

**THE
DISAPPEARANCE
OF
KIMBALL WEBB**

Carolyn Wells

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Carolyn Wells

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF KIMBALL WEBB

BY
ROWLAND WRIGHT



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THE DISAPPEARANCE OF KIMBALL WEBB

CHAPTER I A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE

Kimball Webb didn't look at all like a man who would disappear mysteriously. Though I'm not sure mysteriously disappearing men, as a class, have physical characteristics in common. But one rather imagines them eerie looking, with deep, cavernous eyes and hollow cheeks.

Kimball Webb had nothing of the sort. He was a bit distinguished looking, but that was because he was a New Englander by birth, and a playwright by profession and had won the D. S. C. in the late war. Now, though a lame knee interfered slightly with his outdoor pursuits, his mind was alert and eager to return to work and his brain was fairly bursting with new ideas for his plays. First, however, he must needs attend to a certain business of getting married. A

delightful business it seemed to Webb, for Elsie Powell was as lovely and desirable in the flesh as she had looked to him when seen in his troubled dreams in far off France.

There is a lot to be said about Elsie, but that properly comes in the next chapter.

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Mrs. Webb and Miss Henrietta Webb sat at their pleasant breakfast table, and while they wait for the son and brother, I'll describe them.

Every detail of their appearance and manner shrieked Boston,—so you don't need much more surface description. A mental interior view would show hearts devotedly, even absurdly, fond of Kimball Webb, and minds which reasoned against showing fully that devotion.

The New England repression of feeling is not effaced by life in New York; indeed, the circumstance often accentuates the trait.

And the Webbs lived in New York. This condition crucified the souls of both women but they came cheerfully, because it was Kimball's wish. He felt his dramatic talent was of a wing-spread too wide for the narrow opportunities of his native town, and there were other lures in the metropolis, especially Elsie.

So, with a smile on their lips but tears in their eyes, his mother and sister left the shadow of their State House dome, and set up their household gods in an old but comfortable house in the East Sixties, not far from Park Avenue. It was on Park Avenue that Elsie lived.

Webb's love of all beautiful things,—especially Elsie,—had led him to have the back yard of their home fixed up like an old patio or close or some such doings, and had scattered over its paved area, benches, statues, lions and other more or less damaged stoneware, picked up from certain worthwhile dealers in antiques.

So it was on this picturesque outlook the dining room windows opened, and the house being on the south side of the street, the morning sun added cheer to the already pleasant breakfast scene.

“Kimball is late this morning,” said Miss Webb, naturally, though unnecessarily.

“Small wonder,” returned her mother. “I happen to know that he was up till all hours at his dinner party.”

“What a foolish idea, having a bachelor dinner the night before one is married. I should think he'd prefer a good night's rest to fit him for the responsibilities of the ceremony.”

“Few responsibilities devolve on Kimball's shoulders. The best man looks after everything, I'm told.”

“And Fenn Whiting can do that. He is the most capable man I ever saw, when it comes to social matters of any sort. But I'm a little surprised at his consenting to be best man. You know he worships Elsie.”

“I know. He tried to cut Kim out.”

“And I wish he had! I shall never be reconciled to Kim’s marrying that girl—”

“Rather late now to raise objections, Henrietta.”

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“As if I hadn’t been raising them right along from the day I first heard the outrageous news!”

“Yes, and what good did it do?”

“None. But I’ve put myself on record as against the marriage.”

“You certainly have! And now, do hold your tongue about it; I think I shall send Hollis up to Kimball’s room—”

“Oh, let the poor boy alone. The wedding isn’t until four o’clock, and he may as well sleep late if he wants to. What time did he get in?”

“It was after two. He looked in to say good-night to me. He had the pendant with him.”

“He did? I thought he was to give it to Elsie yesterday.”

“He was. But she was afraid to keep it in her possession over night,—they have no safe.”

“Neither have we.”

“Well, anyway, she asked Kimball to keep it for her till today. He wanted me to put it in my jewel box, but I said no. I didn’t want the responsibility of such a valuable thing.”

“It is perfectly stunning. It’s wicked, I think, for Kim to put so much money in diamonds.”

“It never was done in our family,” Mrs. Webb sighed. “But the Powells, of course, have different standards.”

“Shall we go on and eat our breakfast?”

5

“I hate to, on Kim’s last day under this roof. I shall send up and at least find out if he is still asleep.”

Hollis, the butler and general factotum of the establishment, was dispatched on the errand.

When Hollis returned, though his face showed amazement and doubt, there was no sign of fear, but rather a suppressed smile and an indulgent twinkle of his eye.

“Mr. Kimball is very sound asleep, ma’am,” he reported to his mistress. “Will you not leave him lay for awhile?”

“You are implying,” said Mrs. Webb, astutely, “that Mr. Kimball was at a gay party last night. He spoke with me on his return, and I can assure you, Hollis, that he had not been over-celebrating in any way.”

The butler looked chagrined, then relieved, then puzzled.

“In that case, ma’am, why does he sleep so very soundly? I rapped as loud as I could, and also shook at the door-knob. And then, I listened at the keyhole, but I could hear no deep breathing, as of a sound sleeper.”

“I will go up myself,” said Kimball Webb’s mother, and the man held the door open for her to pass through.

“It is very strange,” said Henrietta, with a covert glance at the butler.

“Yes, Miss Webb,” and the man looked at her until she fidgeted.

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“Leave the room,” she ordered, sharply, and he obeyed.

“There’s something wrong, Henrietta,” her mother declared, as she came hastily back. “I’ve called and called, and pleaded with him to let me in, but he won’t.”

“Did he reply at all?”

“No; not a sound. I should think he was up and out early, about some business, but that his door is locked.”

“He always locks it at night.”

“Of course. And last night, as he had the diamonds in his keeping, I daresay he fastened the door with extra care.”

“Oh, mother, perhaps somebody has murdered him and stolen the diamonds!”

Henrietta was always outspoken, and the result of this speech was a hysterical scream from the elder lady, that brought Hollis to the scene again, followed by the cook and a housemaid.

Leaving her mother to the attentions of the women servants, Henrietta spoke to the butler.

“Mr. Kimball’s room must be opened,” she said; “can you do it, Hollis?”

“Not alone, Miss Henrietta. Shall I get the chauffeur?”

“Yes, and quickly. Meantime I’m going upstairs myself. Come up as soon as you can get Oscar.”

7

Slowly Henrietta Webb mounted the two flights of stairs to her brother’s room. A strange, thoughtful look was on her handsome face.

Not a young woman was Miss Webb, indeed she was three years older than Kimball, who was thirty. But she was what is known as well-preserved, and every detail of her perfect grooming spoke of a determination to look her best at any expense of time, trouble or money.

A tradition in the Webb family was that “haste” is a word unknown to a lady. It may have been the observance of this that caused the lagging footsteps, but to an onlooker it would have appeared that Henrietta Webb was thinking with a rapidity in inverse proportion to her movements.

At Kimball’s door, the door from the hall into the front room on the third floor, she paused, and stood looking at it with a sort of fascination. What lay behind it? Tragedy?—or merely the comedy of over sleeping?

“If it should be!” she murmured, in an irrepressible whisper,

and her hands clinched into one another, as if in expression of some strong emotion.

“Can’t you rouse him, Miss Webb?” asked Hollis, solicitously, as he and the chauffeur came upstairs two or three steps at a bound.

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“I—I haven’t tried,” said Henrietta, dully. “I—I’m afraid—”

“Now, now, Miss Webb,” Oscar, the chauffeur, put in cheerily, “I’ll bet he’s all right. Anyway, we’ll soon see.”

The mechanic quickly picked the lock, but a firm bolt still held the door closed.

“Have to smash in,” he exclaimed; “no other way.”

The door was heavy and solid, as doors of old New York houses are, but after a few futile attempts, the two men burst the bolt from its fastenings and threw the door open.

Kimball Webb was not in the room.

The three, crowding through the doorway, took in this fact without, at first, grasping its full significance.

Then, “The bathroom,” said Henrietta, and Oscar, who was more alert than the butler, flung open the bathroom door.

When the Webbs took the old house, they remodelled it slightly to suit their needs. On this third floor, there had been a joint lavatory and dressing room between two large bedrooms. This had been changed to make it a private bath

connected only with Kimball's room, and having no outlet elsewhere. The room behind it was used as a family sitting-room or library, and there were no other rooms on the floor. What might have been hall bedrooms were alcoves in the two rooms.

Therefore, when Oscar entered the bathroom, and found no one in it, the situation resolved itself into the simple fact that Kimball Webb had disappeared from a room that had but one exit door, and that had been found locked and bolted.

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Oscar turned white and shook, Hollis turned red and shivered, but Miss Webb preserved her colour and her poise. It was not remarkable that her colour remained stationary, she had applied it with that intention, but her unshattered nerves bespoke a marvellous self-control.

"Where is he?" she said, and her voice betrayed her agitation, though she strove to control it.

"Where can he be, miss?" exclaimed Oscar. "I never saw the like! He must have jumped out of a window."

"He couldn't," said Henrietta, briefly; "they're all fastened."

The two men, unfamiliar with these details, examined the windows.

There were three of them, facing front, on the street. Each was opened at the top for the space of about six inches, and was securely held thus by a patent device that proved to be very firm and strong. The small window of the bathroom opened on a narrow airshaft, but this window was closed and

fastened.

Clearly, there was no outlet but the main door into the hall.

10

Closets and wardrobes were thrown open and examined, Oscar even looked under the bed and behind the heavy window curtains, but there was no sign of Kimball Webb.

“I never saw anything so queer!” exclaimed Henrietta, who had not yet thought of tragedy in connection with her brother’s absence. “I should think he has risen early and gone on some errand,—only how could he have gotten out?”

Hollis merely stared in response to her inquiry.

“He couldn’t, ma’am,” declared Oscar. “Nobody could go out of this room, and leave that door bolted behind him. And it was locked on the inside, too, you know. I turned the key from the other side, with strong pincers.”

Henrietta stared at him blankly.

“Where, then,” she said, “is my brother?”

“I don’t know, I’m sure, miss,” Oscar began, and then Mrs. Webb reached the top of the stairs, and joined the astounded group.

After her, trailed the cook and the housemaid, joined as they passed the second floor, by the chambermaid, so that there was a goodly company of startled and excited people to discuss the amazing circumstance.

The servants, however, said little, save a few scared whispers among themselves, for though the lady of the house was often lenient, yet they well knew that no emergency or unusual occurrence was sufficient excuse in Miss Henrietta's eyes, for any breach of strict adherence to orders.

"Where's Kimball, Henrietta?" demanded Mrs. Webb, as if her daughter were entirely responsible for her brother's keeping.

"I don't know, mother; it's the queerest thing! He's gone off somewhere, and yet, he left the door locked behind him."

"I can understand that," and Mrs. Webb looked superiorly informed. "He had—that is, there was, something of value—"

"Oh, yes, I know he had Elsie's wedding gift here,—but the question is, how did he get out? The door was locked when we came up here."

"He locked it himself, Etta. What ails you?"

"Listen here, Mrs. Webb," broke in Oscar, a little forgetful of his etiquette in his excitement. "We found the door locked on the inside,—bolted, too,—we broke in,—so you see it's most mysterious, ma'am."

"Broke in! How dared you?"

"Hush, mother, I told them to," interrupted Henrietta; "there's something strange,—inexplicable,—impossible, even! What shall we do?"

“What is there to do, but wait for Kim to come back and explain matters?”

“How can he come back? How did he get out? How—”

“Don’t be foolish, Henrietta. However he got out, he can certainly come back. I’ve not the slightest doubt he’s over at Elsie’s.”

“At nine o’clock in the morning!”

“It’s half after now,—nearly ten. He must be over there, for where else would he go,—on his wedding day? Why don’t you telephone Elsie, and inquire?”

“Oh, mother, you are talking rubbish! Try to see things more clearly. Kimball’s gone, and—he’s mysteriously gone!”

“Pooh, people don’t go mysteriously nowadays. Kim’s all right; he’ll turn up soon, and have a good laugh at you.”

“Very well then, how did he leave this room, and lock the door behind him, on the inside, leaving the key on in the lock?”

“On the inside?”

“Yes, on the inside, and bolted as well.”

“I don’t know, my dear, how he did it,—but Kimball can do anything!”

And with this comprehensive statement of her trust in her

son's omnipotence, the elder lady went downstairs again.

"My mother doesn't take it all in," said Miss Webb to Oscar, who was rapidly assuming the position of right hand man. "We must do something, I think; can you suggest anything?"

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She looked at the young chauffeur with an air of command, whereupon he felt the immediate necessity of suggesting something,—however absurd.

"Shall I call the police, ma'am?" he said.

"No!" she cried. "What an idea! Of course not. My brother has not absconded!"

"But we ought, by rights, to do something," Oscar went on.

"There's nothing to do," Henrietta returned, evidently dissuaded from all action by the mention of the police.

"If I might look around the room a bit, miss?" Oscar ventured.

Henrietta nodded, and the alert youth started on a tour of investigation.

"Don't touch nothin'," Hollis growled. He stood, with stern eyes glaring at the eager searcher.

"Why not?"

"It's against the law—"

“Oh, Hollis,” and Miss Webb frowned at him. “This is not a criminal case!”

“How do you know it ain’t, Miss Webb?”

Ignoring him, Henrietta watched the other.

Without touching anything, Oscar made a very intelligent and quick search of conditions.

“Where’s his clothes?” he demanded. “You see, he’d been to bed,—yet his night things are gone, and I don’t see the day clothes he took off. What was he wearing last night, ma’am?”

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“Evening dress. He gave his bachelor dinner, you know. Didn’t you drive him to the club?”

“Yes, ma’am, but I didn’t bring him home. He said for me not to go for him, he’d come home with some of his friends.”

“Well, he had on his customary evening clothes. Are they not in his clothes closet?”

But they were not. Henrietta looked dumfounded. It had become evident to her, at last, that there was a mystery connected with her brother’s absence. And today was his wedding day! Ah, he *must* be over at Elsie’s. No matter how contradictory the facts, no matter if he was wearing evening clothes in the morning, there must be a rational explanation,—if only for the reason that there was certainly no irrational one!

“Do let’s do something, miss!” urged Oscar.

Henrietta turned now to the butler as the man of better judgment.

“What do you think, Hollis?”

“I don’t know what to think, Miss Henrietta. There’s nothing possible to think. But I agree, *something* ought to be done. Suppose you telephone to Mr. Whiting.”

“The very thing! Mr. Whiting is most capable and efficient. And too, he’s to be my brother’s best man. I’ll call him up at once.”

And Henrietta ran downstairs to telephone.

CHAPTER II

HENRIETTA TELEPHONES

She made an impressive picture, as she swept the telephone from its little table, even while she sank into the attendant chair. For Henrietta Webb was a striking-looking woman,—only her Bostonian restraint kept her from being a stunning one. Tall, but very graceful, muscular, yet strictly feminine, her demeanor was marked by a calm composure, that was absolutely unshakable.

“Mistress of herself, though china fall,” would be a true but an inadequate comment on Miss Webb’s self-control. She ruled herself, as she did all with whom she came in contact; she dominated every phase and circumstance of her life and that of the household. This domination of others was not obtrusive, was not always even evident, but it showed itself upon occasion.

One person, however, her brother Kimball, Miss Webb could not always rule. Though in many ways, and up to a certain point, he was a veritable mush of concession, yet there came a moment, not infrequently, when he calmly but very decidedly put her in her place. To do Henrietta justice, she took these moments rationally, bowed to his will, and set herself about achieving her desired end by other means.

And rarely, perhaps never, did she fail of achieving her desired ends.

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Personally, Miss Webb was the type of woman that is adjudged beautiful by some people while others say, “I can’t see how you can possibly call her good-looking!”

She had great grey eyes, with dark—well, say, darkened lashes. She would have had grey hair, but she preferred dark brown,—and had it. A faint pink flush showed, usually, on her smooth cheeks, and her firm, beautifully shaped lips were a lovely red.

Now, don’t run away with the impression that Henrietta was awfully made-up and artificial looking. She was nothing of the sort. All her aids to Nature were so skilfully achieved and so natural of effect that he who ran might read them as nature’s own. It would be only one who would peep and botanize who would discover the truth, and even he might not.

Miss Webb’s exquisitely proportioned figure, too, owed something but not all to the art of her *corsetière* and modiste. But her own good judgment and perfect taste kept them from overdoing anything, and the result came pretty near to being a perfect woman, nobly planned. And with the plans nobly carried out.

Her face, *per se*, was fine, aristocratic, and Bostonian of cast; so now you can get a pretty fair idea of Miss Henrietta Webb’s appearance. She had long arms, long fingers, long legs, and—if it interests you at all—long toes. She was that sort, you know, and those long limbs and digital

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extremities fairly shout a psychic nature. Which she had.

Her voice was charming. It had that indescribable, inimitable *timbre*,—that only New England birth bestows; and those wonderful inflections never inborn save in Massachusetts.

This voice and these inflections now sounded over the telephone, like the sound of a grand Hello!

For Miss Webb was too truly correct, too innately proper to descend to the silly subterfuges of “Yes?” or “What is it?” affected by the would-be refined.

But her “Hello,” with her inflection, was like the benediction that follows after prayer,—or like the harmonious echo of this discordant life.

“Hello!” returned Fenn Whiting, in his cheery way. “How are you? How’s old Kimmy?”

“Can you come up here right away?” asked Miss Webb, and catching the serious note in her voice, Whiting replied, “Why, yes; in a few minutes. What’s up?”

“I don’t want to talk over the telephone,” she informed him, “but do get here as soon as you possibly can.”

She hung up the receiver, which was her efficacious way of decreeing the conversation at an end.

18

“Mother,” she said, rising, “we may as well eat our breakfast. Thank Heaven we’re not the sort of people who fly into hysterics. I admit if I were that sort I should certainly do so,

though, for this mystery is baffling me. I feel my brain reel when I try to think it out! Whatever the explanation of Kimball's absence, no power on earth can explain how he got out of his room."

"There are other powers than those of earth, Henrietta," Mrs. Webb began, solemnly.

"There now," spoke up her daughter, with some asperity, "don't begin that jargon! You'll be saying next that spirits carried Kim off!"

"Can you suggest anything more believable?"

"I can't think of anything more unbelievable! I'd rather think he went up the chimney or oozed through the keyhole than any supernatural foolishness!"

"Simply a choice of foolishnesses, then," observed Mrs. Webb, calmly, and she took her seat at the table and asked for hot muffins and fresh coffee.

"Where is the diamond pendant?" said Henrietta, suddenly.

"Gracious! I don't know. It must be in Kim's room, somewhere. You'd better hunt it out before anybody more goes searching around. Didn't you say Oscar showed some curiosity?"

"Not exactly that; he searched with a sort of detective instinct, a systematic investigation to Kim's clothes and that sort of thing."

“All the same, Henrietta, I think the jewels should be secured. When Kim returns he won’t like it much if they have been stolen.”

“Very well, I’ll hunt for the pendant as soon as I finish breakfast.”

But as they rose from the table Fenn Whiting arrived and the story was told to him.

His face showed wonderment, even incredulity, and he had no sort of explanation to suggest.

“The only thing I can think of,” he said, “is that somebody has played a practical joke on Kimmy. You know we were pretty gay at dinner, last night, and there was a lot of guying of the prospective bridegroom. It was fun, because Kim is such an old sober-sides and so matter-of-fact, that—”

“He’s nothing of the sort,” contradicted Henrietta; “Kimball has the finest sense of humour—”

“Oh, that, yes! Doesn’t he write high-class comedies? But I mean he has no liking for personal badinage, no relish for practical jokes—”

“The kind of fun known as horse-play, I suppose you mean,” Henrietta observed, scathingly.

“Well, yes, Miss Webb, I suppose that’s just about what I do mean. Anyway, there was a lot of fooling last night that didn’t appeal strongly to our host, and though he behaved beautifully under fire, he couldn’t help showing his distaste

for some of the speeches.”

“Well,” said Henrietta, impatiently, “what sort of a joke, and perpetrated by whom, would explain my brother’s present absence, and disclose his hiding-place?”

“Oh, Lord! I don’t know! I don’t know that any such thing happened,—I only caught at that as a possible way to turn.”

“Let’s turn that way, then,” and Henrietta looked at Whiting with an air of awaiting further instructions.

“I’m willing, Miss Webb; I’ll do anything I can to help you, —but what shall we do? Are you sure Kimball isn’t in the house?”

“I’m not sure of anything! I only know he is not in evidence; that his bed was slept in, but that he has disappeared,—and, disappeared, leaving his room locked on the inside.”

“What! impossible! How did he get out?”

“That’s the mystery. Oh, Mr. Whiting, think of the situation! Today is his wedding day—”

“Well, I ought to know that! I’m best man.”

“Of course you are. But you can’t be best man without a bridegroom!”

“He’ll turn up, of course. But it is queer! Who can be responsible for the performance?”

“Can you guess? Who, of all the men there last night would be the most likely ones?”

“Nothing like that happened, Mr. Whiting,” broke in Mrs. Webb, who till now had silently listened; “Kimball couldn’t have been tricked out of that room. A human being can’t leave a locked room by human means. He was supernaturally removed. I am a believer in Spiritism, I know all about its manifestations and I am sure my son was levitated—”

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“Levitated? What does that mean, Mrs. Webb?” the puzzled visitor inquired.

“It is a well-known term among psychists. People have been levitated, while in an unconscious state, from one house to another,—simply wafted through the air—”

“Oh, rubbish! I beg your pardon, Mrs. Webb, but—do you really believe that?”

“Of course I do—”

“Hush, mother;” Henrietta reproved her; “those fads of yours are inopportune at this moment. She is a believer in all Spiritism, Mr. Whiting, but this is not the time for such suggestions. Do you know it is eleven o’clock? Something must be done! And oughtn’t we to let Elsie know what has happened? She has a right to be told.”

“Who will tell her?” asked Whiting, looking troubled.

Remembering his own hopeless admiration for the girl,

Henrietta readily understood his disinclination to carry her the disturbing news.

“I’ll go and tell her,” she said, at last. “But you, Mr. Whiting, must do something toward finding Kimball. The cruel person who would do such a thing as to hide away a man on his wedding day is no less than a criminal. Only a wicked mind could conceive of such a deed!”

22

“Perhaps he went of his own accord?”

“I truly hope so; then he’ll come back soon. But we must take no chances. Leave no stone unturned to find out what has happened. Tell me frankly, what men at the dinner would you think capable of such an exhibition of cruelty and bad taste?”

“I hesitate to say; I can’t think any of them would be. Oh, don’t take my whilom suggestion as a fact! I can’t believe it myself. But—what else?”

“There is no other. And even that’s an impossible solution, remembering the locked door!”

“If you leave out the question of the locked door,” said Mrs. Webb, “then I should suspect a burglar, who came to steal the diamond pendant.”

“Is that missing?” asked Whiting, looking shocked.

“We don’t know,” said Henrietta. “Kimball had it last night, he showed it to mother after he came home—”

“He had it at the dinner,” vouchsafed Whiting; “he

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showed it to us all. Oh, he wasn't parading it,—he chanced to have it in his pocket, and Wally Courtney, I think it was, asked to see it. Courtney's a gem fancier, I believe. Well, we all looked at it with interest. It's a great little old jewel, you know!"

"Yes," agreed Miss Webb, "I never saw finer stones; and the four of them, so perfectly matched, yet of graduated sizes, make a wonderful pendant. As they hang, below one another, they look like dripping water."

"An exquisite gift," said Whiting. "Have you searched for it thoroughly?"

"Haven't looked at all," declared Henrietta. "You see, it would take a careful search. For if Kimball hid it from possible thieves, he hid it very securely, I've no doubt."

"Under his pillow, maybe?"

"Oh, I don't think so. But I'll look everywhere. Just now, I'm more anxious to find my brother than his diamonds."

"I don't blame you. Now, to be practical, suppose I name over all the guests of last night's dinner, and let's see if we can fasten suspicion on any one of them."

But listing the guests meant nothing to Henrietta. The ones she knew, she was certain would do nothing of the sort; and the ones with whom she was unacquainted, she could not, of course, judge.

Whiting, also, couldn't bring himself to accuse anybody.

The greatest jokers, even buffoons, present, were, as a rule, the most kind-hearted chaps, and quite incapable of so distressing a prospective bridegroom.

“It can’t be that!” he said, at last. “I’ve rounded them all up in my mind. I’d rather adopt Mrs. Webb’s theory than to suspect any of those jolly, good-natured fellows! Every one is a friend of Kimmy’s, and though they were hilarious, they were nothing more, and we all parted in kindest feeling.”

“You said some of them annoyed Kimball.”

“Oh, hardly annoyed; embarrassed him a little, perhaps. But I’ve been to dozens of bachelor dinners, and I can assure you old Kim was let off pretty easily last night. Most of them respected his dislike for overintimate chaff.”

“I’m glad they did! It’s a horrid thing.” Miss Webb looked disdainful. “But the time is simply melting away! What shall we do? Oh, Mr. Whiting, do help us,—or, if you can’t, suggest somebody who can!”

“Honest, Miss Webb, I feel helpless. I am distressed, beyond all words,—but I don’t seem to be able to think of anything to help. I brought Kim home; there were four of us in my car, and he was the first to get out. That was near two, I should say. Then I took Courtney home, and then Harbison and then went home myself. Honest, I can’t suspect any of those men. As to the others, I know nothing of what they did. We separated as we left the Club, and I’ve not seen anybody this morning. Shall I go up and give Kim’s room the once over? I might find a clue—or something.”

“I hate that word ‘clue!’ It always seems to connote a crime!”

“Oh, not necessarily. Anyway, I can’t see any crime in this case, but I confess it’s mysterious beyond anything I ever heard of.”

“Go up, if you like, Mr. Whiting. But I can’t see any use in it. Kim’s room is exactly as it ought to be, there’s nothing upset or out of place. Only,—we had to break in to get in at all!”

“He must have left the room by some other door, then.”

“There is no other door.”

“Window?”

“All fastened with special catches. But, do go up, Mr. Whiting, you might chance on something that I overlooked. Hollis will show you the way. Now, I’m going to Elsie’s. It isn’t right not to tell her.”

“Shall I go, Henrietta?” Mrs. Webb asked, docilely.

“No, mother. I’d rather go alone. I’ll take the little car. Hollis, tell Oscar to bring it at once, and then do you take Mr. Whiting up to Mr. Kimball’s room.”

With her usual quiet efficiency, Henrietta set the wheels moving, and was ready, dressed for the street, when the car arrived.

She rode the few blocks down Park Avenue that brought her to Elsie Powell’s home, in a deep study.

She was marshalling and formulating her thoughts. Possessed of great mental concentration, she had her mind in order, so far as her knowledge allowed, when she reached her destination.

The Powells' apartment was one of the fine modern ones that cost more than a house and are also more livable. The large rooms, light, airy and attractive, were furnished in the best of taste, though of a very different type from the Webb home. Everything was light, bright and pleasing to the eye. But Miss Webb scorned the lack of all that she deemed desirable; old mahogany, family portraits and heirlooms.

There wasn't a "Treasure Table" to be seen, and the window curtains were suspiciously spick and span.

Newness was a crime in the Webb calendar, and Kimball's choice of a wife was a very sharp thorn in the patrician sides of his mother and sister.

Yet few could find fault with the girl who came running into the room to greet Henrietta.

"Oh, my dear," cried the lovely little voice, "I've just had the most wonderful gift from your cousin,—
Kimball's cousin, Mrs. Saltonstall! It's a set of old china,—a whole set! and really old! Do come and look at it!"

27

Henrietta couldn't help gazing kindly at the speaker. The shining eyes, the soft pink cheeks, the smiling, curved lips,—even if the old china was wasted on this chit of a girl, she was a very engaging chit.

Dark curls, stuffed into a tiptilted, rosebudded lace cap; dainty slender white throat rising from a hastily tied together negligée; fluttering little pinky hands and dancing feet, all were part of the gladsome whole that was Elsie Powell. Happy enthusiasm, childish glee, were combined with a touch of wistful shyness that always attacked her in the presence of her critical sister-in-law to be.

But so gravely did Miss Webb look at her, that Elsie intuitively felt something unusual.

“What is it?” she cried. “Henrietta, what is it?”

The big, brown eyes were full of a frightened premonition, the red lips quivered, and the little butterfly hands clasped themselves in trembling fear.

For Henrietta Webb had a speaking face, and Elsie Powell was by no means dull or unobservant.

“Where is Kimball?” Miss Webb said, first of all.

28

“Why, I don’t know, I’m sure,” replied the girl. “I saw him last night,”—she blushed divinely,—“he was on his way to his dinner,—at the Club, you know. Of course I haven’t seen him since.”

“Nor heard from him?”

“No; and that’s queer, too; for he told me,—” the blush deepened, “that he would telephone me this morning the moment he woke up,—to greet me on my wedding-day. Oh, —nothing has happened—tell me!”

“Oh, probably nothing to worry about, my dear. But,—well, we don’t know where Kimball is.”

“Didn’t he come home from the dinner?” The brown eyes wondered.

“Yes; and spoke to mother, and then went to bed. At least, we assume so. But this morning, he is gone, and—we had to break open the door to get into his room!”

“But,” Elsie smiled, “how could he get out and leave the door locked?”

“That’s just it! That’s the queer part!”

“Queer? It’s impossible!”

“Impossible or not, he did it! Or, that is to say, all we know is that he’s missing, and he disappeared, leaving the room securely fastened.”

“I don’t understand.” Elsie became suddenly very grave and sat down beside her guest. “How can what you tell me be true?”

29

“I can give no explanation,—I simply state the facts.”

Henrietta Webb looked coldly at the girl now; perhaps because Elsie was looking very sternly at her.

“May I ask,—would you mind—stating them again?”

Patently, Miss Webb repeated what she had told, and

amplified it until she had described the entire episode of entering her brother's room by force. She told, too, of calling Fenn Whiting, and of his suggestion of a practical joke.

"Not at all," said Elsie, decidedly. Her cheeks showed a redder flush, her eyes were very bright, and though she repressed it, she was trembling with excitement.

"May I call my mother?" she said, at last, in firm, even tones. "Will you tell this to her?"

She left the room and returned immediately with her mother.

Mrs. Powell was an invalid, and had been for years. But her bright eyes and strong, fine face told of an indomitable will and a capable personality.

Again Miss Webb told her story. She liked none of the Powells, and though she concealed this, yet there was no magnetism in her manner,—no sympathy in her voice.

She told a straightforward tale, precisely as she had told it to Elsie. She did not soften the facts, she held out no hope or encouragement; she talked with a peculiar effect of giving statistics, as a conscientious reporter might do.

30

At the close of the recital, Mrs. Powell promptly went to pieces. She always did this on exciting occasions.

"Try not to, mother," was Elsie's softly spoken advice, and then she turned to Miss Webb.

"You cannot deceive me," she said, quietly, but with flashing

eyes; “I do not believe a word of your story! You have hidden Kimball somewhere so that he cannot marry me today! You are desperately opposed to our marriage, and you have resorted to desperate means to prevent it! Your invention of the locked room business is too silly for words, and you must think me an utter idiot if you think I would swallow such nonsense. You have made no secret of your opposition to me, you have tried every way possible to break off the match, and, failing, you have taken matters into your own hands and you have done this despicable thing! You have hidden or confined your brother,—what have you done with him?”

CHAPTER III

ELSIE SUSPECTS

“After such an exhibition of foolishness, one could scarcely wonder that I can’t look upon you as a desirable mate for my talented brother,—but I am willing to make allowances for your display of temper, as I can readily understand how embarrassed you must be at the awkwardness of having no wedding—”

Henrietta Webb paused as she saw the look that came over Elsie’s face.

“Don’t you propose to let him out in time to get married?” the girl cried. “Oh, Henrietta, how *can* you be so cruel? I *know* you’ve done this thing,—Kimball couldn’t disappear! Nor would he go away of his own accord. But you’ve had something up your sleeve for a long time,—I saw that you had,—only I never dreamed it was anything so heartless, so awful as to stop the wedding at the last minute! Why, it’s after twelve,—and the people will begin to go to the church soon after three. Please, Henrietta, own up now! Give him up! You know you can’t prevent the wedding,—you can only postpone it; and think of the trouble you’ll make!”

“Be quiet, Elsie,” said Miss Webb, a little alarmed at the girl’s excitement. “Tell her she’s all wrong, Mrs. Powell, won’t

you?”

“I’m not sure she is,” said the dazed mother. “I can’t take it all in,—but it seems to me Elsie has hit on the only possible explanation of Kimball’s disappearance.”

32

“What *are* you people talking about?” inquired a newcomer, and Elsie’s sister came into the room.

Gerty Seaman, widowed by the war and left with two tiny children, was one of those helpless, appealing women, who, having no self-reliance, lean upon any one who chances to be near.

“What is the matter? Where is your brother, Miss Webb? Tell me everything,—I refuse to be kept in the dark!”

But after hearing all there was to be told, Gerty took a light view of the situation.

“Nonsense, Elsie,” she said, “of course Miss Webb has nothing to do with it! It’s a joke of some of those horrid men! Some people love to do such things. They’ve kidnapped him for fun, and they’ll let him loose in time for the ceremony, but not much before.”

“I can’t think that,” said Henrietta, musing; “I don’t know all of Kimball’s friends, but those I do know are far above any such uncouth jests as that.”

“What *do* you think, then?” asked Elsie, sharply.

“I’d rather not say what I think.”

“Oh. Well, what does your mother think?”

“You know my mother’s hobby,—spiritualism. She thinks Kimball has been spirited away by supernatural powers.”

“What rubbish!” exclaimed Gerty. “But there’s small use in guessing at the truth. Something has happened,—I suppose there’s no chance that he has turned up at home since you left?”

“I told Hollis to telephone me here in that case.”

“Well,” and Gerty spoke briskly, “we must take steps to postpone the wedding—”

“I won’t!” declared Elsie, “at least, not yet. Wait, Gerty, till the last possible minute for that!”

“I think it is the last minute now, dear. Or shall we wait till one o’clock?”

“Two,” said Elsie, thinking hard. “Give me till two to find him. I’m going over to the Webbs’ now. Will you take me over, Henrietta?”

“Come on,” said Miss Webb, briefly, and Elsie ran to get ready.

“You mustn’t blame the child—” began Mrs. Powell.

“I don’t,” said Henrietta, justly enough. “She is in a fearful position,—I don’t resent her saying to me what she did,—

she's really irresponsible."

"But what *can* be the explanation?" urged Gerty. "You needn't imply that Kimball has hidden himself purposely, for I know that isn't so. He is desperately in love with Elsie,—desperately—"

34

"Of course he is," said Elsie, coolly, as she returned, ready for the street. "Come along, Henrietta."

Not a word was spoken between the two women as they rode to the Webb house.

Inquiringly, Elsie looked at Mrs. Webb, who was in the drawing room, distractedly pacing up and down.

Her greeting was not affectionate; indeed, Elsie seemed to detect a shade of relief in the elder woman's face, a satisfaction, she quickly thought, that the wedding could not take place.

"Where is he?" she cried, but Mrs. Webb only shook her head, and Elsie felt herself dismissed.

"Where is he?" she repeated; "I have a right to ask! I am his promised wife,—his bride! Where is my bridegroom?"

"Gone!" said Mrs. Webb, in a vague, faraway tone. "Gone for ever, Elsie."

"Oh, fiddlesticks! That he isn't! I'm going up to his room,—I want to see how he did get out."

She ran up the stairs, and found Fenn Whiting in the sitting room back of Kimball's room.

"Oh, Fenn," cried Elsie, "I'm so glad you're here! What does it all mean?"

"There's no explanation, Elsie; I'm crazy with trying to think it out."

35

"Is it a joke by some of the men?"

"That's one notion,—but an absurd one, I think. And, anyway, it all comes back to this. Whatever the reason of his disappearance, whatever the cause, how was it accomplished? You see yourself," they had now reached the door of Kimball's room, "there's no way out of this room but by this hall door, and that was locked on the inside."

"So they say!"

"Oh, it was. The servants say so, and look at this broken lock. Yes, that's a true bill. You mustn't suspect the Webbs, Elsie; it won't do."

"I'll suspect anybody you can suggest, if there's the slightest reason."

"That's just it,—I can't suggest anybody. But what are you going to do? *You* must decide—"

"First, I want to look around the room. Here's his watch on the chiffonier—"

“They say he went to bed, and then got up again. All the clothes he had on last evening are missing and his night things, too.”

Elsie stared.

“Shoes and all?” she said.

“I don’t know as to that. I suppose so. Hollis said, all his clothes.”

“You’ve talked with Hollis?”

“Oh, yes. But, Elsie, no talking with anybody amounts to anything! What does it matter whether Kim’s shoes are here or missing? The thing is, how did he get out of this room, shoes or no shoes?”

36

“But everything connected with the matter is important,” persisted Elsie. “It may be a clue, you know.”

“Oh, clues! Well, hunt clues all you like, but remember, the hour for the wedding is not so very far away, and you must say what I am to do. As best man, it’s up to me to help all I can, but as the bride, it’s for you to dictate.”

“Fenn, how can I? How could anybody know what to do?”

The girl was pathetic in her distress. Her lovely face white and drawn with a fear,—all the more awful that she knew not fear of what!

Truly a strange situation! Her wedding hour approaching, and

no possibility of the wedding ceremony being performed, unless by some means her lover should be restored to her.

Mechanically, almost unconsciously, she leaned down and with her fingertips brushed at some white marks on the plain moss-green carpet.

“What’s that?” asked Whiting.

“I don’t know. Chalk, it looks like.”

“Oh, Elsie, dear, please don’t worry about ‘clues’ and such things just now. Listen to me. We must make some plans to follow if Kim doesn’t show up in time. If he does, there’s no harm done; but for the sake of your own dignity do think what you’ll do if he isn’t here at four o’clock. And before that! We ought to call in the invitations,—at once. You can’t have people coming to the church and going away again!”

37

“I don’t care *what* they do!” she cried, passionately. “Oh, Kimball, I *want* you!”

She flung herself into a chair and gave way to tears at last.

Mrs. Webb and Henrietta came in, and seeing them, Elsie controlled herself.

“You have succeeded, Henrietta,” she said with a scathing look; “you were determined I should not marry Kimball, and you have succeeded in—postponing it,—that’s all! The wedding will yet take place! You can’t keep him hidden for ever!”

“Elsie! What nonsense!” exclaimed Whiting. “You know Miss Webb couldn’t have done this thing!”

“Never mind that,” said Henrietta, hurriedly, “I don’t mind her raving. But I think she must notify the guests that they must not come. It is getting late, and, you see, if—if Kimball should return, they can be married just the same, but—”

“But you know he will *not* return!” Elsie stormed at her. “You think you can calm me by saying such things, but you know he *can*’t return until you let him!”

38

Miss Webb smiled, as with kindly indulgence of a disordered mind, and said, gently,

“For your own sake, Elsie, meet the situation as well as you can.”

“It isn’t Henrietta’s doing,” put in Mrs. Webb, solemnly, “I understand it all; I know—”

“Never mind, Mrs. Webb,” Elsie stood up suddenly; “I’ll hear your theories some other time. As Henrietta says, for my own sake, I must do the best I can. I will, too. I’ve decided. I shall give myself till two o’clock,—it’s half-past one now, and if Kimball hasn’t appeared by that time, I shall telephone to my dearest friends; I shall ask you, Henrietta, to telephone to your people,—those you can reach. Fenn will look after the ushers and the church matters,—and,—I must go home now, I’ve a lot to do.”

Her hearers were not surprised at this change of demeanour. Elsie’s nature was mercurial. Quick of decision and of action,

she had sensed her position and had risen to the emergency. She would have time afterward for emotion, for investigation, for sorrow even, but now there was much to be done.

“Will you send me home?” she asked of Henrietta, who nodded. “Come with me, Fenn,” she went on, “and, if you please, Henrietta, I want this room fastened against all comers. I must insist upon this; I have some rights, I am sure. See to it that nobody enters until after I come again.”

39

Miss Webb looked a little rebellious at this dictation, but, fearing to rouse the girl's anger, she promised.

“That is, unless Kim comes home,” she said, but Elsie only gazed at her with an accusing eye.

Alone with Elsie in the little electric brougham, Whiting made a suggestion.

“You know,” he began with diffidence, “my own feelings for you, Elsie,—oh, don't be frightened,” he added quickly, as she turned startled eyes on him. “I'm not going to shock you, only I must—I *must* say, if you want me to,—if you would let me,—I—”

“You'd take Kim's place as bridegroom,—is that it?”

“Yes,—oh, yes!”

“Well, thank you lots, and I know you mean it in the kindest way, but it won't do.”

“Don't be offended, anyway, Elsie,—it seemed a—a way out

for you.”

“Yes, I know; it would be. But not a way I can take. Forgive me, Fenn, I’m not ungrateful for the kind part of your offer, but, oh,—we’ve had all this out before!”

“I know it, dear, and I won’t refer to it again. But just remember, if you do want to go on with the ceremony, there’s a bridegroom ready for you.”

40

Elsie smiled. “I don’t feel wildly hilarious,” she said, and, of a truth she was on the verge of hysterical tears, “but—your speech was funny, Fenn!”

“It wasn’t meant to be,” he rejoined, stoutly; “and I stand by it,—no matter how much you laugh at me.”

“Thank you,” she said, more seriously, and then they got out at her home.

“Oscar,” she stopped to speak to the chauffeur, “you went into Mr. Webb’s room first this morning?”

“Yes, ma’am; me and Hollis.”

“Did you notice anything,—anything at all, that seemed queer or strange?”

“No, ma’am; except for Mr. Kimball’s absence and the fact that his clothes were gone,—all of which you know about; there was nothing else strange.”

“I didn’t suppose there was anything, but I wanted to make

sure,” and Elsie sighed.

“Yes’m; indeed, I wish I could help you, miss. There was a bit of a smell of bananas,—but I don’t suppose that would mean anything?”

“No,” and Elsie smiled in spite of her misery.

Whiting followed her into the house. He assumed a protective air which she did not resent; it was good to have somebody to rely on.

Elsie lost no time in perfecting her plans.

41

Rapidly she made lists of the most important guests, those to be notified first.

“We can’t tell half the people,” she said, in despair. “They’ll have to go to the church and go away again. Oh, I wish now I hadn’t decided on a church wedding! It would have been easier at the house. Well, I shall have the minister come here anyway, and then if Kim comes at the last minute,—or later, even,—we can be married here. Fenn, we’ll wait till two o’clock,—or shall we say half-past?”

She looked so wistful that Gerty cried, “Oh, do wait till three!”

“No,” Elsie decided, “half-past two, and not a second later. Then, as we’ve only one telephone, and I shall use that, you take this list, Gerty, and go out somewhere, into some other apartment, I mean, and rattle them off. Mother, you take this, and do the same. Fenn, here’s yours. You see, I’ve listed the

necessary names; if you think of others, follow up with them. We can't head off the caterers, but they needn't send the waiters—"

"My dear child," said her mother, "don't think of those things! I'll see to the caterer's people."

"All right, mother,—oh, poppet, you do look so sweet!"

This last was spoken to Elsie's niece and godchild, who ran in just then, partly dressed in her wedding finery. She was to be flower-girl, and never tired of practising her rôle.

42

The sight of the baby figure, dancing about—upset Elsie entirely, and Gerty rose quickly and carried her daughter away.

"Now," Elsie, resumed, with a glance at the clock, "the Webbs must tell their own friends and relatives. You go and telephone Henrietta now, Fenn, that she must begin at half-past two to notify them that there will be no wedding."

The finality of this made Elsie's voice quiver, but she went on bravely.

"I'm pretty sure Kim will turn up at the last minute,—I think he'll break loose, whoever's holding him—"

"What makes you think he's held, Elsie?" asked Gerty, curiously.

"What else could keep him?" and Elsie looked her

wonderment.

“Lots of things. Suppose he went somewhere,—he must have gone somewhere, you know,—and met with a fearful accident. He may be in some hospital,—”

“By Jove, that’s so!” interrupted Whiting. “Shall I round ’em up, Elsie? That would make a heap better case than—mysterious disappearance.”

“I don’t know,” Elsie hesitated. “Yes, Fenn, if there’s time, do that. But I’ll go right on planning our immediate schedule. I must do it,—it will save all sorts of awkwardness.”

43

Whiting attacked the list of hospitals, and the others waited on Elsie’s will. Both Gerty and Mrs. Powell adored Elsie, and as they were at their own wits’ end, they were only too willing to be guided by her ideas.

“Perhaps he had a stroke or something, and lost his mind and climbed out of a window,” suggested Gerty, who was unable to keep from surmising.

“He couldn’t,” said Elsie, shortly. “His game knee wouldn’t let him get out of a window,—and his are on the third story, and they were all closed, except for a few inches at the top.”

“Well, maybe he squeezed through, and injured himself so, that they took him to a hospital.”

“Who took him, Gerty! What are you talking about! I never heard such nonsense.” Elsie returned to her lists. “I shall

dress,” she said, looking up; “I must be ready if Kimball comes,—”

“Oh, don’t!” cried her mother; “I’m sure it would be unlucky to dress for your wedding and not be married after all!”

“Unlucky!” said Elsie, with a sad little smile. “I don’t think I could very well be more unlucky than I am!”

“Don’t put on your wedding gown,” urged Gerty. “Put on a simple little white frock, and then, if Kim comes, be married in that.”

44

“Yes; that’s what I’ll do,” agreed the poor little bride, her big, brown eyes sombre with sadness, and despair. “And I’ll dress now, for at half-past two, I take the telephone. After all,” she tried to speak cheerfully, “it’s no crime to postpone a wedding. It is unusual, it’s unfortunate, but nobody can blame me.”

“Blame you, you poor darling, I should think not!” cried her mother, who was bearing up bravely for her child’s sake.

“I wish you had kept the diamonds,” Gerty said, ruminatively.

“Oh, what a speech! Gert, you are the most mercenary thing I ever knew!” Elsie scowled at her sister. “The idea of thinking of such a matter at this time!”

“Well, you may as well have had them. They’re yours, by right.”

“I don’t want them,—without Kim! I’m glad I didn’t keep

them, it would have been one more thing for Henrietta to sneer at.”

“How she hates you.”

“No; she doesn’t hate me. Only she never thought I was of good enough family to marry into theirs.”

“I’m sure the Powells are all right,” said Mrs. Powell, plaintively; “and as for my own family,—”

“It doesn’t matter, mother, what or who we are. We’re not Bostonians, and that settles us for Henrietta Webb! It’s her fetich, that Massachusetts blood of hers! Kimball laughs at her fanaticism. You know his new play is a satire on that subject.”

45

“Is his play finished?” asked Gerty.

“No; only about three-quarters done. He expects to do up the rest quickly,—after our honeymoon.”

Elsie couldn’t make herself quite realize that her honeymoon was probably destined not to occur,—at least, at present.

She went away to dress, and was so expeditious that she returned just as Whiting came from the library where he had been telephoning the hospitals. “Nothing doing,” he reported; “oh, Elsie, how sweet you look!”

In a dainty white house dress, with her lovely hair simply tucked up in a curly mass, and no ornaments of any sort, Elsie was exquisitely lovely. Her face was pale, but there was a

dear, sweet expression that went straight to Fenn Whiting's heart. He had loved her a long time, and it was in no way his fault that Kimball Webb had won her.

"Almost two-thirty," he said, tearing his glance away from her dear face.

"Yes," said Elsie, and with a tense, drawn expression, she sat watching the clock.

No one spoke. It was an awful moment, and yet each realized there was no choice but to do as Elsie had decreed.

46

"Don't act as if it was a funeral!" Gerty burst out at last, unable to hold the tension longer.

"I'm not!" declared Elsie, indignantly; "and it's nothing of the sort! I'm just as sure that Kimball will come back to me as—as anything!" she finished, a little lamely.

"If he only comes in time!" wailed Gerty.

"He can't," said Whiting; "it's half-past two now."

"I don't mean in time for *that*!" Gerty said, and Elsie gave her a look of scorn that made her blush, and fairly shrivel beneath her sister's glance of displeasure.

"It is half-past," Elsie agreed, and rose, giving herself a little shake, as if disciplining an unwilling child, and went straight to the telephone.

“Every man to his post!” her clear voice rang out, and, obediently her mother and sister went out with their lists.

Whiting delayed a moment.

“Are you sure, dear,—” he began, but Elsie, the receiver in her hand, was already calling her maid of honour’s number.

CHAPTER IV

AUNT ELIZABETH'S WILL

Mrs. Powell soon returned, utterly unable to do her part in the awful task of telling people not to come to the wedding. Their exclamations and questions were too much for her. She went to her room, suffering from a severe attack of nervous exhaustion.

Gerty Seaman, who like Elsie, had strong powers of endurance and ability to meet emergency, stuck to her post until all on her list had been spoken to and had promised to tell others.

It was a big undertaking to get word to the larger part of the expected assembly, but it was fairly well accomplished. Of course, many people did go to the church, and were informed that there would be no wedding there that day. The Webbs, mother and daughter, were equally busy in the matter, but with them there was a secret undercurrent of satisfaction, not admitted, even to themselves, but there all the same.

The mystery of Kimball's disappearance was yet to be looked into, but whatever might be revealed regarding that, at least he was not to marry Elsie Powell today.

The Webbs were honest in their disapproval of the

match. They had really nothing against Elsie or her family save that it was not, in their estimation, in the same class with their own. And, too, they didn't approve of great wealth. A moderate income seemed to them more in keeping with high standards and fine traditions than millions.

"Of course," opined Henrietta, "she will marry some one else, if Kim—"

"Of course," returned her mother. "By June, there will be no further danger, I'm sure."

The Webbs had decided not to state, over the telephone, what was the reason for the recalling of the invitations. It seemed to them more decorous merely to say there would be no ceremony, and let the people find out why for themselves. Intimate friends were given a hint, but others received only formal announcements, mostly from the Webb servants.

"Of course," Mrs. Webb said, to her daughter, "Kim saw the truth at last. He realized how undesirable it was that he should marry Elsie, and he chose this way of getting out of it. Not a very commendable way but I, for one, don't blame the poor boy."

"You wouldn't blame him if he had chosen to kill Elsie, as a way to escape marrying her," Henrietta returned, smiling grimly.

"Nothing could make me blame my son," and Mrs. Webb complacently folded her hands.

"But, if we have guessed the truth, Kim ought to let us

know soon where he really is.”

“That’s the queer part,” mused Miss Webb. “Wherever he is, how did he lock his door after him?”

The afternoon dragged away, and the evening passed, somehow.

There was no further communication between the two houses; it had been agreed that if either family heard any news of the missing bridegroom they would at once notify the others.

Fenn Whiting went back and forth from one house to the other several times. He, as best man, was alertly ready to do anything, in any way bearing on the matter. He was in possession of the wedding ring, the tickets for the projected honeymoon trip, luggage checks, and all such details of a best man’s duties. Whiting’s all-around efficiency and his general capability made him a valuable assistant to a bridegroom, and Kimball Webb had entrusted everything to him.

“You’d better take the ring, Elsie, and keep it,” Whiting said to her, in the evening. “I’ll try to redeem the tickets, and I’ll cancel the reservations as far as I can. Understand, I’m perfectly sure Kim will turn up soon, but there’s no use holding staterooms and hotel rooms. You see, if the boy has met with some accident,—and to my mind that’s more plausible than a joke,—it may be a day or so before we hear from him, that is, assuming—oh, hang it all! It’s so mysterious there’s no assuming anything! What do you want me to tell the reporters?”

“Tell them the truth!” Elsie replied; “there’s no sense in holding anything back. And full details may help to find him. I have no fear that Kim has deserted me,—that’s too ridiculous,—though Henrietta Webb does more than hint at it! No, Fenn, Kimball is as true to me as a magnet to the pole; I don’t care who knows the whole story. Kim has done nothing wrong. A wrong has been done to him.”

So all the strange details were given to the press, and next morning’s papers were full of the story of the mysterious disappearance of Kimball Webb on his wedding day.

Though not a celebrity, Webb was fairly well known as a playwright. He had had one or two real successes before he went to the war, and since his return had been busy on a new play, that was to be his masterpiece.

High comedy, founded on satire, was his field, and the new play was pronounced a wonder by all who had heard its plot and plan. A member of the *Workers’*, and of a fraternizing nature, he often talked over his play at the Club with other members engaged in the same occupation.

He had laid aside his work for a fortnight’s honeymoon, but both he and Elsie were too anxious for the completion of the play in time for late summer production, to devote more time to idleness, and they expected to spend the summer in a mountain resort not too far from New York where Webb could work.

Webb was a forceful man, tall, well built, and with a strong, fine face. Athletics were his hobby, but an injury to his knee

while in France, was not yet entirely healed. He limped very slightly, and would eventually entirely recover, but at present was debarred from active physical effort.

Of the gentle, rather easy-going nature, Webb was an Indian when roused. Even Elsie declared if she ever really deserved his wrath she should run away from him,—nothing would induce her to face him when angry! But, on the other hand, the man was so just in his dealings and so tolerant in his opinions that only righteous indignation would ever move him to punish an offender.

For the rest, Kimball Webb was merry, light-hearted, kindly, and if careless of social obligations and indifferent to acquaintances, he was a staunch friend and an ideal lover.

All the poetry of his nature was brought out in his love for Elsie Powell, and the girl was enthralled, and sometimes bewildered at the depth and sincerity of his expressions of devotion. And she was worthy of it all. Notwithstanding Henrietta Webb's disparagement, Elsie Powell was a desirable mate for any true hearted man. Not clever in Kimball's way, she was a strong, true-hearted woman, and her faithfulness and loyalty quite equalled Kimball's own. Moreover they were exceedingly congenial, enjoyed the same things, and liked the same people.

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And Elsie was capable of appreciating Webb's talent, and interested herself in his plays with an understanding that surpassed that of Henrietta herself.

Had it not been for Kimball Webb, Elsie would doubtless

have married Fenn Whiting. For the latter had great charm and his passion for Elsie was a matter of long standing. Though a few years older than Webb, he was of a vital energy that defied age and made him seem far younger than he was. But when Elsie made her choice, Whiting stepped back and proved his manliness by a cheerful acceptance of the inevitable.

When Webb asked him to be best man, he hesitated but a moment and then agreed to do so.

And now, in the mysterious emergency that had come upon them all, Whiting was endeavouring to do whatever he could and whatever Elsie wished him to do, to be of any possible help or comfort.

“I think,” Mrs. Powell said, as the evening wore on, “we’ll send Elsie to bed now. You’ve been a good friend, Fenn; I don’t know what we should have done without you. Now, what are we going to do next?”

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“What is there to do?” spoke up Gerty. “We can do nothing but wait for Kimball to return,—and for my part I don’t believe he ever will. I think there’s more to this thing than a disappearance,—I think you’ll find there’s been a crime—”

“Oh, hush, Gert!” wailed Elsie. “I’ve been afraid somebody would say that! I won’t think of it! Anyway, not tonight! And it isn’t true! It can’t be true!”

On the verge of a breakdown, after her trying day, Elsie ran out of the room, and her mother followed, bidding Whiting a brief good night as she passed him.

Left alone with Gerty Seaman, Whiting asked if she had any errand he might do for her, and then he proposed to say good night.

“No,” said Gerty, “there’s nothing more to be done tonight, I should say,—but, oh, Fenn, what do you think of it all?”

“What is there to think, Gerty? Every one of us knows as much as the next one about it,—and who among us can suggest even a possible explanation?”

“Nobody can,—and yet, Fenn, there must be an explanation. I mean,—Kimball *did* get out of his room—”

“Of his own volition,—of course, Gerty. How he managed to lock the door behind him is, to be sure, an enormous mystery, but not so great a one as to imagine that any one else did it! Why, that idea of a practical joke won’t hold water a minute.”

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“I thought it was your theory.”

“Only until I figured it out. How on earth could anybody abduct Kim, take him from his room unwillingly, and depart, bolting the door behind them? It couldn’t be done. Kim’s fastening the door behind himself is a puzzle, but an easier one, it seems to me, than for an outsider to do it. Kim could get downstairs and out, unobserved, if alone, but not if he was being kidnapped by a jocularly inclined comrade!”

“I don’t see it that way,” Gerty said, thoughtfully. “I think the mystery of the locked door is a thing by itself, and in no way affected by or dependent upon other circumstances. However,

it doesn't matter much. Will the police take a hand?"

"Yes. I happen to know they are to be at the Webb house this evening. I'm going there now. Oh, Kimmy will be found, of course. Never doubt that!"

"But—but, you know about the will, Fenn,—do you suppose he'll be found by Elsie's birthday?"

"When is that, exactly?"

"The thirtieth of June."

55

"And it's now the sixth of April. Nearly three months! I should say so! If he isn't found in that time, he never will be!"

"And—what then?"

"What then? Oh, you mean about Elsie's money. I know there's some tie-up there, but I don't know just what it is. Her old aunt's freakishness, wasn't it?"

"Yes; Aunt Elizabeth Powell,—Elsie is named for her. She left all her fortune, millions, to Elsie, with a reservation. You've heard the story."

"Not in detail; tell me."

"Well, you see, the Powell money was half my father's and half his sister's, Aunt Elizabeth. Father lost all his, sooner or later, in Wall Street. Aunt Elizabeth, she never married, left hers with a Trust Company, this way. Father was to have the interest of it all as long as he lived; then it all went to Elsie,—

for the name, you know. Besides, at the time the will was made, my husband was alive and well-to-do. But, you see, only the interest was to come to Elsie, until her wedding day, then she is to have the whole fortune.”

“Oh, well, the interest is enough for you all to live on, isn’t it?”

“Goodness, yes; we’ve lived on it for years, comfortable enough. But, here’s the trouble. If Elsie isn’t married by the time she is twenty-four, the whole fortune goes to a distant cousin of Aunt Elizabeth.”

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“What an unjust will!”

“Oh, no; you see, everybody would expect Elsie to marry before she was twenty-four. The reason of it all was Aunt Elizabeth’s own love affair. If she had married young all would have been well, but she waited, thinking she was *too* young, and her lover married somebody else. She never got over it,—I think it affected her mind. She wouldn’t look at anybody else, though she had lots of suitors, of course. So, she made a condition that Elsie should marry before she was twenty-four. And it never seemed to us a hard condition, for Elsie was engaged to Kimball before he went to France, you know. They would have been married much sooner but for the war. However, the wedding day which was to have been today, was in ample time to meet the requirements of the will. And now—”

“Oh, well, Gerty, Kim will surely turn up before the birthday in June! And, if he doesn’t,—Elsie will surely marry some

one else,—rather than lose the inheritance!”

“That’s just it,—she won’t. She’s as stubborn as Aunt Powell herself, and she’d go to the poorhouse before she’d marry anybody but Kimball Webb!”

“Don’t worry, Kimball will return. Why, he’s too wrapped up in that play of his to stay away from New York very long.”

57

“But there’s no sense to it all! If somebody spirited Kim off for a joke,—they’d surely returned him in time for the ceremony.”

“You’d think so. And the only other alternative is to think that he went away voluntarily,—which is, to say the least, hard on Elsie.”

“He never went away because he didn’t want to marry her,—not much!”

“Mrs. Webb thinks he was spirited away.”

“So do I! But by very human and physical spirits! I firmly believe Henrietta Webb or her mother, or both, managed the whole business, and they will keep Kim out of the way until after Elsie’s birthday, thinking she will marry some one else, and then they’ll produce Kim!”

“A queer theory, but perhaps about the easiest one to believe. And if, as you assume, Elsie won’t marry some one else,—what then?”

“That’s what I said a few minutes ago. And it will come hardest on mother and me. Elsie doesn’t care much for money,—oh, of course, she likes things comfortable,—she doesn’t realize what it would mean to have them any other way,—but she’d give up all for love. Now, mother and I have absolutely no income except the interest Elsie gets from the Powell money. And I have two little children—and mother is practically an invalid,—and I think I may well ask, what then?”

“I think so too, Gerty! It’s tough on you,—I didn’t know all this. Why, it will be awful if Elsie doesn’t marry! What will become of you all?”

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“I don’t know. I don’t even know how Elsie’s going to look at it. If she sees it right, and if Kimball never returns, of course, she ought to marry some nice man rather than let all that money go! But she’s quite capable of refusing point blank to marry any one but Kim,—and that’s what I think she’ll do.”

“She most likely will, if I know anything about Elsie!”

“You—you like her,—Fenn?”

“Oh, Lord, yes! I’ve been in love with her ever since I’ve known her. But she won’t look at me. And,—ahem, Gerty, I’m not a fortune hunter!”

“Oh, no, of course not. But,—I do hope Elsie will be safely married before she reaches twenty-four!”

“So do I! I’m with you there! I’d hate to see all that money go out of your family. A pretty shabby will, I call it.”

“Oh, no, Fenn; nobody could foresee this thing that has happened. And but for this mysterious disappearance, Elsie would be already married and everything all right.”

“She’s willing to allow you and the children and your mother enough to live on, after she’s married?”

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“Yes, indeed. She’s most generous. Her allowance to us is all we could ask. I wish I knew her ideas about it all.”

“Poor child, I don’t believe she has any ideas as yet. It’s an awful shock to her, and it came so suddenly. I wonder she bears up at all.”

“Oh, that’s Elsie. You’ll see. Tomorrow, she’ll be ready with all sorts of plans and suggestions about hunting up Kim. They won’t amount to anything,—they can’t, but she’ll try every possible way to find him!”

“Hopeless task,—hunting for him, I mean. If he can,—he’ll turn up of his own accord. And if he can’t—”

“Fenn! You don’t—you don’t think—he’s—dead, do you?”

“I haven’t any reason to think that, Gerty. Yet it must be considered among the possibilities. You know, there’s the question of that diamond pendant. Kim had it with him at the dinner, and he had it after he reached home, last night, for he showed it to his mother, they say. Well, suppose a burglar got into his room to steal that,—it must be worth ten thousand dollars?”

“Yes, it is,—or a little more.”

“Well, isn’t a burglar a more plausible supposition than a practical joker, after all?”

“How did he get in?”

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“That question, Gerty, must be asked regarding any intruder. Moreover, how did he get out? must be asked in connection with an intruder,—or with Kim alone. Anyway, the diamonds are not to be found,—”

“Kim probably has them with him,—wherever he is.”

“That’s true enough, but a probability isn’t a certainty.”

“If, as I still think, the two Webb women are behind it all,—they have the diamonds.”

“Yes, of course. Why are they so down on Elsie?”

“Oh, only because she wasn’t born in Boston!”

“Really? Is that all?”

“Yes; that is, I mean, the Webbs don’t think the Powells in their own social rank. Nobody could dislike Elsie, personally; she’s the sweetest thing in the world!”

“Of course she is, but she never seems to hit it off with Friend Henrietta.”

“It’s Henrietta’s fault entirely! Elsie has been like an angel to her, but Miss Webb is always haughty and superior. She has never been reconciled to the match and never will be!”

“Well, I hope old Kimmy will turn up, and the match will come off,—and in time to save the inheritance!”

“The match *will* come off, if Kimball can be found, whether it’s in time to save the inheritance or not!”

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This announcement was made by Elsie herself, who suddenly appeared in boudoir robe and cap. “I heard you,” she went on, “and I came in to tell you my decision,—to state my platform!”

Her eyes shone with excitement, her cheeks were flushed and she was trembling nervously.

“Elsie dear,” begged Gerty, “don’t let’s talk any more about it tonight.”

“Yes, I will; I’ve been listening to you two, and as Fenn is going over to the Webbs’ now, and he will see the police there, I suppose, I want him to know just where I stand. I shall make it my work,—my life work, if necessary,—to find Kimball. I know, as well as I know my own name, that he was taken away by force. I won’t say who I think did it, or was responsible for the deed, but I shall get him back! The police can go ahead, let them do all they can,—it won’t be much. The abduction of Kimball Webb,—for it is an abduction,—was a carefully planned, cleverly carried out scheme. I won’t say who’s at the bottom of it,—but I know.”

“You mean the Webbs,” said Gerty sagaciously.

“It’s an awful thing to say,” Elsie admitted, “but I do mean the Webbs. Who else could it be? That joke

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business is nonsense,—and besides the jokers would have restored him in time for the wedding. They wouldn't be so cruel to me."

"No; they wouldn't," agreed Whiting. "But, be careful, Elsie, how you accuse the Webbs. You don't want to get into deeper trouble than—"

"I can't be in deeper trouble than I am now! You know that, Fenn. But I've got sense enough to know better than to accuse the Webbs openly! I know that would be the very way to spike my own guns! No, Miss Henrietta Webb is a very clever schemer, but I'll outwit her yet!"

"And if not?" said Gerty, alarmed at the possibilities crowding her mind.

"If not, if Kimball Webb is never restored to me, I shall live and die an old maid,—just as Aunt Elizabeth did."

"But, Elsie," Gerty cried, "think of mother! think of me, and the children! Surely, you have some generosity, some loyalty to your people?"

"Not to the extent of selling myself for them," said Elsie, sternly. "If anybody in this family is to marry for money, you can do it, Gerty. You have several rich suitors, to my certain knowledge—"

"Nothing of the sort, Elsie! I think you're disgraceful!"

"No more disgraceful than for me to marry some one I don't love, in time to secure Aunt Powell's money! And,

anyway, I can look after mother,—I can work—”

“Yes! What could you do?” Gerty scoffed.

“Oh, I don’t know; stenography or something. Anyway, I could take care of mother, and you certainly could do as much for yourself, Gerty. If you don’t want to marry, you could work, too.”

“Oh, Elsie,—and leave this house,—this apartment—”

“Yes; I’d far rather, than marry anybody,—anybody except Kimball. But, understand this; I’m going to find that man—”

“Elsie!” exclaimed Whiting; “you speak as if he were held somewhere in durance vile!”

“Not durance vile, but held,—yes! And by his mother and sister.”

“With his own consent?”

“Most certainly not!”

“Then your theory is rubbish. How could they hold him against his will?”

“I don’t know—but I shall find out! Good-night.”

CHAPTER V

ELSIE MAKES INQUIRIES

Elsie Powell's nature was generous. She gave of herself to all with whom she came in contact, and gave freely and willingly; time, thought, and sympathy as well as more material gifts. Her disposition was so free from selfishness that not always did she sufficiently guard her own interests.

But when need arose, she promptly rose to the occasion.

And the morning after the day which was to have been her wedding-day, she awoke with a saddened heart but a mind alert and ready to plan and execute action of some sort that should bring about the end of her troubles. She wasted little time in grieving,—indeed her mental attitude was that of dumfounded amazement rather than grief.

Lying in her pretty room, partly dismantled by reason of her anticipated flight from it, she sized up the situation to herself.

“If I go to pieces,” she mused, “it will do no good, and will be small comfort to me. Therefore, I will brace up, put my wits to work and do my part toward solving the mystery. And I'll do more than any fool detective. I never had much opinion of their cleverness, anyhow. To begin with, they'd never dare suspect Henrietta Webb, and if they did,

she'd pull the wool over their eyes. But she can't bamboozle me, and I'm going to start out by assuming that in some mysterious way she has hidden Kim and means to keep him hidden until I marry somebody else,—which, of course, she thinks I'll do, in order to get my inheritance. But I shan't! How would I feel, married to John Doe, and then have Kimball come home and look at me reproachfully! Not much. If I don't marry Kimball Webb, I marry nobody at all,—and that settles that!”

Her decision arrived at, Elsie hopped out of bed, and dressed and went to breakfast quite as usual.

“Why, Elsie,” exclaimed Gerty; “you needn't get up! I'll look after everything,—I suppose there will be reporters and, later on, callers in shoals—”

“Yes, Gert, you may attend to those; I'm going on the warpath!”

“Meaning?”

“I'm going to solve the mystery of Kim's getaway,—though it's no mystery to me! But I'm going to get him back. That's all about *that*!”

“How are you going to set out?”

“Dunno. First, I'm going over to the Webb house, and see what they've got to say. I didn't get any satisfaction out of them yesterday, but I'm going to make them surrender. They owe me one Kimball, and I'm going to collect!”

“I don’t think you ought to go out today, Elsie.”

“Rubbish! You talk as if Kim were dead! I’m not a widow, to stay in seclusion. No, ma’am; I’ve thought it all out and I’ve made up my mind.”

Gerty protested no more. She knew from experience, when Elsie’s mind was made up, nothing could shake it.

At the Webb house, Elsie found her prospective relatives-in-law closeted with a detective. He was a City Official, from the Bureau of Missing Persons, and he was deeply interested in the case.

Often missing persons were merely placed on record, and little was done by way of effort to discover their whereabouts. But in the case of Kimball Webb a big story was anticipated. Moreover, the absolute insolubility of the puzzle of how he managed his flight,—or how it was managed for him, gave an added interest.

Elsie’s arrival, also, thrilled the detective, and he turned eagerly to question her.

However, he found himself the questioned one instead of the inquirer.

“I’m glad to meet you, Mr. Hanley,” Elsie smiled at him; “tell me, won’t you, just how you’re going to set to work on the case? For I mean to help you, and I want to do so intelligently.”

She glanced at the two Webbs for a nod of sanction but she received no such encouragement.

Indeed, Henrietta gave a scornful sniff, and Mrs. Webb remarked:

“Don’t be forward, Elsie. You can’t help, and it would look very queer if you tried.”

“It’ll be queer if I don’t try,” Elsie returned, but with a smile that freed her words from rudeness. “I’m most certainly going to work on the case, and if Mr. Hanley doesn’t want my help, I’ll work on my own lines.”

Hanley looked at her with growing respect. Here, he decided, was no silly society girl, but a young woman of brain and, perhaps, initiative.

“You know nothing that will throw any light on Mr. Webb’s absence?” he asked, gazing intently at her.

“No, indeed; if I had I should have told it without being asked. I’m here to learn, to seek, to solve,—not to inform.”

“Yes,—oh, certainly.” The detective was a little flustered.

Miss Webb had been haughty, even condescending,—but Hanley knew that sort. Elsie’s attitude was a new one to him, and he had to adjust himself.

“Well, Mr. Hanley,” the sweet voice went on, “which is it to be? Do we work together, or, each for himself?”

“Together, miss, by all means. I’ll be only too glad of any help you can give me.”

Hanley had decided; it would certainly be better for him to be in with the one most nearly affected, and he considered that Elsie was.

Although, to be sure, the Webbs had called him in, and he was responsible to them. Nor did it require an abnormally acute mind to discern that the Webbs and Miss Powell were not entirely at one.

This impression of his was deepened when Miss Webb said, severely, “I must beg of you, Elsie, not to disgrace us by any public effort in this distressing matter. We are already sufficiently embarrassed at the unfortunate publicity it has gained, and I want to keep further disclosures entirely to ourselves.”

“Can’t be done, Miss Webb,” said Hanley; “the thing is out, —why, ma’am, it had to come out! And now, you can no more stop the press notice of it than you could dam the Hudson! Better take that part of it calmly, for the papers will be full of it for nine days, at least. Now, ma’am, I’d like to see Mr. Webb’s room.”

Dejectedly, Henrietta Webb led the way. Elsie followed, as a matter of course, and soon Hanley was silently but carefully scrutinizing the furniture, walls and floor of the room in question.

“No exit but the door,—so far as appears on the surface,” he remarked, at last. “You don’t know of any secret entrance, I

suppose!”

“Certainly not,” said Henrietta, positively. “Those things occur in old country houses,—not in city homes.”

“Well, we must think of everything,” Hanley said, and he proceeded to tap walls, and partitions in a knowing manner.

“Nope, nothing of that sort,” he concluded, after exhaustive experimenting.

“You’re sure?” asked Elsie, her eyes shining with eagerness. “I had thought there might be something like that.”

“No, ma’am,” declared Hanley; “I know a lot about building, and I can tell for sure and certain, there’s no entrance through these walls of any sort. Why, look at the wall paper,—intact all round. And, not only that, but I can tell by tapping, there’s no chance of a secret door or panel.”

“Mr. Whiting is an architect, and he said the same,” observed Miss Webb, coldly, as if to disparage Hanley’s would-be superior knowledge.

“There, you see!” said Hanley, taking the snub in good part. “If a smart architect and a smart detective agree there’s no secret passage or entrance or exit, you may depend on it there isn’t any.”

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“What about the chimney?” asked Elsie. “I’ve thought this all out, you see.”

“Quite right, miss.” But Hanley’s investigation of the

chimney that he made by looking up inside the big, old-fashioned fireplace, showed him at once the impossibility of any one entering or leaving the room by that means.

“A monkey couldn’t negotiate that,” he stated, “let alone a man.”

The bathroom gave no hint of help. The little window had been found closed and fastened, and save for the entrance door there was no other break in the walls.

In a word, Hanley expressed his positive assurance that nobody could by any chance enter or leave Kimball Webb’s room, except by the door that opened from the hall.

“The windows are out of the question,” he asserted. “To begin with, they’re third story windows, with a sheer drop to the street.

“Next, they were opened only at the tops for a few inches, and fastened in that position. Nobody could get through one of those narrow apertures.”

This was so evident, there was no use dwelling on it.

“Then,” said Elsie, slowly, “the problem comes down to this; how did Mr. Webb get out through the door, and leave it fastened behind him,—not only locked with a key, but bolted with a strong, firm bolt?”

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“That’s the problem,” and the detective looked at her in admiration.

He had never seen a young woman,—a mere girl, who could so succinctly state a case.

“But, granting that,” urged Henrietta Webb, “where is he now? The front street door was fastened with heavy bolts, all of which were intact in the morning. The rear door, the same.”

“Then,” said Elsie, turning on her quickly, “he must be in this house still!”

Henrietta Webb turned pale. “What nonsense!” she cried. “In that case, Elsie, are you smart enough to find him?” and with a suppressed exclamation, half shriek and half gasp, she ran from the room, and they heard her go downstairs to her mother’s room.

“Good!” cried Elsie. “I’m glad she’s gone! Excuse me, Mr. Hanley, but though she is his sister, I am Mr. Webb’s *fiancée*, and I have really more reason to want to find him than anybody else on earth. And I’m going to find him, too! But, first, can *you* form any theory? Can you make any suggestion?”

“I can’t. I’ve never seen a case that ran so hopelessly up against a blank wall. There’s foul play, somewhere,—that is, unless—you don’t think—”

Elsie read his thoughts.

“No, I *don’t* think Mr. Webb went away of his own volition. I know he did not! And quite aside from his love for me, and his wish to marry me yesterday, if those things hadn’t been so, Mr. Webb is too much of a gentleman, too kind-hearted a

man, to go away and leave his mother and sister, to say nothing of myself, in this fearful predicament.”

“That’s right! No decent man could do such a sneak! Well, then as it’s perfectly clear you suspect Miss Webb of being complicated,—why do you?”

“I don’t want to say anything against Miss Webb. I’ve nothing to say against anybody. But,—oughtn’t a detective to suspect everybody? Or at least, to investigate the possibilities of every suspect?”

“Yes’m; that’s right. Never mind why. I’ll bear in mind that Miss Webb’s part in the matter must be inquired into. Any more hints?”

“Oh, that isn’t a hint. What sort of a detective are you, asking for hints? Why don’t you get busy? Hunt for clues, or something definite like that!”

“Clues? Why, it isn’t a murder!”

“You don’t know,—it may be! And, anyway, there are clues to other crimes than murder.”

“But it isn’t a crime. Leastways,—”

“Leastways, you’re absolutely useless! Go away, I’ll hunt for clues myself. And, first of all, where are those white marks that were on the floor yesterday?”

“White marks? What sort of marks?”

“Just some white daubs. They showed clearly on this plain green carpet, and now they’re gone.”

“Anything else been disturbed?”

“No, except that the whole room seems to have been cleaned, the bed made, and the chiffonier tidied.”

“Oh, well, they told me about that. The condition of the room only went to prove that Mr. Webb had retired as usual on Wednesday night, and then he went away either in his evening clothes and carried his night clothes with him; or he went wearing his night things and carrying his dress suit.”

“Either of which suppositions is absolutely ridiculous! As he had been to bed, why dress again in his dinner clothes, and why take his pajamas with him? Or, if he went away in his night clothes,—why in the world wouldn’t he carry a morning suit with him,—and not full dress?”

“Right you are,—it all don’t get us anywhere!”

“But it ought to! The very fact that the conditions are ridiculous,—inexplicable,—ought to make it easier to get up a theory. If he had gone away in a business suit and carried his night things in a bag, it would be easily believed he had suddenly been called on some important matter. But to go off with evening clothes and no other suit is so ridiculous, that it ought to point to some inevitable conclusion,—even if not a definite one!”

“My! You sure are a thinker, Miss Powell! But,—let’s hear that indefinite conclusion you’d draw from the facts!”

“I haven’t drawn it yet,—but I shall,—and, I want you to help me.”

Elsie’s appealing smile brought a hearty “Sure I will, miss!” and after some further futile looking about, they both went downstairs.

Elsie waylaid the chambermaid, and stepped aside to speak with her.

“Did you do up Mr. Webb’s room yesterday?” she asked, with an ingratiating glance.

“Yes, miss,” replied the girl, a bit frightened.

“That’s all right; only, tell me, did you notice those white marks on the carpet?”

“I did, ma’am,—and I tried hard to get it all off? Did I leave any sign of it?”

“No; I wish you had! But never mind. What do you think made those marks?”

“I couldn’t say, ma’am. They was like chalk, now, and mighty hard to get off they was.”

“You remember just how they looked,—and where they were?”

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“Oh, yes, ma’am.”

“Very well, then, that’s all. Don’t mention the matter to

anybody, please.”

“No, ma’am, I won’t.”

Elsie went on down to the drawing room, and there found Mrs. Webb making the detective’s hair stand on end, as she detailed to him her experiences with spirits and her reasons for belief that her son had been taken away from his home by supernatural means.

Hanley listened, more with a horrified interest in her talk than with any belief in its bearing on the present case, and Elsie almost laughed outright as she heard Mrs. Webb solemnly avowing that she had seen, at *séances*, live people wafted through a solid wooden door.

“Oh, come, now,” she said, as she entered the room. “Dear Mrs. Webb, don’t ask us to believe such things!”

“Believe or not, as you choose,” said Mrs. Webb, haughtily; “your scepticism only exposes your ignorance. Why, innumerable such cases are on record; to students of spiritism the passing of matter through matter is one of the proved facts of psychical research.”

“And you think that Kim passed through that locked wooden door? Through the panels,—and left no trace of his passing?”

“I do,—indeed I do, Elsie! For, my dear child, what other explanation is there?”

Mrs. Webb’s triumphant air impressed her hearers, even though it amused them. The trusting soul believed so

implicitly in her creed that one must respect her sincerity, at least.

“Who lives next door?” asked Hanley, suddenly.

“Which side?” asked Mrs. Webb. “On the left, is the home of Owen Thorne, the banker; and on the other side, the Marsden St. Johns live. They’re at Lakewood just now; they’re always there in the spring. But they don’t own the house they live in. It’s Mr. Whiting’s. Part of the estate his father left him.”

“Are the Thorne family at home?”

“Yes, so far as I know. They were there yesterday. Why?”

“I only wondered if any of the neighbors saw Mr. Webb leave this house during the night.”

“Maybe he hasn’t left it,” put in Elsie.

“He must have done so. He couldn’t be concealed here against his will all this time, and you won’t allow that he’s willingly absent.”

“Of course I won’t!”

“Then he must have left this house between the hours of two A. M. and, say, seven,—or, when did you call him, Mrs. Webb?”

“About eight, or soon after.”

“Very well, say he got away,—somehow,—between two

and eight,—there’s a possibility that a watching or wakeful neighbor might have seen him go.”

“Oh, I see,” and Mrs. Webb nodded. “Well, make inquiries. As I said, the St. Johns are away, and their house is closed; but ask the Thornes if you like. It’s quite possible they saw something!”

The weird look came again into her eyes, and Elsie at once surmised that Kimball’s mother had a mental vision of her son, wafted by supernatural means through his own bedroom door, down two flights of stairs, and through the closed and locked street door, out,—away, nobody knew where, and the interested neighbors looking on!

Then Henry Harbison was announced, and with a sigh of relief Elsie turned to talk to him.

Harbison was to have been an usher at the wedding, and he called to see if he could be of any assistance to the family of the missing bridegroom.

After sympathetic greetings and inquiries, the young man took an active part in the discussion of the mystery.

“It’s the strangest thing I ever heard of!” he declared; “but I bet I can put you wise to a possible solution, anyway.”

“Good!” cried Hanley; “I confess it baffles me. I’m about to give up my part in it and ask the Chief to turn it over to a cleverer man.”

“Don’t!” begged Elsie; “you and I are working together,

you know, Mr. Hanley,—and I like your methods.”

Hanley stared. What had she seen of his methods, as yet, he wondered.

“Well, here’s my theory,” began Harbison. “I was at Kimball’s bachelor dinner, you know, night before last, at the Club. Also, Wallace Courtney was there. Now, you know, Mrs. Webb, your son is writing a play,—a mighty clever one, too, founded on a satirical view of New England aristocratic tendencies.”

Mrs. Webb flushed almost angrily.

“I do know it,—and I regret it exceedingly. I strongly advised Kimball against such ridiculing of his native town and of his own family traditions and standards, but he only laughed, and said nothing was too sacred to use for material for a play. Yes, Mr. Harbison, I know all about that play. It’s nearly finished, too.”

“That’s the point. As you may or may not know, Wallace Courtney is a playwright, also, and by the merest chance, he is writing a satirical play on the very same subject. Now, he didn’t know about Kim’s play, until the night of the dinner. It was mentioned, and Courtney asked Kim what it was about,—that is, how he had treated the matter. Well, sir, do you know they’ve chosen almost identical plots! Why, whichever of those plays first reaches the public, the other will be stamped as a plagiarism. Courtney was terribly put out. He tried to conceal his wrath, but it kept cropping out—”

“Why, Kimball wasn’t to blame!” cried Elsie.

“Not a bit. But Courtney was so upset at the coincidence, and the peculiar situation. Well, he worried around until he found out that Kim’s play was nearing completion,—and then he went to pieces for fair. ‘You shan’t put it on!’ he cried, excitedly. ‘I’ll move Heaven and earth to prevent you! Why, it wipes out my every chance!’ Oh, he said a lot more in that strain, and Kimball added fuel to the fire by treating it lightly. ‘Go ahead with your play, Wally,’ he told him; ‘I’m going on my honeymoon, and I’ll be gone a fortnight or more. You’ll have time to get ahead of me.’ Of course that wouldn’t give Courtney time enough, nor any where near it,—and he sulked all the evening. We all guyed him on his ill nature, but that only made things worse. Now, here’s my suggestion. Pretty slim, I admit,—but take it for what it’s worth. Might Courtney somehow or other have kidnapped Kimmy, intending to keep him away until he can get his own play finished and on the road to production?”

“Motive all right,” said the detective, smiling, “but how about the method?”

“That’s where I get off,” and Harbison laughed. “You see, while the whole affair is pretty awful in a social way, and has made a fearful mess of the wedding, and all that, I can’t look on it as a tragedy.”

“Who does?” exclaimed Elsie. “Of course, there’s no tragedy,—if you mean any harm to Kimball, personally,—but I do call it a tragedy all the same!”

“It is,” Hanley agreed; “but, of course, the angle I get is the mystery side of it. How did Mr. Webb get out of his door, and

lock it behind him? That’s what I want to know!”

CHAPTER VI

A HAUNTED ROOM

“You’re right, man,” declared Harbison; “let’s tackle that problem seriously. How *could* it be done,—no matter how absurd or unlikely the suggestion?”

“First,” enumerated Hanley, “there’s Mrs. Webb’s suggestion of spirits.”

“It would be hard to beat that for unlikeliness!” said Harbison, speaking very seriously, and entirely ignoring Mrs. Webb’s disdainful expression. “Now, see here,—how about turning the key from the outside by means of a very powerful magnet —”

“No such thing possible,” Hanley declared. “There’s not a magnet in existence that could do that. And shoot the bolt also, did you mean?”

“Yes, I did. But, of course, it’s only a suggestion. Well, what else?”

“Untruthfulness!” said Elsie, suddenly, coming out into the open. “I regret exceedingly to mention such a thing, but as there is no explanation of the alleged facts,—must we not doubt the truth of the alleged facts?”

Henrietta Webb glared at her. "Do you mean," she cried, "that we have not told you the truth about finding Kim's door locked?"

"That's precisely what I mean!" and a red spot appeared on Elsie's either cheek. "If you can offer the slightest, vaguest sort of a hint as to how your story could be true, I'll listen; but if you can't, you must not be surprised that I refuse to believe it."

"Doubt my word? Let me tell you, miss, a Webb does not speak untruth!"

"Not ordinarily,—nor do most of us. But I know, Henrietta, that you would resort to any means to prevent Kimball from marrying me, and I am justified in thinking you have done so."

"What do you mean, Miss Powell," asked Hanley; "that Mr. Webb went away voluntarily?"

"Not exactly. I mean that I think he was persuaded, forced or tricked into going away by his sister, and that the broken lock and burst bolt are fabrications to mislead investigators."

Henrietta Webb looked at Elsie, first with amazed scorn, and then, her face changing to a gentler expression, she said, "You are not quite responsible, dear. I shall not hold your speech against you. And, really, I'm not surprised that you try to grasp at any straw, in this sea of mystery. But," she turned to Harbison and the detective, "there is no reason to doubt the truth of the story of my brother's disappearance. Our butler and chauffeur will corroborate it, and will tell you

just how much difficulty they had in entering the room.”

At Hanley’s request, Hollis and Oscar were summoned, and they told in detail the events of the morning before.

“And you heard or saw nothing that could give you the slightest hint as to any reason for Mr. Webb’s disappearance?”

“No!” both men answered.

“You saw or heard nothing unusual or that you could not understand?” the detective continued.

“Well, sir,” Oscar began, “when I ran upstairs, and Miss Webb was waiting outside her brother’s door, I heard her say, to herself, ‘Oh, if it *should* be!’—sort of excited like.”

“Whom was she speaking to?”

“To nobody, sir, just to herself.”

“What did you mean by that speech, Miss Webb?” Hanley inquired.

“I didn’t make it,” replied Henrietta coolly. “Oscar is mistaken. He imagined it all.”

“I told you so!” Elsie cried, irrepressibly; “I knew Miss Webb was at the bottom of it all!”

“Well, such a speech as that doesn’t prove it,” Hanley observed. “It rather lets her out. If she had concealed her

brother previously, why should she say those words? And if she was merely hoping he had gone away, it goes to show she had no hand in the matter.”

Henrietta’s face was expressionless, as if the subject interested her not at all.

“You will all have to agree with me, sooner or later,” Mrs. Webb began. “There is, as you’ve seen, no normal explanation. Only the supernatural remains. And, you ought to know, that room of Kimball’s has been haunted for a long time.”

“What, haunted?” exclaimed Hanley.

“Yes, sir. Not only my son and my daughter have heard and seen strange things in it, but the maids have also had such experiences.”

“Such as what?”

“Hearing queer sounds. Once, there was a complete conversation carried on by voices that belonged to invisible people.”

“This is interesting only if confirmed by credible witnesses,” Hanley said.

“It interests me, anyway,” said Harbison. “I don’t believe in levitation and the passing of a human body through a locked door, but a haunted room always thrills me. Tell me some more about it.”

“I will,” said Henrietta. “For the last year or two, there have been times when voices were audible there. Not loud or entirely distinct,—but vaguely to be heard,—like the sound of a faraway speaker. My brother heard them,—he frequently told me so.”

“Well, not frequently, Henrietta,” said her mother, correcting her, “but two or three times.”

“Who else heard them?” asked Hanley, briefly.

“The servants,” Henrietta informed them. “One chambermaid was so frightened she left at once.”

“Oh, fiddlesticks!” cried Harbison. “This gets us nowhere! If they were really spirits it is absurd; and if, as I thought at first, they were human voices, heard through a secret passage or a hollow panel, it’s up to us to find the secret entrance.”

“There isn’t any,” declared Hanley. “I’ve sounded and tested every bit of wall in the room.”

“All the same, I’d like a try at it,” Harbison declared, and asking permission, he went alone up to the room that had been Kimball Webb’s.

“Who saw Mr. Webb last?” asked Hanley, by way of pursuing his duty.

“I suppose I did,” answered his mother. “He came to my room to say good night, as he often does, after he’s been out late. We had a little chat, and then he kissed me good night, and I heard him go upstairs.”

“Did you hear him, Miss Webb?”

“N—no; I was asleep.”

“And he didn’t wake you as he passed your door?”

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“No; it was closed. I didn’t hear his footsteps.”

“But you went up to his room later!” Elsie cried, accusingly.

“N—no, I didn’t! What do you mean?”

Henrietta Webb spoke hesitatingly; one would have said she was prevaricating, from the manner of her speech. But she looked straight at Elsie, and demanded an explanation of her words.

“Then, you were up in Kim’s room before he came home that night.”

“No, I wasn’t. Why do you say these things?”

“When were you in your brother’s room last, before he—went away?” Elsie demanded.

“Oh, not for several days. I sometimes go up there to chat with him, but he’s been so pre-occupied lately, with his play and his wedding preparations both, that I haven’t intruded on his time.”

“You were up there the night before last, after Kim came home from the dinner!” Elsie declared, looking straight at Miss Webb, “and you sat on the little sofa between the front

windows.”

“I’ve been considerate of you, Elsie,” Miss Webb said, coldly, “because I feel sorry for you, and I make allowances for your disturbed nerves and your—your natural lack of poise,—but, I warn you I won’t stand everything! Your accusations are not only false, they’re ridiculous! If I had gone to Kim’s room and talked to him after his return, why should I deny it?”

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“Because you’re afraid it will incriminate you!—in his disappearance! Oh, Henrietta, *where* is he? Give him back to me! I love him so—I want him so! Oh, Kimball,—my love —”

The girl gave way and burst into hysterical tears. Truly, she had not the poise of the woman before her,—but she had resiliency.

In a moment she pulled herself together, steadied her voice, and said;

“You *were* in Kim’s room that night,—and I can prove it by a witness! Stay here,—all of you!”

She ran out of the room, and they heard her go upstairs.

“Don’t put too much reliance on what Miss Powell says,” Henrietta said to the detective. “She’s not quite herself.”

“All right, ma’am,” returned Hanley, but he looked closely at the speaker.

“Any news?” asked a man’s voice from the doorway, and Fenn Whiting came into the room.

“I couldn’t keep away,” he went on. “I’ve been over to the Powells’ and they said Elsie was here.” He looked about.

“She is,” began Henrietta, but Harbison, who had returned from his futile quest, impatiently broke in.

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“I say, Whiting, listen to my theory.”

He proceeded to detail the matter of Courtney’s play and recalled to Whiting the wrath that Courtney exhibited at the bachelor dinner.

“By Jove, he was mad!” Whiting agreed, his attention arrested at once by the ideas Harbison put forth.

“And, though it sounds like a cock and bull story,” Harbison went on, “suppose Wally thinks to himself, if I could only tie Kim up somewhere till I can get my play finished and accepted by a manager, it will be my salvation! Now, of course, if he kidnapped Kim it had to be done before the wedding, so—”

“It’s far-fetched,” said Whiting thoughtfully, “but I’ll say it’s the first thing I’ve heard put forth by way of a motive. You know finding a motive is a necessary step to be taken before finding the perpetrator of this thing.”

“I know the motive,” Elsie’s voice announced, as she entered in time to hear Whiting’s closing words. “I’ve found the perpetrator,—and I did have proof,—but she’s destroyed it.”

Elsie's stern gaze at Henrietta Webb decidedly discomfited that cool, calm personality, and for the first time Miss Webb's poise seemed about to desert her.

Ignoring the others, Elsie addressed herself to Hanley.

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"I found a real clue, yesterday morning," she said, "when I went up to look around Mr. Webb's room. On the floor, in front of the little sofa were several white marks,—"

"How absurd!" cried Henrietta; "I beg of you don't discuss the shortcomings of a careless housemaid!"

"White marks," Elsie went on, as if uninterrupted, "that were made by the rubbing on the carpet of a woman's white shoes. Shoes, I mean, that had been whitened with some of those chalk preparations that most women use,—or their maids use for them."

A side glance at Henrietta's face showed Elsie that it was as white as the chalk in question, but she went on: "I know that those marks were made by Miss Webb's shoes; I know that it was at her request that the maid carefully removed the marks from the green carpet; I know she gave the maid orders to say nothing about the matter; and I know she has destroyed or concealed those shoes!"

Henrietta's face became like a stone. Impassive, unreadable, its expression showed neither embarrassment nor fear. Only in her eyes was there a sign of perturbation. Her glance at Elsie was defiant, and a little threatening.

"Well, Miss Webb," Hanley began, "you advised me not

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to be too much impressed by Miss Powell's statements, so I'll ask you for a bit of explanation right here."

"There is nothing to explain," Henrietta began, calmly; "I deny everything she has asserted. I may have been in my brother's room during the past week, I may have left some white marks from my shoes on the carpet, but I do not recollect such an occasion, nor do I think it at all pertinent to the matter in hand. As to the matter of the housemaid, that is pure fabrication. I am not in the habit of conniving with servants, as Miss Powell seems to be."

"Which shoes of yours are so whitened that the marks on the carpet are usual,—and where are the shoes?" Elsie demanded, pointing an accusing finger at Miss Webb.

"I really don't know," Henrietta shrugged her shoulders. "You must ask Janet, she looks after my wardrobe."

"Come, come, Miss Powell," said Hanley, impressed more by Henrietta's indifference than by Elsie's "clue." "I don't think you're adapted to detective work. You overestimate the importance of trifles."

"Nothing is a trifle if it points the way to discovery," said Elsie, her brown eyes flashing and her red lips quivering as she looked from one to another for help or sympathy.

And it came, from Fenn Whiting.

"I think, Miss Webb," he said, a bit shortly, "that you owe us a little information. Doesn't the maid clean the rooms each morning?"

“Certainly.”

“Then white marks, as of chalked shoes, early in the morning would seem to me to imply that you *were* there the night before. Why not own up to it? It couldn’t have been on any secret errand?”

“Of course it couldn’t. But I wasn’t there at all. The marks, if they existed outside of Elsie’s imagination, must have been made by one of the maids. They wear white shoes sometimes.”

“Then call the maid, and let her produce the shoes,” cried Elsie. “I tell you, Mr. Hanley, this is a clue, and a real one. If you let it slip, you are not doing your duty.”

Hanley became angry.

“It isn’t for a man twelve years on the force to be taught his duty by a chit of a girl who ought to be in school herself!” he exploded, and the nod of approval from Henrietta decided him to go on. “I’m sorry, indeed, for you, Miss Powell, and it’s a small wonder that you’re nearly distracted, but I must insist that it isn’t right for you to imagine that Miss Webb is implicated. It seems to me much more likely that we ought to look in the direction of this Mr. Courtney. If he is the sort of a man to stop at nothing in the furtherance of his own schemes, I can believe that he has somehow secreted Kimball Webb in order to get his play done first.”

“How could he?” Elsie cried; “how could he get into the house? How could he get Kimball out?”

“Those questions are unanswerable at present, no matter who the suspect is,” the detective returned, imperturbably. “Now, look here, Miss Powell, I want to know about this will business. I’ve only heard a vague story. Is it true that if you are not married by a certain date, your fortune is taken away from you?”

“It is,” she replied; “and the date is the thirtieth of June. This gives us three months, nearly, to find Mr. Kimball Webb.”

“And that’s about time enough for Mr. Wallace Courtney to finish his precious play! I predict that you will not see Mr. Webb until Mr. Courtney’s play is finished!”

“And you’re going to let him get away with it!” cried Harbison. “Can one man put another aside in that fashion, at will, without prevention or even protest?”

“Well, hardly; but after all, it may not be Mr. Courtney at all. Here’s another point I want cleared up. In the event of your not marrying by the given date, Miss Powell, what becomes of your aunt’s money?”

“It will go to a cousin of hers, who lives out West somewhere. I don’t know exactly where.”

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“A relative of yours?”

“No; my aunt was my father’s half sister. This man is a connection of her mother, and is no relation to my father or myself.”

“You know him?”

“Only his name, Joseph Allison. I’ve never seen him, never heard from him. You see, there was no question of the fortune not being mine, as I expected to marry Mr. Kimball well within the prescribed time.”

“I see; and may we not assume an interest on the part of this young man as to the disposition of the estate, in the event of your not marrying?”

“Hullo!” exclaimed Harbison, “that opens up a new field of conjecture. May not the young man have been sufficiently interested to go to the length of removing Kimball Webb from the field of action altogether?”

“Oh, no,” Elsie said. “You see, it’s this way. Mr. Allison tried to break the will at the time of my aunt’s death, four years ago; but there wasn’t a chance of it, and so, as the lawyers told me, he gracefully gave up the matter and has never been heard from since.”

“That doesn’t prevent his still being interested,” persisted Hanley. “You see, Miss Powell, I’m an experienced detective. I’m no story-book chap, but I’m a good plain worker, and I keep my eyes open, with the result that I see a hole through a millstone, now and then. And, I think I’ve learned about all I can pick up here, just now. I shall look into the matter of Mr. Courtney and his play; also into the affairs of Mr. Joseph Allison. And let me advise you, Miss Powell, not to put your inexperienced fingers into pies that you don’t understand. A girl of your age and ignorance of these things can’t be a detective,—even an amateur one. So leave it all to those who know the ropes.”

Hanley went away, and the others remained for a time.

There was a silence at first, and then Henrietta said, "I'm not going to reprove you, Elsie, I feel too sorry for you to do that, but I am going to ask you not to trump up any more such foolish yarns as the one you spun about the white shoes!"

"What became of the shoes, then?" asked Elsie, bluntly.

"What shoes? There are no especial shoes to be considered. Drop the subject, dear. Such harping on it makes it seem as if you were not quite calmed down yet."

"And I'm not, and I never shall be, until Kimball is given back to me! I'm going to find him, myself, I don't care what that detective says. Who is going to help me?"

"I, for one," said Henry Harbison, promptly. "I'm mighty sorry for you, Miss Powell, and you may command me as you like."

"Thank you, Mr. Harbison; I know you're a firm friend of Kimball's and I gladly accept your friendship also."

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"I suppose you know you can depend on me to see you through, without any definite avowal," said Fenn Whiting, smiling.

"Of course, Fenn, you are my right-hand man. But I want all the help I can get."

"We'll help you, Elsie," Henrietta began, but Elsie only gave her a scornful glance.

“When you are ready to help, Henrietta, begin by telling me about your white shoes.”

Miss Webb made a scornful gesture, as of one powerless to aid such a wilful girl, and Mrs. Webb began on her hobby.

“You can all search and detect and deduce all you like; there is nothing that can explain Kim’s disappearance or solve the mystery of his absence except supernatural forces. Carp as you will, object as you see fit, you must admit there’s no other way out!”

“You’re right, to a degree, Mrs. Webb,” said Fenn Whiting slowly; “there’s no other way out! I don’t for a minute believe in spooks, but—I’m ready to agree there’s no other way out.”

“Then we must stay in,” said Harbison.

“Not we!” declared Elsie; “not I, at least. And you men have promised to help me. Now, first of all, is there any chance of Joe Allison being implicated? I hadn’t thought of it,—but it must, as Mr. Hanley said, be looked into.”

“How could he manage it?” asked Whiting. “Courtney looks more possible, if you ask me.”

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“I do ask you,” said Elsie, “I ask you all. I want your help, your counsel, your advice. I *am* inexperienced, I’ve no knowledge of police work or detective work, but I have courage, hope and a will that is unbreakable and unshakable! I will go through fire and water, I will move heaven and earth, I will face danger of any sort, I will suffer or endure anything,—if it will help in the least degree to get Kimball back.”

“Never mind the theatrical demonstration, Elsie,” said Henrietta, scoffingly, “we all want Kim back, but we don’t announce it from the housetops!”

“Nor am I doing so,” Elsie spoke quietly but with flashing eyes; “I will omit all personal remarks, hereafter, but I must still insist upon my determination and my perseverance,—which, after all, are my stock in trade!”

“Good for you, Elsie,” and Whiting smiled at her. “I’m with you, and we’ll never let up until we find the boy! Harbison, you’re in on this?”

“To a finish! Now, how do we begin? I’m all for looking up Courtney. It’s too much of a coincidence that he should want Kim out of the way,—and, immediately, Kim is out of the way! Isn’t that a bit curious?”

“It is, now you put it that way,” and Whiting looked visibly impressed. “Let’s run him to cover first of all.”

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And then, the telephone bell rang, and Detective Hanley informed them that Wallace Courtney had disappeared as suddenly and as inexplicably as Kimball Webb had himself!

“That settles it!” declared Harbison, jumping up and grasping his hat. “I’ve got to get in on the ground floor! Good-bye, all!”

He left the house hastily, and Fenn Whiting was eager to follow. But he spoke first to Elsie.

“Shall I go,” he asked, “or stay with you?”

“Go!” she cried, with shining eyes. “At last, we’re beginning to *do* something! Go and find out all you can about Mr. Courtney, and report to me at my home. I’m going over there, —as soon as I have this matter out with Henrietta!”

CHAPTER VII

JOE ALLISON

“Well, I’m a red-blooded young American, and I’m not denying that a fortune of a few millions would come in mighty handy in my business!”

The speaker was Joe Allison, and he was paying his first call on the Powells.

They liked him at once, for one could scarce help liking the breezy mannered light-hearted chap, and his frankness and straightforwardness won Elsie’s heart.

“Of course,” he went on,—they were talking of Miss Elizabeth Powell’s will, “the whole thing is pretty ridiculous,—freak wills are,—but it’s none of my quarrel that she should run me in as an afterclap. You have the inside track, Cousin Elsie,—let me call you that,—but I have a right to feel an interest in your doings. And I’ve heard,—I may as well speak frankly,—I’ve heard it rumoured that you’re determined to marry nobody,—nobody in the world,—except Mr. Webb. Who is, I understand, unavailable for the moment.”

“That’s all true,—” Elsie admitted, but Gerty spoke up:

“Only true in part, Mr. Allison.”

“Oh, call me Joe. I’m not really related, but it makes me feel good to be connected in any way with the Powell money.”

“I fear you’ve a mercenary spirit,” said Mrs. Powell, smiling at the boyish face.

“No more so than the average man. I’m no dollar-grabber, but when I’m up against a possible inheritance, I want to know how strong a probability there is.”

“A decidedly strong one, Joe,” Elsie said, looking at him, but Gerty again interrupted.

“Don’t take her too seriously,” she begged. “Elsie doesn’t realize her own position. And there’s considerable time yet for her to come to a true sense of things as they are,—”

“And time to find the missing man,” suggested Joe, cheerfully. “I am not going to pretend I don’t want to be the old lady’s heir, for I do,—but not at the expense of Elsie’s happiness. I’ve known you less than half an hour, Cousin Elsie, but, by George, I’m for you!”

“Why?” said Elsie, with a real curiosity.

“First, because you’re so pretty; second, because you’re so plucky; and third, because the whole thing is so much of a gamble,—it would be an awful pity for you to lose out,—even if it would be nuts for me!”

“You’re a good sort, Joe; and, truly, if Kimball Webb never reappears, and you inherit Aunt Elizabeth’s money, I’ll be

glad for you—”

“Come, come, Elsie,” said her mother, pettishly, “that’s all right in Sunday-school books, and Uplift pamphlets, but we live in a practical world, and I don’t propose to let you do yourself the injustice of losing your rightful fortune for a bit of misplaced sentiment. You’re young,—too young to realize what it would mean to you to go through life alone and poor. And that’s what your life will be if you refuse to marry any one except Kimball. You must know that he *may* never return. Of course it is possible that he will,—but he may *not*. And in that case, I shall insist on your marrying some other good and worthy man,—if only for the sake of your financial well-being in the future.”

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“And that of your family,” added Allison, sagaciously, quite sensing the undercurrent of Mrs. Powell’s thoughts.

“That, too,” she admitted. “Elsie knows that our happiness depends upon her course in the matter. Gerty’s husband, a well-to-do lawyer, was killed in action; for myself, I am practically penniless. It is, therefore, Elsie’s duty to sacrifice herself to some extent for those dependent on her. I am an invalid, Gerty has the care and support of two tiny children, and I am sure we are not unduly selfish in our attitude.”

“And it isn’t,” Gerty took up the tale, “as if we were asking anything wrong or unusual of Elsie. There is some time yet for her to look around and choose among her various suitors,—and she has lots of them,—”

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“Naturally,” said Allison, dryly.

“Oh, I don’t mean fortune-hunters! There are plenty of men who love Elsie for herself alone. And they are first class, desirable men, who would make delightful husbands.”

“Gerty, you give me the shivers!” exclaimed Elsie. “I’m merely an investment, it would seem! I can tell you, Mr. Allison,—Joe,—I do not propose to marry somebody in order to secure a fortune for my people! I am fond of them, I will work for them, but I refuse to sell myself for them!”

“Fine talk, Cousin Elsie,” the young man said, smiling, “but you won’t last out. Let me see, Mr. Webb has been missing three days now,—isn’t it?”

“Yes; three days, now.”

“And you have three months in which to find him,—you see I know the main facts. Well, I hate to be discouraging, but I don’t believe you’ll ever see that man again,—and you may as well begin to pick his successor.”

“I started out by liking you, Joe, but you’ve changed my attitude,” Elsie exclaimed, her cheeks flushing with anger. “How can you speak like that?”

“I’m a hardheaded Westerner, Elsie, and I look things square in the face. It’s out of all thinking that Webb was kidnapped! Such things aren’t done! And, too, how could it be possible?”

102

“How could his departure be possible, anyway?”

“Far easier, if he went of his own accord, than if he were

forced to go against his will. In fact, my girl, you must see that he couldn't have been taken unwillingly. Granting the mystery of the locked room, it can be,—it *must* be explained in some way,—but, only if Webb went away of his own volition. You must see that?”

“I do,” declared Gerty, “and Elsie does too, only she won't admit it.”

“I don't,” Elsie denied; “but I refuse to discuss the subject at all. I find it does no good. Nothing does any good! Here, three days have passed; a detective has done his best,—and it amounted to nothing at all! Two of my friends,—Mr. Whiting and Mr. Harbison have done their best,—and it has amounted to nothing at all; Kimball's mother and sister have done their best—”

“Are you sure of them?” Allison broke in; “I mean, are you sure they are hunting him,—or, are they foxy enough—”

He paused and looked from one to another to guess their attitude toward the Webb ladies.

“I don't think they know anything more about Kimball than I do,” said Elsie, slowly. “I *did* think Henrietta engineered the whole thing,—and I had reason to think so,—I still have,—but, not enough to make me feel sure of it.”

103

“I'm keen on the mystery part of it,” said Allison. “I've a fondness for mystery and I'd like to know just how Mr. Webb did get out of that room,—that is, if it was as securely locked as the stories made it out.”

“Oh, it was;” Elsie nodded her head, positively. “That is, if Henrietta’s story is true. And it must be, for she couldn’t make all the servants stick to a made-up tale, after all the grilling they’ve been through by the detectives and by all of us. Yes, I do believe that Hollis and Oscar,—they’re the two men servants,—broke in, just as they say they did.”

“Then it’s the mystery of the century!” young Allison exclaimed. “I’m going to take a hand at it!”

Elsie smiled with an indulgent air. “All right, Joe, go ahead. But, the very simplicity of it all is the baffling part. Door and windows fastened on the inside, and the man gone, with no trace of how he got out, where he went to, or where he is now.”

“Can you beat it?” and Allison’s round face fairly glowed with interest. “No secret passage?”

“No; everybody’s tried to find one, but there’s no unexplained space in the walls, or between partitions, or anything of the sort. Mr. Whiting is an architect, and he showed the police detective how he could see there is no chance for any secret exit. The walls are intact and solid,—oh, I don’t know how to express it, but there’s absolutely no chance of a sliding panel or secret staircase or passage.”

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“Makes it still more interesting. What theories have been suggested?”

“Nothing definite, except Kimball’s mother’s idea that spirits wafted him away!”

“Oh, I don’t mean idiotic talk, like that! Is the maternal Webb a Spookist?”

“Of the deepest dye. She really believes Kimball was carried bodily through a closed door—”

“Don’t waste time on that. What does the detective think?”

“Can’t think of anything,—that fits all conditions. But he says Kimball must have gone away purposely, and, in some unexplained fashion, locked the door after him.”

“Street door open?”

“No; locked and bolted as usual.”

“Beautiful case! Finest mystery I ever heard of! I’m going to imperil my chance at the fortune and try to get your man back for you!”

“That’s nice of you, Joe, but I wish I had more hope of your success.” Elsie’s disconsolate face did not brighten at her cousin’s offer.

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“Look here, Elsie; what say to offering a reward? Make a nice big sum,—contingent on the restoration of your lover,—and then if I can find him for you, I lose the fortune,—but I get the prize money.”

“Oh, I’ll do that, Joe! Gladly. How much shall I make it? Ten thousand dollars?”

“No; fifty thousand. You see, I want a slice of the money and,

—to be honest,—I don't think you'd let the fortune slip for want of a bridegroom.”

“Indeed she won't!” cried Gerty. “She'll see reason before the thirtieth of June!”

“That's what I think,” agreed Joe; “so, Cousin Elsie, you'll never miss fifty thousand from your millions, and it'll do me a power of good!”

“You haven't solved the mystery yet,” said Elsie, but her face had brightened at the mere idea of Joe's success.

“Then, if I don't, you won't have to pay me.”

“Also,” said Mrs. Powell, “if some one else wins the reward —”

“That's all right,” said Joe, casually. “If so, Elsie'll be mighty glad to pay it!”

“Of course I will! I'd pay it to anybody who will restore my lover!”

“And a good investment, too; the return of the man means the assurance of the money.”

Fenn Whiting did not altogether approve of the plan of a reward.

When he came to see Elsie, after Allison had left the house, he advised against it.

“You see, dear,” he said, “it is all right to offer the money to your cousin, but the lure of a big reward will attract all sorts and conditions of men, and you’ll get involved in devious bothers.”

“Such as what?” demanded Elsie. “I don’t care who gets the money if Kimball is found. You know, Fenn, Kim must be *somewhere*! I don’t for a minute believe he is dead, do you?”

“No; there’s no reason to think that. Who would have any motive for killing him?—that is,—except,—oh, Elsie, can’t you see an inch in front of your nose? The only one with a possible motive for taking Kim away from you is that precious cousin of yours,—though why you call him cousin, I don’t know.”

“Joe Allison! Why, Fenn, if you saw that boy, you’d never associate any wrong doing with him! He’s the frankest, most honest—”

“Elsie! how innocent you are! Surely, child, you must have intelligence,—if not experience enough to see that a scamp would assume honesty and frankness of demeanour—”

“But you haven’t seen Joe!”

“No matter. I know he’s the only one with a motive,—if we except Wally Courtney.”

“Haven’t they found him yet?”

“No; but they’re on his trail. He is hiding somewhere, but I don’t believe he’s responsible for Kim’s disappearance. How

could he be?”

“He could be,—as well as any one else. How could anybody be the means of,—and yet somebody was!”

“Nobody but Kim himself,—Elsie. The method of his disappearance is still a mystery, but a motive for any one is more dubious still. I merely mentioned this Allison, but after all, I can’t believe he came here to New York from Chicago, got into a strange house, abducted a strong, able-bodied man, and spirited him away, leaving the doors locked behind him! Your theory of Miss Webb’s connivance is more plausible than that!”

“You mix me all up, Fenn! I thought at first you suspected Joe.”

“I suspect no one, because, as yet, I’ve found no real motive. But this Allison can be said to have a motive,—and still, my reason won’t let me suspect him. We’re all of us at sea, Elsie. We all speculate, and wonder and assume,—then, when it comes to a positive suspicion, we can’t find a logical one.”

“Then I am sure I’m right in offering a reward,—and a big one. You see, if Kim isn’t found in time, I won’t have to pay it,—and if he is found, I shall marry him at once and so have plenty of money to pay it!”

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“You mean, make the payment contingent on his restoration before your birthday?”

“Of course. I shall never marry any one else. I’ll wait for ever for him. If he never comes back to me, I shall never marry. If

he comes after my birthday,—then Joe Allison will have the money and I will be a poor girl.”

“How foolish you are, Elsie!”

“You think so?”

“No, dear, not really. I appreciate your loyal love, and I know you can’t dream of marrying another man. But,—you may change your mind later. And, remember, Elsie, I have always loved you. I’m not asking you to marry me, now; but if Kim *doesn’t* return before your birthday, and if the money goes to Allison, and if you’re, as you say, a girl dependent on your own efforts,—for I suppose you wouldn’t accept an allowance from Allison?”

“He hasn’t offered one, I never thought of such a thing! Yes, I would accept it for mother and Gerty and the children! Not for myself.”

“He wouldn’t make you any such allowance as your mother and Gerty would want. You know, Elsie, they *are* a bit mercenary.”

“You sha’n’t call them that! They’ve always had lots of money,—they can’t get along without it. And Gerty isn’t strong, and mother is growing more of an invalid every day, and the children are expensive little things. Oh, Fenn, what *can* I do? I *can’t* see my people in want! And I can’t marry somebody just to get a fortune for them!”

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“I’m in a sorry predicament, dear, when I try to advise you; you know how I love you,—how long I have loved you.

When I found you had chosen Kimball, I never obtruded my claims. But, now,—oh, Elsie, I can't ask you to marry me to save the fortune! I'm not such a poor thing as that! But, if Allison gets the money, and if he will look after your mother and Gerty, won't you, dearest, won't you let me provide for you?—I can't offer to take the whole family,—I'm not a rich man,—but I love you so,—dear,—and all I can say is, that you must remember my only wish is to serve you,—in any way. Command me anything,—anything, Elsie!”

“Very well, Fenn, find Kimball for me.”

“I'll do my best, dear. If I don't succeed, you'll know I tried.”

“You're a good friend, Fenn; and I'll say this. I shall never—*never* marry any other man but my Kim, but I like you best of all my friends, and I depend on you most of all to help me.”

“You may, Elsie. Now, are you determined to offer this reward?”

“Oh, yes; and if you win it—”

“*Don't!* dear heart, you don't know how you hurt me! Do you think for a minute *I'd* take it?”

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“I don't see why not, if you earn it, by restoring Kim to me.”

“Well, don't let's speak of reward! To give you happiness is all the reward I shall ask. I don't want pay for that!”

A visitor was announced, and in another minute Joe Allison entered the room.

“Oh, Elsie,” he cried; “I’m finding out things! Beg pardon, I thought you were alone.”

Elsie introduced the two men, and Joe favoured Fenn Whiting with a long steady glance.

“How do you do?” he said; “I’m glad to meet you, Mr. Whiting, for lots of reasons.”

“Thank you,” said Whiting; “am I to know them?”

“You bet. But, I say, you’re in with us on this deal?”

“Rather! Still, I’d like to know more of your ideas of what the deal is.”

“Oh, yes; sure. I mean this notion of Elsie’s offering a reward for the return of her missing man.”

“Don’t speak of it so—so bluntly, Joe,” Elsie urged.

“I side with Miss Powell,” Whiting said; “seems to me, Mr. Allison, the matter might be put more delicately.”

“Oh, all right. But I’m a blunt man,—Westerners have that rep. Anyway, I’m keen on the scent.”

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“What have you found out?” cried Elsie.

“I’ve found that Mr. Courtney, for one thing.”

“Where is he?” exclaimed Whiting and Elsie, too.

“He’s practically in hiding, but not for concealment at all; merely to get a chance to work in peace, I take it.”

“Where is he?” insisted Whiting.

“He’s staying with a Miss Lulie Lloyd,—only she won’t admit it.”

“Lulie Lloyd!” Elsie cried; “why, she’s Kim’s stenographer.”

“Yep; I found that out, too. Well, Miss Lloyd has an apartment of her own,—lives there with her mother,—if it is her mother,—and I believe for the present, Mr. Wallace Courtney is making his abode there also.”

“What’s he doing there?”

“Working like mad on his play!”

“Oh, then he did steal Kim away!” and Elsie’s eyes grew wide with glad surprise. “If that’s so, we can soon get Kim back! I hoped it was Mr. Courtney, but I couldn’t believe it!”

“I can’t believe it yet,” put in Whiting. “How did you get all this, Mr. Allison?”

“Just by nosing around. I found out that Miss Lloyd had been Mr. Webb’s stenographer, and I went to see her—”

“Why?”

“Just to quiz her, and maybe find out a thing or two. You know a stenographer is often a mine of information regarding

her employer,—whether she lets go of it or not.”

“And did she?” Whiting was agog with interest.

“She did not! She has the tightest closed pair of lips that ever felt a lipstick! She told me just about nothing. But—I caught on to some points! I’ll say I did!”

“Go on,” said Elsie, breathlessly, “what about Kim?”

“Nothing about him,—nothing at all. But it’s my belief she has Mr. Courtney there,—in her place,—because of her—well, because of a lot of things I saw.”

“You went there?”

“I did. And Miss Lloyd so little expected any inquisitive intruders that I caught her utterly unprepared. I rather rudely brushed past the maid, who was taking my card to the lady, and I entered the room just as an inner door closed behind a hurried departure of somebody. I only deduce that somebody was Mr. Wallace Courtney, for these reasons. First, there was a definite odour of good cigar smoke in the room. Second, there were papers and notebooks scattered about a desk,—whose chair was pushed aside as if just vacated by its occupant. Third, Miss Lloyd, herself, who rose hastily from her typewriter table, was exceedingly flustered and absurdly angry at my intrusion.”

“Hadn’t she a right to be?” asked Whiting, a little severely, for he did not approve of the young man’s easy-going ways.

“Sure she had! I fully expected it. Well, I simply said, ‘Where’s Mr. Courtney gone?’ and she did the high and mighty, ‘I don’t know what you mean, sir!’ with a loud exclamation point after the ‘sir!’ And then with the usual tragedy queen gag, she pointed to the door. But I had caught on to the dope I was after, and casually picking up a few sheets of the copy she had just written, I saw it was a play, and I saw the characters in said play, were named. ‘Mrs. Saltonstall, Mr. Cabot and Miss Adams.’ I glanced at the notes on the abandoned desk hard by, and found the same names scribbled there. To make assurance sure, I helped myself to a page of the scribblement, and came away. That was all I did there. Then I went to the *Workers’ Club*, and somehow or other I wormed myself in, and I managed to get the information from a friend of Mr. Courtney’s that the page of scribbled notes is in his handwriting and that Mr. Courtney’s play included the characters named as I have hereinbefore enumerated! That’s about all.”

“And enough!” cried Whiting. “Man, you’re a wonder! Courtney is there, of course—”

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“And I see farther into it than you do!” Elsie exclaimed; “that Lulie Lloyd is giving Mr. Courtney all the points of Kim’s play! She’s Kim’s stenographer, you know!”

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CHAPTER VIII

COURTNEY'S TALK

When Elsie arrived at Lulie Lloyd's home, that young woman greeted her most pleasantly.

"I came to see Mr. Courtney," Elsie said, briefly, looking about.

"Here I am, Miss Powell," and Wallace Courtney came in from the next room.

"I was told you were here,—in hiding!" Elsie exclaimed, excitedly.

"In retreat, not in hiding," Courtney corrected her. "I am exceedingly busy, and in order to work uninterruptedly, I've set up an office in this house, and Miss Lloyd is helping me."

"But you're Mr. Webb's stenographer," and Elsie turned on the girl.

"I know it, Miss Powell," she said, good-naturedly, "but Mr. Webb is away, and nobody knows when he'll come back, so I thought I had a right to take another position."

"Of course she has," defended Courtney. "But tell me, Miss

Powell, have you any news of the missing man?"

"How can I have, unless you give it to me?"

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that I think you are in some way responsible for his disappearance! I think you feared his play would clash with your own, and in some clever manner you contrived to hide him somewhere until too late to interfere with you."

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"What an idea! Miss Powell, you give me credit, then, for supernatural cleverness, for I must say, from what I've heard, the hiding of Kimball Webb,—if he is hidden,—is a masterpiece of ingenuity! How, may I ask, do you think I did it?"

"I haven't the least idea, but I know nobody else had any interest in his removal; and now that you've gone to work at your play with such energy, and have availed yourself of Mr. Webb's stenographer, which must be very advantageous, I've no further doubt that you did the outrageous thing! When do you propose to liberate him?"

"Not having him in custody, I can't answer that question. And, I tell you frankly, Miss Powell, your suspicions are so utterly absurd I decline to refute them. If you choose to think I abducted Kimball Webb, you are at liberty to do so, but until you can produce some proof or some indicative evidence, I have no call to defend myself. Also, I am willing to admit that I'm glad he's gone! I wish no harm to Webb, he's a friend of mine, but his play put the kibosh on my hopes, and now that I

have a chance at success, I'm taking it! As to Miss Lloyd, she is a first-class stenographer and more. She is a real help in knowing all about Webb's play. Not that I mean to plagiarize, —on the contrary, Miss Lloyd can tell me his points, and I shall take care to avoid using them."

"You are exceedingly clever, Mr. Courtney," Elsie looked at him curiously, "especially so in the attitude you take regarding Kim! I believe you got him away,—somehow,—and that you will not give him up until you are ready. How you did it, I can't imagine, but I shall find out, and I shall have you punished! There is,—there *must* be a law that will reach you, and you'll have a worse fate than the failure of a play!"

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"Whew! Miss Powell, you take my breath away! If I were afraid of anybody in this matter, I should certainly fear you! You have enterprise and persistence to a marked degree. But, I'm not afraid of you, go ahead with your investigation of my criminal career, and let me know your results. You have the police back of you, I suppose?"

"I think you're perfectly horrid, Mr. Courtney! Haven't you a particle of sympathy for me? Don't you think I am in the depths of misery at the loss of the man I love?"

"Oh, he isn't lost, Miss Powell. Whatever the reason for his disappearance,—and I could suggest several of them,—his absence is but temporary."

"You're very sure! So sure, that I am more than ever convinced that you're behind the crime,—for it is a

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crime!”

“Fasten it on me, then,” retorted Courtney, cheerfully; “I deny it, but if it’s proven on me, I’ll admit it!”

“Of course you will! You’ll have to! And I’ll get it proved, all right! Miss Lloyd, be careful. You know how Mr. Webb trusted you, you know all the ins and outs of his work, you must know that you reveal his secrets at your peril—”

“Oh, wait a minute, Miss Powell,” Courtney broke in; “cut out the dramatics. Miss Lloyd is a stenographer, and she has a right to work for any one she chooses. If her previous employer returns and calls her to account for taking another position, that’s one thing. But until he does so, no one else has a right to question her course.”

“That’s right, Miss Powell,” said Lulie Lloyd. “But, anyway, don’t you fear I’ll do anything wrong. As Mr. Courtney says, anything I can tell him regarding Mr. Webb’s play is by way of caution against plagiarism, not the means of bringing it about.”

“I don’t believe a word of that!” and Elsie’s little nose went up scornfully. “I know perfectly well Mr. Courtney will use the best of Mr. Webb’s ideas, and will so change and rewrite them that he can claim them as his own. I may be baffled but I’m not fooled!”

119

The brown eyes swept coldly over the flushed face of the stenographer and then turned again to Courtney.

“I’ve no desire to discuss the matter further,” Elsie said,

calmly, “but I can tell you, Mr. Wallace Courtney, you’ll be sorry for what you have done. This is not the age of bandits and pirates! Citizens cannot be secretly taken from their homes with impunity! You are the man with the motive for desiring the disappearance of Kimball Webb, and so you are the man who brought about that disappearance. And I shall see to it that you get your just deserts.”

Elsie turned on her heel, and started for the door.

“Just a moment, Miss Powell,” said Courtney, and she turned.

“Do listen to me, for your own sake,” he urged; “I didn’t steal your lover away from you,—but, though you will doubtless scorn it, I’d like to give you a hint.”

“You can’t divert my attention from you in that way!” Elsie declared, but she waited for further words.

“I daresay not; still, it ought to interest you to know that Kimball was looking for something queer to happen.”

“Can you prove that, other than by your own statement?”

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“So you won’t believe anything I say! Well, listen, anyway. We were talking recently at the Club about spiritualism,—”

“Oh, don’t harp on that! That’s Kim’s mother’s theory,—and of all ridiculous nonsense! Why,—”

“Now, wait a minute. This was only two nights before his bachelor dinner. We were discussing the foolishness of

séances, and talking about the people who claim to have communication with their relatives who were killed in the war,—and all that rot,—when Kim said, ‘There may be something in it after all.’

“We laughed at him, and asked him if he had any experiences worth telling. And he said he’d had one the night before.”

“I don’t want to hear it. Either you’re deceiving me, or he was hoaxing you. Kim hates everything of the sort,—his mother will tell you that.”

“It isn’t a question of his hating it,—he did,—but he told us a tale which I, for one, refuse to doubt. It bore evidence of its truth on its very face.”

“What was it?” Elsie became interested in spite of herself.

“It seems Kim has had a number of queer experiences happen to him while he slept. For instance, clothing that he left on one chair when he went to bed he found in the morning on another chair.”

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“Pooh, he might have forgotten which chair he left the things on!”

“But it happened three times in succession. And his door was carefully locked each night. In fact, he said that’s why he formed the habit of locking and bolting it. He was not at all afraid, but his mother had talked about spirit performances and he wanted to know what it all meant.”

“Is there any more of this rubbish?” Elsie asked.

“There is. The night I speak of, two nights before the dinner,—he told us this tale. He was lying in bed with the bedclothing drawn smoothly over him. He felt it slipping down as if it were being drawn off. He made no effort to hold it, nor to rise, as he was bent on waiting to see what would happen. Well, the sheet, blanket and counterpane, all, were drawn slowly, steadily and entirely off the bed and they fell in a heap on the floor.”

“I don’t believe it,” said Elsie, simply.

“You don’t have to. I’m merely repeating the story Kim told. Half a dozen fellows heard it, they’ll all tell you the same. Want their names?”

“Not now. I may ask for them some time.”

“All right. As soon as the clothes were all off, Kim sprang up, made a light, and investigated. There was no sign of any one about,—the door was locked as he had left it, and, he said, there was no other possible access to the room. Kim wasn’t afraid, but he was flabbergasted. He asked us our opinion. You know what Poltergeist means?”

122

“Oh, I know it’s some foolishness the Spiritualists babble about,—that snatches bedclothes off and clatters tin pans and that.”

“Yes; well, several of the men said it was Poltergeist.”

“Polter—fiddlesticks! It was a nightmare, and you only tell the story to get me off the track.”

“Meaning the track of my own participation in the crime?”

“Meaning just that!”

“Well, listen to this, then. One night about a week before the bedclothes affair, a diamond pin was stolen from Kimball Webb’s room.”

“A diamond pin!”

“Yes, a scarf pin. Small diamonds, set round a cat’s-eye. Not of great value, but an expensive little trinket. In that case, too, the door was locked and bolted on the inside.”

“Servants, I suppose. Why didn’t Kim report the theft to the police?”

“He said he was too curious to find out how it was done.”

“Poltergeist don’t steal things.”

123

“Oh, yes, they do; well, anyway, I wanted you to know that there have been queer doings and they are not explicable by natural means. Kimball told of strange sounds,—groans and moans,—”

“The same old stuff!”

“Yes, but Kim told it all as fact. I’ve no reason to doubt his word,—he’s never been a man given to big yarns, and he has a reputation for veracity. Do *you* doubt him?”

“Kimball? No! But I believe these stories are embroidered, if

not made up out of whole cloth! And I don't want to hear any more of them."

But Elsie was not allowed to forget the stories.

For, her next stopping place was at the Webb house, and she found the family there in a state of turmoil.

Mrs. Webb's declaration of her belief in the supernatural disappearance of Kimball, having been overheard by the chambermaid, the girl begged permission to tell what she knew about the room.

"It's haunted," she had told the Webb ladies. "I know it is, for I've seen things the haunt done!"

"Tell what you know, Janet," Henrietta said, severely, "but don't exaggerate or colour your story in any way."

"No, ma'am, I don't need to. It's this way. A few weeks ago, I went up to make up Mr. Kimball's room, and when I opened the door, the room was full of smoke—"

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"Cigar smoke?" asked Henrietta.

"Oh, no, ma'am. Smoke like from a fire."

"Was there a fire in the grate?"

"No, ma'am, and no sign of one. Why, there hasn't been a fire there since winter time. But the smoke didn't come from the fireplace, exactly,—it was sort of around the room,—and a smell like that of fresh kindled wood."

“You could imagine the odour, Janet,” demurred Henrietta.

“No, ma’am, I didn’t. It was too strong for that. You know, ma’am, there’s no smell like that of a fresh wood fire.”

“And no ashes or burnt wood in the fireplace?”

“No, ma’am; it was clean as clean.”

“You see, Henrietta,” said her mother; “Poltergeist is the only thing that explains that. They carry fire about as easily as we carry water.”

“I don’t want to believe it,” said Henrietta, slowly,—“it’s too absurd,—but Janet has always been a truthful girl—”

“Oh, it’s the truth I’m telling, miss,” Janet avowed, “and I was that scared I never mentioned it to nobody.”

“That’s like Janet, too,” observed Mrs. Webb; “she’s very close-mouthed. But you should have told us.”

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“I thought I would, ma’am, and I feared you’d laugh at me. I never supposed any harm would come of it. And now the little men have carried off Mr. Kimball!” The girl broke into tears and ran from the room.

“The little men?” said Mrs. Webb, wonderingly.

“That’s what they call any supernatural force,” said Henrietta; “here comes Elsie, let’s tell her about it.”

It was at that juncture that Elsie appeared, and as the Webbs

told the story of Janet's experiences, she told what Wallace Courtney had told her.

"There's no doubt at all," said Mrs. Webb, with a strange mixed feeling of satisfaction at having her own theory gain ground, and a shock of desolation at the loss of her son.

Elsie looked at her in amazement.

"Mrs. Webb," she said, slowly, "do you really mean that you think Poltergeist, or any supernatural power removed him bodily, and took him out of his locked room, and is keeping him concealed somewhere?"

"Of course I do!"

"How are they keeping him alive?"

"I don't know that he is alive."

"And you are willing to believe such rubbish? You—"

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"It does no good, Elsie," interrupted Henrietta, "to talk to mother like that. You've no right to scorn her beliefs,—she is a confirmed spiritualist, and as such, she is entitled to a respectful consideration, whether or not you agree with her beliefs."

"That's so, Henrietta, and I apologize. But it seems incredible that a sensible woman can stand for that sort of foolishness! Dear Mrs. Webb, I beg you to forgive me, I don't mean to be rude, but—oh, I'm so crazy to find Kimball, I'm not myself! I'm going to devote my life to it, I'm going to try every means

I can think of and then make up more, but I'll find him yet! You see, I start out by assuming that he didn't go away voluntarily,—you know he wouldn't do that! On our wedding day!"

Henrietta said no word, but a slight sound of disagreement that could be faintly heard made Elsie turn to her. She was amazed at the look of hatred on Henrietta's face.

"Why," she cried, "you look as if you could eat me, Henrietta! Now, look here, even if you don't like me very much, I'm your brother's promised wife, and so I shall remain until I'm his wife in fact. You can't change that,—and though I don't think,—now,—that *you* spirited Kim away,—yet I did think so,—and if you look like that, I may come back to that opinion!"

"Your opinions don't interest me, Elsie, and though I shouldn't have chosen you for Kimball's wife, yet I am just enough to treat properly the woman he himself selected for that honour."

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"All right, why don't you begin to treat me properly, then? For, if you ask me, I don't think you've done so yet!"

Henrietta scorned to reply, save by a disdainful look.

"And now," Elsie went on, "I'm going up in Kimball's room to look around a bit. I'm no detective, but then Hanley isn't one, either, not a real one. I suppose he does all he can, but I've been told that hunting a 'missing person,' is about as slow a process as that of ward in chancery. Sometimes I think I'll get a private detective, a big one, who will find my

Kimball and give him back to me.”

“My son will never be seen again,” declared Mrs. Webb, solemnly.

“I’m glad I’m not impressed by your dark views about it,” Elsie said, smiling at the old lady, whom she really liked, in spite of her absurd beliefs.

Mrs. Webb was more kindly disposed toward Elsie than Henrietta, and Elsie responded gratefully.

“You’ll change your mind,” she went on, to Mrs. Webb, 128 “when I make a triumphant rescue of my beloved. Oh,” she burst out, suddenly, “don’t you feel sorry for me? Think, a bride, left alone on her wedding day!”

“A deserted—” began Henrietta, but Elsie turned on her like a young tempest.

“No! Not a deserted wife! My Kimball didn’t desert me,—and this minute, wherever he is, he is planning and striving to get back to me. That is, if he’s conscious,—and, I know he is! I’d die if I didn’t believe that!”

She ran from the room and made her way up to Kimball’s room.

It was no longer kept locked, and it had been swept and garnished, so that any clues, if there ever had been any, had been removed.

“But,” Elsie mused, sadly, “how could there have been any

clues? Clues to what?" She couldn't believe an intruder had carried Kim off, for there was no possible way for an intruder to get in or out. What she really thought was that he had been lured away; say somebody had telephoned him and he had gone off suddenly, or something like that. How he locked the door after him and the hall door, too, was a stumbling block, but she didn't try to get over it.

She wandered about the large, pleasant room. On the chiffonier was her own photograph in a silver frame. Scattered about were several trifles she had given him; a paper-knife, a single flower vase, a calendar.

She looked in the scrap-basket,—it was empty.

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"What am I looking for?" she said, smiling to herself. "I've read in detective stories how the sleuth ran about a room, like a hound on the scent,—always like a hound on the scent. But he had something to detect,—some criminal of whom to hunt traces. I don't believe the criminal was here in this room, so there can be no clues. Unless a note called Kim away,—that might be!"

She looked through the small writing case that lay on a table. But it held nothing but fresh stationery, stamps and so forth. It looked as if it had never been used.

"A present from somebody," Elsie decided. "Nobody ever uses 'em!"

She glanced through some dresser drawers, but there was nothing out of order, nothing unusual, only the appointments of a man's wardrobe.

Idly, Elsie tapped at the walls. She had no knowledge as to what sort of a sound revealed a secret passage and what sort meant a solid wall. But other and wiser people had thoroughly tested that point, and one and all declared there wasn't a chance of a secret or concealed exit from the room.

And yet, Kimball had gone out of it, and had fastened the door behind him. Whether alone or accompanied, whether of his own volition or not, he had left the room that night, and had never been seen or heard of since.

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The very impossibility of the case made it weird. But no belief in supernatural forces took root in Elsie's brain.

"A clue," she said to herself, over and over again. "I must find a clue! In books they search the floor,—I'll search the floor."

She did, going over it on her hands and knees. But the careful sweeping it had received had obliterated any footprints,—so beloved of writers of detective fiction! and had also removed any of the conventional shreds of cloth, ravellings or any such oft found bits of evidence.

However, the maid who did the sweeping was not entirely unique among her sort, for she had slighted her work when sweeping under the bed. There Elsie found some rolls of dust that would have roused Mrs. Webb's ire had she known of their existence.

Elsie smiled at the thought that not even New England aristocrats can always command service beyond reproach, and after scanning the rug, as far as she could see, she rose from her knees.

One scrap caught her attention, and from beneath the bed she picked up a tiny twisted thing.

She carefully unfolded it, but it proved to be only a paper that had once contained a quill toothpick and that bore printed on it the name of a city restaurant.

Mechanically she twirled it in her fingers until the flimsy thing was a mere wad, and then she threw it into the waste-basket.

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She lingered a moment at the chiffonier, sadness stealing over her heart as she looked at the prosaic, commonplace array of brushes and trays, and she felt a fresh pang as she noted the absence of Kimball's best things, which, like her own ivory set, were packed for the wedding trip!

"And we'll go on that wedding trip yet!" Elsie vowed in her heart. "I'm determined to find that man! He never left me voluntarily,—either Henrietta or Wallace Courtney hid him somewhere,—somehow! But I'll find out where, and I'll get him back. He's *mine*,—my love, my own, and nobody shall take him from me!"

She went down stairs, slowly, thinking deeply as she went.

"I've decided," she announced, as she rejoined the Webb ladies, "I'm going to get a detective,—the best one I can hear of, anywhere."

"They're very expensive," Henrietta reminded her.

"I suppose that means you won't shoulder any of the expense.

Well, I'll do it, then. My income will remain unchanged until my birthday, anyway, and I'll use it all, if necessary, to get him back,—but I'll get him back!”

CHAPTER IX

GERTY'S PLEA

But Elsie's determination to get a special detective was not easily carried out. She visited several who were recommended to her by agencies, but none seemed sufficiently sure of success to make her willing to pay the large fees they demanded, irrespective of the outcome of their efforts.

In fact none seemed anxious to take up the case. They deemed it too difficult to locate the missing man, for they held the opinion, that he had been hidden with his own consent or at his own request.

One detective told Elsie plainly, that he had learned that Mr. Webb was entirely amenable to the advices of his mother and sister, and that as they so thoroughly disapproved of the marriage he contemplated, he had at last agreed to their views and had vanished the day of the projected wedding. He politely expressed his personal surprise at this state of things, and with an admiring glance at his would-be client, implied that, for his part, he didn't see how Mr. Webb could have chosen more happily.

Disgusted at his impertinence, Elsie left him, and after a few more trials to find a detective who would take a real interest, aside from his financial reward, she gave up in

despair.

“I thought it would be an easy matter to get a detective like they have in the stories,” she said to Gerty; “but they’re most of them stupid and indifferent.”

“Give up the idea that you’ll ever see Kimball again,” Gerty urged, “that is, before your birthday. There’s not the slightest doubt that Henrietta is at the bottom of the whole affair. Nobody else could be. Nobody from outside could get into the house and get Kim away. Henrietta could, of course, and then all the mysteries are explainable.”

“Explainable, how?”

“Why, after he left the house,—to go wherever they planned for him to go,—Henrietta could lock the street door for him.”

“And his room door,—locked from the inside?”

“Oh, that yarn isn’t true. Henrietta made it all up. She bribed the servants to keep it quiet, and she made up the whole story. It couldn’t be, you know, that he really got out of those locked doors. Unless you’re going over to Mrs. Webb’s Spirit theory!”

“Good gracious, no! But, she says she’s going to see a clairvoyant about Kimball, and she’ll find out the truth that way.”

“Poppycrack! Of course she could learn nothing, but if she could, she would have done so long ago. It’s nearly three weeks now since that he’s been gone, and nobody has

done one thing toward finding him. That proves the Webbs did it. If he had been kidnapped or killed, the police would have found it out. But the Webbs can keep him hidden indefinitely; and they're going to do it, until after your birthday."

"If they'll give him back to me then,—I'll be glad!"

"Elsie, don't talk like that. And, dear, I wish you would look at the matter sensibly. You can't mean to give up five million dollars—for a mere bit of sentiment—"

"Don't call my love for Kimball a mere bit of sentiment! You don't know what love means—"

"Don't say that! I guess if your husband had been killed in the war, you'd—"

"Killed in the war! That's a glorious fate! Philip died honourably, fighting for his country, and you can be proud of him! While I am not only deprived of my love, my mate, but I've no notion where he is, or what suffering he's undergoing! Oh, Gerty, your sorrow is a great one, I know, but it's nothing to mine!"

"You talk like a silly girl! You can't feel the same about a lover as I do about a husband and the father of my children! And you can marry some one else,—you can look on Kimball merely as a dear memory—"

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"You can marry some one else, too!"

"No; my heart is buried in my husband's grave. Elsie, dear

sister, try to look at these things from a rational point of view. Try to realize that sad as your lot seems at present, there's happiness ahead, if you choose to accept it. No young girl can so love a man to whom she's not married as to be inconsolable at his loss."

"I can," Elsie persisted, "and I do. And you can talk as long as you like, you'll never persuade me that I could know a happy moment if I married any one else!"

"Then, dear, don't you think you ought to sacrifice yourself for mother's sake? She is so ill,—"

"One word for mother and two for yourself! You don't fool me, Gerty, not for a minute! You want me to marry because if I don't we'll lose Aunt Elizabeth's money! Why not speak out and say so!"

"Very well, I do, then! And it's quite as much for your sake as for mine! You don't know what it will mean to leave this place to live in some little cramped flat, and to work for your living,—unless, indeed, you think of depending on Joe Allison for charity?"

"I don't,—you know I don't! But I'd work myself into my grave before I'd marry a man I didn't love! I can't even think about it—it makes me so indignant that you can suggest it!"

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"That's the natural feeling, dear, but your case is so different from most girls'. Try to see it clearly. The income of five millions and all the comfort that means, against the sufferings and discomforts that poverty brings. And think not only of

yourself, but of mother—”

“Yes! and Gerty; Gerty first, last and all the time!”

“Then, all I have to say is,—you’re a very selfish girl.”

The discussions always wound up like this. Gerty took occasion nearly every day to repeat her accusations of selfishness, to impress on Elsie her duty to her invalid mother; to refer to her own two little children and her own inability to do any work, having the care of them; and eternally did she harp on the fact that since Elsie had not been married to Webb, her grief was merely a temporary regret for a man to whom she had been engaged, which, Gerty held, was an episode that might occur in any girl’s life.

None of the arguments had any weight with Elsie, except the charge of selfishness. She was not selfish: she had always given lavishly of her wealth to her family and to her friends and to various charities. There was not a selfish impulse in Elsie Powell’s soul. And here was a very strong sense of duty and of obligation to her own people.

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She did not go so far as to think of marrying any one but Kimball,—that determination was, as yet, unshakable,—but she tried with all her might to think of some other way out.

Yet there was none. She had been to see one of the trustees, who had her aunt’s estate in charge, and he had declared there was no possible loophole. If Elsie was not married when she became twenty-four years old, the entire property would revert to Joe Allison.

“A pretty hard place that young man’s in!” said Mr. Thorne, the trustee; “he naturally has no ill feelings toward you, but if he’s human he can’t help wishing he might inherit all the money. So, he’s doubtless breathlessly awaiting developments, and every day that passes without any word from Kimball Webb brings Allison one day nearer to his inheritance. I suppose you’ve told him of your decision not to marry any one else?”

“Oh, yes,” said Elsie, “I’ve told everybody of that. I thought if the Webbs were made to believe that, they might give up and let Kimball come back.”

“Why do you think they know where he is?”

“Who else could know? And if they find out that I shall marry him when he does return, they may think that he might better marry a rich girl than a poor one.”

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“They have no desire for money,” Mr. Thorne remarked. “I live next door to the Webbs, I’ve known them for years, and they’re among the few people I know who really and honestly scorn money. They think great wealth is vulgar, and though they require and have enough to live very comfortably, they’ve absolutely no desire for more.”

“I know that,” Elsie sighed. “And I’m not so awfully keen for money myself,—not at all, compared to love and happiness! But I’ve people dependent on me. That is, my mother and my sister and her children have no home except what I give them from my inheritance. And if I give that up, what can we all do?”

“That’s a grave question, my dear, and if you’ll listen to my advice, I suggest that you marry before your birthday. You’ll be glad in after years that you did so, even though you dread the idea just now.”

“Everybody says the same thing,” Elsie rose to go; “but I’m not obliged to take the advice. I think I can trust Mr. Allison to provide for my mother, and Gerty can marry again. There’s no reason *she* shouldn’t marry for money, if it’s the thing for me to do!”

“That’s quite different, my dear. Mrs. Seaman is a widow, and her husband’s memory is too dear to her—”

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“Oh, hush! I get so tired of that argument! Let me tell you, Kimball Webb’s memory is as dear to me as if he had been my husband for a thousand years! And I shall never marry any one else,—never!”

Fenn Whiting continued to interest himself in the search for the missing Webb. He followed up the proceedings of the detective, Hanley, and brought reports, unsatisfactory as they were, to the Powell family.

“I feel embarrassed about it all,” Whiting said to Gerty, in Elsie’s absence, “for, truly, I love Elsie enough to want her to get Webb back and marry him. But if he never turns up,—and I don’t believe he ever will,—I don’t mind telling you that I haven’t given up hope of yet winning Elsie for myself. But not before her birthday. I’m not a fortune-hunter, and rather than be thought so, I’d really rather take her without the money, than with it.”

“But it would mean so much to her,” demurred Gerty.

“Yes, and to all of you. I’ve a good income, and it would be entirely at Elsie’s disposal, and I know her well enough to know how she would feel toward her family. But, my income isn’t a princely one, and so, the matter of the inheritance would be up to Elsie herself. I’d be thankful if she’d marry me, say in a year, or after she gives up her last hope of ever seeing Kimball again. Do you think she’d do that, Gerty? do you?”

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Whiting was very much in earnest, and indeed, it was easy to believe in his great love for Elsie. He said little to her about it, but when in her presence he watched her with an expression of devotion that seemed all the greater for being untold.

He was at the house one afternoon, when Elsie came in, bringing Joe Allison with her.

Gerty opened the subject of the inheritance, making no secret of her opinion that Elsie ought to marry before her birthday.

“It’s hard on you, Joe,” she said, for they had all learned to like young Allison. “But the fortune is rightfully Elsie’s,—Aunt Powell merely put in that alternative clause to make sure Elsie married. And but for Kimball’s strange absence all would have gone well, you wouldn’t even have thought about being a millionaire.”

“That’s so,” and Joe smiled, grimly. “But, I say, the thought that I may be one, has taken hold of me. I’m only human, after all, and I’d like a fortune as well as the next one! Oh, I suppose it would be more noble to say I don’t want

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it,—and all that,—but I *do*. That is, if it comes to me squarely. I want Elsie to get her man back, and be happy. Or, I want her to marry some other man—if she wants to. But, if Elsie, of her own free will, gives up that bunch of ducats, I’m mighty glad that it will then come my way! There, honesty is the worst policy, I daresay, but it’s mine.”

“Good for you, Joe,” Elsie smiled at him. “I like your frank statement, and it is, as you say, only human nature to feel that way.”

“But, Joe,” Gerty began, “how about some kind of a compromise? Why can’t you and Elsie make a compact, that if Elsie gets the money she’ll give you a good slice, and if you get it, you’ll give her—”

“Nothing doing!” Allison cried; “that isn’t cricket, and, besides, I know Elsie well enough to know that she doesn’t want charity.”

“Not for herself, maybe—” but Elsie interrupted her sister:

“No, nor for any one else. You’ve proposed all sorts of plans, Gert, but this last is about the worst of all! I may ask you, Joe, to look after mother a bit, but not unless you’re glad to do it!”

“Oh, pshaw, Elsie, you know I’ll do the right thing by her. But, here’s the truth: I don’t suppose it’s the time to say it,—but I do want you all to know it,—and Mr. Whiting, too.”

Joe looked at Whiting with a glance of hesitation and then proceeded.

“It’s this way: if Elsie doesn’t marry by her birthday,—the thirtieth of next month, the money comes to me. Well, suppose Elsie marries me, the day after her birthday!”

Elsie gasped; Fenn Whiting laughed outright, and Gerty exclaimed quickly, “Why not the day before?”

“No, sir!” retorted Joe. “I love Elsie. I want her for my wife, and I’ll be glad to share the fortune with her, if she marries me. But my independence, my manhood, my whole better judgment calls out for the ownership of the fortune myself. I’ll gladly settle a big sum on her, she shall have all the allowance she wants, she shall do as she pleases, unquestioned and unconditionally, but I think I don’t care to be dependent on a rich wife! Any man worth his salt, *would* feel that way about it.”

“Joe, you are too funny for anything!” and Elsie laughed in spite of her shocked amazement.

“I am, am I? Well, I don’t care what you think I am, Elsie, if you’ll marry me. This is a queer way to propose, I know, but it’s a queer situation.”

“It’s all that!” agreed Whiting. “And, as I’ve proposed to Elsie many times in the past, and in more appropriate circumstances, I’ll also take this occasion to renew my plea that she’ll marry me,—the day after her birthday.”

“Why, then she’d lose the money!” cried Gerty.

“Yes, but I can’t ask her to marry me in time to save the money! That would stamp me a fortune-seeker. I love Elsie

for herself alone, and she knows it. This proposal, here and now, is so that you others will understand the situation.”

“Well, I’m the most proposed to girl in the city, I do believe,” and Elsie smiled at both her suitors as at two blundering children. “But you see, gentlemen, I’ve no intention of marrying anybody. As Joe has tacitly agreed to look after mother, and as I can look after myself, I propose to live in single blessedness till Kimball comes home, if it’s my whole lifetime. I’m sorry, Gerty, that I can’t sacrifice myself for you and the babies—but—oh, Gerty, dearest, don’t!”

For Gerty had dropped her face in her hands and was crying silently.

“You must forgive me,” she sobbed; “I’m not mercenary, but when I think of those two dear little innocent children, with no home, no means,—oh, Elsie, how *can* you?”

“I can’t!” declared Elsie, her arms round her sister. “But, what can I do? I wish I knew,—Oh, I am the most miserable girl in the world!”

She ran from the room, and after a few minutes Joe Allison went away.

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“I thought he’d prove more generous,” Whiting said to Gerty.

“I understand him,” Gerty replied. “He thinks if he offers to settle a large sum on us, Elsie won’t marry him. And if he holds off, she may.”

“Yes, I see that, but I say, Gerty, I don’t want him to marry

Elsie!”

“Well, I do! It would fix everything all right, and everybody’d be happy.”

“Except Elsie! She couldn’t stand a life with that kid!”

“Oh, he’s as old as she is. He’s not quite our sort, but he’s a nice chap, and Elsie could twist him round her finger.”

“But I want Elsie myself. She’d be happy with me—I could make her forget Kim. Allison never could do that.”

“Well, marry her before the birthday, and it will be all right.”

“If I can get her to consent, I will. But before or after her birthday, I want her just the same. I’ll tell you what, Gerty, *you* marry young Allison, and let him have the money, and after that,—I mean after the birthday is past, I’ll hope to get Elsie to take me.”

“You don’t think Kimball will ever come back, then?”

“Not till after Elsie is married. There’s no solution, Gerty, but that the Webbs know where he is. Doubtless, tucked away in some comfortable place, working on his play. They’re so sure Elsie will marry, to get the money, they expect he’ll be ready to return right after her birthday.”

“You think he went willingly?”

“I think he let Henrietta and his mother persuade him. He’s under Henrietta’s thumb, you know, and always has been.”

“That’s not fair, Fenn. Kimball’s a strong character.”

“So’s Henrietta. She’s the only one in the world who can rule him.”

It was the day after this confab, that a stranger called on Elsie.

She willingly saw him, for she had always a lurking hope that news of Kimball might come from some unexpected quarter.

So she entered the little reception room, where strangers were entertained, and saw what seemed at first to be a shy, shock-headed youth.

But a second glance revealed that the apparent shyness was merely the quiet air of a thoughtful man, and the shock-headedness resolved itself into a peculiar way of wearing his hair.

The unusually thick crop of light brown was cut short behind and at the sides, but over the man’s brow the long locks stood out straight and then fell over, not like a thatch, but like a long marquise over a doorway! Elsie was fascinated by the effect. The thick tresses waved and bobbed as the owner of them smiled at her.

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“May I have a talk with you?” he said, impulsively.

“Certainly,” she said, smiling in spite of her amazement.

“May I ask your business?”

“Yes, indeed; that’s what I came to tell you. I’m a Stirrer Up of Sleeping Dogs.”

“I—I beg your pardon?”

“Unusual profession, yes. But I’m a whale at it! Now, it’s this way, Miss Powell. I read the papers, and I see a lot of funny things; I don’t mean humorous, but queer,—inexplicable,—questionable. And, often they’re things that ought to be investigated,—and aren’t. Aren’t,—because somebody doesn’t want them to be,—although they should be! Well, I don’t believe in letting sleeping dogs lie. So, I go around and stir them up. See? Simple enough!”

“A detective?”

“I don’t call myself that,—for I’m not at the beck and call of the populace. I don’t accept invitations to stir up the dogs, but when I feel enough interest, I go and ask permission to do so.”

“Oh, I’m glad you came!” cried Elsie, fervently. “I believe you’re the right man at last.”

“I’m the right man, all right. And, if I may, I’ll begin to stir at once.”

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“Oh, do! But, wait a minute,—Mr.—Mr.?”

“Coe, Miss Powell. Coleman Coe,—called Coley Coe, of course.”

“I was going to say, Mr. Coe, are your services very expensive?”

“Depends on time, place, degree and manner of the work, and more than that, on the results. No results, no pay. Results,—

pay accordingly.”

“Begin to stir, then,” said Elsie, with a straight glance into the honest eyes that had already gained her trust. “You know the case.”

“I know all that has been in the papers; all I could glean from gunning around among people; and I’ve a few stirring ideas of my own. Let’s work together, shall us?” And the brown marquise shook eagerly.

“To a finish!” exclaimed Elsie.

CHAPTER X

COLEY COE

Nearly every evening Coley Coe came to report to Elsie.

The first time that he met the other members of the Powell family he quite took them by storm. His big, blue eyes had a frank, even impudent stare, but his smile was so winning and his laugh so spontaneous that it was impossible to be otherwise than friendly toward him.

“Awful glad to meet you, Mrs. Powell,” he said, shaking hands cordially, “and I want to congratulate you on your daughter. Miss Powell’s a wonder! How? Oh, in every way, but especially in having a sense of humour. So few girls do, nowadays!”

Coley spoke as a man of wide experience, though as a matter of fact, he was only about Elsie’s age himself. “And you have, too,” he went on, seeing the twinkle in Mrs. Powell’s eyes. “I suppose it runs in the family.”

“You’re likely to find out,” said Elsie, as Gerty came into the room and Coleman was presented to her.

Another of the young man’s comprehensive glances seemed to gather Gerty into his acquaintance, and after

pleasant greetings he said, "Now, we're all acquainted, and ready to begin work."

He trotted around the room, selected the chair he preferred, and pulling out the smallest from a nest of little tables, placed it in front of him, and produced a notebook and pencil.

"I don't want to know the facts or details of the case, for I know all those," he said, "I want to find some sleeping dogs to stir up. By which, I mean," his wavy mop of hair shook over his forehead as he explained, "I want to get sidelights, I want to find out things that you people know of, that others don't,—I want your opinions, your suspicions, your ideas,—no matter how absurd they may seem."

Coe's eyes were of that intense, yet light, China blue, that is said by physiognomists to denote the vagabond character. And vagabond partly describes the boy's nature. Not that he was one, but his temperament was roving, erratic, receptive and of wide interests. He saw everything that came within the vision of those alert blue eyes, and most things he saw he understood at once; if not, he kept at them until he did.

"Suspects, for instance," he went on. "Whom do you suspect?" and he turned suddenly to Mrs. Powell.

"Gracious! I don't know,—” the good lady replied, flustered at his attack.

"But there must be somebody,—that seems to you a possible factor in the removal of Mr. Webb. Somebody, of whom you would say, if that person proved to be the criminal, 'I thought so!' Isn't there, now?"

“No,” said Mrs. Powell, but she spoke hesitantly.

“There! you’ve proved there is, by your tone. Come, now, who is it?”

“The Webbs,” said Mrs. Powell, speaking sharply. “I don’t say I’m right, but I can’t get it out of my head, that they know where Kimball is.”

“That’s the ticket!” Coley smiled at her.

“I’ve got to get a line on this thing. Now, Mrs. Seaman, your suspect is—”

“Wallace Courtney,” Gerty declared. “I’d suspect the Webbs, but I can’t think they’d want all the opprobrium of the cancelled wedding party and all the unpleasant notoriety that it caused—”

“A lot they cared for that!” exclaimed Elsie.

“Go on, Mrs. Seaman,” urged Coe. “You think that Mr. Courtney—”

“I think he somehow arranged to have Kimball Webb kidnapped,” Gerty said, positively; “I don’t know how he accomplished it, but you see, he just learned that very evening, that Mr. Webb’s play was so nearly like his own and much farther along. He realized that Kimball’s play would be done and produced before his own could be finished, and he was desperate. He knew he couldn’t do anything after the wedding, so he made a grand dash and put Kimball out of the way at once.”

“How?” cried Elsie, looking scornful.

“Never mind that side of it for the moment, Miss Powell,” Coley Coe shook his forelock at her and smiled. “I’m going to find out the manner of the exit, but first I want to find the guilty man.”

“The guilty man is a woman,” Mrs. Powell persisted, “two women, in fact.”

A blue-eyed smile from Coe quieted her, and Gerty went on, “I know Wallace Courtney pretty well, and he’s a man who, with all his quiet ways is a firebrand at heart. If he wants a thing, everything else must give way. He is unconventional and lawless. He cares nothing for appearances,—why, look at him! He’s practically living with Lulie Lloyd,—”

“Oh, that’s all right,” Elsie broke in, “he merely took rooms in that same house, to be quiet for his work and to have the services of Lulie. I went there, you know. Mrs. Lloyd lives with Lulie,—and, too, there’s nothing that interests Wallace Courtney but his play. He is bound up in it, and, as Gerty says, he would sacrifice everything,—his reputation, or Lulie’s either,—if it would help him along with his work.”

“That’s right,” Coley agreed; “I’ve looked up the Courtney side of the case, and it’s all as Miss Powell says. I don’t trust the fair Lulie, though,—do you?” and he looked at Elsie.

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“No, I don’t. She adores Wallace, and I know she’ll tell him a whole lot of points from Kim’s play, which Mr. Courtney will use in his own. But I don’t care, if we can only get Kim back,

—his play can go into the discard.”

“That’s the talk! Now, Miss Powell, who’s your suspect?”

“I’m of a divided opinion, between the Webbs and Mr. Courtney. And sometimes,—I don’t think it could have been either of them.”

“Spooks, then?”

“Oh, gracious, no! Cut out all thought of that idea!”

“But what about the queer things that have happened in the room Mr. Webb used? I’m told there have been unexplained sounds and missing jewels and pulled-off bedclothes—”

“All garbled reports of servants or the Webb ladies themselves, who are foolishly inclined to the supernatural.”

“Miss Webb, as well as her mother?”

“Partially. Henrietta doesn’t admit it, but she believes in visitations,—or premonitions, anyway.”

“Well, so much for suspects. Now, for motives: The Webbs’ motive being, of course, to prevent their beloved son and brother from making a match of which they don’t wholly approve.”

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“Right,” said Elsie, her lip curling.

“Mr. Courtney’s motive being the sequestration of Kimball Webb, his rival playwright, until his own play is completed.”

“Motive enough in his estimation,” commented Elsie.

“Yes; motive enough for his desire to put the man away, but not enough to explain his accomplishment of what must have been for him a difficult feat. The abduction of Mr. Webb would have been easy enough for his own people but for no one else. That so?”

“Yes,” Elsie added. “But if his own people did it, where are they keeping him all this time?”

“The same question is pertinent, whoever is responsible for the disappearance. I’m leaving out the reckoning that Mr. Webb went away willingly. I don’t believe that for a minute. I’m working entirely on the assumption that he was kidnapped, abducted, carried off by force and for a wrong purpose. That means there’s a criminal to be found, and I’m going to find him. The witnesses against him are sleeping dogs, so far, but I’m going to stir them up! You’ll see!”

“But there couldn’t have been any witnesses,” exclaimed Elsie.

“Why not? Granting that somebody took Mr. Webb away from his home,—and, unless he’s still in that house, somebody did, why couldn’t some other body have seen him taken?”

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“I suppose somebody could,” Elsie admitted, “but in that case, why haven’t they come forward and told of it?”

“There are lots of good and expensive reasons why they don’t.”

“But you know there’s a reward of fifty thousand dollars—”

“Which, to my mind, goes to prove that whoever took him had a bigger deal on than that. Now, let’s consider a motive. This isn’t a murder case,—so far as we know—oh, don’t do that!” for Elsie broke down at his implied suggestion and shook with sobs.

“Look here, Miss Powell, we’re going to stir up things and we must be prepared for whatever we find. I’ve not the slightest reason to think of foul play in the case, but we must hunt the criminal just as carefully as if we were looking for a murderer. Now, brace up and don’t be scared by a sleeping dog that isn’t there!”

“Go on about a motive,” said Gerty, who was listening intently.

“Well, we’ve got to admit that Kimball Webb has been 155 stolen. We’ll use that term as being more graphic than kidnapped or abducted. The former always connotes an infant, and the latter seems to me to imply a girl. Let’s say Mr. Webb has been stolen, and we’re out to get back the stolen goods. Now, what’s the reason he was stolen? It’s got to be an awful big reason, for the robber took awful big risks. And it’s a daring,—a stupendously daring stunt that he pulled off! He’s been planning it for a long time,—I say, he,—but if it turns out to be the Webb ladies, we’ll change our pronoun. Now, there’s no reason big enough but money. I’m prepared to stand by that statement. Love is a strong motive for lots of crimes,—but you don’t suspect any of your disappointed suitors, do you, Miss Powell?”

“No,” and Elsie smiled at his expression. “There are lots of them heartbroken, of course, but none that I can think would have inclination or ability to cut up such a trick.”

“Well, then, grant the reason is acquisition of money, somehow. Perhaps the reward is not big enough,—”

“Fifty thousand dollars!”

“Maybe the criminal is out for bigger loot. Who would benefit financially by the disappearance of Kimball Webb?”

“Nobody; he is not a rich man by any means,” Elsie informed him.

The mass of brown hair wagged wildly, as Coley Cole shook his head.

“Not from his estate,—the man isn’t dead. But supposing you, Miss Powell, stuck to your resolution not to marry any one else, thereby losing your aunt’s money, who would benefit?”

“Joe Allison!”

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“Exactly. No, we’ve no definite reason to suspect Mr. Allison, we’ve no scrap of evidence against him, no clue to his guilt. But I shall stir up some sleeping dogs and see how they bark at him.”

“Joe!” Gerty exclaimed; “ridiculous!”

“So, Mrs. Seaman? And who *wouldn’t* be ridiculous?”

“The Webbs wouldn’t. It would be natural, quite in keeping with their way of doing things, and it wouldn’t be ridiculous to suspect them.”

“Now, I think it would,” Coley put his head on one side, and his blue eyes smiled at her. “I do think it would be ridiculous to imagine two staid, respectable ladies putting a man out of the way, against his will. And, if with his consent, why the mystery at all? Why not let the man go off of his own accord,—or, even tell Miss Powell of his wish to break off the affair, and ask her to release him.”

“He didn’t want to be released!” Elsie cried, indignantly, “and you know it, Gert!”

“Of course I know it! No, Mr. Coe, Elsie’s bridegroom never deserted her! I know him well, and I know his devotion to my sister was loyal and faithful.”

“Yes, I know all that, too,” Coley tossed back his hair. “If the Webbs are responsible for his disappearance, it was done without his knowledge or consent.”

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“How do you mean?” Elsie exclaimed.

“I mean he was carried off while unconscious.”

“Impossible!”

“Any other theory is impossible. Mr. Webb is no weakling,—although hampered by his wounded knee. He would put up a stiff fight if he knew he was being stolen!”

“How do you know that?”

“Oh, I told you I had all the facts of the case. I’m getting fancies now,—and I’ll admit yours are illuminating.”

“Go on,” Elsie said, “ask for more,—we’ll give ’em.”

“Nope. Got enough now. Next I want to see friend Allison.”

“Don’t let him know you suspect him,” Gerty begged. “He can’t be the one.”

“Leave me to judge of that. How can I see him?”

“He’ll probably be here soon,” Elsie said, “but as Gerty says, don’t suspect *him*,—it’s foolish.”

Coley glared at her, his blue eyes glinting with mock severity. “Don’t tell me whom to suspect, Miss Powell! I shall suspect everybody. Not omitting yourself, your mother, your sister,—or her babies! Now, will you be good?”

“Oh, if it’s merely a matter of universal suspicion, all right.”

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“That’s my custom. Suspect everybody, and then eliminate the useless suspects as fast as you can.”

“Eliminate my two kiddies as soon as possible, won’t you?” laughed Gerty, and Coe promised.

Before Allison came, Fenn Whiting turned up.

He looked at Coley Coe with interest, as they were introduced, and Coe's business there explained.

"Good work!" Whiting said, heartily. "Count on me to help."

"First you must be suspected, Fenn," Elsie said, and Whiting looked inquiringly at Coe.

"You're after me?" he asked, genially.

"After everybody," Coe returned. "I've just crossed off the two Seaman children as suspects, because of the pleadings of their mother, but no one else may be stricken from my list until he is proved to be beyond suspicion."

"Good! Go ahead. Where do I get off? Want my alibi or what? I'm not impatient, but I'd like to be passed, so I can begin to help you."

"Good for you, I want help. Start in, will you, by telling me whom you suspect,—if any?"

"Suspect is too strong a word,—but my theory is that Kimball Webb abducted himself, with the connivance and help of his butler and chauffeur."

"And the knowledge and consent of his mother and sister?"

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"That I'm not so sure of. But looked at from the viewpoint of plain common sense, there seems to me no other way for that man to have gotten out of that room and out of that house, but to have walked out voluntarily."

“And the locked doors?”

“A fabrication of the said servants. You may theorize and talk fairy tales all you like, but there’s no other rational explanation.”

“And the motive?”

“I can’t say. Quite aside from the rudeness and impoliteness of hinting any lack of his desire to marry Miss Powell, I can’t believe such a thing could be true. I’m positive that man, when at his own bachelor dinner, at which I was present, expected and intended to become a bridegroom the following day. Now, I believe something transpired, after his return home, that made it impossible or undesirable that he should be married. I can’t say what,—for I’ve no idea,—but something pretty big and unavoidable.”

“You mean something disgraceful?” the blue eyes of his questioner looked into his own.

The steel grey eyes of Fenn Whiting met the others squarely.

“I don’t want to say that,” he spoke slowly, “but it may have been. Better men than Kimball Webb have been brought to bay by force of circumstances; wiser men than he have been the victims of blackmailing schemes; stronger men than he have met disaster through no fault of their own. I make no suggestions,—I have none to make,—but I maintain the only logical theory of Webb’s disappearance is that he went voluntarily, if not willingly.”

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“I think you’re horrid!” Elsie cried, her eyes flashing. “Kim

never did anything wrong or underhanded! He couldn't have been blackmailed! He couldn't have been involved in any thing disgraceful! How idiotic!"

"If the idea is idiotic, Miss Powell, it will meet the fate it deserves. But we must stir up those sleeping dogs of blackmailers, if they exist. It is a plausible theory, if not the only possible one, and I shall remember it."

Whiting gave the young detective a look of appreciative interest and the glance was returned, for the two men seemed to understand each other.

"I admit it's only a theory," Whiting said, his prominent, muscular jaw set with a grim decision, "but you'll be hard put to it, to trump up a better one."

"That may well be," Coe agreed, "but I'd be sorry to depend on one theory alone. I like to have lots of them, then, if I pick up a clue here or there, I can fit it in where it belongs."

Like a Skye Terrier, he blinked through the absurd mop of hair that covered his forehead, and Whiting, his own brow bared, showing lines that sloped up to a point, gazed at Coe with a fascinated curiosity.

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He wondered why the man chose that peculiar haircut, but it was not his business and he asked no questions.

"All right," he said; "any of your theories ripe for discussion?"

"Yes; one of them. I think a very strong motive could be

ascribed to the young man from the West,—the alternative heir, you know.”

“Allison?” said Whiting. “Oh, come, now, you’ve nothing against him.”

“Only his certainty of inheriting the millions, in case Miss Powell doesn’t marry by the stated date. Fine scheme, to steal the bridegroom,—thus lessening by a large percentage the chances of her immediate wedding.”

“Yes, the motive is all right,” Whiting agreed, “but you don’t know Joe! Why, he’s the whitest young chap—”

“On the surface; why not? But, do you suppose a criminal goes about labelled? Count every man guilty until he’s proved innocent, is a better plan to work on than the reverse principle. If Joe Allison is innocent it will be far easier for him to prove it, than for me to prove it if he’s guilty.”

Whiting pondered over this, then he said,

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“Well, I admit, you’re the most novel detective I’ve ever run up against! Have you usually succeeded in your quests?”

“That’s a leading question.” Coley Coe looked a little surprised at it, as if he thought it a breach of etiquette.

Whiting flushed and his thin lips shut together sharply, as they did when he was a bit embarrassed.

“I beg your pardon,” he said, simply. “That did sound rude, but honestly, I didn’t mean it so. It was the unconsidered

expression of my interest in your methods,—which, if I may say it, are refreshingly unusual.”

Coe accepted the honourable apology, and met Whiting halfway.

“My methods are unusual, and I’m properly ashamed of them.” His eyes smiled. “But they do work,—and I have had successes,—oh, lots of ’em!” he wound up, boyishly.

Then Allison came.

The others looked on curiously as Coley Cole made his first survey of the young Westerner.

Unsuspectingly, Joe stood the ordeal well. He looked his usual frank, good-natured self, and he greeted the detective with unconcealed interest.

“Miss Powell told me about you,” he said, “and I’m downright glad you’ve begun to look into this thing. It seemed to me nothing was being done. Not that it’s my business,—but I’m more or less mixed up in it, and I want to see the mystery cleared up.”

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“When did you arrive in New York?” Coe asked him, with a straightforward glance.

“About a week after the disappearance of Mr. Webb. Why?”

“Merely getting information. You’ve no objection to giving it?”

“Not a bit. But if you’re suspecting me, say so, right out. I’d like it better.”

“I daresay you would, but we detectives don’t always ask suspects their preferences.”

Joe’s blank look of surprise at this speech was funny to see. He glared at Coe, and then under the influence of the shining eyes and the ridiculous hair, Allison laughed and said, “You’ll do! And so you don’t suspect me, after all? Why don’t you?”

“That’s part of the tricks of my trade,” Coe returned. “I never let my suspects think I suspect them. It would spoil my investigation work if I did.”

“By George!” ejaculated Allison; “you’ll get me scared if you talk like that. I suppose you think I had a motive for putting Mr. Webb out of the way—”

“Oh, Joe,” cried Gerty, “don’t take Mr. Coe so seriously; of course he doesn’t suspect you.”

“Of course I do,” said Coley, calmly. “I suspect everybody. I’ve told you that before. At this moment I suspect every person who I’ve heard has any connection with the matter at all,—*any* connection, mind you,—and I shall finally fasten the guilt on one of my suspects.”

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“Do you know already which one?” Elsie cried, quickly.

“I do not; but I’ll say that I suspect some more than others,—though I may be mistaken. I’m not infallible.”

CHAPTER XI

SLEEPING DOGS

No one deemed Kimball Webb dead, yet the grave itself could not have been more silent than the circumstances of his absence.

The public generally were divided into two classes, those who thought he had decamped to avoid his wedding and those who thought he had been abducted for some undiscovered reason.

The Webb family were extremely reticent, and neither Mrs. Webb nor Henrietta expressed definite beliefs or fears. Even to their nearest and dearest friends they showed an attitude of patient waiting and cheery hopefulness of Kimball's return. This caused, in many minds, suspicion that they knew where Kimball was, and had no fears for his safety.

The Powell family,—that is, Mrs. Powell and Gerty, were growing daily more alarmed and anxious about the future. If Kimball did not reappear before the thirtieth of June, and if Elsie persisted in her refusal to marry any one else, their present income would cease entirely, they would have to move out of their luxurious home, and the outlook was most dismal.

There were many men ready and willing to marry Elsie

Powell, and not alone for the fortune she would inherit. Elsie had had “shoals of suitors” ever since her school days, and though when she met Kimball Webb, she discarded all serious thought of the others, they did not so easily give her up.

Fenn Whiting was the most zealous and insistent of the lot. He had worshipped Elsie for years. He had been forced to step aside in Webb’s favour, but now, with Webb out of the running, he renewed his suit with all the ardour of his intense nature.

He put the matter before Elsie in every possible light. He offered to marry her after her birthday had passed and she was a poor girl, or before her birthday, when the marriage would assure her the fortune. The decision was left to her. Or, he suggested, he would consider her engaged to him, she could set the wedding day whenever she chose, and, then, if Webb turned up before the hour, he would abdicate in his favour.

No one could make more generous or more magnanimous proposals, and Elsie was touched by his patience and devotion.

Yet she could not bring herself to agree to his plans. There was nearly a month, still, before her birthday, and much might happen in a month.

Then, too, Joe Allison was to be considered. He, also, wanted to marry Elsie, but he adhered to his plan of waiting until after her birthday when the control of the fortune would be his.

This, he declared, in no way reflected on his love or consideration for her, but it seemed to him, more fitting in every way, that the husband should own the fortune,—especially as he was willing to give his wife *carte blanche* and also to provide liberally for her family.

Elsie rather admired the staunchness of his purpose in this respect, for she had come to know Allison well enough to appreciate his strong will and his hard common sense.

Meantime, Coleman Coe was busily stirring up his sleeping dogs.

He seemed to possess an uncanny intuition as to where sleeping dogs were lying, and he went straight, though secretly, after them.

His methods were, perhaps, unusual, for he depended largely on assistants. His belief was, that he could do better work by farming out the drudgery of his pursuit, and doing only the thinking parts himself.

So, he had a fairly good-sized corps of assistants, whom he had trained to do just what he told them and no more.

By far the greater part of them were shadowers.

Not professional trailers, from a detective Bureau, but men, boys,—and also girls, whom he had picked here and there with a view to their special adaptation for the work.

Coe's great first principle was to learn what a suspect is doing when he doesn't think he is watched.

Therefore, with careful and comprehensive effort, he was making a list of the people he wanted shadowed.

Coley Coe, was neither visionary nor imaginative. He did depend a great deal on intuition, but only when it was undoubtedly in accordance with facts.

His list completed, he put his machinery in motion, and soon had quiet but efficient trailers following the daily routine of both Henrietta Webb and her mother, also their two men servants, Hollis and Oscar.

Then, a competent shadow never lost sight of Joe Allison. Another was unobtrusively at the heels of Fenn Whiting, and another reported duly every move of Wallace Courtney.

Lulie Lloyd was under secret surveillance, as was Owen Thorne, the trusted trustee.

This work in the hands of efficient workers was neither difficult nor onerous, and it gave Coe a wide outlook of possibilities when the reports came in.

Nor was Coley himself idle. He could cover a great many occasions denied to his underlings. He could see the Webb ladies in their home surroundings; could call on Allison or Whiting when he chose, could demand an interview with Wallace Courtney however much that busy gentleman might object; and could see Lulie Lloyd any time he cared to invite her out for an evening.

In fact, Lulie was quite taken with the gay young Coe, and small wonder, for he deliberately determined that she should

be.

No girl of Lulie Lloyd's stamp could resist the lure of Coley's admiring blue eyes, or the fascination of the tossing hair above his brow.

Even Elsie found him so agreeable that her mother said pettishly, "If that young busy-body never succeeds in finding Kim, you might marry him—"

She stopped, a little frightened at the look Elsie gave her.

"Don't look at me like that," she cried.

"Then never say anything of that sort again," Elsie warned her, in a severe voice. "I've trouble enough, mother, without such thoughtless, heartless speeches from you."

"Oh, pshaw, Elsie," spoke up Gerty, "mother didn't mean anything. If you take it so seriously I shall think you're really interested in Coley Coe."

"I am, to the extent of his work for me,—and no further."

"I've yet to see any extent to his work," sneered Gerty; "it seems to me that he doesn't get anywhere."

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"Give him time," Elsie retorted. "He's only been on the case about a week. But, truly, Gert, I have faith in him. I believe he'll find Kimball yet!"

"Well, I don't. You may rest assured that whoever put Kim out of the way will keep him out till after your birthday. And I

think, Elsie, you ought to decide what you're going to do. It's too awful for you to sit still, and let your birthday go by, without marrying anybody."

"Far more awful to marry somebody you don't care for. Look here, you and mother both married for love; why should *I* sacrifice myself for the greed of my family—"

"Oh, Elsie," cried her mother, "what a way to put it!"

"It's the truth," said Elsie, doggedly, "and you two must admit it. You want me to marry just so you can continue to live here in luxury, and have no care about money matters."

"I'm sure I think more of your welfare than my own," insisted Mrs. Powell. "I want my child to secure the inheritance that was left to her."

"At the cost of all my happiness in life!" stormed Elsie. "At the cost of a broken heart and a loveless marriage,—the saddest fate that can befall a woman!"

"Rubbish!" exclaimed Gerty. "Cut out the histrionics, Elsie. You're too young to think your heart is for ever bound up in Kimball Webb. There are lots of men as good as he,—and if you'd never met him, you would have been entirely satisfied with Fenn Whiting,—who is really the finer man of the two."

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"Gerty, I'm ashamed of you. Suppose somebody had told you another man was better or finer than Philip, would you have calmly agreed?"

“That’s different. And it doesn’t matter. Had I been situated as you are, I would have thought it my duty to marry some good man rather than let my mother and sister know want.”

“Yes, had you been situated as I am, you would have married anybody, for your own sake, rather than lose five million dollars!”

“I should,” Gerty calmly agreed; “and ninety-nine women out of a hundred would do the same.”

“Then I’m the hundredth,” Elsie spoke with a quiet decision, “for I repeat, what you already know, I will never marry any one but Kimball Webb,—money or no money,—family or no family.”

“That I should live to hear a child of mine talk like that!” wailed Mrs. Powell. “Elsie, have you no heart? Have you no compassion for an invalid mother,—a sorrow-stricken sister,—two helpless little children? What sort of a monster are you?”

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“Don’t, mother!” Elsie begged, her lovely face aghast at the accusations hurled at her.

“Mother is right,” said Gerty; “I haven’t the same authority over you, as your mother, but if I had, I should command you to do what is so clearly your duty. I do not speak for myself, but for mother’s sake, and for the sake of my lovely innocent children, I humiliate my pride and beg of you,—beg of you, Elsie, to save us from disgrace and poverty.”

“You do speak for yourself,” Elsie’s clear eyes rested on her

sister, “you do think of yourself first, Gerty, you always do,—though you pretend you don’t. And I don’t see how you can! It is outrageous,—heathenish for you to talk as you do,—both of you! You practically want to sell me,—sell me for your own comfort and ease! And I refuse to be sold!”

“Very well, then,” and Gerty looked despairing, “there’s no more to be said. We may as well begin to get ready to leave this apartment. Where we can go, I’ve no idea. You know what rents are, now; you know how impossible it is to get an apartment of any sort,—and, too, we can’t afford *any* apartment! I suppose we shall have to live in a tenement house,—or go into the country.”

“I expect to get work,” said Elsie.

“Don’t be ridiculous, child,” said her mother. “What work can you possibly do?”

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“Oh, there are lots of things,—stenography,—private secretary, open a tea room—”

“Elsie,” and Gerty looked very stern. “Do try to talk sense! If you’re really thinking you can do those things, let me remind you that stenography requires a year, at least, for tuition and practice; a tea room requires capital, influence and a special adaptation for that sort of thing,—which you haven’t got. As for a private secretary, you’re about the least fitted for that of any one I know! You can’t keep your own desk in order, or your own correspondence looked after. You’re for ever forgetting engagements, and you’re accustomed to an idle life, getting up when you choose and being absolute mistress of

your time. You couldn't adapt yourself to routine work, or to being always at the beck and call of anybody, so you couldn't make a success of any of those things. The result would be that instead of providing a home, you would be everlastingly sent back home from your work because of your failure to give satisfaction."

Elsie looked at her sister, a dumb acquiescence in her big brown eyes. They had a hunted expression, as of a frightened fawn at bay.

"Then, what *can* I do! Oh, Gerty, help me! You're my older sister, give me some real help—tell me some way I can satisfy you and mother, and not—not be sold like a slave in the market!"

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"Dear child," and Gerty became suddenly suave and gentle, "it isn't being sold to give yourself to some good and worthy man. And, it is as your loving elder sister that I advise you as I do. I speak truly, when I tell you you could never earn your living at any business. In this day, skilled labour is required; the services of experienced, efficient girls are demanded and a beginner, a learner, has no chance at all. Now, marriage, with a true-hearted, honourable man, is the best lot that could befall you,—"

"Without love!"

"Love will come. No woman can remain insensible to the devotion of a loving husband. Fenn Whiting—"

"I won't marry Fenn Whiting! I hate him!"

“Well, Mr. Harbison—”

“I hate him, too!” Elsie was white with angry excitement. “I hate everybody but Kim!”

“Oh, well, if you’re going to act like that!” Gerty gave up the argument.

But Mrs. Powell took it up.

“Your sister is right, Elsie, dear,” she said; “and I’m 175 sure you must know your own mother would be the last person in the world to advise you to do anything wrong or anything that might endanger your happiness. But a woman’s happiest life is the married life. You will eventually believe this; you will some day marry, and if Kimball never returns, it will be some other man. Why not realize this, and marry now, thus securing the great wealth that is rightfully your own but can be attained only by your marriage. Don’t harp on love,—as Gerty says, it will come with your married life. It will unfold like a beautiful flower as the time goes on,—as you live with and in the companionship of a good kind man—”

“Mother, do stop!” Elsie cried, in desperation. “If you want me to sacrifice myself for that detestable money, say so! But don’t get off all that foolish argument about love coming after marriage and all that! In fact you stand a better chance of persuading me, if you say frankly it’s for your sake and Gerty’s, than if you talk rubbish about me.”

“I thought you’d see your duty,” Gerty cried, clutching at the straw Elsie had tacitly held out. “Do it for us, then, Elsie! Marry whomever you will, goodness knows you’ve enough to

choose from, but do it before the thirtieth of June! Will you, —*will* you, Elsie?”

She hung on her sister’s words, she listened for Elsie’s decision.

“Oh, Gerty, let me think—”

“You’ve had time enough to think. If you’re to be married before the thirtieth, it’s time we began preparations.”

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“Preparations? They’re all made. I have my trousseau,—”

“Yes, of course. The principal preparation is to decide on the right man.”

“There’s only one right man,” and Elsie’s eyes were piteous.

“Yes, yes,” said Gerty, hurriedly, “I mean the nicest man except Kimball. Now, let’s think him over. You don’t really hate Fenn, do you?”

“No, I don’t hate him,—he’s a good friend, and all that. But, oh, Gert, I couldn’t live with him! He has no,—no imagination.”

“You mean no love of hifalutin poetry, and that sort of thing that you and Kim fooled so much time over.”

“Yes,—I suppose I do.”

“Well, let me tell you, a strong, sound personality like Fenn

Whiting, is worth a lot more in the long run than a mooning, visionary sort of person.”

“Kim isn’t mooning and visionary.”

“Never mind Kim. Say, Elsie, how do you like Joe?”

“Joe Allison! Marry him! Oh, Gerty, ridiculous! And, too, he insists on having the money in his own right.”

“He won’t, if you insist the other way. Joe’s over head and ears in love with you, and if you like you can twist him round your finger.”

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“I suppose I could,—but Joe is so—so—, oh, sort of raw—”

“Raw! Joe Allison! Why, Elsie, he’s most polished,—most correct of manner, most delightful conversationalist—”

“Hold on, Gert, you’re making him out a paragon! If he’s all that, in your eyes, why don’t you marry him yourself? You’re bound to marry again, sooner or later, and really, it would settle things beautifully, if I let my birthday pass, let Joe get the money, and then let him marry you instead of me. You could give me enough to live on,—and I could wait for Kim.”

“Great scheme, Elsie,” Gerty said, coldly; “there’s only the objection,—Joe wouldn’t have me.”

“Oh, so you’ve thought it over, have you? Well, Gerty, I don’t know just what I shall do. But I’m not going to be pushed to a decision. I’m waiting on Mr. Coe’s actions. He may find Kim for me—”

“Not likely!” Gerty scoffed.

“No, I fear it isn’t likely. But I’m still hoping for it. Anyway, I won’t be forced into this wedding you insist upon. If I agree, I’ll tell you in time for you to make the ‘preparations’ you talk about. But I won’t have a big wedding—”

“No, dearest, just a small, quiet affair,—oh, Elsie, how sweet you are! I knew you’d see reason at last—”

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“I haven’t seen it yet,—and I haven’t said positively that I will!”

Gerty kept silent, lest she should lose the ground she had already gained in the conflict.

That evening Coley Coe called to report to Elsie.

“Let’s go out somewhere where we can talk unheard,” he urged.

“Oh, we’re all right in the drawing room,” Elsie demurred, “no one can overhear us here.”

“Yes, they can. Come out somewhere.”

So Elsie agreed and they went for a stroll, winding up at a quiet pleasant restaurant where they had supper.

“I’ve a lot of wild information,” Coe informed her; “and I believe when it’s sifted out, we’ll find out things, decidedly important, if true!”

“Such as?” Elsie asked, smiling at his impetuous manner.

“I’ve had my minions out stirring up sleeping dogs, and by George, Miss Powell, they’ve wakened up some mighty funny curs!”

“Tell me all about it,” and Elsie’s interest equalled Coley’s own.

“Well, to begin with, the Hen, Henrietta, is a most mysterious person. That is, she goes on most mysterious errands, secretly and alone.”

“To visit her brother! In his concealment!” Elsie jumped at the conclusion.

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“Dunno yet. Know where she goes, all right,—but not what for. But we’ll find out. Things are working. Then, Mrs. Webb, the old lady, she goes on private missions also. They’re a queer pair!”

“Doesn’t that seem as if they must have Mr. Webb hidden? Or, at least know where he is hiding?”

“Looks a little that way, I admit. Then we’re trailing the Webb servants, you know. Well, Hollis seems all right, but Oscar’s a lame duck!”

“How?”

“He goes to the same place Miss Webb goes to, and he goes on the sly, too. I’ll get onto it, but I haven’t been able to do so yet.”

“Go on,—who else?”

“Then there’s Mr. Courtney. I doubt there’s anything wrong about him, after all. I think he’s tickled to death at Mr. Webb’s disappearance for he’s fairly digging at his play, but I don’t think he had anything to do with the crime.”

“Crime?”

“Sure. Abduction is a crime,—and I’m positive that Kimball Webb never went away of his own initiative! Never!”

“I agree to that! What about Joe Allison?”

“Can’t pin anything on him,—nor on Fenn Whiting.”

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“I didn’t expect you would.”

“Well, I’m having them both watched. Allison frequents second-hand jewellery shops, that’s the only queer thing about him.”

“You’re thinking of my diamond pendant.”

“I am. Maybe Mr. Webb has that with him,—wherever he is, and then again maybe he hasn’t.”

Elsie looked thoughtful. “If the Webb ladies know where he is, they know where the diamonds are,” she declared. “I can’t help thinking there may be a thief in the matter though. You see, he showed the diamonds at his dinner party,—oh, I don’t mean his guests,—but, maybe the waiters,—”

“I’ve thrashed that all out,—and there’s small chance of burglary. If anybody had wanted to steal that valuable pendant, he wouldn’t have attempted to get away with the man at the same time! And, if anybody wanted to abduct the man, the diamonds would have been a secondary consideration. To be sure the abductor might have stolen them,—just because they were handy by,—but in that case, they won’t be on the market for a long time, and then, not here.”

“Then how do you mix Joe Allison with it all?”

“I don’t know. But he’s such a good one to suspect.”

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Coley grinned, and tossed his brown mane back like a war horse, prancing. “You see, if he can’t get the fortune, it’s a next best thing to get that big diamond haul. I’m told it was a pretty high-priced gewgaw.”

“Oh, it was. And the Webb ladies were mad as mad that Kimball bought it for me.”

“That’s not enough to stamp them as burglars,—but their disapproval of the match is quite enough to lay them open to suspicion as to the disappearance. And the necklace would be missing in either case.”

“Haven’t you done anything toward finding out how Kim got out of the locked room?”

“Not a thing. If the Webb ladies made up that yarn, there’s no use worrying over it. And if they didn’t, I’ll know soon that they didn’t.”

“How?”

“By finding out where their secret errands take them to.”

CHAPTER XII

COE'S CONCLUSIONS

Coley Coe sat in his somewhat eccentric looking den, in an attitude characteristic of his working hours. He occupied a big over-stuffed chair, and while his head and shoulders rested on one of its wide arms, his feet and legs were draped carelessly over the other. His remarkable hair fountained out over his forehead and almost hid his eyes, which were fairly blinking in the earnestness of his thought.

He was clearing out his always methodical mind, and tabulating his ideas as he went along.

“There are two distinct things to hunt for,” he said to himself; “first, Mr. Kimball Webb, and second the abductor of Mr. Kimball Webb. In fact it doesn’t matter which I find first,—one will doubtless lead to the other. Now, it’s practically hopeless to hunt for Mr. Webb, for if he could have escaped his confinement,—granting that he is confined,—he would have been heard from before this. There’s the theory that he’s staying away willingly, but that I do not believe. Now, so far as I can see, there’s nobody likely to know anything about where he is, except the person or persons who put him there. And while his mother and sister are possible suspects, they are not, to my mind, plausible ones. For,—oh, well, I just

can't see 'em in that light.

“Now, I'm also ready to cross off Wallace Courtney. He's benefited largely by the absence of his rival playwright, but, even granting his willingness, I don't see how he could have pulled it off. Owen Thorne is out of the question, also. Just because he is Elsie Powell's trustee is no reason to think he would stick a finger in her romantic pie. As to his having played ducks and drakes with her money, and daren't acknowledge it, I've yet to find any proof of that. So far as I can get hold of the facts, the Powell fortune is in honest hands, and is intact and safe.

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“Now, I'm left with mighty few people to suspect. And those few I propose to run down pretty quick. There's just one element that's bothering me and that's the supernatural one. Those yarns that Kimball Webb told at his club are not to be passed over lightly, for as far as I can make out Mr. Webb is a pretty much worthwhile chap. And judging from the line I've got on his character, he's not the sort to tell those stories unless they were true. True that the things he related happened, I mean. Not true that they happened by supernatural forces. If there's some sort of hocus-pocus possible in that room of Kimball Webb's, that means somebody has access to it, when it's apparently securely locked. It might be his mother, after all,—or that high and mighty sister. But Mrs. Webb is too sincerely a believer in the spirit business to fake it, and—well, it doesn't fit in with that scheme of things called Henrietta!

“But what it is, or what it may be, I've got to find out,—and that with neatness and dispatch.”

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Disentangling himself from his easy chair, Coe put on his hat, and started out on his quest.

But, according to his principle, “when in doubt, go to Elsie’s,” he went straight to the Powells’ home.

It was late afternoon, and he was not surprised to find the faithful pair, Allison and Whiting already there, and having tea.

It was no secret now, that these two men were rivals for Elsie’s hand. Urged on by her mother and sister, strongly advised by the Webb ladies, and even besought by her trustee and guardian to marry before her birthday, the poor child felt she would be unable to combat their decrees much longer.

The arguments that she was foolish to throw away a fortune, that she owed it to her mother and sister, that she’d be sorry afterward if she didn’t, all had no effect on her personal inclination, but they had the wearing action of constant dropping of water upon a stone, upon her will.

Her strong determination was giving way under pressure and she had no one to bolster up her side of the decision. Even Coe, with his clear vision and good judgment, did not dare advise her against marriage, for he feared she might later regret her course.

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Yet, when alone, Elsie was as positive in her determination as ever, and vowed to herself that she would not be swayed by others, and that she would never marry if she could not marry the man she loved.

And, then, Gerty's pale, martyr-like face, or her mother's gentle coaxing would so shake the poor child's will power, that she wavered and almost allowed herself to be convinced.

The great question was whom to marry. Gerty favoured Joe Allison, but Mrs. Powell inclined toward Fenn Whiting.

Gerty declared that Elsie could easily change Joe's plan of a marriage after the birthday, if she made her consent conditional on an earlier date. For each day saw the young man more and more in love with Elsie, and he was rapidly approaching the stage where he would agree to anything if she would marry him.

Fenn Whiting, adhered to his statement that it was for Elsie to say whether she would marry him, a rich girl or a poor one. For his part, he had no advice to offer in that regard. He wanted the girl; if she wanted the fortune, all right,—if not, all right, also.

This was the only manly attitude for Whiting to take, but, as Gerty observed, there could be no possible reason for Elsie to throw away the money if she concluded to marry Fenn.

186

Elsie wouldn't say what she would or wouldn't do. She went around—as one in a daze; hoping against hope that something would transpire to give her some idea of what had happened to Kimball Webb.

And so, when Coe came in, bright and cheery as always, she turned to him with renewed hope and cried out:

“Anything new?”

“Nixy; except that I have crossed off some suspects and I’m going to cross off some more. Elimination’s the thing!”

“Go on,” cried Elsie, “tell me what.”

“Well, next, I’m going to sleep in that room of Mr. Webb’s. Do you suppose the powers that be will permit it?”

“I don’t see why not,” offered Whiting. “What’s the great idea?”

“I want to see if the Poltergeist snatch off my bedclothes, or any stunt like that.”

“I can’t see that it would get you anywhere,” Whiting laughed, “but there’s no harm in it.”

“It’s a good plan,” Allison said, slowly. “That Poltergeist business is the real thing. I’ve looked into those subjects, more or less, and I’m interested. Let me spend a night there with you, will you, Coe?”

187

“Not the first trip. I don’t look for anything to happen, but it might and I want to tackle it alone.”

“What are you going to prove?” asked Gerty, puzzled.

“Only that if a Poltergeist comes after me, and I can’t catch him, that there’s a possibility that one carried off Kimball Webb.”

“Rubbish!” said Whiting.

“Rubbish, I admit,” said Coe, placidly, “but what’s a theory that isn’t rubbish?”

Nobody knew of any, and Coe soon departed for the Webb home to put his plan in action.

The Webb ladies liked the pleasant young man, with his winning smile and his good-natured ways.

His request to sleep for a night or two in Kimball Webb’s room met with a willing, though surprised consent.

“What in the world do you hope to learn that way?” Mrs. Webb asked, and Coley returned, gravely: “I want to test your theory, Mrs. Webb. If friend Poltergeist,—is that his name?—carries me through a closed and locked wooden door, I’m ready to drop all else and follow your cult for life!”

“You’re going to lock the door?” asked Henrietta.

“Surely, otherwise it’s no test! All New York city,—I mean any one of its inhabitants, might come in and play at poltering otherwise. Of course, I’m going to lock the door and bolt it, too.”

188

The broken lock on the inside of Kimball Webb’s door had been replaced with a new one, for no special reason save that the Webb ladies were too orderly by nature to leave anything incomplete in the way of household appointments.

And so, when that night, Coley Coe locked himself into the

mysterious room, he was securely entrenched against attack from the hall.

He scrutinized the window fastenings and corroborated his knowledge that the patent catch enabled one to get sufficient ventilation, yet left no possible chance of a man entering or escaping that way.

Coley Coe locked himself into that room at ten-thirty, at one o'clock he was still hunting for the secret entrance that he had been so sure of finding. But his search had been utterly fruitless, and in an unusual spirit of despair, he decided to abandon it. He arrived at this decision only after a most exhaustive and repeated investigation of every part of the room. He proved to his own satisfaction that there was not a break in the walls, not a chance of a secret passage between the partitions.

He made sure the window frames or door frames could not be taken out bodily, as a whole. The old woodwork was as firm and true as when it was built, many decades before.

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“And yet,” Coley observed to himself, “there’s got to be a secret entrance,—there’s *got* to be! There’s no other way out!”

He smiled at his inadvertent play on words, and renewed his search. He paid special attention to the chimney, for except the windows and door that was the only outlet from the room.

It was a large fireplace, of the old fashioned style. There was an empty and scrupulously clean basket grate, wide but not

deep, with horizontal bars in front after the fashion of most old grates. The black japanned parts were shining, and the gilded rim round the fireplace opening was brilliantly bright. Surely the Webbs had been scrupulous in their tidying up of Kimball's room.

Coe looked about. The white paint was immaculate, the window panes fairly sparkled with cleanliness. He gave a sigh,—any clue that might have been left in that room must have been destroyed by the ruthless hands of the Webbs' servants.

Coe poked his head well up the chimney, to the imminent peril of his waving forelocks, but the flue was not sooty at all. Neither was it in any way a possible means of escape. Coe's imagination was well nigh boundless, but he couldn't, by the wildest flight of fancy, see Kimball Webb making an exit that way. It was simply impossible.

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He sat in a chair and strove to reconstruct the scene. Webb, perhaps, had sat in that very chair, the night before the day that was to have been his wedding day. Coe knew that Webb had every intention of attending his own wedding. He had learned from Elsie the indubitable truths of the man's character and of his love for the girl he had chosen. Not for a minute did Coley Coe think Webb had absconded purposely.

And abduction presupposed one other person at least. How did that person get in,—and accompanied by Webb, get out?

"He couldn't," Coe decided, and then turned his attention to the idea that Webb had been lured away,—say, by means of

an imperative message.

But that made the exit from the locked room no easier of solution, and Coley Coe gave it up, and turned in for the night.

As he stretched himself between the sheets of Kimball Webb's bed, he realized there was no night light, as is usual in modern houses.

He thought of going down stairs for a candle, but concluded that the switch of the centre chandelier was within two jumps of his bedside and depended on that.

He thought of leaving the light on, but assumed that that would bar the intruder,—human or supernatural,—who, he felt sure, would come.

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Worn out by his hard thinking and his long and indefatigable searching, the healthy young chap was soon asleep.

How long he slept, he had no idea, but he awoke suddenly, with a feeling of something happening.

He rubbed his sleepy eyes, and saw plainly, though not clearly, a strange light at the foot of the bed. It seemed to be a wraith or phantom, of translucent, shimmering light.

Wide awake in an instant, Coe sprang out of bed and switched on the light.

There was nothing, absolutely nothing unusual in the room.

Nothing had been moved, nothing disturbed.

Coe ran about the room frantically. Not for a minute did he believe he had been dreaming or imagined the vision. He had just as surely seen that white, glimmering apparition as he now saw his own hand. He knew it,—and he knew too, it was some human agency that had compassed it. No supernatural for him! That ghost was the work of some mischievous or wicked human, and who it was Coley Coe determined to discover.

He determined to have another try at it some other night, for, he felt sure, there would be no further performance at this time.

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He switched off the light, and went back to bed, feeling that he had at least accomplished something in having had any experience at all.

Again he slept,—and, again he awakened.

This time, he saw nothing. The room was pitch dark, but,—and his thatch of hair rose from his forehead,—he could certainly feel his bed clothes being pulled off!

He lay still a moment, unable to believe his senses, but there was no mistake, they were certainly slipping down,—down, away from his neck, his shoulders,—and then, as he gathered himself for a spring, they were pulled entirely off of him, and thrown back, helter-skelter over his face and head.

A low, and it seemed to him, demoniac chuckle reached his ears, and struggling to free himself from the entangling sheets

and blankets, he finally got to the light switch and threw it on.

Again there was nothing to be seen,—nothing to be heard, of any human presence.

Coley sat down in the big chair, lighted a cigarette and began to size the matter up.

He thought a while, and then he again went the rounds of the room, only to find no more sign of a secret entrance than he had before discovered.

193

What was the explanation? Must he accept the foolish Poltergeist? He knew,—his reason told him, no supernatural agency could have pulled off those bedclothes and thrown them back over his face, but his reason failed to inform him who or what could have done it,—and above all how.

The door was still securely locked and bolted. The windows were untouched,—Coe knew this, for he had taken the precaution to sprinkle a little talcum powder beneath them, and this showed no marks of foot-prints. He looked up the chimney, where he had pasted across a strip of paper, just before he got into bed. The paper was intact.

In the brownest of brown studies he sat till morning, but he could imagine or invent no theory that would work. He knew,—he positively *knew* the semi-luminous ghost was a fake,—he knew, he positively knew human hands had pulled off his sheets, and a human throat had sounded that low laugh, but how?—HOW?

At breakfast time he dressed and went down stairs.

He met Miss Webb's eager questions as to what had happened with a denial that anything had. He wanted to see if a look of surprise or incredulity came to her face, but it didn't. She only said,

"I scarcely thought it would. Are you satisfied, or do you want to try it again?"

"I may try it again later," he thanked her, "but not at present."

To Mrs. Webb who soon appeared he also denied that he had had any queer or inexplicable experience, having resolved to keep the matter strictly secret as the best chance of finding out who did it.

But at breakfast, the subject of Kimball's past experiences in that room was mentioned.

"I don't believe it," Henrietta stated calmly. "Oh, Kimball told the truth, of course, or what he thought was truth. He dreamed so vividly that he really thought his dream was true. I am more convinced than ever,—since you saw or heard nothing unusual. Did you have any peculiar dreams?"

"No," Coley said, truthfully. "I did not. I'm positive I did not."

After breakfast, Coe went straight to Elsie. They went for a stroll in the Park, a not unusual proceeding with them, and he told her the whole story, for his plan of secrecy did not include the girl he was working for.

"It must be supernatural," Elsie said, after she had heard

the whole tale. “I’m ready to believe you when you say there’s no chance for any one to get in,—so it’s got to be spirits, or Poltergeist, or what ever you choose to call it. I’m no Spiritualist,—I think the whole thing is silly,—but what *are* we to think, after this?”

“We’re to think that somebody is too clever for me.”

“But lots of people have tried to find a secret entrance, and they can’t do it. Mr. Hanley said he was a sort of an architect, and Fenn Whiting is an architect, and they’ve both tried their best but they can’t find any loophole of escape. I tried, too,—oh, you needn’t laugh. Sometimes an ignoramus can succeed where the wiseacres fail.”

“I know it; but, look here, Miss Powell. Supposing, just for argument’s sake, that there is somebody back of it all,—some master-mind criminal who has made a way to get in and out of that room at his will, defying discovery, then you must admit, we’re up against it.”

“How? What do you mean?”

“I mean that I can’t find the way he enters or leaves. I spent many hours last night seeking the means, and I admit I can’t succeed. There’s no use my trying again, for I went over every square inch of walls, floor and ceiling. I considered every plausible method or manner of entrance, and I’m at the end of my rope in that direction. If solving the mystery of Webb’s disappearance depends on finding a secret entrance to that room, I confess I’ll have to give it up.”

“Do you think it does depend on that?”

“Frankly, I do.”

196

“Then are we to give up all hope of seeing Kimball Webb again?” Elsie’s lips quivered, and Coe was so sorry for her he scarce knew what to say. But he had to tell her the truth.

“I fear we are, until after your birthday, at least.”

“Do you think he’ll return after that?”

“I can’t say. You see we haven’t decided definitely on the motive of the person or persons who abducted him. If the Webb ladies, and it may be, then they hope you’ll marry before the date, and he will then return. If not the Webb ladies,—then,—the motive is a very different one.”

“Meantime what do you advise me to do?”

“I am not going to give up entirely,—but I have to confess to you that I’m not sure I can discover a criminal who is so deep and so clever as this one.”

“You’ve been trailing the Webb ladies, what did you learn?”

“Nothing, so far, that affects the case,—and I doubt if we do. To tell the truth, Miss Powell, I’m discouraged, —deeply discouraged. I can’t solve the mystery of last night, so how can I solve the mystery of Webb’s disappearance—for I am positive the same agency compassed both.”

197

“Well, I’m ready to believe it was a supernatural agency. I never was before, but what you’ve told me convinces me. After all, lots of great and wise men believe in it—”

“Lots of great and wise fools! Pardon me, Miss Powell, but I’d rather be baffled by any human cleverness than to admit the possibility of superhuman intervention.”

“But that doesn’t help matters, Mr. Coe. Your preferences don’t solve mysteries,—your disbelief doesn’t help to find the truth. I’m vanquished,—I’m ready to go over to the other side. I’ll accept the theory of Poltergeist or disembodied spirits or levitation or anything, now that you tell me a human being couldn’t get into that room!”

“But a human being did!”

“You only assume that because you’re not willing to believe the other. Anyway, I can see you have no hope of restoring my lover to me?”

“I can’t say I’ve a definite hope,—that is a hope founded on belief,—but of course, I hope.”

“Oh, that kind of hope,—merely a wish or desire,—that doesn’t mean anything!”

Not blaming Coe, but deeply disappointed, Elsie turned her thoughts to duty. Her torn, bleeding heart knew at last the meaning of the word despair. Yet her unselfish nature would not let her forget those dependent upon her. And so she made up her mind what she would do.

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That night Fenn Whiting renewed his suit.

“Have you any hope of Kimball’s return?” he asked, gently.

“No,” Elsie returned in a low voice, devoid of all inflection,
“no, Fenn, I haven’t.”

“Then, oh, Elsie, won’t you marry me? Won’t you, dearest?
Set the date yourself,—you know I don’t care about that
confounded money,—but give me your promise.”

“I suppose I may as well,” she said, slowly.

“Elsie, darling! do you mean it? You make me so happy.
When, dearest, when?”

“I’m going to marry you, Fenn, in time to get the money, for
Mother and Gerty’s sake. So, I’ll set the day before my
birthday,—the twenty-ninth of June.”

“Darling! Oh, Elsie, I can hardly believe it.”

“Yes; I mean it. And, Fenn, as soon as the ceremony is over;
and as soon as I have signed the necessary papers to leave the
fortune to Mother and Gerty, with a good bit for Joe Allison,
—I shall kill myself.”

CHAPTER XIII

THE EXPECTED LETTER

Fenn Whiting was not unversed in feminine ways. And, especially did he count himself familiar with the ways of Elsie Powell. And though the average woman would make a threat of killing herself as a melodramatic bluff, not so Elsie. Whiting knew, for a certainty, if she had made up her mind to such a desperate step, she would assuredly take it. No interference or hindrance could prevent her. She might be foiled in several attempts but she would succeed finally, if she had set her face that way. And she had. Further conversation only revealed the depth and steadfastness of her purpose. She was willing to die for her mother and sister but not to live for them.

“But, Elsie, darling,” Whiting urged, “I can’t marry you that way. You must choose some one else, then. Could you live with Allison?”

“No! I couldn’t live with any man except Kimball Webb. And I never will! But my people have hounded me about that money, until I can’t stand it another minute. I must marry before my birthday, in order that they may get it, —but I don’t have to live on *after* that!” The big brown eyes were wide with despair, and the suffering, hunted look on

Elsie's face went to Whiting's heart.

"Marry me, dearest," he said, softly; "I'll engage that you sha'n't kill yourself afterward. Why, sweetheart, I'll make life a continuous round of pleasure for you; you shall have your own way in everything—everything! I'll be your humble slave, and you may command me—"

"Hush, Fenn. I've told you the course I shall take. Now, I think I may as well marry you as any one else. Then I'll be legally entitled to the money. I've made a will, which I must sign after I'm married,—and then—"

"Don't, Elsie! You're talking rubbish! Girls don't kill themselves so easily, with friends around to prevent."

"Never mind about that," Elsie smiled mysteriously, "the way is already provided. And I shall make no horrible scene, I shall merely go away from this horrid, horrid world!"

"But I shall transform the horrid world into a world of light and flowers and love! Give me a chance, Elsie, let me prove my words—"

"Don't discuss it, Fenn," Elsie was imperious, "you know nothing of my heart,—you couldn't even appreciate my feelings if you knew them. But I do like you, and you are a friend. Marry me, then, and the rest is in my hands."

"No; Elsie. I refuse to marry you under such conditions. What man would?"

"That's the trouble,—no man would! That's why I've decided

on you, as my only hope. Marry me, Fenn, to save the money for my people. I'll leave you a goodly share, too—"

"Elsie!" Whiting's look made her flush.

"Well," she defended herself, "that's only fair, if you're my husband."

"But I won't be,—I can't be,—the way you've arranged things!"

"Yes, you can, and you will! Don't desert me, Fenn, it's the only thing you can do for me. I'd marry some one else, and not tell my plans,—but I don't think it fair to any man."

"I should say not!"

"But you,—you have always been a friend of Kim's and I want you to be friend enough of mine to go through the ceremony with me, and for me. Why, Fenn, there's no way for me to get that money without marrying,—and no way else, to secure the happiness of my people."

"If only Gerty would marry Joe,—"

"That would fix it all right,—but in the first place, Gert wouldn't marry anybody just yet,—it's too soon,—and, oh, Fenn, it's an awful thing to tell, but I sounded Joe,—and he—he doesn't want to marry Gerty."

"Of course he doesn't! He's insanely in love with you!"

"I know it,—and he's too nice a boy for me to marry

him and then—and then carry out my plan.”

“So’m I, for that matter!” Whiting tried to speak jocularly.

“I know you are,—any man would be. But, you’re my only hope. I’ve thought this thing out to the bitter end. Whoever took Kimball away has killed him. That I am sure of.”

“Oh, no, Elsie, I don’t believe that.”

“I know it. He isn’t in this world. And so, I want to go where he is,—I don’t care where that may be.”

Elsie’s gaze was a little wild, her voice a trifle hysterical, but she was in complete control of her speech.

“Well, let’s wait a bit, anyway. There’s nearly three weeks yet before the birthday, and in that time you may hear something from Kim.”

“No, I won’t. And I’d rather get it over with. Marry me at once,—won’t you, Fenn?”

“Well, for a young woman whom I’ve begged and coaxed to marry me, it’s turning the tables to have you urging me to marry you!”

“All the same,—will you?”

“Not this week. Do wait a few days, and consider matters a little more fully. I promise to tell nobody of this plan of yours, so you can revise it when you wish. But, oh, Elsie,—my little girl,—if you’ll marry me and stay right

here on earth with me,—I'll engage to make earth a heaven for you!"

"Nobody could do that but Kimball," and Elsie's eyes filled with tears.

True to his promise, Whiting told no one of Elsie's gruesome plan. For, he decided, to tell her mother or sister would only stir up trouble in their household. And he hoped Elsie would change her mind. It was a forlorn hope, for the girl was so positive in her decisions and was rarely if ever known to change one. He thought of telling it all to Coley Coe, but decided against it, for he could see no use in passing the hateful secret on to anybody.

Any other woman he would have expected to weaken when the time came for the tragic deed. But he knew Elsie's determination well enough to believe that she had the means already at hand,—poison, probably,—and that if prevented several times, would finally manage to turn the trick.

The more Whiting thought it over, the more he was convinced he would marry her. If he didn't, she would pick up somebody else and marry him without telling her plan,—for she could never secure a bridegroom who was in her confidence. Then, he argued, he would stand a better chance of persuading her to give up her tragic course, than if he were not her husband. He thought he could watch her so closely that she would have no chance for a time, at least, and then if he couldn't persuade her to live for him and with him, he could offer her the privilege of divorcing him,—and the money, the great object in Elsie's dilemma, would be all right.

So Whiting determined that if nothing transpired to change the situation he would soon urge Elsie to announce their engagement, and trust to Fate that all might yet turn out well.

Elsie, after her talk with Whiting felt better than she had done since her sorrow came to her. She was filled with an exaltation that buoyed her spirit up, and she went around as one in a trance.

It may be that her strange experiences had affected her brain a little but except for a slight absent-mindedness she showed no eccentric impulses.

And then, in her morning's mail she received a letter.

A letter that she had sub-consciously looked for,—a letter she had vaguely expected,—a letter from the people who had stolen Kimball Webb!

Realizing its purport, she went off to her own room to read it by herself.

Written in a strong, bold hand, on decent, inconspicuous paper, it read:

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Miss Elsie Powell:

We have Kimball Webb hidden and in confinement. Where he is neither you nor your smarty-cat young detective can ever discover. We make no secret of the fact that we abducted him for ransom. How we secured his person, though a clever performance, will never be

known by any one,—not even himself. The whole point of this message is, do you want him back enough to pay us fifty thousand dollars,—and no questions asked? If so, follow our directions implicitly,—if not, the incident may be considered closed and neither you nor any one else will ever see the gentleman in question again. We are no bunglers, we have covered our tracks, and have no fear of being caught. If you want to pay the money and if you are willing to agree not to refer this matter to anybody, not to speak of it to your people or to the police, you may hang a white towel,—or a handkerchief out of a window of your own room any time tomorrow afternoon. This will be taken to mean that you agree to our terms. If you play any tricks, Mr. Webb will vanish at once from this world of ours. We enclose a bit of a note from him that you may have faith in the reality of our story.

The letter was not signed, but the enclosure was. It was from Kimball himself,—there was no mistaking his small, scholarly writing, and even before reading it, Elsie pressed it to her lips in a frenzy of joy. Then she read:

Elsie, darling! do as the note says. It is the only way. I love you! Kim.

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It was no forgery, every word, every letter was the work of the hand of Kimball Webb. Elsie knew his writing too well to be deceived. And there were peculiar little quirks and twirls that made it impossible for the note to be a forgery.

It was the real thing! And, noting the date on the letter, Elsie suddenly bethought her that today was the day to hang out her flag of truce! Her white handkerchief,—no, a small towel would be more visible,—must be displayed that very afternoon.

Quivering with excitement, she got out the towel, and was of half a mind to hang it out at once, but desisted, as she wished to follow instructions implicitly.

How to get all that money troubled her not a whit. She hadn't a tenth of it at her command, but get it she would, if she had to break a bank! And then she began to think. A wild suggestion of breaking a bank meant nothing,—she couldn't do it, with all the will in the world. And how could she get it from Mr. Thorne unless she told her story? And if she did that,—the writer of the note would find it out,—already she pictured him in her mind as omniscient,—and the whole deal would be off!

But, even with no plan for getting the money, she obeyed the written instructions. She told no one of the letter. That afternoon she hung out a small towel, and it hung undisturbed until sundown.

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Then next morning she received the second letter.

This one was as explicit as the first.

Miss Powell:

Glad to see you're amenable to reason. Now, you may

have plenty of ways to raise the cash, but if not, use the enclosed card. You may go to that address without fear of any unpleasantness or publicity. Remember, if you give us the money as we direct, you will have your lover in time for you to secure your inheritance by marriage with him. Here are the directions. You will not hear from us again. Have the money in cash, with no bill larger than one hundred dollars. Go to Altman's tomorrow morning, and when you come out, take a taxicab that will be waiting. You will know which one when you see a driver with a yellow plaid cap. We are relying on you not to have anybody with you, or in watching,—if you do, we shall know it, and the whole deal is off. You will not hear from us again. If you attempt anything,—anything at all but the most perfect good faith and honesty in your course, you will be more than sorry. In a word, you will then bring about the sudden death of the man you love. There is no more to be said on that score. Get into the taxi and when it stops, near another taxi, make a quick change. Have the money with you in a small compact parcel. The second taxi will take you along a certain road. When it meets a certain car, it will slow down and you will hand the parcel to the man who leans out of that car for it. That is all. Good-bye.

Elsie read and re-read the missive.

She was uncertain what to do. Her impulse was to lay the whole matter before Whiting or Coleman Coe, and follow their advice.

But suppose they should say,—as so many people do,—make no bargains with the kidnappers. Treat any such communications with silent contempt,—or, arrange for police protection, even if it is forbidden.

The more she thought it over, the more she was inclined to manage the whole affair alone. She could do it,—and she was not afraid. It was all to be done in broad daylight, there was no danger if she herself acted in good faith. And if she brought any one else into it, there was grave danger, not only to herself but to Kimball.

She looked curiously at the card that had come in the letter.

It was an address on Broadway, and was evidently,—even to her inexperienced mind,—the office of a loan broker.

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From him she could get the necessary money on the assurance of her nearby wedding and consequent inheritance.

Arrangements had, of course, been made by the perpetrators of the crime against Kimball Webb. They must be a clever and powerful set,—they were so unafraid of anything or anybody. The thought of her restored lover and their wedding at last, so thrilled Elsie, that she began preparations at once.

She could scarcely control her impatience to get to the broker's office.

Once there, she found indeed, that all had been arranged.

The affable Hebrew, who presided over the establishment, was confidentially minded, and was quite ready to advance

the large sum required in return for Elsie's signed promise to pay,—with exorbitant interest, the day after her marriage.

For Elsie Powell and her affairs were well known to newspaper readers and the affable Jew felt no qualms of doubt as to his future reimbursement and his usury.

The parcel, made up neatly and inconspicuously, was handed to Elsie and her signed document carefully put away in a big safe.

The transaction meant little to Elsie, herself, so wrapped up was her whole soul in her coming adventure.

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She would get Kimball back! That was all she knew or cared about!

She went to Altman's, her precious package in her handbag, which she carried with seeming carelessness, but with a watchful eye.

She had a strange feeling of security because of the character and appearance of the notes she had received. Had they been illiterate scrawls she would have hesitated to go ahead as she had done, but the educated and socially correct tone of the letters gave her the impression of brains and character, however big a villain the writer might be.

With a beating heart, but with a steady step she came out of Altman's shop and seemed to glance casually about for a cab.

Seeing a driver with a yellow plaid cap, she beckoned him and got into his cab.

No word was spoken as she settled herself on the seat, and watched the man start the car.

He, too, was nonchalant of manner, and drove away toward Madison Avenue.

From there they followed a devious course, turning often, returning on their own tracks, wheeling suddenly, performing various eccentric detours, all, doubtless in an endeavour to detect a follower, if any.

Elsie sat quietly, unmoved by these strange motions, and full of buoyant hope that all would be well, since she had not betrayed her trust.

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After a time the taxicab stopped at a curb, another cab drew up at its side, and Elsie stepped from one to the other.

The second cab had also a taciturn, grave-faced driver. Though he said no word, gave no look of intelligence, Elsie felt a sense of safety with him, from his very silence. She was free from all fear, and looked forward eagerly to the consummation of her errand.

This time it was a long drive. On they went, northward from the city and into a pleasant, wooded locality. Swiftly the car flew and after an hour's journey they were on a smooth road, with groves of trees on either side. But it was a travelled road, and its well-kept asphalt proclaimed its nearness to civilization.

Elsie kept her eyes open and her mind clear. She grew impatient for the end of her trip, but she preserved her poise

and her balance.

“Here’s the car, miss,” the taxi driver said suddenly, and she saw a red roadster approaching swiftly.

Both cars slowed down and then stopped.

From the red car a man leaned out. He had a small mask on that concealed most of his features, but Elsie caught a gleam of many gold filled teeth in his lower jaw. Into his outstretched hand, conveniently near, Elsie placed the packet, from her hand-bag. She felt a shock of disappointment that she did not receive Kimball in return, right then and there, but she had no time to speak. In a flash, the driver on the cab she was in, sprang from his seat, jumped into the red car, and like a streak the roadster disappeared.

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Alone, in a driverless taxicab, Elsie sat, unable for a moment to realize what had happened.

Slowly it dawned upon her that she had been tricked,—swindled,—but no, she couldn’t believe that! She felt sure that the men had only carried out their plans for safety. That they feared pursuit and had made off with the money and would restore Kimball in their own good time, she had no doubt. The thing was, now, how was she to get home?

She wasn’t greatly alarmed, for the well-kept road gave hope of frequent travellers, and somebody would take her back to New York.

And, after a time, somebody did. She let several cars pass before she asked help, and though curious looks were cast at

her, no one intruded upon her. But when she saw a car come by, with a good chauffeur, and a benignant looking lady in the tonneau, she asked for a ride to New York.

The benignant looking lady was not all that could be hoped for in the way of cordiality, but when Elsie explained that the taxicab had refused to go and the chauffeur had gone for help and that she was in great haste to get to the city the lady agreed to take her. Remarking, however, that for a girl who wanted to get to New York in haste, her cab was turned astonishingly in the opposite direction!

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But Elsie's smile and winning manner soon overcame the other's asperity, and they were affably chatting long before they reached the city.

Naturally enough, the kind lady asked the name of her passenger, but Elsie, knowing the necessity for caution, gave an assumed name and address and made up a story of her life that was as plausible as it was false.

But she dared take no chances on breaking her pledge of inviolate secrecy, lest she lose her chance of getting Kimball back, and after all she had gone through, that would be unbearable.

She asked to be set down at the Grand Central Station, as she was going back to her home,—avowedly in Boston,—that night.

Warmly friendly by this time, the benignant lady set her down as requested, after exacting a promise to hear from her by letter.

Alone again, Elsie flew for a taxicab and went straight home. She glanced at the mail, arrived since her departure, but was not surprised to find no letter in the writing of her new correspondent. He had said he would not write again, and she did not think he would.

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She had nothing to do now, but wait. She had conscientiously fulfilled her part of the bargain, and she had utter faith that the abductors of Kimball would do the same. They had their money—what more did they want?

She waited all that evening, dully patient, quietly serene of manner, but with a heart that beat wildly when the door bell or telephone sounded.

Occasionally, she telephoned to the Webb house, hardly thinking Kimball would go there before coming to her, but unable to resist general inquiry.

At bedtime, she had heard nothing from him, and resolved to go to bed and to sleep in happy hopes of a blessed meeting tomorrow.

She could not sleep,—slumber does not come for the willing of it and as she tossed in wide awake suspense, her thoughts took a new turn.

Suppose,—just suppose she had been tricked! Suppose the notes had not come from the men who stole Kimball,—ah, they must have done so! She had Kim's note to prove it! Nothing ever could make her believe that note a forgery. She knew his dear writing too well—she knew every stroke of his pen, every peculiarity of his really unusual

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handwriting, and she felt in every letter of that note that he himself had penned it. There was no chance that he had not. Therefore, the letters from the kidnappers were in good faith. They proved the fact that Kimball had been abducted,—and held for ransom. Well, now they had the ransom, and Kim would be returned. Of course he would! She would not think otherwise, or she would die! She knew he would come tomorrow,—and in that knowledge she at last fell asleep.

She awoke with a start. Throwing on her night light, she found it was three o'clock in the morning. She felt a strange numbness of mind, a peculiar feeling as if the end of the world had come. Striving to determine what it all meant, she realized that she had lost hope,—that she was now persuaded that she had been tricked. The notes were from the kidnappers but they had no intention of returning her lover!

Something, she could not tell what, brought the conviction to her soul that she had done very wrong in following their bidding blindly in giving them the money on such uncertainty. She remembered clearly the smile of the man in the red car,—the smile that had disclosed those gold-filled teeth, and she knew she had been duped, deceived and swindled!

CHAPTER XIV

AN EASY MARK

Though slow to anger, Elsie was a little firebrand when roused. And the more she thought over the matter the more furious she grew at the game that had been played on her. The fact that she brought it all upon herself only made her more angry.

And, yet, she didn't blame herself utterly, for she had felt so sure that only by following instructions implicitly, could she accomplish her end.

She didn't for a moment believe that some one had tricked her who knew nothing of Kimball Webb, for she had his own letter to disprove that. She concluded they had tricked him, too, and had forced him to write the note and then had cheated him as they had her.

Still, he might come home yet; the day might bring him or news of him.

But when the slow hours passed and morning melted into afternoon, poor Elsie gave up hope.

By the time Coe came in the evening, Elsie had decided to tell him the whole story, assuming that since the

money was paid, it was now no breach of trust.

Coley Coe stared at her as she unfolded the surprising tale.

“You chump! You Easy Mark!” he cried, angrily, quite forgetting in his astonishment to whom he was speaking.

“I beg your pardon,” he said, as he noted her rising colour. “I oughtn’t to say such things,—but, oh, Miss Powell, how could you go off on such a wild-goose chase,—and a dangerous one, too?”

His thatch of hair bobbed wildly about in his excitement, and he clutched at it as if almost frenzied.

Then he calmed down, and looked at the thing squarely. His blue eyes seemed to grow darker as their concentrated gaze fell on Elsie’s troubled face.

“It’s outrageous!” he cried, “it’s a shame, but, Miss Powell, the villains may have overreached themselves. They may have started something that will lead to their own undoing. We’ve learned a heap from this experience of yours. Now, tell me all over again,—every smallest detail.”

So again Elsie went over the whole story, and told of every step of the way.

“Clever! clever!” was Coe’s grudging tribute to the ability of the abductors.

“You see the first taxicab was a real one. They engaged the driver to do just what he did do. The second was a

fake one,—their own car and one of their own men. Then when the time came, the car was abandoned,—and so were you. They knew you'd get a lift back to the city,—and they didn't care whether you did or not! In one way, I can't blame you, Miss Powell, for I see you didn't dare tell me. Yet, you might have known they'd not release their prisoner."

"I don't agree," cried Elsie. "How could I know that? And if they had given him to me the money was well spent."

"That's so; it wouldn't have been surprising if they had let him go; they'd doubtless be glad to get rid of him. But I think your quick willingness to give the money make them greedy for more, and I think they'll try the same game right over again."

"Oh," Elsie cried, "I couldn't do it again!"

"No, indeed! And you're not going to throw away another fifty thousand dollars, if I can prevent it! Now, let's consider. What have we learned? What sleeping dogs have we stirred up? Much depends on the positive fact that this note is really from Mr. Webb himself. You're sure?"

"Absolutely," declared Elsie. "I know Kimball's writing, and I know that's it. Nobody could forge so skilfully,—you can see that yourself. It's dashed off."

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"Yes, that's so. A forgery would show a little hesitation or painstaking effort. But I'm going to show it to an expert. He can tell if he has some of Webb's other letters."

"Anybody could tell," insisted Elsie. "Wait, I'll get some

letters.”

She ran away to her own room and returned with a packet of them.

Comparison soon made it evident that the note in question was beyond all doubt the work of Webb himself. A thousand little points proved it. Coe was satisfied, and went on with his conclusions from it.

“You see, it proves a whole lot of things,” he cried, jubilantly. “Perhaps your money, enormous sum though it was, bought worthwhile evidence.”

“Such as what?”

“Well, to begin with, we know now that Webb was really abducted, and is now held against his will. This does away with all thought of his having decamped on purpose,—also, to my mind, precludes the theory of his mother or sister being implicated. Miss Webb is a Tartar,—if you ask me! but she never managed the affair of yesterday!”

“No, she never did! Henrietta is not acquainted with those—”

“Loan Sharks! Right! Kimball Webb was carried off by desperate and clever men,—and, here’s a strong point,—he was unconscious when removed from his room.”

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“How do you know?”

“Because in this first letter, it says the means used will never be known by any one,—not even himself. So, as I imagined,

he was taken from his room,—from his home, while unconscious,—in a drugged sleep probably, and therefore, we must assume a secret entrance!”

“But there isn’t any!”

“There is! There’s got to be! They couldn’t take him through the door and fasten it behind them! They couldn’t get him out of that six inch opening at the top of a window! There *has* to be a secret way out! And, by George, I’m going to find it, if I have to tear the house down!”

“I’d rather you’d find Kim,” said Elsie, sadly.

“You poor child! Of course you would. Forgive me, I’m afraid I seem to think less of the quarry than the chase! But I don’t really. We’re going to get Kimball Webb back,—and we’re going to do it by means of the information you unconsciously achieved through this adventure of yours!”

“And you don’t think they mean to give him back after I did my part?”

“I do not! They look on you as an inexhaustible gold mine. They’ll wait a while and then make a stab for another big sum. Less maybe than the first, but exorbitant. Apparently they’re not afraid of anything or anybody. Clever chaps, but sure to come a cropper yet!”

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“How do you know?”

“Oh, they’re *too* cocksure; they’re bound to overlook or forget some little thing, and now I know there is a scent to be

followed, I'm all for following it. Now I know there's a sleeping dog, I shan't let him lie! Take that letter! The two letters from them! Look at 'em! No attempt at disguised writing. Plain, bold penmanship,—not printed nor words cut out from a newspaper, nor any of those hackneyed stunts."

"Well?"

"Well, that proves they were written by some one who never could by the remotest chance be suspected. Somebody so outside suspicion that they're willing to send his regular handwriting."

"Proving?"

"Proving a clever, bold master spirit, who stops at nothing and who knows just what he dare do and what not! I believe he fully intended to set Mr. Webb free on the receipt of the money,—then, when you proved such a ninny,—pardon me, it slipped out,—but you were! then, he concluded you were good for one more touch, at least."

"Well, if what I learned,—or made it possible for you to learn—restores Kimball Webb to me,—I'll never begrudge the money."

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"That is, if we get him home in time for the wedding."

"Oh, I don't care for the fortune—"

"Then, just how are you going to pay your indebtedness to the Hebrew gentleman?"

Elsie's face fell. "I hadn't thought of that!"

"It's a big thing to think of, Miss Powell! You can't get out of that obligation, you know. And while the receipt of your aunt's money would make it easy for you to pay it, yet if you are not married by your birthday—"

"And do you think if I had acted differently in any way, I could have held those men to their agreement?"

"I can't say positively,—but I do think so."

"What ought I to have done?"

"Demanded the person of Webb before you gave up the money,—or at least, asked for some assurance of his return, and asked when and where you might expect to see him."

"I was too frightened."

"I know you were, and they knew it, too."

"And anyway, even if they had made me promises then, they wouldn't have kept them."

"Likely not. Now, Miss Powell, here's a hard fact,—if Mr. Webb is not here by your birthday, you'll have to marry somebody,—in order to get that money so you can pay off that loan."

"What?" Elsie's face went white, and her eyes were filled with horror at the sudden realization of the truth of Coe's statement.

“I won’t,—I’ll kill myself first!”

“Oh, come now, don’t talk about killing. And that would be a cowardly thing, for your people would be hounded,—whether legally or not.”

“Mother and Gerty! Oh, no!”

“I don’t say they could be made to pay it, but there’d be some mighty unpleasant experiences coming to them! No, Miss Powell, don’t kill yourself,—surely a marriage with some man other than Mr. Webb would be a better fate than suicide!”

“No, not to my way of thinking. But I *must* think of my mother and sister! Oh, Mr. Coe, *do* help me! I think I shall go distracted!”

“Small wonder! You poor child! I wish, now, we had more time. The birthday is drawing perilously near. Something must be done. Of course, you can’t describe either man well enough for positive identification?”

“No; the taxi driver, the second one was a decent looking man, of medium build, with a grave, rather stern face. He was dark, I think,—with brownish hair. I saw his back mostly, and didn’t notice his face at all. I thought of him merely as a means to an end, and when the red car came along, I thought only of giving up the money. And the man in the red car wore a mask,—just a small one, but it covered his eyes and nose and came down partly over his mouth. But I noticed several gold filled teeth in the lower jaw. Unusually bright they were.”

“That would be a help, if we could get any other hint which way to look. But, as I said, the master mind behind all this scheme is so diabolically clever, that he has discounted all chances of discovery and, I’ve no doubt, feels secure from police and detectives.

“Now, I’m for spending another night in that room of Kimball Webb’s, and I’ll bet there’ll be no Poltergeist this time!”

“Why?”

“Why, don’t you see it! The arch villain,—I feel sure there’s one principal and two or more subordinates,—the chief devil, we’ll say, has a means of access to that room. It was he who was responsible for all the Poltergeist performances, he who pulled bedclothes off Webb, and later, off yours truly,—he who made a ghost appear,—”

“How?”

“Oh, lots of ways for that. I’ll tell you some other time. I must skittle, now. Go to sleep and dream of Webb’s return. But,—and this is very serious, Miss Powell,—if I don’t succeed in getting him back,—if the villains are scared off or any such matter, you must make up your mind to marry somebody else. For I should hate to see you in the clutches of that wretch of a Loan Broker! You’ve no idea what it would mean!”

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Coe went away, and Elsie went straight to her room. She denied admittance, when Gerty begged for it, and said she wanted to rest.

But rest, she did not; in fact she was such a victim of unrest, worry and anguish, that morning found her in a high fever and grave danger of nervous collapse.

The doctor came, a nurse was summoned and for a few days brain fever was feared. But Elsie's strong constitution and brave will power conquered, and she pulled through without the dreaded attack.

The doctor ordered, however, a change of scene, were it ever so small a journey, and after some discussion Elsie agreed to go to Atlantic City for a few days.

Coley Coe was the one who finally persuaded her to adopt the plan. He promised to keep in constant touch with her and tell her any bit of information he could gain. He said he would come down to see her as often as necessary for their mutual conference, and he felt sure that she would be better off in every way from her family for a time.

He had slept in Kimball Webb's room several nights, since, and as he anticipated, nothing at all had happened.

"You see," he said, "the rascal thought he could make it appear supernatural, now he knows I'm on his trail, he has given up that idea."

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"How does he know it?" asked Elsie. "Is he omniscient?"

"Nearly so! You may depend he knows every step that is taken toward his discovery! Why, Miss Powell, he's a man in the know, every way. He may not be one of Mr. Webb's own particular circle, socially, but he's enough in his set or in his

life somehow, to be in touch with everybody even remotely connected with the case.”

“Have the police done nothing at all?”

“Yes, they’re working at it. But their methods are different from mine, and while they’re all right, I doubt if they get anywhere. Sometimes I doubt if I will, either. Howsumever, you toddle along to Atlantic City with Nursey, and I’ll try to corral a nice young man for you to marry before the fatal thirtieth gets much nearer. You wasted some good time with that illness of yours,—though I don’t wonder at it, I’m sure.”

“Why, what could I have done,—if I hadn’t been ill?”

“Nothing definite, but I feel sure the abductors would have written you another of those good-looking notes, and if you had gone on another taxi ride, I should have been off in the offing somehow.”

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The nurse, a Miss Loring, was a pleasant, sympathetic girl, and as she of course knew all about Elsie’s tragedy from the papers, she was deeply interested in her young charge. She was experienced and capable and Elsie found herself really glad to go away with the kind and gentle nurse.

They were pleasantly located in The Turrets, a new hotel, and after twenty-four hours of rest and sea air Elsie felt wonderfully better.

“I’m not really ill, you know,” she said, and the nurse agreed.

“No, Miss Powell, but it was a real nervous breakdown, and

another will follow, unless you try to keep it off.”

“I’ll try,” and Elsie voluntarily became a biddable and obedient patient.

It was on a Thursday,—just one week before the thirtieth of June that the two went for a ride in the rolling chairs. Sometimes they rode together, but this day they chanced to take separate chairs.

The man who pushed Elsie’s was a big, husky chap, with an engaging smile. Miss Loring’s man was a slender youth, but of a wiry strength.

For a time they rode close together, chatting casually, and then as Elsie grew silent, the nurse ceased to bother her with talk.

Thus, it chanced, now and then, one chair or the other forged ahead, by reason of the traffic or danger of a collision.

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And one time, when Elsie’s chair was pushed ahead of Miss Loring’s it did not fall back beside the nurse’s chair as promptly as usual.

Elsie looked around for the nurse, but failed to see her.

“Where’s my companion?” she said over her shoulder; “don’t let us get separated.”

“No, ma’am,” smiled the big man who pushed her, and she settled back into her seat, thinking deeply.

A moment later, she looked around again, and still not seeing the nurse told the man to wait for her to come up to them.

“Why, the other lady is ahead, ma’am, I’ll catch up to her,” and he moved her chair more quickly.

Elsie looked about with a sudden thrill of alarm, and saw no sign of the nurse anywhere.

“Here we are, ma’am, she just went in here,” the man stopped the chair in front of a tall hotel.

“Went in here? What do you mean?”

“Yes’m, the lady who belongs with you,—the nurse, ma’am, she went in here in great haste and motioned for you to follow her. Better go in, ma’am.”

Bewildered, Elsie allowed herself to be assisted from the chair and ushered inside, not thinking at the moment that it was strange for the chair-pusher to be so officious.

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“What in the world did Miss Loring come in here for?” she asked, as they stood a moment in the hall.

“I don’t know, ma’am, but I just saw her go up in this elevator. She beckoned for you to follow.”

Elsie hesitated a moment, but it was a first class hotel, not a large building but a tall one, and handsomely appointed.

She got into the elevator, the man following, indeed, urging her in by a guiding hand on her elbow.

“Tenth,” he said to the elevator girl, and the car shot upward.

It was not until they were walking along the corridor on the tenth floor that Elsie felt a thrill of fear. What did it mean? Surely Miss Loring never came up here,—expecting Elsie to follow!

“Here you are,” and as they reached a closed door, the man swung it open and led Elsie firmly inside. “Sorry, Miss, but I’m only obeying orders. Good-bye.” He jerked off his cap, closed the door behind him and went away, leaving Elsie alone, in a strange room in a strange house.

She flew to the door, but she could not open it. She was trapped,—and she had walked into a trap, unresistingly, in broad daylight!

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What would Coley Coe say to her now?

She went to the window and looked out. The familiar sight of the ocean and the boardwalk cheered her. She didn’t know what she was to experience next, but she felt a sense of relief at sight of the throngs of people.

She was alone in the room for what seemed hours but was not more than twenty minutes when the door was flung open and in rushed,—not the man with the gold teeth, whom she had rather expected to see,—but Fenn Whiting.

“Oh, Elsie,” he cried, wildly, “am I in time?”

“Time for what?” she asked bewilderedly.

“Why, I met Miss Loring and she said she had lost you, and I chased madly about asking everybody questions, and I finally traced you here! Who brought you? What does it mean?”

“I know no more than you do, Fenn,” and so relieved at sight of a kind and familiar face was she, that Elsie burst into tears on his shoulder.

“There, there, darling,” he soothed her, “never mind,—it’s all right. Stay there, dearest, that’s your rightful place. I hope it will always be your haven in troublous times. Be quiet, my love, don’t try to talk yet,—and when you can, then tell me what happened.”

“Yes, I can talk! I’m all right,” and Elsie stopped crying; “I’m only mad! Why, Fenn, somebody trapped me into this room!”

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“Trapped you! What do you mean?”

“Just that!” and Elsie told how the chair-pusher had led her to the house, and urged her up in the elevator and into the room, and then had locked her in.

“Why, the door isn’t locked,” Whiting exclaimed, “I walked right in!”

“How did you know I was in here?”

“Asked the elevator girl,—she told me.”

“Well, the door was locked on this side,—must be a spring catch.”

“It must be, then,”—and Whiting went to examine it. “Yes, it is. Thank Heaven I could open it from outside. Well, dearest, we’ll go home, shall we?”

“Yes, I suppose so. But I want to know what it all means.”

“Didn’t you know your chair man?”

“No; we pick up different ones every time,—wherever we happen to be. He wasn’t a real one, of course. He must have been placed there, so I’d engage him, by those villains—”

“What villains? What are you talking about?”

Elsie bit her lip. She had promised Coe to reveal no slightest word regarding her experiences with the kidnappers of Webb, and now she had given a hint!

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“Nothing,” she said, “*nothing*, Fenn. Oh, I am ill, please take me home!”

“You’re not ill, Elsie, but you’re terribly frightened. Tell me what about and tell me who are the villains who are troubling you. Let me settle with them! I am your rightful protector. You are engaged to me, and in less than a week is our wedding day! Can’t we announce it, at once, and let me be known as your proper protector? You shall not leave this room until you say yes!”

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CHAPTER XV

IN UNIFORM

“Is that a threat?” Elsie turned on Whiting, with sudden rage.

“Not unless you choose to take it so.” But the man’s steely grey eyes were commanding rather than imploring, and his thin lips were set in a straight line that bespoke determination.

“Don’t make me threaten you, Elsie,—why should it be necessary? I love you and I want you,—but more than that I want your promise to marry me at once to save yourself from persecution and trouble. You were trapped here, you say,—you just referred to some villains who have, I must infer, already annoyed you. Why haven’t you told me of it?”

“Why should I? I *can’t* marry you, Fenn, after all. I know I said I would,—and you know what I said I’d do right afterward. But I can’t do that. Perhaps I’m too much of a coward, to take my own life,—perhaps it would be a cowardly thing to do, anyway. But, I can’t marry you—”

“You must, Elsie, you promised me—”

“Such promises have been broken before this! A consent to marry is not a marriage contract! Sue me for breach of promise, if you choose,—I refuse to marry you!”

Her voice rose at the last to an almost hysterical shriek. She was both nervous and frightened. The knowledge that she had been abducted,—for that was what it seemed to be,—scared her, and though grateful for Whiting’s rescue and his presence, yet she felt a strange fear of him, too.

“Let me go,” she said, at last, starting toward the door.

“No,” and Fenn strode across the room, locked the door and pocketed the key. “No, you shall not go until I have your promise,—and an unbreakable one this time. In fact, Elsie, I want you to marry me right now and here. I’ll arrange all details,—I have arranged most of them. Just consent, dearest, and then you’ll be mine to love and care for and to protect from those villains you speak of.”

“Fenn, are you crazy?”

“No, I’m not, but you’ll be, if you keep up this nervous tension you’re living under. Be guided by me, Elsie, darling; marry me out of hand, and we’ll go away to some beautiful, quiet spot, and all care shall be lifted from your dear shoulders.”

Elsie looked at him curiously.

“Suppose I agree to marry you the day *after* my birthday,” she said; “will that do?”

“Do perfectly, as far as the loss of your fortune is concerned. I’ve told you before I’m no fortune hunter. You *must* believe it by now. I’d rather marry you at once, for your sake, and for my own. But not for the sake of the

inheritance. So, promise me sacredly to marry me the day after your birthday, and I'll take you home now."

"Oh, no, Fenn, don't you see, if I marry you, it must be before the thirtieth, to get the money for Mother and Gerty. They'd never forgive me otherwise. And, too, why should I wait? I'd like the money all right,—if only I didn't have to marry to get it. What an awful will! And yet, it all seemed so lovely when I had Kimball with me!"

"It will seem just as lovely when I'm with you. Let me try, dear; give me a chance to make good! I'm not over conceited, but I'm sure I can make you happy. If you choose to marry me in time to get the money, we can do wonderful things! Take wonderful trips, see beautiful places,—but beautiful to me, only because you are with me!"

There was a deep thrill in his tones that moved Elsie by its genuine passion and devotion. She looked into his grey eyes,—their steely glint softened now, and read there a great unconquerable love for herself. Should she cast this aside for a chance, an uncertainty? She must get the money for her people,—she had decided on that,—and she felt it her duty to sacrifice herself for them. But, when she tried to say yes to Whiting's pleas, the word would not come.

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"I can't! Oh, Fenn, I can't!" she moaned. "I love Kimball,—oh, I love him *desperately*! I can never marry any one else,—I can't—I can't do it!"

"Hush, Elsie, don't sob so. Listen, dear; the time for that sort of thing is past. There are only seven days now to your

birthday; you can't wait till the last minute to decide. And if Webb had been coming back he would have been here before this. He will never come back,—I'm sure of it!"

"You can't be sure of it, Fenn; but will you arrange it this way,—you said you would, once. Let the wedding take place the day before my birthday, and if Kim comes home, let him be the bridegroom, and if not, I'll marry you."

"No! I'll not do that! You've played fast and loose with me long enough! I've stood for it because I love you so, and I want you so. But I won't be that sort of a cat's-paw! You'll say right now you'll marry me, or I'll drop out of it all, and you can marry anybody you choose to get your precious legacy!"

Whiting's face was distorted by passion and by rage at the idea of being baffled at the last. "I do not think for a minute that Webb would show up, but if he did, I'd not stand having my bride snatched from me at the very altar! No!"

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"Then, you *may* drop out!" Elsie's determination was as great as his own. "I refuse to promise. I'd rather marry Joe Allison, at the last minute, and so keep a chance for Kim, than to promise *you*, and have no chance at all!"

"Allison! You would, would you? We'll see about that!"

Whiting quite lost control of himself and flew into a veritable frenzy. "You'll marry me now, and here,—get that?"

Elsie was horror-stricken. Fenn's teeth were set together and his expression was that of a hungry, wild animal. She wasn't

afraid that he could force her to marry him, but she was afraid of what he might say or do if he were further defied.

“Fenn,” she said, gently, “Fenn, dear—”

“Don’t ‘Fenn, dear’ me unless you mean it! Don’t think you can placate me by soft words that mean nothing! Will you marry me, *now*?”

“I will not,” Elsie’s hauteur was the last straw.

“Then, you’ll stay here until you will!”

Whiting flung himself into a chair, and looked at her as if he held the whip-hand.

“What do you mean?” Elsie said, icily.

“These are my rooms. You are locked in here with me, alone. How long must you stay here before you decide it’s wiser to be my wife than—”

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The look the girl gave him made him quail.

“Elsie,” he said, more gently.

“Hush! Don’t dare to speak to me again. Let me out!”

She flew to the door, but it was locked, the key in Whiting’s pocket, or the spring catch holding it, she didn’t know which. She pounded on the door, with her soft hands, but made little commotion that way.

“Useless, my dear,” Whiting said, calmly. “These rooms are on a wing containing but few guests. Nobody will hear you. Pound away, if you like.”

This wasn’t true; as a matter of fact, Whiting was very much afraid somebody would hear her, but he deemed this the best way to stop her,—and it was.

Elsie believed him and quit pounding. Nor did she scream. An idea had come to her. Whiting had said rooms. Therefore there was more to the suite than the one they were in. Covertly she glanced at the doors, and decided that while one rather narrow one was doubtless a closet, the wide one, the other side of the room, probably opened into an adjoining room, which was likely to give on the hall.

At any rate, it was worth trying.

Cleverly, she seemed not to be noticing these details, but sat, her handkerchief to her eyes, apparently subdued and dismayed. And, in fact she was both, but not to the point of surrender, as she appeared to Whiting’s anxious watchfulness.

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Cautiously looking about, with seemingly a vacant stare, she saw many little personal belongings, that convinced her the room was Whiting’s sitting room. Doubtless the next was his bedroom. All the same, she determined to dash through it in an attempt at freedom. If she were quick, and the other hall door not locked, she could get to the hall,—while if she were trapped in the other room, her plight would be no worse than it was at present.

She rose and walked disconsolately about,—looked from the windows, stared, unseeing, at a picture on the wall,—and generally appeared to be aimlessly wandering, while she thought matters over.

Whiting watched her, but so cannily did Elsie mislead his thoughts, that he didn't notice she drew nearer and nearer the bedroom door.

At last, she was almost against it, her eyes fastened on a small clock which stood on a table at the opposite side of the room.

“What time is it?” she said, dully, as if her decision depended on the flight of the hours.

The ruse succeeded. He followed the direction of her straining eyes, and looked at the little clock instead of taking out his own watch.

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Like a flash, Elsie tore open the door, found that it opened into a bedroom, with a hall door, and crossing the room in the fewest possible steps, wrenched open the hall door. It was not locked, and she flew through it and down the corridor toward the elevators, of which there were two side by side.

Elsie pushed the bell so violently, that the car came up immediately and she sprang into it, just as Whiting came racing down the hall after her.

He rang, a long steady ring, and though Elsie's prayers persuaded the girl in the car with her not to go up again, the other car shot past them flying upward.

And now Elsie achieved a master-stroke. Thinking swiftly, she knew Whiting would make the other car drop without a stop, and would await her on the ground floor.

Determined to outwit him, she ordered the girl to stop between floors and change gowns with her.

Willing enough, when Elsie offered her all the money in her bag, and also told her she would be aiding a crime if she refused, the little elevator girl slipped out of her uniform, Elsie dropped off her own gown and in two minutes they were transformed, even the cap of the girl in place of Elsie's pretty hat, and the hat on the other's head.

A little bewildered the girl then ran her car on down, without stop.

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At the ground floor, acting at Elsie's orders, the other girl stepped from the car in a furtive, hunted manner, and ran swiftly down a long cross hall,—Whiting, full tilt after her.

Elsie, meanwhile, stepped briskly out the front door, sprang into a taxicab and was whirled away.

Elsie's spirits rose. She had outwitted Fenn Whiting, and she had escaped from a situation more dangerous than that of the deserted taxicab of a few days before.

She went straight back to the hotel where she and the nurse had been staying. Here the desk clerk told her that the nurse had packed up everything and had returned to New York.

Elsie was amazed. She trusted the nurse absolutely, but she

now began to fear her sincerity. To the poor girl it seemed as if there were nobody in whom she could place confidence. And there was the ever dreadful question of the fortune. Had it not been for her insistent family, she would have given up all thought of the money and would have run away to hide by herself until her birthday had passed.

But, she argued, this was not the way to feel. For she must be at home, in case Kimball should somehow miraculously appear.

Unable to fathom the meaning of the nurse's departure, though since she had taken all their luggage, Elsie couldn't think she was honest, she concluded to go right back to New York herself.

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She couldn't hope to escape Fenn Whiting's presence much longer, for having learned the trick played on him, he would of course come at once to The Turrets.

Moreover, Elsie was attracting curious looks, and even disapproving ones by reason of her standing about in the hall, dressed in the uniform of an elevator girl! She wondered what the poor girl was doing, who now wore her clothes. Perhaps she would lose her position! Elsie determined to look after her as soon as she could secure and count on her own safety.

And now a new dilemma presented itself. She had no money!

All she had carried with her, in her handbag, she had given to the girl in the elevator, thinking she would go back to the hotel where she had her check book.

But that was gone with her trunks. Even the unpaid cabman was already clamouring for his fare!

“Why did Miss Loring say she left?” she asked the clerk.

“She said you had sent her word you had already gone home, and she was to follow at once,” he returned, glancing at her severely. “She packed quickly and caught the first train she could get.”

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“She paid the bill?”

“Yes, in full to the time of her leaving.”

“I will ask you then, to pay this cabman, and let me have money enough to get to New York. I will send you a check from there.”

But the desk clerk didn't seem to care for this plan at all. He paid the cabman, who was becoming a nuisance, but he declined to advance money to such an erratic person as the lady before him seemed to be.

She had made no explanation of her strange garb, and his manner had so roused her indignation that she kept her own counsel.

But she was at her wits' end. It was after four in the afternoon and a hotel who wouldn't lend a few dollars, would doubtless object to her re-registering there, with no money, and in most eccentric costume.

As she thought it over a man approached and asked if he

might be of assistance.

It was the man of the gold-filled teeth!

Any fear of him she might have felt vanished in a strange sense of seeing an old friend! For so helpless and friendless was the poor child that even this man, presumably one of the “villains,” seemed a godsend!

And he was polite and deferential.

“Well,” she said, her poise returning, “all things considered, I think I am privileged to ask you for the loan of a few dollars.”

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“I’ll do better than that,” he said, with a really cordial smile, “I’ll escort you back to New York. I’m going myself, on the four-forty-five. And you need have no fear,” he said, coming nearer. “I’ve no reason to wish you any harm. I’ll deliver you safe and sound at your own home on Park Avenue.”

There was something about him that inspired confidence. And Elsie was tired, faint and exhausted. She thought this plan offered her, however it might turn out, a lesser evil than to stay alone at The Turrets, even if this new friend gave her money, for there she was still in the vicinity of Fenn Whiting. Indeed, he was liable to appear at any minute.

She made up her mind, quickly.

“I’ll go with you,” she said. “Will you lend me enough money to buy some sort of a large cloak or cape, and a hat?”

“Yes,” he said, and he looked at her uniform with the queerest glance.

But it was not to be wondered at, doubtless he was striving to keep from bursting into laughter. The cocky little cap, above Elsie’s lovely troubled face was a picture!

So, the strangely assorted pair took a cab, stopped at a goods emporium and Elsie procured a decent hat and a large full cape, and then they reached the station just in time to take the desired train.

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In the car he left her to herself, and went away to the smoker.

He was most deferential, most polite.

“And why shouldn’t he be?” Elsie asked herself. “I’ve paid him,—or his gang fifty thousand dollars,—surely they owe me something! I’ve a mind to ask him something about Kim,—he seems so nice.”

But thoughts of Coley Coe kept her silent on any save the most casual subjects.

She felt, during the ride to New York, as if she ought to plan some way of trailing the gold-toothed man after he left her. But how could she do it? Vague thoughts of telegraphing from the moving train,—of having policemen meet her at the station,—all sorts of plans went through her mind, but none were practicable.

So she determined to talk more with the man and find out anything she might, that way, and then do the best she could

to get Coe quickly, as soon as she was safely at home.

For she dreaded any further abduction or trapping,—and she longed only to be at home once more and safe from impending danger.

As they neared the big station the gold-tooth man returned.

“Sure,” he replied to her request, “I’ll tell you my name. It’s Pike. Richard Pike. And now, miss, you’re bound for home?”

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“Yes, as soon as I can get there. Please leave me at the platform, I can get a taxi myself.”

“Desert you at the last post? No indeed, ma’am. Don’t be afraid,—I’m not going to carry you off!” He laughed good-naturedly, and again Elsie’s fears were drowned in a sense of his honest intention to treat her with courtesy.

So they walked to the taxicab, and after she got into one he followed.

So amazed was she at this, that she made a protest.

“Oh, it’s right on my way,” he said, “so why pay two fares?”

The ride was not long, but when the cab stopped, it was not at Elsie’s home.

It was at a house, a fine-looking brownstone house, that had the appearance of being closed for the summer. The windows were boarded up, the front door likewise, and all was silent

and still.

“Where’s this?” Elsie asked, refusing to get out.

“Hush!” and Pike put his finger to his lip. “The taxi driver is a bad one! Get out, miss, quick!”

Scared at his serious tone, and secret manner, Elsie got out, through sheer force of the other’s will, and in a moment the fare was paid and the cab had disappeared down the street.

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“Now, miss,” and the hitherto kind voice had a hard note in it, “you’ll stop in here for a minute on your way home. Don’t refuse, now, it wouldn’t be healthy!”

The cold little ring of an automatic pressed against Elsie’s temple, and with a glance at Pike’s face, she knew in an instant she was trapped again!

Almost without volition, for this new terror seemed to deprive her of her senses, Elsie stumbled along, through the gate the man opened, and which led to the area entrance.

Through the basement door, they entered the house, and in the doorway, Elsie was met by a woman, a decent, middle-aged body, who took the fainting girl to her breast.

“There now,” she said, in the kindest tones, “there now, miss, brace up. It’s faint you are, dearie. Sit there, now, and let me fix you up.”

She bustled about and gave Elsie a glass of warm milk, then

taking off her shoes and her wraps, she laid her down on a wide couch in the front one of the basement rooms.

“Sakes alive! what’s she got on a uniform for?”

“I don’t know,” Pike returned, but he winked at the woman to make her refrain from further queries.

Elsie was exhausted, but not to the point of going to sleep.

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After a second glass of milk and some bread and fruit, she was quite herself again, and, buoyed up by excitement and anger was ready for combat.

“What does it all mean?” she asked the woman, thinking it wiser not to show her indignation at first.

“Don’t ask me, miss, *I don’t know*,” the woman returned.

“That’s right, miss,” Pike broke in; “my wife don’t know anything about it all,—and neither do I. We’re paid tools,—that’s all we are. Now, there’s the matter in a nutshell. We’re paid to look after you good and proper. We’ll do it, too, and if you let us, we’ll be kind and gentle with you. But if you force us to it, we may have to use stronger means. I’d be sorry to lay a hand on you, miss, and I hope to goodness you won’t make it necessary,—but I’ll say straight out, you’ve got to obey our orders.”

“I’ve no objection, so long as you’re merely taking care of me, as you say,” Elsie returned, coolly. She felt a conviction that her best plan with these people was to placate them all in

all possible ways.

It could do no good to combat them, and might do great harm.

“Who pays you?” she asked, so casually, she hoped for an answer.

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“We’re forbidden to tell,” Pike said, simply. “And, you must see, miss, questions will not get you anywhere, for we’re paid to keep our mouths shut, so it stands to reason we’re going to do it.”

“Of course,” Elsie agreed. “But suppose I pay you better, far better than your present paymaster?”

The woman looked up quickly, her small black eyes shining with cupidity, but Pike said in a voice that rang with truth:

“I wouldn’t *dare*, miss. I wouldn’t dare even *listen* to you!”

“Oh,” she said, “you’re afraid of *him*—” and she whispered, —“the master mind!”

“You said it!” Pike exclaimed. “Nobody dares stand up against *him*!”

And at that moment a shout rang through the house. The two Pikes turned white and fairly trembled with terror, but Elsie cried out,

“That’s the voice of Kimball Webb!”

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CHAPTER XVI

A SAFE MAN

There was consternation in the Powell household when Miss Loring arrived without Elsie.

“Where is she?” cried Gerty.

“Here, isn’t she?” returned the bewildered nurse.

“No, of course not! Why did you think so?”

And then Nurse Loring told how she had received a message from Elsie saying she had been obliged to return to New York suddenly, that she had gone with some friends, and for Miss Loring to follow as soon as she could pack off.

“Did she write you a note?” asked Mrs. Powell.

“No; the word was brought by a man.”

“What sort of a man?”

“A decent appearing person, who said he was the chauffeur of Miss Powell’s friends with whom she had gone.”

“What did he look like?”

“Ordinary looking, like a servant, but respectful and well-mannered, and he had a great many gold filled teeth. Do you know him?”

“No; and I think there’s something wrong. Elsie never would have done such a thing. She hasn’t any friends down there with their car,—that I know of. Has she, mother?”

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“No,” Mrs. Powell agreed. “There is something wrong.” She clasped her hands nervously. “Do send for Mr. Coe, Gerty.”

Coley Coe came on the jump, and listened to the tale with a grave face.

“I should say there was!” he exclaimed, “something *very* wrong! That girl has been kidnapped and the villains mean to keep her till after her birthday! I’ve been fearing some such performance, but I thought she was safe with the nurse.”

Miss Loring spoke quickly: “Oh, I was so careful of her! I never let her out of my sight for a moment, but if I had known there was any danger of this sort, I should have been doubly careful! Why didn’t you tell me?”

“My own suspicions were not definite enough,” said Coe. “Nobody blames you, Miss Loring, you could not help it. In the crowd, the trick was easily turned. Now, Mrs. Powell, don’t cry so; you need fear no harm for your daughter, no bodily harm, I mean. She will likely be treated with greatest consideration and kindness,—but—”

“But I don’t understand,” Gerty looked doubtful,—“why should any one want to kidnap Elsie?”

“It’s a moil, Mrs. Seaman,” Coe said, shaking his long thatch out of his eyes. “I’m not yet discouraged, but I’m getting to see that we’re up against not only a very clever villain but an utterly unscrupulous one.”

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“Aren’t all villains that?”

“Not entirely. Some draw the line at certain crimes. But this master-fiend, for that’s what he is—”

“Do you know him?” Gerty asked eagerly.

“No, I don’t! I know so much about him,—I’ve so many sidelights on him, so much evidence against him, and yet I lack the one connecting link that would give me his identity. I have my suspicions—but, oh, there were some things I wanted to ask Miss Powell!”

“Perhaps I can tell you, she talked over everything with me.”

“No; I only wanted her to tell me over again the little things she picked up that first morning at the Webbs. You know the white marks on the floor? Well, they’re explained. Miss Webb was in the room that evening, but it was before her brother came in, and she, foolishly enough! tried to conceal the fact, lest she be suspected of having Kimball Webb in hiding!”

“She was suspected.”

“Yes, but she isn’t now. At least, not by me. That speech, ‘if it should be!’ referred to spooks; and I had her trailed, you know, and though she was reported as going

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on mysterious secret errands, they were,—what do you suppose?”

“Oh, what?”

“Trips to a Beauty Doctor!”

“Poor Henrietta! It’s pathetic, but I can’t help laughing. And Mrs. Webb, she went on secret errands, too, didn’t she?”

“Yes; and hers were to *séances* with people that she didn’t want to acknowledge as her friends! Common people,—as mediums usually are, and some cronies that Mrs. Webb only cultivated in the pursuit of her psychic researches! No, there’s no reason to suspect that the mother or sister know where Webb is. Nor, do I see any chance of finding his hiding place before the thirtieth. After that, I’m very sure he will be freed.”

“But now Elsie’s gone, too!”

“Yes, and I’ve no doubt, taken away by the same people.”

A few questions asked of the nurse gave Coe no information concerning the man with the gold teeth.

“Oho!” he cried; “it is the same gang, then! We *must* get them! Do describe him further, Miss Loring!”

But her detailed description was only such as called up a picture of an average looking man, large, strong, with dark hair and eyes, healthy colour, and with no striking characteristic but the unusual number of gold filled teeth in the front part of his lower jaw.

“Enough to identify him,” said Coe, “but not enough to find him! We could scour the dentists’ records, but we’d have to visit thousands, and then, maybe, fail because the work was done in another city! If we only had one more line on him.”

“Maybe he’s the Sherman’s man,” mused Gerty.

“What! What’s that?” said Coe, quickly.

“Why, Elsie picked up a paper in Kim’s room, and it was one of those little toothpick wrappers, tissue, you know, and it was stamped ‘Sherman’s.’”

“Yes, the big restaurant.”

“Yes; now Kimball Webb never went to Sherman’s in his life! I know he didn’t, and Elsie says she knows he didn’t. He isn’t that sort of a man.”

“Why, Sherman’s is all right.”

“Yes, for the class of people that like it. But Kim is fastidious and Elsie says she knows of his prejudice against Sherman’s. Of course she’s been out with him so much she knows his tastes.”

“And this paper was in Webb’s room! When?”

“Elsie found it the day after or a few days after his disappearance. She threw it away—”

“That doesn’t matter, the fact of its being there is the important thing! You see, the man who got in the room may

have dropped it—”

“How could any man get in the room! You’re crazy!”

“Deed I’m not! Some man *did* get in that room, and carry off Kimball Webb while Webb was unconscious! Now, you put that away in your mind, and keep it there, for it’s true!”

“How did he get in?”

“Mrs. Seaman, if any one ever asks me that question again, I’m going to run away! I don’t know *how* he got in,—but, he *did* get in,—and, if this interests you, I’m going to find out how he got in! But even more than that, I want to find the man! That’s the objective point. To find how he got in, would be fearfully interesting and would gratify my overweening curiosity,—I think overweening is the word for it! Anyhow, it’s the biggest order of curiosity I’ve ever experienced in my career! But, overweeninger yet, is my desire to get the man! It’s an obsession with me,—a craze! My fingers itch for him,—and I feel he’s so near—and yet so far! But this little old toothpick paper may be a clue! You know what flimsy little bits they are, how they cling in a pocket and are easily flirled out with a handkerchief or such matter!”

“Wouldn’t it be a good deal of a coincidence if your man, a frequenter of Sherman’s, left the paper,—as one might a visiting card?”

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“Don’t be sarcastic, Mrs. Seaman!” Coe smiled good-naturedly. “And the coincidence wouldn’t be so extraordinarily strange! They say, a man can’t enter and leave a room, without making half a dozen at least ineffaceable

marks of his presence there. Now, the only reason I doubted the entrance of my man, as you call him, was the fact that I hadn't been able to find any trace,—not even the slightest, of his visit there. That made me think Webb might have been lured out,—stop! don't you dare ask me how he got out. We know he did get out,—and as I told you I'm going to find out how. Well, this little paper changes the whole map of my cogitations. Now, do you know of anybody who does go to Sherman's?"

"I do not. My friends don't care for the place."

"Probably not; but I'll bet it's the great little old rendezvous of Friend Gold-teeth, and his boss."

"Oh, he isn't the principal, then?"

"Surely not! The man higher up is a big-brained chap, and working for big stakes! Sherman's! Ho, ho! Pardon my unholy glee, but I'm 'way up over this thing! And now I'll skip. Look for me when you see me!"

Coe went away and went straight to Wallace Courtney's.

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He began by saying frankly, "Do you want to help me to find Kimball Webb, or don't you?"

"I do," returned Courtney, "I'm not a heathen! I'm working on my hay while the sun shines, but I'd do anything in my power to find Webb even if it meant the failure of my masterpiece. You know, I think he had a spell of divine afflatus and went away to finish his own play by himself."

“Leaving a bride, practically at the altar!”

“Oh, I think Elsie’s in the secret. She knows where he is! I shouldn’t wonder if they were married before he went,—that would make her fortune all right.”

“Well, what do you think of this? Elsie’s kidnapped too, now!”

“That carries out my theory. She’s gone to him.”

“Oh, you’re impossible! Well, tell me this, and I’ll scat. Do you know anybody who frequents Sherman’s? Or who goes there occasionally?”

“I should hope not! Why?”

“Oh, don’t be so supercilious. Sherman’s is decent if it is popular.”

“I know it. I’ve been there. It’s just a big, gay dance hall. No, I don’t number any of its regular patrons among my friends. Kimball Webb was not one, if that’s what you want to know.”

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“That isn’t what I want to know. Don’t any of your crowd go there at times,—anybody who was at Webb’s dinner?”

“Why, Coe, I’d tell you if I could. I suppose every chap at that dinner has been inside of Sherman’s, but I doubt if many of them have been more than once or twice as a mere matter of curiosity. If that’s all you’re asking me, clear out, I’m busy.”

Coe was about to clear out, when Lulie Lloyd stopped him.

“I know somebody who goes to Sherman’s a lot,” she said; “he sometimes takes me there.”

“Thank you, Miss Lloyd,” Coe said, politely, “but I mean some one of Mr. Webb’s friends.”

“So do I,” said the girl, her colour rising and her expression a little defiant.

“Oh,” and Coley Coe began to see things, as in a glass darkly. “Some one who was at Mr. Webb’s dinner?”

“Yes,” she spoke almost sullenly.

“May I ask his name?”

“I’ll tell you, but I don’t want Mr. Courtney to hear.”

“I don’t want to,” the busy playwright returned, and Lulie Lloyd leaned over and whispered a name into the ear of Coleman Coe.

He nodded his head, as one who was not overwhelmingly surprised, and continued in a low tone, “And do you know a man with ever so many gold filled teeth in his lower jaw?”

“Do I?” she cried. “Why, he’s that man’s valet!”

“And a friend of yours?”

“He was! He isn’t now!”

“Ah,—he went back on you?”

“He did all of that,—and then some!”

And then Lulie Lloyd looked frightened, looked as if she regretted deeply what she had involuntarily blurted out, and she returned to her typewriter and began madly pounding the keys.

But Coe had learned enough.

He left quickly, and hopping on a street car, he arrived at the house where lived the man whose name Lulie had whispered to him. The man whose valet had the auriferous teeth.

The man he asked for was out, and though not an easy matter, Coe succeeded by dint of threats and bribes to gain admission to the room where, he said, he would await his host’s return.

Left alone Coleman Coe proceeded to ransack the desk, which stood, carelessly open.

He ran rapidly through a sheaf of letters and bills, now and then shaking his feathery forelock wildly, in mad bursts of satisfaction.

The bills, paid and unpaid, were illuminating. The letters even more so, and Coe grew more and more beaming of face as he proceeded.

He kept a wary eye on the door, and at last finding an old

letter that specially interested him, he read it three times, though this was the quickly mastered gist of it:

“I think Simeon Breese will be a *safe* man for you.”

The address of the said Simeon followed, and this short bit of information seemed to afford Coley the deepest pleasure.

The underscoring of the word safe, particularly entertained him, and he laughed as at a great joke.

“I knew it!” he cried, though silently. “I knew it!”

Then, replacing such papers as he had visibly disarranged, Coe sauntered forth and left the house.

“Tell him I couldn’t wait any longer,” he said, casually to the door man and went his way.

His way took him to the establishment of Simeon Breese, Safe Maker.

“You make safes?” was Coe’s totally unnecessary query.

“Yes, sir,” admitted Breese, “what can I do for you?”

“I don’t exactly want a safe,” Coe said, with what was meant to be an ingratiating wink. “I,—that is,” he looked embarrassed, “I want a sort of a—well, a very confidential matter.”

“I don’t understand, sir.”

There was no invitation to proceed, but Coe went on: "I want a secret entrance built—"

"Whatever made you come to me on such an errand, then? My business is building safes,—not building means to rob them."

"Nonsense, that's not the idea. I merely want a private passage from one room to another in my house,—"

"You're way off, sir. You've come to the wrong place, entirely. Good morning, sir."

"But,—stay,—wait a minute. I'm recommended here by—"
And Coe whispered in the ear of Breese the same name Lulie Lloyd had whispered to him.

Breese looked utterly blank.

"Don't know your friend, sir; never heard of him. Good morning!"

This last dismissal was accompanied by a glance that meant a very definite invitation to leave, and as there seemed small use in staying Coe left. But he was disappointed. He had hoped to get a line on the secret entrance which he knew gave into Kimball Webb's room.

One forlorn hope came into his breast. He would try to get hold of the valet, the gold-toothed valet, who had played fast and loose with Lulie Lloyd. This showed him to be a man of not unimpeachable morals, and he might be useful.

He went boldly back to the house he had so recently left, and inquired if his friend had yet returned.

“No, sir,” the imperturbable doorman informed him.

“Then is his man in,—his valet?”

“Bass? That he ain’t. He’s left.”

“He has? How long ago?”

“Oh, a matter of a couple of months or more now.”

Ah! Not a great discrepancy between that and the date of Kimball Webb’s disappearance!

“Funny looking man, Bass,” Coe said, casually.

“All right, I should say.”

“Queer teeth, at least.”

“Yes,” the other admitted. “I shouldn’t care to carry round such an El Dorado, but Bass is rather proud of it.”

“Well, we’re all more or less proud of something. You don’t know where Bass hangs out now?”

“I don’t.”

Coe sighed and turned away.

He had so little to work on. That ridiculous toothpick paper,—Webb might easily have dropped that himself.

Many a man would go to Sherman's without the knowledge of his sweetheart, and think it no crime.

And the safe builder seemed to dwindle to even greater insignificance. For if he hadn't built the secret entrance which *had* to be in existence, who had, and how was Coe to find him.

There was only one answer to it all. Coleman Coe was up against the necessity,—the actual bare necessity of finding that entrance for himself. No matter whether he *could* do it, or not, it had to be done, and he had to do it.

As he had previously argued, the finding of the secret didn't prove the perpetrator of it, nor did it produce Kimball Webb,—but these things might result from the discovery of how he was taken away, and anyway, there was no other way to find out.

The master mind of the villain who took him was so clever, so diabolically canny, there was nothing to work on or to work with.

And, now, Elsie was gone,—there was added necessity for hasty action and result.

The motive, Coe had long ago decided, was the fortune. Just how that affected the case he wasn't sure, but he felt an unshakable conviction that had it not been for the freak will left by Miss Elizabeth Powell there would have been no disappearance of either the bridegroom or the bride.

This naturally turned his mind to Joe Allison. But he

had long ago ceased to suspect Joe. He had, at first, but now he knew the chap, and it was impossible to connect him with such a crime as abduction to gain a fortune. Allison was money-mad, that Coe admitted,—but, well, he wouldn't put it on Joe till he had to.

He decided he'd go to the room of Kimball Webb and once again make those hopeless rounds of walls, ceiling and floor; doors and windows; chimney and bathroom window, which were all the points to be examined.

He asked Miss Webb a few preliminary questions. How long had they lived in the house, and such things as that.

This led nowhere. How could it possibly help to know they had lived there six years; to know where they had lived in Boston; to know when Kimball first met Elsie Powell; to learn why the Webbs didn't fully approve of the match; all these things were as chaff which didn't even show which way the wind blew.

And Miss Webb's attitude had greatly changed since the last time he talked with her.

She had now begun to despair of ever seeing her brother again.

With a womanly injustice she was inclined to blame Elsie for the whole trouble, but when Coe told her that Elsie, too, was mysteriously missing, she saw the thing as he did, that a gang or at least a pair of able and ingenious villains were at work.

Coe was tempted to tell her of the valet, Bass, and his master, but concluded to wait a little longer.

He asked for a talk with the two men servants, who had broken into Kimball's room that morning, and this being willingly granted, he asked them again of any point or hint they might remember that hadn't yet been brought.

"No, sir," said Hollis thoughtfully, "I've had all sorts of notions, but they've all been wrong, and sometimes I'm ready to agree with Mrs. Webb herself that it's the spirits as done it."

"Rubbish!" Coe observed, and Hollis really agreed, though he had no wiser suggestion to make.

"How long have you been here?" Coe asked, idly.

"Two years, sir."

"And have you seen or heard anything mysterious?"

"No; not myself, sir. But I've heard the other servants' stories."

"So have I," groaned Coe, wearily. "I've heard the tales of moans and groans that grew weirder each time,—the tales did, I mean. But I've heard nothing definite. Have you, Oscar?"

"No, sir," said the chauffeur, a taciturn chap. "Nor I've never seen anything myself, nor heard anything. But, Mr. Coe, everybody laughs at this, so I haven't harped on it. You know I did smell bananas as I opened that door, that

morning, and I'd swear to that on a stack of Bibles!"

"Bananas!"

"Yes, sir. And Mr. Kimball Webb didn't care for bananas. I mean he wouldn't think of having them in his bedroom to eat! He never did things like that. Now, doesn't that smell mean something?"

"It's queer, but I can't see any indicative evidence in it."

"No, sir, I s'pose not. But I'd like to know what made it. Maybe ghosts eat bananas."

CHAPTER XVII

GILDED ACORNS

And so again Coe went over the room.

“Lord!” he cried, “I’m sick and tired of looking for a mousehole when the mousehole isn’t here! Not a baby mouse could get in or out of this box,—let alone a swashbuckler villain, carrying a drugged unconscious man on his back!”

For that was the way Coe visualized it,—he felt sure the abductor had entered by his confounded secret entrance, had drugged or chloroformed the sleeping Webb, and had returned the way he came, carrying his prey.

For how else could it have been done? And anyway details didn’t matter. Even if Webb had been cajoled,—say by a tale of Elsie in immediate danger,—or her sudden illness,—even so, the secret entrance must have afforded the way in.

And so the secret entrance had to be found, and Coe vowed he wouldn’t leave the room until he left through that entrance itself!

Patiently he went over the walls again,—the floor, the ceiling, noting unmarred decorations that precluded an opening of any sort.

But this he soon finished and set himself to work with his brain, thinking up some other type of entrance than any he had yet thought of.

“Suppose the whole side wall swings out,” he thought. “Suppose this wall between his house and the next—swings like a door,—no, that’s too wide,—suppose it swings on a pivot,—a central pivot,—oh, shucks, it couldn’t! Well, suppose the whole hall door came out in one piece,—frame and all. Suppose the frame is hinged on like a door,—then the bolted door wouldn’t matter.”

But this ingenious plan likewise failed to work, because the door wasn’t built that way. It was just an ordinary, regular made and regular hung door.

The windows, too, failed to prove themselves freak windows of any sort but insisted on remaining the regulation, prosaic windows of commerce.

The chimney was the only outlet left.

Coe had peered up this so many times; poked up it with so many rods and poles; invented and discarded so many clever schemes of how it might work; that he felt no hope of further light from this source.

He glared at the great fireplace with an air of righteous indignation. Why,—oh, why couldn’t it obligingly turn out to be some sort of a mechanism that would solve his puzzle.

He scrutinized every inch of it.

All he got for his trouble was the conviction that certain parts of it had been recently touched up with gilding,—where the gilt iron filigree work decorated the edges of the wide opening. Moreover, the newer gilding was of a slightly different shade and lustre from the old.

Of course, all this meant, that in their housekeeping zeal the Webbs or their servants had touched up some points of the oak leaf design that needed such renovation.

They were here and there among the leaves and acorns that surrounded the opening of the fireplace.

Grasping at any straw Coe went downstairs and made inquiry, learning that there had been no such gilding done.

Coe went back and sat looking at the oak leaves.

It seemed more conspicuous now,—indeed, he wondered how he could have missed seeing it sooner.

Then he realized it was not really conspicuous,—it had doubtless been done last housecleaning time.

But it was too bright for that theory. No, sir, that gilt had been applied to those scratched or marred leaves lately, and it had been done carefully and well. Done by somebody who knew how,—not a professional decorator, necessarily, but some one who knew about that sort of thing.

Why, he used to do it himself, when he lived at home,—and he remembered even yet the way the gold paint got all over his fingers and the way it smelled of—

Great Scott! of bananas!

It did! Every metal paint he had ever used,—gilt, bronze, copper,—all smelled of bananas,—acetate of amyl,—or something like that!

Had Oscar's reference to a banana odour proved valuable after all?

And what could it mean? Why, the answer flashed across his eager brain,—it meant that the entrance,—the secret entrance, was somehow connected with that fireplace,—that the kidnapper had scratched the gilt leaves so badly when making his exit, that he had, to escape detection, to retouch the marred places!

To work uninterruptedly Coe went and closed the room door and locked it.

Then he sat down on the floor in front of the fireplace, and pondered.

Not the chimney. No. He had long ago discarded that as a course of exit. But the fireplace, somehow.

He peered and scrutinized; he fingered and pinched; he reasoned and cogitated; and at last his patient effort was rewarded by seeing the tiniest bit of rust or rubbed enamel that looked as if it *might* mean a hidden spring.

And it did! Careful manipulation, gentle urging, without forcing made the fireplace give up its secret at last, and the whole grate with its back piece, all, swung round on a

pivot into the house next door, and the fireplace that belonged in there swung into Coleman Coe's astonished ken!

The back of the fireplace, was a mere gate,—hung on a pivot, instead of on side hinges, and it swung as easily as if recently oiled, which it doubtless had been.

Half dazed, Coe went through the opening,—a wide enough one, as the grates were exceedingly shallow, though very broad.

He found himself in a pleasant bedroom, almost a duplicate of Webb's own, as to size, shape and arrangement.

The secret entrance was found at last!

Eagerly Coe examined every part of it. The grates in the two rooms were alike,—the Webb one much cleaner and brighter than the other.

Coe's mind flew back to the story of the servant or somebody who smelled a newly kindled fire without reason therefor.

It was, of course, because some hand had turned the revolving grates around when there was or had been a fire in one side and not in the other.

"Slick!" mused Coe, admiringly. "Very slick!"

And then, he remembered the Poltergeist! What easier than to enter noiselessly, pull the bedclothes off the drowsy sleeper, and with a toss of the sheets over the victim's face, escape again before discovery could be made?

And this was the way Kimball Webb had been abducted. The kidnapper had come through the opening, had chloroformed Webb, and had carried him back with him. The grate opening was wide enough for that. Or, would be if the victim were, say, dragged through after the abductor.

Oh, it was possible—possible? Why, it was what had been done! The mystery of the disappearance was explained as to means.

And the ghost that had been meant to frighten Coley Coe and had only roused his hilarity.

That too, had been prepared and exhibited by the same clever Artful Dodger responsible for all the rest.

Yes, the discovery explained everything. And, the rogue, having so marred the gilt acorns, that attention must necessarily be drawn to them, had crept back and touched them up with gold paint,—that smelled of bananas! Thus overreaching his own cleverness!

Good old Oscar! To remember to mention the banana odour!

Hesitatingly, Coe went through to the other house.

He looked about the room. Unused, evidently. Dust on furniture, windows closed. Dry atmosphere and blinds drawn.

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He switched on a light. That had not been cut off.

Then he remembered the people were away and the house was

closed. Well, one of them could have returned from his summer resort to carry out his fell purpose, and return again. Who were the people?

Oh, yes, the Marsden St. Johns. Coe didn't know one iota about them, but he proposed to find out.

He tried to learn the character of its inhabitant from the room itself.

But it seemed to him the abode of a lady. There were no clothes in the wardrobe, but a stray hairpin or two, and a scantily furnished workbasket were indicative of a departed feminine incumbent.

Still, this didn't make it probable that a lady had carried Webb off. Her room, in her absence, might well be used by another.

Coe returned to Webb's room, closed the fireplace carefully, unlocked the door and went down stairs.

He went to Miss Webb and asked about the people next door.

“A delightful family,” she said, “but very quiet. They are away much of the time. They leave very early for their summer place, and close the house the first of April. Then they return about October. But before the holidays they go South, and after the holidays to California or somewhere else, so that, as a matter of fact, they're almost never at home, —if you can even call it their home.”

“Who occupies the front room on the third floor?”

“I think Miss Marsden, the old spinster aunt.”

Coe nodded. He felt sure the kidnapper was not the one who belonged in the room with the turning fireplace. Of course, she knew nothing about it. Really, it was mysterious enough still!

He told Miss Webb of his discovery. Naturally, she wanted to go up at once and see it.

Calling Mrs. Webb in they all three went up and Coe showed his treasure trove.

“Well, of all things!” exclaimed Mrs. Webb; “why, it’s big enough to crawl through!”

“To go through without crawling,” returned Coe, as, squatting, he fairly shuffled through on his feet.

“And you think that’s the way Kim went out?” asked Henrietta, as Coe returned.

“I know it’s the way,—but I think he was taken out unconscious.”

“Of course he was!” cried Mrs. Webb. “He never would go through into a strange house of his own accord.”

“Well, where is he?” asked Henrietta, as if, Coe, having done so much must now produce the missing man.

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“I don’t know. But, Miss Webb, are you sure the Marsden St. Johns had nothing to do with the kidnapping?”

“Of course they didn’t! They were away, and aside from that the thing is preposterous! Why, we scarcely know them, and moreover, they’re the quietest, most reserved people. That’s why we like them.

“Steal Kimball! They’d be more likely to protect him! But I tell you they were not at home then.”

“Let me go through,” and Miss Webb looked at the open way.

“Certainly, the people are not home,—come along,” Coe agreed.

“Why, Henrietta,” cried her mother, “I don’t think you ought to.”

But curiosity triumphed, and soon all three stood in the room in the next door house.

“What awful housekeeping!” Mrs. Webb cried, and her daughter’s expression of distaste spoke volumes.

Coley Coe stood smiling to himself, at the way the aristocratic ladies descended to the vulgar depths of prying. They peered into cupboards and bureau drawers until he was positively shocked.

But it brought about a strange result.

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“Why, here’s the diamond pendant!” exclaimed Henrietta.

And sure enough, in a small drawer in the dresser was the very jewel case Mrs. Webb had last seen in her son’s hands

the night before his mysterious disappearance.

“Impossible!” Coe cried. But it was, beyond all shadow of a doubt. The four magnificent stones, hung one below another, of perfectly graduated sizes, sparkled and scintillated as Henrietta let it dangle from her finger.

“I don’t understand,” said Mrs. Webb, utterly bewildered.

“Who could!” exclaimed Coe. “I’m all at sea. Tell me more about those St. Johns. What sort of people can they be?”

“Oh, they aren’t thieves,—they can’t be!” Miss Webb stared, wide-eyed, at the gems. “And yet, how else explain all this? Tell me, Mr. Coe, why did they take Kimball away?”

“It looks to me as if whoever took him, did it to get the diamonds, at least partly for that.”

“But the St. Johns are wealthy; they could buy these stones and never miss the money.”

“Well, let’s look further. Suppose somebody utilized this empty house of the St. Johns to—”

“Oh, they don’t own the house,” Mrs. Webb interrupted, “they rent it.”

“Millionaires, and rent a house!”

“Yes, they’re in the city so little, you know. And it’s a most desirable house. Fenn Whiting owns it.”

“What?” Coley Coe was stunned.

“Yes, it belongs to Mr. Whiting. It was left to him with several other houses by an uncle who died years ago.”

“Oh! Whoopee! Wow! I beg your pardon, Mrs. Webb, but I *must* be allowed to yell! Fenn Whiting owns this house! My heavens and earth!”

“What is the matter? Are you crazy, Mr. Coe? Why does it so please you to learn that?”

“Oh, because—because—excuse me, ladies, I must run away, —I’ve most important business. I’ll see you again later,—this evening, say,—and then I’ll tell you,—oh, a whole heap of things!”

“Wait a minute,” as he started back through the fireplace.
“Help us through, please!”

“I beg pardon, Miss Webb! I guess I *am* crazy! Come, give me your hand.”

The trip was safely made by all three, and then Coe carefully closed the fireplace, and noted that it showed no crack or crevice where the pivot turned.

“Please don’t tell about this just at present,” he requested.
“It’s all most important! We shall not only recover Mr. Webb very soon now but bring his abductor to justice and punishment, and also find Miss Powell, and oh, maybe it will all be in time for the wedding.”

“What shall I do with this?” and Miss Webb held out the jewel box helplessly.

“Oh,—put it—haven’t you a safe?”

“No.”

“Well, lock it up in your room somewhere. Nobody knows you have it so there’s no danger of theft. Hide it securely.”

And with a brief word of good-bye Coe ran downstairs and out of doors.

First of all, he went to Fenn Whiting’s home. Only to be told that that gentleman was not at home. He was expected any minute, however, and Coe waited. This time he did not go up to Whiting’s rooms, but waited down in the lobby.

But his wait was in vain. He grew restless, and began to cast about in his mind how to find the man he sought. He telephoned various clubs and homes of friends, and some business houses but not a word of information could he get concerning Mr. Whiting.

At last, in hopeless despair he went away, after leaving word to telephone him as soon as Mr. Whiting came home.

“I do have the hardest stunts to do,” poor Coley Coe told himself.

“Now I’ve found my criminal and I can’t lay my hands on him. And something tells me I may never lay my eyes on him!”

He went to the Powells, for he must tell them that he had a hope at least of recovering Elsie before long. Yet, had he?

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However, he told the Powells the whole story of what he had found in the way of a secret entrance.

“I should think it was secret!” Gerty exclaimed. “I don’t see how you were clever enough to find it!”

“I was stupid not to find it sooner,” Coe bewailed.

And then he told his further discoveries. Allison was present, and with the two Powell ladies made a most interested audience.

Mrs. Powell was in a nervous and broken down state, but she rallied perceptibly at Coe’s hints of good news.

“You see,” he told them, “Mrs. Seaman’s tip about the toothpick paper put me on a scent. I went to Courtney’s to see if I could trace anything, and by sheer luck, Miss Lloyd,—bless her! told me that Fenn Whiting frequently, or at least, occasionally, took her there.”

“Why, I thought Fenn looked higher than that!” sniffed Gerty.

“Some men look high and low by turns,” commented Joe.

“Well, anyhow,” Coley went on, “I took her tip for what it was worth. Then she also informed me that Whiting’s valet, named Bass, possessed just such gold filled teeth as Miss Elsie described, and as the nurse mentioned in

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connection with the man that brought her that fake message.”

“Do explain clearly,” begged Mrs. Powell, “I’m getting all mixed up!”

“This is how I dope it out,” Coley said, slowly. “Whiting is the master villain. He has all the earmarks of a depraved, criminal type.”

“Why, I never thought so,” Gerty said.

“I saw it,” said Allison. “His jaw and the shape of his head gave it away.”

“Yes, and his ears. Those points at the top,—and his steely grey eyes. That colour marks the sly, even murderous type.”

“Oh, I never dreamed Fenn was so bad!” Gerty almost cried.

“Well, he is,” Coe declared. “Now, after Lulie Lloyd’s tip, I went to Whiting’s rooms, and I found a letter from somebody recommending a safe man for him to employ.

“At first I thought this meant a reliable man, but it turned out it meant a man who built safes! To make a long story short, Whiting engaged that man to build that fireplace door some time when his tenants were away, and, of course when the Webbs were away also. He owned the house, he could do it, and too, he doubtless paid the fellow well to do it, and keep quiet about it. For the safe builder denied all knowledge of Whiting. Then, I found that the diamonds were hidden in that house,—”

“Elsie’s diamonds?” Gerty gasped.

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“Yes, put there by Whiting of course, after he stole them from Webb that night. A perfect hiding-place!”

“Where is Kimball?”

“That’s the point of the whole thing. As I reconstruct it all, Whiting sneaked into the room that night soon after Webb went to bed, chloroformed him, and then dragged or carried or shoved him through into the next house. He must have taken his clothes along and put them on the unconscious man. You see, he had that brute of a man with the gold teeth, his own man, to help him.”

“How do you know?” Allison’s eyes gleamed with interest.

“I don’t know, but it *must* have been that way. Then, he and his precious helper, managed somehow to get Webb away and carried him off, doubtless in Whiting’s own car, to some place of concealment where he still is.”

“And stole the diamonds too!”

“Yes; and has since stolen Elsie too,—and, worst of all, has now disappeared himself!”

“Whiting stolen?” Allison’s eyes nearly popped out of his head.

“No; he is the thief, not a victim. He has those two people hidden and he has now hidden himself.”

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“Why? What for?” Mrs. Powell was unable to comprehend.

“This, I think. He wanted to marry Elsie,—he really loves her,—but even more he loved the fortune she would get. He planned to remove Webb and step into his shoes. The rest is all consequent on that determination. He took the diamonds because they were there in Webb’s room, and Whiting’s predatory instinct couldn’t resist the temptation. He hid Webb securely,—time has proved how very securely,—and then he tried every way to win Elsie.”

“But he always said he didn’t want her fortune,” Gerty interrupted. “He said he’d just as lief marry her the day after her birthday as the day before.”

“He said that, because he knew it was a safe bet if the girl would marry him at all, she’d secure the fortune too. If she had agreed to marry him the day after her birthday, he would have changed his schemes a bit. So, as he couldn’t get Elsie to marry him,—I happen to know how hard he tried,—he determined she shouldn’t marry at all, and kidnapped her. I’m sure he has her somewhere where he can use every influence still, to make her consent.”

“And was he at the bottom of the ransom scheme?”
asked Joe.

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“Sure he was. His gold toothed tool trapped Elsie, and they secured the fifty thousand dollars without a bit of trouble. He never meant to return Webb,—or, if he did, he changed his mind when he found how easily he could get cash from Elsie. Oh, you’ve no idea of the depths of this man’s baseness!”

“And where is he now?” Allison half rose, as if he couldn’t longer keep himself from meting out punishment to this prince of malefactors.

“That’s it,” and Coe’s bright face clouded. “I’ve not the slightest idea! Nor do I see a glimmer of light toward finding out. He has hidden Webb and hidden Elsie so thoroughly, he can, of course, conceal himself with equal surety. I don’t know where to look for him!”

“But let’s look all the same!” cried Allison, boyish in his haste.

CHAPTER XVIII

ELSIE'S BIRTHDAY

It was the twenty-ninth of June.

Elsie Powell had been nearly a week in confinement, under the care and at the mercy of the woman she called Mrs. Pike, but who was in reality the wife of Bass, the valet and general factotum of Fenn Whiting.

When Elsie had asked his name he had said Pike, on the spur of the moment, and Pike he had remained to her.

Elsie was not at all uncomfortably housed. She had comforts if not luxuries. She was allowed to go in the several rooms of the basement of the house, which were fitted up with more elaborate appointments than most basement floors are. Mrs. Pike, as Elsie knew her, was kind enough to the girl, except when she took it upon herself to advise her. This Elsie invariably resented, and there was war. For Elsie had a temper of her own, and when it was roused it was by no means inconsiderable.

There was a door at the foot of the basement stairs. This was always locked. From the time when Elsie had heard that shout the first night of her arrival, that door had never again been opened.

Elsie was positive that it had been Kimball's voice, but the two Pikes denied it, and she thought she might be mistaken.

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Every afternoon at four o'clock, Fenn Whiting came to talk with Elsie and urge her to marry him. But now, knowing that it was he who had brought her where she was, she vowed she would stay there till she died, rather than marry him! So angry did she become at mere mention of it, that she flew into passionate rage, and looked so wondrously beautiful with flaming cheeks and flashing eyes that Whiting was more infatuated than ever.

The days went by somehow. By turns, Elsie stormed, sulked, wept, coaxed and plead with her keeper, the imperturbable Mrs. Pike, but all to no purpose. The woman was adamant. She had been inclined to listen to Elsie's suggestion of higher pay than they had been promised, but her husband had forbidden her any such ideas. And so the days went by, and Elsie wondered what would finally become of her.

And so came the twenty-ninth, the day before her birthday. Elsie resolved to make a final desperate effort with Mrs. Pike. She did, and she had the satisfaction of seeing that the woman was interested at least.

"If you'll let me out," Elsie begged her, "I'll see to it that you shall never be blamed or punished in any way for what you have done, I'll give you ten thousand dollars and I'll find you a pleasant home somewhere in the country,—which I know you want."

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It was the mention of a home in the country that touched the woman most deeply, and for a moment she wavered. But even as she began to speak, Fenn Whiting arrived and the conversation was stopped.

“Now, Elsie,” Whiting said, “here’s your last chance to be sensible. I’m nearly at the end of my rope, but so are you. If you’re not married by tomorrow,—that’s your birthday,—you lose all that money. And I tell you plainly,—I swear to you, you shall not leave this house until after your birthday, unless you marry me first. You’ve no chance at all, you see, for nobody knows where you are,—you don’t know, yourself! But here you are and here you stay, unless you agree to my wish. Remember your mother and sister, and remember your sister’s two little kiddies. Will you doom those innocent children to a life of poverty, when you could so easily make them happy and comfortable for life? And I’m not a bad sort, Elsie. I’ll let you have your own way in everything. What I’ve done, I’ve done for love of you. Not the money, you know I don’t care for that, but my devotion to *you* is unbounded. Come, Elsie, dearest, say yes.”

“I say No!”

“Think of your mother. The loss of you and the loss of the fortune both, may kill her. Then you would be her murderer!”

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“Hush!” and Elsie clapped her hands over her ears.

“I won’t hush. I want you to see what you’re doing! Yes, you may be the death of your poor invalid mother. You will surely

spoil the lives of Gerty and her dear little ones, and what do you gain by it?"

"Did you do away with Kimball Webb?"

"I most certainly did not. I know nothing of him or his fate; but you must see that he left you willingly,—deserted you, and on the very eve of your wedding."

"I don't believe it!" but Elsie's tortured soul could bear no more and she fell in a dead faint.

Whiting was a little scared, and he called Mrs. Pike quickly.

"Poor lamb," she said, gathering the unconscious girl in her arms. In the days together she had learned to love Elsie, and she turned on Whiting. "Go, you! How dare you torment the darling so! Away with you, you shall trouble her no more tonight."

Whiting went away, and Mrs. Pike helped the sick girl to bed.

"There now, dearie, try to rest and forget your troubles," she crooned over her, with real affection.

"I will," Elsie whispered to her, "if you'll help me out. Can't you let me get away tonight?"

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"Oh, no, I wish I might,—but I daren't,—I daren't!"

"Tell me this, then. Isn't Mr. Webb in this house?"

"Hush, hush, now,—don't say such things."

“But isn’t he?”

“I can’t tell you,—I daren’t.”

“I am answered!” cried Elsie, triumphantly. “I know he is! Oh, what a refinement of cruelty. Are you a human being, that you countenance such fiendish cruelty? Please,—please, dear, good Mrs. Pike, let me get away! You needn’t do anything. Just let me steal your key when you’re not looking—”

“There now, there now, go to sleep, my girl. I can’t do a thing for you and you know it! If I could, I’d have done it long ago.”

“I believe you would,” and Elsie sobbed herself into a troubled sleep.

The next day was her birthday.

She awoke early, and lay, with a leaden heart, but with an alert brain, trying to think of some plan of escape. She was sure if she could break her prison doors, she could get help and rescue Kimball Webb, who, she felt certain, was confined in the upper part of the same house.

Desperate, she rose early, and looked about. Her tiny bedroom, though clean and airy, was protected by the iron barred windows so often seen in basements, and the one door was locked at night by Mrs. Pike.

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There was no chance, and yet she would not give up. She wrote on a bit of paper, her home address, and wrote beneath

it, "Take this paper to the house, and tell them the number of this house, and they will give you ten dollars."

This paper she folded small and secreted in her waist. She had a last, a forlorn hope, but she meant to try it.

She manœuvred very carefully to be about when the milk man came, and with what was almost sleight of hand she did manage to tuck the paper into his big red hand almost under the very nose of Mrs. Pike.

The man gave her a sharp glance and closed his fingers on the paper, going off without a word.

"What you doing up so early?" asked Mrs. Pike, and Elsie said, "I couldn't sleep so I got up." Then she quickly changed the subject and managed to divert the woman by her chatter.

The milkman, not at all averse to getting an extra ten dollars, concluded to get to the address so strangely given to him, as soon as he had finished his morning rounds. It never occurred to his limited imagination that he could do otherwise than continue his daily routine.

So it was nearly noon when he arrived at the Powell home.

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The wooden-faced doorman advised the caller to go round to the tradesman's entrance, and the milkman expressed his entire willingness to do so.

"But," he said, "these people are going to be mighty glad to see me! I bring them a message from a young girl—"

“What!” for the doorman knew the principal facts of the tragedy in one apartment of the big house. “Here, you, go right up. Take that elevator!”

And so it happened that the uncouth and unkempt person went up in the shining and luxurious elevator, and was eagerly shown by the elevator man to the Powell door.

“I want to see the head of the house,” he announced, as he stepped inside the hall.

“I’ll do,” said Coley Coe, on the alert for anything new or strange.

“Well, sir, here’s a note.”

Coe read the few scribbled words, recognized Elsie’s writing and gave a low, but very triumphant shout.

“Oh, Gerty, Mrs. Powell, Joe,—everybody,—listen here!”

Coe capered round like a happy child, he grasped Gerty round the shoulders, he grabbed Mrs. Powell’s hand, he shook his queer forelock until he looked like a shaggy dog, and then he read out the words on the paper.

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“Do I get my ten?” asked the milkman, stolidly.

“You do!” shouted Coe. “You get twenty,—and here it is!”

Murmuring his astonished thanks, the man disappeared.

“Hold on!” Coe yelled, “wait a minute, you! Where’s this

house? Where'd you get this paper?"

The man told him the number, a fairly high number, on Madison Avenue.

"Good gracious, in a classy section! Whose house is it, my man?"

"It's Mr. James Van Winkle's house, but it's closed for the summer,—the folks are away."

"Closed!"

"Yes, but there's a coupla caretakers there, and they keep things going. And, between you and me, sir, I think there's something wrong."

"If this young lady's there, it's something very wrong."

"She is, sir, and to my way of thinking, she's kept there against her will."

"You bet she is! But she won't be there long! Thank you, my man,—here's another five. It's worth it. Now, good morning!"

The milkman left and Coe made ready to depart also.

"You'd better come with me, Joe," he said; "and I think I'll be on the safe side and take a brace of policemen. I'm looking for trouble. Hold on,—I want a word alone with Mrs. Powell,—just a minute."

And then, Coe was ready and he and Allison went off.

“I’ll let you know as soon as possible, Gerty,” Coe called back, and the two hurried on.

It took a little time to gather up two policemen and get over to the Madison Avenue house, but they arrived before two o’clock.

The house was boarded up after the manner of houses vacated for the summer, and repeated pulls at the bell brought no response.

“Nothing doing,” opined a policeman. “Guess you people were stung.”

“I guess we weren’t!” declared Coe. “Break in. I’ll take all responsibility.”

“Try the basement door,” suggested Allison; “that’s where the milkman would see the caretakers, you know.”

Down they trooped and recommenced their knocking there.

“I’m scared they’ll escape at the back,” warned Coe. “One of you chaps scoot around there.”

By this time, though there was no response to their summons, they heard faint sounds of a commotion inside the house.

And at last a girl’s shriek rose high, though muffled at once by interception of some sort.

“That’s Elsie!” whispered Coe, not so much from recognition of the voice as from an intuition of the facts.

At sound of the shriek, the policeman burst in the door, and they rushed in. Nobody was in sight, but they went on to the rear room, and found there Elsie and Fenn Whiting.

The two caretakers had managed to hide themselves, but small attention was paid to that.

It was quite evident from the girl’s trembling, nerve-racked condition that Whiting had been frightening her with some terrible threat, and his brutal, rage-drawn countenance corroborated this.

“Drop that lady’s arm,” the brawny bluecoat ordered, and Whiting turned in startled surprise and fury.

“What do you want here?” he bluffed. “This is my house,—get out!”

“Not so fast, Whiting,” said Coley Coe, as Elsie flew to Joe Allison’s protecting arms.

“Arrest him,” Coe went on. “On the charge of abduction and theft and housebreaking, and—oh, lots of other things! Anything to say, Whiting?”

“No, except that you’ll pay for this. I tell you, this is my house and you’ve no right here!”

“Stuff and nonsense!” commented Coe. “But how do you make out it’s your house?”

“I’ve rented it,—sublet it from the owners—”

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“Who are away for the summer! Oh, yes—I see! I especially *see*! And,—ahem,—just when did you take the house over?”

“Long ago, I’ve had it for months. I tell you it’s mine!”

“Sure it is! I don’t dispute you. And you rented it before the sixth of April, didn’t you? And you’ve used it ever since as a —”

“Yes, Coley, he has!” Elsie cried out. “Kimball is upstairs,—I know he is! Oh, find him,—find him quick!”

The second policeman was now present, and he and Allison ran upstairs by leaps and bounds, leaving Coe and the other to attend to Whiting.

Elsie was quite herself again, hope and gladness having restored her like magic. She was for running after the man, but Coe said, “Wait, Elsie, they’ll soon be back,—you stay here,—” for he was all uncertain as to what the men might discover.

On the two rushed, finding no one in the rooms on the first or second floor. On, up to the third floor, and there, from a closed room they heard faint sounds.

Smashing the light door in, they found Kimball Webb.

Allison had never seen the man before, nor had the policeman, but they knew him from his photographs,

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and they gasped at his condition. Emaciated, pale, with a haunted look in his big, dark eyes, the man seemed half crazed. But at sight of them he revived instantly. "Police!" he cried, "oh, thank Heaven!" He mumbled unintelligibly, because of a diabolically clever gag which impeded his speech, while it allowed him to breathe and eat.

This was removed quickly, and the restored man, cried imploringly, "Elsie?"

"She's all right," said Allison, cheerily, and Webb smiled happily, then, immediately his face darkened and he said, "Whiting?"

"Safe in custody, sir," the policeman assured him, staring as if he could scarce believe that the long lost man was really found.

"Let me at him!" and Webb's look of righteous revenge was something so awful that the other two stared in awe.

"Tell me everything, quick," Webb went on, for he was rapidly regaining his poise, strength and activity. "Where is Elsie? Where is Whiting? Oh, men, I've been here an eternity!"

"You have!" cried Joe. "I say, have you been here all the time?"

"Yes, every day,—every hour of it! I thought I'd die,—I wanted to,—but I wanted to live to give Whiting his!"

"And for Elsie's sake," put in Joe, to divert Webb's thoughts

from the more dangerous channel.

“Yes, Elsie! Where is she? Can I see her now?”

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“I don’t see why not,” said Allison, and the other man nodded as Joe ran to the stairs and called down over the banister.

At the sound, Elsie came flying upstairs, and the men, unable to hold Webb back, followed him as he descended one flight to meet her.

They met in the second floor hall, and clasped in each others’ arms were so silent in their shock of joy that the others went rapidly downstairs and left them to themselves.

“Oh, Kimball, I knew I’d get you back,” Elsie kept repeating, “I *knew* I would!”

“I didn’t, dearest, I didn’t dare even hope for it. I’ve been so helpless,—gagged always, lest I attract attention from outside and bound much of the time, lest I break out, somehow.”

“And you couldn’t manage an escape?”

“Not possible. Bass, that’s Whiting’s man,—”

“Mr. Pike?”

“No, Bass is his name. And his wife’s here, too. They’ve looked after me with decency, but they were absolutely unapproachable as to bribery.”

“I know it,” and Elsie smiled ruefully. “Oh, Kim, never mind,

now, dearest, I've got you at last! Did they force you to write that note to me?"

"Yes, at the point of a pistol."

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She wept softly in his arms, and he held her close, forgetting all his misery in his present joy.

"How did he get me?" he said, presently. "How did Whiting pull it off?"

"Oh, he had a contrivance in the fireplace by which he could get into your room, and he carried you off, drugged, I suppose —"

"Yes; I remember the sweetish smell of chloroform and that's the last I knew."

"Well, never mind. You can hear all these details some other time."

"After we're married,—you *will* marry me, won't you, Elsie,—dearest! you,—you—haven't married anybody else, have you?"

"No!" she cried, frightened at the grasp on her arm. But her assurance restored his poise.

"Forgive me, dear. I'm weak from being housed and tortured so long. Come, can we go away from this dreadful place?"

"Yes, we will. And I will marry you, of course. Haven't I waited for you? But, we can't get the money, Kim, it's too

late. Today's my birthday, and the time is up."

"Never mind, dear heart. I'll make money enough for us. Don't worry. I've finished my play since I've been here,—and it's a corker! I had to work on it to keep from losing my mind. I almost did, anyway. But they let me have paper and pencil, and I finished the thing some time ago. Oh, Elsie, it has been the most unutterable hell!"

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"Yes, dearest, but I'll make a Heaven for you that will make you forget it all."

"You shall, my beloved. I've forgotten it already! The sight of your dear face has blotted it all out."

"You're awfully thin, Kim, but otherwise you look just the same."

"Good! I feared I'd be but a small remnant of my former beauty! Come on, girl, darling; let's go home. Lord, I don't know a thing that's going on,—and I don't much care. I've got you,—and some day I shall have a go at Whiting,—but I'm too happy now to tackle him. Is he about?"

"He is indeed! Very much about. Here comes Coley Coe."

"Who's he?"

And then, at Elsie's introduction, the two men shook hands.

"I've hunted for you long enough,"—said Coe,—“I'm right down glad to see you!"

“And I’m glad to see any one who was instrumental in bringing about my rescue!”

“Miss Powell did that,” Coe said; “she cleverly corralled a milkman and made him serve her ends!”

“But Coley did lots,—oh, lots!” Elsie cried, her eyes sparkling with appreciation. “You’ll adore him after you know him better, Kim! I do!”

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Webb smiled happily at his lovely *fiancée*, and said, “I see I must marry you out of hand, to be sure of you! When can we pick up our broken threads?”

“Pretty soon,” Elsie promised him. “There’s no special hurry for a day or two,” she added, “for it’s just too late to get the fortune,—and that must go to Joe.”

“Never mind,” Webb reiterated. “But I won’t wait very long for you, I can tell you that!”

“Want to see Whiting?” Coley Coe asked of Webb.

“I do indeed! But you’d better hold me!”

“Stay here, I’ll have him fetched up.”

And so it was in the parlour of the Madison Avenue mansion that the master criminal and his principal victim met.

Whiting was blustering,—bragging. Subdued at first by the defeat that had so suddenly overwhelmed him, he later became cocky and insufferable.

“Hello, Webb,” he jeered. “You’re on top at last,—but I led you a dance! And I achieved my purpose, too! You won’t marry a great heiress after all! You’ve lost your chance!”

“Hush!” and Webb took a step toward him, though warily watched by the two policemen.

“Let him come, I’m not afraid of him,” blustered Whiting.

“No, you coward,” Webb said, “you are not afraid of a man weakened by months of confinement, and suffering from a lamed knee! You are bravery itself! And furthermore, you are beneath even my scorn! I refuse to tell you what I feel for you. I scorn to speak to you at all. Let the police deal with you and all such as you!”

The repressed wrath, the scathing tones, the loathing evident in Webb’s glance made even the depraved Whiting shrivel as if seared with a hot iron. He said nothing and his cocksure manner fell from him, leaving him limp with futile anger.

“You—you—” he muttered, but could find no words.

“Come, Elsie,” said Webb, without a further glance at Whiting; “may we go, officer?”

“Yes, Mr. Webb, and all joy go with you.”

Whiting found his voice, and called out, “Small joy to marry a poor girl when you hoped for a fortune!”

Webb’s face flushed darkly, and but for Elsie’s restraining hand he would have turned on his tormentor.

“And you must hand it to me for cleverness!” Whiting went on. “I had that connection between the houses made four years ago. I meant to get you sooner or later, you stuck-up aristocrat. You won’t be quite so proud when you find you’ve married a penniless bride. Oh, yes, I had the thing built that I might go in and kill you! Yes, that’s what I planned to do,—kill you! Then, I saw better game than that! I kidnapped you, meaning to marry the girl and get all that money myself!”

A chattering laugh broke from the speaker, and Elsie shuddered. Without doubt the wicked brain had snapped its tension and Whiting was demented!

But he wasn’t,—except momentarily.

“Or,” he resumed, “I thought I’d scare you to death with ghosts and things,—but I didn’t—I waited and I had the best scheme after all,—it all worked perfectly,—only scratched the guilt so badly, had to regild it—just a little—just a little—” he babbled on like a veritable idiot, and fearing lest his next phase might be one of violence the policeman urged Webb and Elsie to go at once.

Coe and Allison went too, for they all wanted to be at the jubilee of reunion.

“And,” said Coe, as they were seated in a swiftly rolling taxi, “Friend Whiting is ’way off about the fortune, Elsie. For, I chance to know the will is worded, ‘married before you are twenty-four years old’; nothing is said about marrying before your birthday. Just before I started I asked

your mother what hour you were born, and she said, late in the evening,—after ten o'clock! As it isn't five yet, you've ample time to set your wedding bells ringing!"

"Yes," said Joe Allison, his fine face lighted up with honest joy. "Yes, Elsie, that's so,—and I congratulate you from the bottom of my heart! I'll probably feel mighty different later on, but now I'm so keyed up with excitement and noble generosity, that for today, at least, I can say I'm glad you've got the money,—glad for you, I mean."

Elsie couldn't help smiling at his qualified joy over her prospects, and she was a little excited herself.

"Are you sure, Coley?" she asked; "then we must be married at once. Will you have me, Kim?"

"For richer for poorer," he murmured, and Elsie, laughing, went on making plans. "You're only the bridegroom, anyway," she said, "and you haven't a word to say. Joe, don't cry, dear, I'll give you a goodly slice of that old money. I'll give you a hundred thousand dollars, anyway, and maybe more."

"Lord! Elsie, that's enough! I wouldn't wish any more than that! Now I'm truly happy, all over!" and his round young face beamed joyously.

"We're 'most home," went on the happy bride to be.

"We'll telephone everybody we want to, and we'll be married,—let me see,—well, we'll be married as soon as I get things ready enough! I sha'n't trust you out of my sight, Kim, you stay right at our house, and somebody can bring you

clothes from home, and all that.”

Elsie had her way, she called the Webb ladies over first, and then arranged all sorts of things to make a pretty wedding, and the ceremony took place in ample time to make her the inheritor of the fortune left by her eccentric aunt, and later on, Allison received his promised portion.

Coe earned the fifty thousand dollars reward, for his efforts were at the bottom of the final discoveries.

Elsie even remembered the elevator girl and all others who had helped her, and the use of the money proved a source of genuine satisfaction to the newly married pair, as well as to the mother and sister of the bride.

Both Joe Allison and Coley Coe insisted on being best man, and were allowed to share that honour.

The wedding was a happy one, for every one put aside all present thought of the base and despicable man who had tried so hard to prevent it. He received his due reward in good time, but Elsie Webb and her husband refused ever to hear his name mentioned.

The beautiful diamond pendant,—the gift of the bridegroom, flashed at the bride’s fair throat, and there was no discord or jangling of the merry marriage bells.

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- In the text versions, delimited italics text in underscores (the HTML version reproduces the font form of the printed book.)
- Silently corrected palpable typos; left non-standard spellings and dialect unchanged.

[The end of *The Disappearance of Kimball Webb* by Carolyn Wells [using pseud. Rowland Wright]]