over there?"

"Sure," was Toosey's leisurely response. "That's Gas-House Aggie."

"And what do you know about her?"

"There's nothin' much *to* know! She's just a frail who's always had her finger out for a helpin' hand."

"Did you ever hear that she'd hitched up with a man called Duke Callahan?"

"Among others," admitted Toosey, "there sure was Dook!"

I resented Toosey's lack of interest. But I had no time for the exercise of personal emotions.

"Well, watch that girl, until I get back here," I said, "and watch her closely. For Gas-House Aggie is going to mean more to us to-night than you imagine."

I left her to worry over this and made my way out of Tiernan's with a care-free swagger that must have proved an even greater source of bewilderment to Toosey. But the moment I was well clear of that dump of abomination I made a dive for a telephone-booth and was sending my call across the city for Sloan himself.

Reluctant as I was to admit it, a sort of second-wind of fortitude crept through me as I heard the quiet and confident voice of the chief over the wire.

"How soon can you get down to Tiernan's?" I asked.

"When I'm needed," he snapped back. But his curtness no longer impressed me. Never again did I intend to be over-awed by that once intimidating personality. Never again did I propose to see him ride rough-shod over my sensibilities.

"Well, I imagine you might be needed any old time," I quietly informed him, remembering the lion that walked back and forth behind the picket-fence.

"Why do you say that?" was the chief's sharp demand. He wasn't in the habit of taking suggestions from his operatives.

"Because there's going to be some rough-house down there before midnight."

I could hear him snort, even over the wire.

"That's where you're dead wrong! And I've just sent word down for Doyle and Toosey to get back to the up-town office. There's no use waiting for any Pareto down there at Tiernan's. Pareto's been in touch with Chick Eberts and found out our nice little decoy duck is solid wood. What's more, Pareto's laid his ropes for a safe-job in the hotel district, just to give us the laugh. And it's up to this office to see who's going to enjoy the final grin!"

I stood for a moment or two thinking this over.

"Then what do you want me to do?" I asked, more from force of habit than anything else.

"Anything, except waste my time," was Sloan's answer as the wire was shut off. And without difficulty I could picture him as he slammed that receiver down on its hook.

I tried to hold my indignation in check, but it wasn't so easy now, with that new-found wine of freedom still singing in my veins. I had intended asking Sloan if there wasn't a chance of having the law take Gas-House Aggie under its wing and keeping her there until reason could be injected into Duke Callahan. Sloan's interests, however, were in other quarters. And if anything was to be done, it would have to be done quickly.

Then I thought of Winkie. From to-night, I knew, I could face him without fear. He had proclaimed that he still believed in me, that he would come the moment I called on him. Winkie, I said as I sent in a call for his number, would never fail me. Winkie would understand. And it might lead to a chance for certain explanations which were due him.

But Winkie, I found, was not at home.

"If it is urgent," explained his man over the wire, "Mr. Ealand might be called at Mrs. De Haven's. He is dining there to-night."

"Never mind," I said with a sigh.

"Whom shall I say called him?" inquired the pompous-noted voice over the wire.

"You can say it was Miss Rymal, speaking from Tiernan's," was my retort, as I turned the double-edged knife of my misery in its wound.

I hung up the receiver with a still wayward sense of desolation mill-stoning about my heart. I could picture Mr. Winfred Ealand in that Fifth Avenue home, drinking Turkish coffee out of a Sèvres demi-tasse and leisurely helping himself to another gold-tipped cigarette as the white-calfed footman made his rounds. And I could see him leaning idly over the grand piano, in a music-room of rose and Roman gold, while Gwendolyn De Haven played Grieg and gazed ardently into my Winkie's eye. And *I* had spent the evening in a beer-dump with saw-dust on the floor and obscenity in the air!

It brought suddenly home to me the gulfs, the unfathomable gulfs, that yawned between me and the man who had once made life a little more worth living for me. We belonged to different worlds. We looked at life from different angles. We had our own trails to follow. And the sooner I learned "to go my lonely," as Toosey would put it, the sooner I'd know that it never paid a woman to live on dreams.

So I went back to Tiernan's, thinking of the girl who sat waiting at the scarred round table. I went back to Tiernan's, oppressed by that vague ache for companionship which probably brought Eve and Adam considerably closer together after Eden's pearly gates had been pushed shut in their faces.

Yet the tainted air of Tiernan's "ink-pot" was more than ever repellent to me. The same sordid gaiety went on as before, and in the midst of that sinister merry-go-round Gas-House Aggie still sat alone at her table. The only difference was that Doyle and Toosey had mysteriously disappeared, and that Aggie had changed her position, so that instead of sitting with her back to the main entrance, she faced it.

The rest of the room, I noticed, had left her strictly alone, in an instinctive and animal-like respect for her unhappiness, I suppose, the same as a sick steer is impassively shunned by the range-herd. And for the second time I noticed something wonderful in the girl's face as I sat down across the table from her. She may have been illiterate, and she was unmistakably and undeniably degraded, but there was the trumpeting appeal of Woman in her shadowy eyes. Her narrow little life had been abandoned to passion, had faced its only triumphs through passion. But men had desired her, had fought for her. Those youthfully sophisticated lips had drunk love to its bitterest dregs. She had stirred the pulse of men not easily moved to emotion. She had known her hour of power, however uncouth it may have been in character and setting. And now she sat there stunned, face to face with an impending calamity where her old-time physical appeal was of no value, where her sedulously acquired technique of voluptuous provocation could never come to her aid. That being her only weapon and her only armor, she had obviously surrendered to the inevitable. That surrender was so complete that she looked at me when I spoke, with the abstraction of a sleep-walker.

"Say, Aggie, I tried to sidestep this thing," I told her in the language that would come closest to her comprehension, "but I just couldn't do it."

Her dull eye surveyed my person without emotion.

"Who said my name was Aggie," she finally asked.

"That bouncer called you Aggie," I reminded her. "And perhaps I know more about you than your name."

She sat there silent for a full minute.

"It's nuttin' that'll do yuh any good," she finally remarked, "or me, either."

But I didn't intend to be rebuffed. It was essential that the truth or falsity of that girl's story should be confirmed.

"Aggie, all this world nurses a sure-enough contempt for a quitter. There's a taxi thirty yards from this corner. What's the matter with you and me taking that taxi and getting tucked away up in my district until we can talk this thing out? Then maybe we can lay the right sort of plans for having Callahan rounded up before he runs away from the idea that a shooting-iron is the supreme court of New York State!"

The woman didn't answer me. She wasn't even looking at me. Instead, she was staring above and beyond me, with eyes that widened into a sort of vapid gape.

"*It's him!*" she said in a loose-lipped whisper that brought my heart up into my throat.

I couldn't see the man who had stepped in through the door, the man she was watching. I could only read what was happening as it was reflected in that tragically intent face. And I was afraid to turn around, afraid to confront the calamitous moment that couldn't be long deferred, very much the same as a child dreads to uncover a cut. And I didn't turn around. I waited, even as the woman on the other side of the table waited.

Then the man who had stepped in through the door moved forward into my line of vision. And that man wasn't Duke Callahan. It was Angelo Pareto.

He came forward slowly and deliberately, with a cigarette between his fingers. His hat-rim was pulled low over his eyes, a little tiltingly, giving him a look of care-free bravado. But under the arched black brows the seal-dark eyes were as alert as a marten's. I never saw a man so alive, in fact, so mysteriously, so electrically alive, notwithstanding that paraded mask of calmness. At just what point he saw and knew me I couldn't tell, for his eyes, all the time, were on the face of the woman across the table from me. So absorbed was he in that gaze, indeed, and so unwavering was her answering stare, that the two of them might have been alone in a desert instead of in a slum-dump crowded with the riff-raff of the streets.

The man's face was inscrutable. But on the woman's face I saw appeal mingled with hopelessness, reproof touched with contrition. And as I saw that face, deepening as a shop-window deepens when the shop-keeper has turned on his lights, I awakened to the fact that the woman had deceived me. Pareto meant more to her than I had imagined, than she had acknowledged. Her lower lip even quivered, like a child's, as he sank easily into the vacant chair that stood between us. But all the while his eyes were on the woman's face. Not once did he so much as glance in my direction. But he laughed, quietly and softly.

"Eet ees a leetla world!" he said in his familiarly suave voice that made me think of a ring-dove in a pine-tree.

He must have seen me, and known me, I realized as I heard that speech. It reminded me that he was a past-master of the theatrical, that his control of himself was as perfect as an actor's. For he gave evidence of no concern, showed no surprise. If the element of fear entered into his sensations, he betrayed no sign of it. He must have known there was a price on his head, just as he must have known I was his enemy and that the apparatus of the entire Alliance organization stood behind me. Yet to all intents and purposes he coolly ignored me until he had read, as one might read a page of print, the

silent face across the table from him. Then, and then only, he turned and looked at me long and earnestly. The faintest shadow of a smile played about the corners of his mouth.

"You expec' me, maybe?" he inquired.

"I've been expecting you for some time," I replied, doing my best to meet his calmness with a countering calmness.

"You knowa why I have come?" he quietly asked me. It was through women, and because of women, I was remembering, that most criminals were finally rounded up. And Pareto had side-stepped a *coup* to rejoin his "rib."

"I think I do," I replied. For all his nonchalance, I knew he was appraising me, pondering the contingencies that hovered about us. And I, of course, was doing the same with him. I knew that he was "heeled." And I knew, if the need arose, that he would be lightning quick in the use of a gun. But some vast new indifference which had taken possession of me left me singularly unafraid of him. The problem of his apprehension seemed suddenly remote from me and my life, as remote as the problem of keeping the canals of Mars cleaned out.

"And your padrone, he knowa why too?"

"No, Sloan's rather looking for you to put through a robbery up in the hotel district," I told him.

He frowned a little, as he glanced quickly about, as though to make sure my speech had not been overheard. But he saw that I knew more than he had imagined.

"Eet ees an honor, to be observe' so close," he said. But the note of mockery in his voice was unmistakable.

"And sometimes an obvious inconvenience," I added, doing my best to give him point for point. My fortitude, I felt sure, was a source of secret worry to him.

"Eet ees," he meditatively agreed.

I was wondering how much he would give for the privilege of knifing me. But he surprised me by becoming suddenly less circuitous, less theatrical.

"I will beata you—always!" he announced, looking me square in the face. He proclaimed that conviction with the quiet and honest faith in himself and in his powers which the world has the habit of calling genius.

"After to-night," I just as quietly announced, "there will be no further contest between us."

"You t'inka not?" he said with a sudden uncontrollable flash of hostility. Then, as his eye wavered to the white-faced girl who sat beside me, he thought better of it, and compelled himself to calmness. "Leesten! You are a smarta girl. But t'ree times I coulda keel you—t'ree times!"

"And why not now?"

He shrugged. The gesture was eloquent.

"I t'inka you know why."

I shook my head in negation. I was wondering, all the while, what Sloan would have to say if he walked in on that altogether remarkable colloquy.

"Leeve and let leeve," said the softly modulated voice beside me.

"Yes, live and let live," I repeated, with my eyes on Gas-House Aggie. I could feel, in turn, the man's seal-brown eyes studying my face, weighing in his necessarily confused mind just how much I knew of the situation confronting him.

"Leesten," he said, drawing a little closer to the table-edge. "Almos' t'ree year ago, in a 'ospitale, you helpa me w'en I very much needa help. You no forgeta that? No, I also no forgeta that. Eef that no 'appened, I shoulda keel you to-night, I t'ink. For in two-t'ree minute I mus' walka out from this place. I walka out with this signorina, and nobody mus' stoppa me. Eete ees necessaire!"

It was my turn to draw closer in to the table-edge.

"And you, Pareto, listen to me. I know much better than you imagine why you and this woman must get away from this place. And since you have said live and let live, I want you to leave me a little better able to live. I know what you are. I have no illusions about that. But there is one thing I want you to tell me, now you have the chance. I want you to tell me just who it was—"

But that was as far as I got. I stopped for the simple reason that I knew he was no longer listening to me. He had turned toward the door with that quick and furtive side-movement of his eyes so characteristic of the criminal. For a change had swept over that ill-assorted company. A silence had crept over their turgid babel of talk and laughter, followed by a murmur of voices that was slightly derisive and unmistakably inhospitable. This, I saw, was caused by an unlooked-for and somewhat incongruous intruder. It was an intruder in full evening dress, wearing an exceptionally shiny silk hat and a top-coat of black broadcloth thrown back from the shoulders. His generous expanse of shirt-bosom shone very white, as white as a tombstone, through the smoke-blue air. He was a tall man, tall almost to the point of lankiness, but it wasn't until he stepped closer into the crowded room,

inhaling its fetid air with obvious disdain, that I discovered it was Winfred Ealand. I could see him look deliberately and interrogatively about him, from table to crowded table, and my heart skipped a beat or two at the thought that he had come there in search of me.

It did another two-step as I realized that he had caught sight of me and was coolly but determinedly piloting his way in my direction. But instead of watching Winkie, I kept my eye on Pareto, for I was unusually interested in just how Pareto would accept that intrusion. I saw his hand slip down to his side-pocket. There was no change in his expression, and a stranger might have imagined the movement was merely that of an idle man reaching for another cigarette. But I knew better. I knew that that apprehensive right hand was clutched about the stock of a firearm and that the brain controlling that hand was terribly alert and watchful for the first movement of suspicion. And I'm afraid that my smile, as Winkie strode over to the one remaining empty chair at our table, and sat down on it, was rather a sickly one. For Winkie, I knew only too well, hadn't the remotest idea of what he was wandering into. And for the life of me I couldn't think of any respectable way of explaining things to him.

"Well," he said, calmly ignoring my two companions as he directed his attention solely at me, "you seem to be all right."

"Please do not speak so loud," I warned him. And then I added: "Why shouldn't I be all right?"

"Then why did you send for me?" he demanded.

"Who said I sent for you?"

"My man said you had telephoned to me from Tiernan's. I must acknowledge that I wasn't acquainted with Tiernan's. I had some slight difficulty, in fact, in identifying it. But I was helped out by my friend, Captain Offley of Police Headquarters, and—"

"But what made you imagine I was in any way in need of help?" I cut in, realizing that Winkie was blundering across very dangerous frontiers.

I could see him glance about, with his eyebrows up.

"When I learned the nature of this—er—this rather aromatic resort I naturally concluded there were better places than Tiernan's for a young lady to spend her midnights!"

"And you came to lead me away?" I prompted.

"I ventured to hope that I might be of some slight help to you," he amended.

"But, you see, I'm much more used to this sort of thing than you are," I was ungracious enough to retort. "And these are my friends," I added with

an eye-sweep toward the two silent spectators of our interview.

Poor old thick-headed Winkie contemplated them quite without fear, and equally without approbation.

"Then I'm glad I'm here," he announced with unqualified heartiness.

I couldn't help thinking that we made a strange assortment as we sat grouped about that iron-pedestaled beer-table. But my thoughts on that point were cut short by Pareto.

"Who ees this man?" he asked, slanting an arrogant eye at my dress-suited champion.

"I'd rather know who you are," was Winkie's quick retort, "for I must confess that neither your face nor your manners particularly appeal to me."

It was then that Gas-House Aggie spoke for the first time. She spoke quickly, and in a voice shrill with apprehension, for Pareto had half-risen to his feet in a sort of cat-like crouch.

"Don't start nuttin' wit' that cuff-shooter!" she cried out, with her intent eyes fixed on Pareto's.

"I should be inclined to endorse the advice," Winkie went on with the bravery of ignorance, "especially as I've taken the trouble to station Captain Offley and three of his men just outside that door." Then he turned to me with his most casual drawing-room manner. "And before the music begins I'd like to know what your interest is in this individual."

Winkie, I felt sure, misread the meaning of my gasp. Still again he was proving to me how terribly out of place he was in that environment. He had no comprehension of his perils. He quite failed to see how futile were those four policemen who waited around the corner. For there are occasions when an officer out of sight is an officer out of action. And when the music started in a place like Tiernan's, it usually started without an overture. The reptiles of that cave didn't indulge in warning rattles. It was apt to be a case of cold steel in the dark, or a blackjack from behind, or the quick bark of a pistol and a duck for cover.

Remembering these things, I looked Winkie in the eye and fibbed to him. I fibbed, to save him from his own stupid honesty. For I felt like a private in a front-line trench, a private still confronted by all the menace and horror of conflict while he knows that in a far-off capital peace had already been declared. I no longer had anything to fight for. I was without a cause. But I was still on the firing-line, with a scalp to save.

"Listen," I said to Winkie. "My interest in this man is a very important one. He can not and must not be interfered with. I am perfectly safe here. And if you truly want to help me, as you say, you can do so by going quietly

through that door, putting your captain friend and his men in your car, and carrying them back where they belong."

Winkie's stare locked with mine. His look was almost a combative one.

"I'm sorry," he retorted, "but I can't see it that way. If this hole isn't safe enough for me, it isn't safe enough for you. And I prefer being where you are."

"It isn't a question of personal preferences," I told him.

"Then the question is, are you in danger of any kind here, or are you not?"

"Only the danger," I retorted, "involved in your intrusion. And I can't—"

But for the second time Pareto took it upon himself to interrupt:

"Whata claim 'ave you on thisa girl?" he demanded of Winkie, with a gesture that airily bracketed me in with that king of diamond thieves.

"Unfortunately, none!" was Winkie's unexpected reply.

Pareto's sagacious eyes looked him over.

"*You lova her!*" It was neither an interrogation nor a statement. But it was uttered with a sneer, with a touch of mockery that brought the blood to my cheeks.

"I think I do," was Winkie's second quite unlooked-for statement that night. Yet I had no chance to meditate over that statement, for Pareto was speaking again, and speaking with grim earnestness.

"Then the besta t'ing you can do ees to take her queeck outa here! Taka her when you hava the chance, or somet'ing will 'appen, Meester Man, w'en you will have the chance no more!"

"But I have something to say about that," I quickly contended.

Pareto swung about on me. He was more excited than I had imagined.

"Leesten!"

But it was Winfred Ealand who cut in this time.

"Don't imagine that this Dago's threats are in the least disturbing to me," he announced as he sat back in his chair and let his glance lock with Pareto's. The latter said something in Italian, which I couldn't understand, over his shoulder. What that message was, remained unknown to me. But I noticed that a wide-shouldered youth who had appeared to be drowsing over a bottle of Chianti at the table next to ours sidled quietly out of his chair and drifted like a shadow down between the serried tables.

Pareto, in the meantime, had turned back to my quiet-eyed Winkie.

"I will tella you somet'ing," he began, and it surprised me a little to find that his voice was shaking with either excitement or passion. "Thisa girl ees —"

Pareto stopped short. His glance wavered from Winkie to the white-faced girl directly across the table from him. He sat leaning forward, staring at Gas-House Aggie. His body was poised there, so tense and yet so motionless, that at first I thought he sat awaiting some secret signal from her, some signal of tremendous importance. But when I stared into the girl's face I saw that she wasn't even looking at him. She was looking beyond him, just as she had looked beyond me when Pareto had first stepped into the room. But on her face this time there seemed less of wonder and more of terror. It brought her right hand up toward her mouth, with her crooked fingers in a cluster, as though they had been intended to shut off a scream which her flaccid lips couldn't control. But no sound came from those lips, though they moved loosely, like a drunkard's.

I could see Pareto read that face. Through it he seemed to apprehend something awesome behind him, as astronomers study a star in a mirror. And I at once thought of Winkie's officers of the law and fleetingly wondered what folly could be bringing them on the scene at such a time. Then I no longer thought of even this, for I had noticed Gas-House Aggie do a remarkable thing. It was a movement that would have been ludicrous, had the stark fear on that face of hers been less tragic. She melted down out of sight, like a disappearing gun sinking behind its redoubt. She disappeared noiselessly and spinelessly beneath the level of the table-top with the charred edge, subsiding snakily into a huddled mass on the saw-dust floor.

Winkie looked at that suddenly vacated chair with wonder in his eyes and a little frown of trouble on his face. He was probably thinking of trap-doors and the melodramas of his undergraduate days. His troubled frown was almost shot through with amusement. But I didn't wait until he laughed outright, for my glance swung back to Pareto, who repeated his earlier movement of half-rising from his chair and turning about as he rose. His posture, even after he was on his feet, struck me as an incongruously timid and crouching one. It brought flashing through my mind the picture of an over-grown child trying to appear small before a ticket-window, in the hope of a half-rate admission. He was huddled in on himself, as an empty-bellied panhandler contracts before the bite of a winter wind. Yet at almost the same time it flashed home to me that he wasn't directing his attention toward Winkie. He wasn't even thinking of Winkie. That discovery gave me the courage to swing half-way about in my chair. And then I understood.

I understood even before I saw the flash of metal in Pareto's hand held close in to his side. It was the paroled "lifer" returning to balance up his ledger of hate. It was Duke Callahan come back, as he had promised to come back, to wipe out a blot of betrayal.

I saw a lank man advancing through the smoke-blue air of Tiernan's "ink-pot," a man as tall and lank as Curate Sam himself. He didn't seem to move hurriedly, and yet he moved without hesitation, with a colossal preoccupation on his face. That face was gaunt, and the boniness of it was accentuated by the short-clipped hair which made the large ears stand out like a rabbit's ears. On that face, too, was a gray pallor that made it look almost cadaverous. But what most struck me was the self-hypnotizing concentration of the man. He seemed to see nobody in that crowded room but the enemy who had robbed him of his woman. He seemed incapable of all impulse but an Adamitic and instinctive impulse for vengeance. He was drunk with this, just as other men become drunk with gin and whisky. Yet his movements were steady and deliberate, terribly deliberate, as he advanced toward the still crouching Pareto. His single subsidiary movement seemed to be an unwilled one, for as Pareto circled out clear of the table and faced him, he swung his left arm up in front of his breast, in an involuntary attitude of defense. Then for the first time I clearly saw the revolver poised in Duke Callahan's right hand. Winkie, too, must have seen it, for his startled gaze wavered back to me with a sort of child-like wonder shot through with protest.

"Quick," I gasped, "get that captain of yours!"

Shame swept its wing across Winkie's startled face.

"I lied," he gasped back. "That was a bluff. I was afraid—"

He was cut short by a double clap of sound, as sharp and clear as the double stroke of a mallet on a deck-board, followed by the scream of a terrified woman. Then came a clatter of suddenly moving furniture and stamping feet, a clatter so quick and explosive that it almost swallowed up the repeated double slap of sound as the two revolvers barked out for the second time.

I noticed neither the tumultuous ducking for cover nor the magic-like clearing of the room. All I saw was Duke Callahan's inexplicable movement as he threw his right hand high above his face and turned half-way around. Then, with a great intake of breath, he drew himself up to his full height. It seemed so unmistakably an attitude of defiance that I was thinly startled, the next moment, to see him pitch forward on his face and lie full-length between two of the iron-pedestaled tables, where, for a second or two, his limbs threshed in the saw-dust, and then were quite still.

It wasn't until then that I became aware of the fact that Pareto was standing close beside me, with one hand on the charred table-edge. His other hand, I noticed, he lifted hesitatingly toward his watch-pocket, as though abstractedly in search of a time-piece. But instead of lifting out a watch, he pressed this hand to his body and then withdrew it, lifting it to the light as he did so. There was a vague and plaintive wonder in his eyes as he stared at it, for it was red with blood. Then he looked at me with an odd little grimace of the features, a grimace that was almost deprecatory. Before I could get out of my chair he sank noiselessly to the floor, seeming to go down in sections.

"Great God!" gasped Winfred Ealand, with a face as white as his shirt-front, "is *he* gone too?"

I don't think I answered Winkie, for I'd already dropped on my knees and was tugging at Pareto's twisted shoulders, trying to move him away from the widening pool of crimson that followed the sagging limbs across the cleared boards. Then I looked up for help, and as I did so I realized that the place had quickly but noiselessly emptied. It was manifestly unwise, I remembered, for most of that company to sit in the neighborhood of murder. Yet their cowardice angered me. And that futile anger was only increased as I looked quickly about and saw that even Gas-House Aggie had scurried away with the rest of those human rats. That poor little empty-headed "rib," the cause of it all, had gone when the going was good. That second Helen of the Ruinous Face hadn't deemed it worth while to linger in the neighborhood of either her dead Hector or her dying Paris.

For Pareto was surely dying. I realized that as I got his head up on my lap and wiped the blood and froth away from his lips. He seemed to be wanting to say something. But speech was beyond him. The thing that most impressed me, at the moment, was the unbroken quiet of that once noisy slum-dump. It was a stillness that made you imagine the whole city had been suddenly deserted. And even Winkie, who should have been a help and comfort to me, was sitting there like a stunned ox, his eyes wide with horror. I didn't feel a shred of pity for him. I even resented his soft and sheltered channels of life which had always led him away from ugliness. And I told myself, rather bitterly, as I knelt there with Pareto's blood soaking through my skirt, that it would do Winfred Ealand good, that it would wake him up to some of the things I'd had to wade through.

I don't know how long I knelt there, for emotion plays miracles with time, often making an hour like a minute, and a second seem as long as an hour. The whole thing, I suppose, hadn't been a matter of a hundred heart-beats. But it was hard to keep thought from taking the bit in its teeth and bolting.

"Winkie," I called, "get me some whisky, from the soda-jerker, through that door!"

But Winkie made no move to obey that order. Instead, he slipped down on his knees beside me and stared at Pareto's face.

"He's trying to say something," Winkie informed me, with his face twisted up in an involuntary frown of sympathy.

The bubbling lips were struggling to frame a speech. I held Pareto's head a little higher. He coughed and cleared his throat.

"What is it?" I prompted, studying the agony for communication in the inarticulate eyes.

"What is it?" re-echoed Winkie wheedlingly, as though he were speaking to a sick child. But Pareto's eyes were on my face, and on my face alone. His narrow chest heaved and lifted with a deeper breath.

"*You no keela ol' man Grosset*," he said in a thick whisper that at times was almost a gargle.

"Who did?" I sharply demanded.

His eyes fell. Then they lifted to my face again. But they were indifferent eyes, this time.

"Who did?" I repeated.

But he seemed unable to answer.

"Was it Duke Callahan?" I asked, almost shaking the inert shoulders.

"Yes," was the whispered response. Then the old, the familiar, the unlovely struggle began.

"What's he trying to tell you?" asked Winkie, stooping closer. I suppose it was merely overstrained nerves that made my words, when I spoke to him, a shrill and impatient shout.

"Can't you do something besides gaping there? Can't you try to help a little? Can't you even—"

"What shall I do?" asked poor Winkie, staring at the red-colored sawdust that stuck to his knees.

"Get somebody! Get an officer here, as quick as you can!"

Winkie rose obediently and started for the door. He had reached that door before a quick tumult of voices sounded outside it. He tried to push through it. But he was stopped.

"Oh, no, you don't!" cried a calm and resolute baritone. "You stay right in there!"

The next moment I saw Winkie thrust unceremoniously back and a blue-clad figure take possession of the doorway. At the other door, a moment later, a second blue-clad figure appeared. Then came another sharp clash of voices, and Sloan himself, without a hat, pushed in through the guarded doorway. His face, I noticed, was surprisingly colorless. It was not the pallor of fear, but the pallor of a passionate man who had surrendered to sudden anger. Yet his mind was alert enough, for at one quick survey he seemed to comprehend the entire situation.

He stopped half-way between the two men, now lying full length on the unclean flooring. His interest in Pareto seemed only a momentary one. It was Callahan he knelt beside. I could hear him breathe deep as he slipped a hand in under the vest of the dead "lifer."

"Did this man say anything to you?" he asked.

"No," I truthfully enough replied. His face cleared as he rose to his feet and glanced around.

"This pretty well cleans up our gang," he said in a voice that still bracketed me with him and the Alliance. But it was my forgotten Winkie, more than me, who resented that speech.

"And it pretty well cleans up the work this girl is going to do for you and your office," announced my knight in broadcloth, with an altogether unlooked-for steeliness of voice.

"What makes you think that?" demanded Sloan, fixing him with a heavy and hostile stare.

"Because I'm going to take her out of it."

"She may be in it a little too deep for that," challenged the chief.

"Are you?" asked Winkie as he stepped over to my side and put a protective arm about me. Something in my face, I suppose, must have perplexed Sloan, for he glanced from me down to the two silent-lipped figures on the floor.

"Winkie," I said to the owner of the arm that was holding me against a somewhat crumpled starched shirt-front, "I'm as free as the wind. And if you want me, my beloved, I'm utterly and entirely yours."

Even the blue-coats looked away when he kissed me. It was Sloan, and Sloan alone, who stood studying my face.

"And what has made you as free as the wind?" he demanded, with the bitterness of an officious man who unexpectedly finds himself confronted by defeat.

“The truth,” I said as I smiled back at him, with my arm still linked through Winkie’s.

The chief’s face, as a rule, was not an expressive one. But as a barricaded look crept into his habitually ironic eyes and an unmistakable tinge of abashment crimsoned his heavy jowls, I knew that he knew what I knew. And he himself turned away when Winkie kissed me for the second time.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

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.

The cover is from the A. L. Burt Company edition with color art work of the frontispiece by the illustrator.

[The end of *The Diamond Thieves*, by Arthur Stringer.]