

THE HOUSE
OF INTRIGUE

Arthur Stringer

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THE HOUSE OF INTRIGUE

By
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THE PRAIRIE WIFE, THE DOOR OF DREAD, ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY
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CHAPTER ONE

BEFORE the tent-flap of every woman's soul, I think, sleeps a wolf-hound that answers to the name of Instinct. And Instinct stood up and showed the white of an eye as Big Ben Locke crossed over to the office door and swung it shut.

"Baddie," he said, as he sank back in his creaking swivel chair, "I want to talk to you. I've *got* to talk to you."

"About what?" I asked, wondering as to the origin of this newborn need of intimacy.

"About *us!*" he declared, as he sat there blinking down at his desk-top, apparently digesting that unlooked-for audacity of bracketing his august self with one of his younger operatives. And low was the growl from that four-footed shadow standing on guard over the timorous souls of women. For life had long since taught me to beware the man of power with meekness in his eye. Yet I waited, outwardly calm, for the Chief to continue.

"You're kind of tired out, aren't you, Baddie?" he ventured, in a sort of eager solicitude, as he finally let his eye meet mine. It was that glance of his, more than the question itself, which made the ghost-hound still growling from the door-mat of my soul suddenly lift his nose in the air and *kai-yai* aloud.

"I don't think I've ever complained," I parried, doing my best to buckle on that armor of impersonality which half a million business girls of America have learned to don, morning by morning, as surely as they don their straight-fronts.

"But what would you say to a little holiday?" the Chief was asking me, with a sort of hang-dog wistfulness that made my heart go down, floor by floor, like a freight elevator, until it bumped against the very bed-rock of desperation.

"Where?" I rather inanely asked, trying to cover up the catch in my breath. For Big Ben Locke had always struck me as a man of iron, as something as solid as a locomotive. In and out of that office he'd always seemed to swing through his cluster of operatives, men and women alike, about the same as the

Transcontinental Limited swings through the clump of track-navvies who step quietly aside to let the big Mogul thunder past.

“Anywhere you say,” he explained in his heavy chest-tones. “Long Beach for three or four days, or a run down to Hot Springs!”

“On a case?” I queried. Yet I tried to make it more a prompt cue than a question, in a sort of frantic eagerness to get the big Mogul safely back on the rails.

“No, Baddie,” he announced with a deliberation which seemed to translate that announcement into an ultimatum, “just for a holiday!” And hope went out of my heart like light out of a room when a switch is turned. For I knew then what he meant. I knew it beyond a shadow of doubt. And if Big Ben Locke had quietly reached to his desk and taken up an Indian pogamoggan and with it struck me over the head, I don’t think I could have been more startled. It was unbelievable. It was unfair. It was unreasonable. It was as absurd as standing there and witnessing a Tottenville coast-gun trying to do a fox-trot.

“I don’t—don’t understand,” I quavered, trying to swallow my bewilderment. For always, in that office, I’d been taught to cover up every warmer impulse of life, to hide my human feelings under a false front of cynicism, the same as bald-headed men hide their barren bumps of veneration by festooning them with side-fringes from below the timber-line. I prided myself on knowing the world, and its shams. But no woman, I’ve concluded, can be sure of any man’s character until she’s seen and studied him for half a lifetime, and then, like the poor old philosopher in *Pisgah Sights*, the light of wisdom dawns on her only when they start lettering her tombstone.

“I’m trying to make you understand,” explained Big Ben, in his grim and ponderous meekness. “For I may as well tell you now, straight out, Baddie, that you’ve got me beat!”

“Got you beat!” And I echoed that odious phrase in a helpless sort of gasp, for I saw my position in that office suddenly blowing up like a pink-and-blue circus-balloon. And that position had grown into something more than a mere habit with me. It had become a necessity. It held me up in the world, the same as a nursery “walker” holds up a child still uncertain as to the use of its legs.

“You’re different, of course,” continued the heavy-jawed man in the swivel chair. “And that’s what I like about you. You’re—”

“Don’t!” I said, trying to keep him from noticing the shake in my knees. I hated to see him stare at me with those hungry-looking eyes of his, like an old mastiff’s. It seemed to demean him, that incongruous humility of his, almost as much as it demeaned me. It seemed to leave the whole world fetid and tainted, like the smoke-laden and breathed-over air of a “revue” theater when you

happen in on the last act. It made me ache for out-of-doors, for the final sanity of a fresh wind against my face.

There was a time, I remembered, when it might not have meant so much to me. But things were different now. I'd worn the shoe-leather of civilization, and I had to face its penalty of being tender-footed. So a feeling strangely like hate smoldered deep down in my heart, hate for that heavy-bodied animal who seemed something of the Stone Age where man stunned his dinner with a club and ate it raw.

"Baddie," that poor purblind cave-man in the twentieth-century swivel chair was trying to tell me, "you're too hanged good-looking for this sleuthing work here!"

I looked at him. He seemed almost pathetic, with that sirupy sort of smile wrinkling his big ursine face. And for a moment I was able to remarshal my scattering lines of courage.

"You didn't tell me that," I somewhat tremulously reminded him, "when you took me into this office. You took the pains to announce, in fact, that an operative who didn't look like a hen-hawk and dress like a scrub-woman would be of special value to you in your work!"

But argument, before that barbaric method of attack, was out of the question. It was like trying to hold discourse with a hungry grizzly. And my helplessness in the whole thing sent a tidal wave of exasperation through my tingling body.

"But you're too young for all this, Baddie," my sad-eyed ogre of persecution went on. "It's too full of danger for a girl like you!"

"So it seems!" was my bitter retort. But it went from him, like water off a duck's back.

"It's full of risks, my dear, full of risks," he went lumbering on, as though his paternalism with a string to it were the last haven for the storm-tossed heart of youth.

"I think that was the part of it which rather appealed to me," I contended, with a final effort at calmness. "And I *don't* think I ever complained about its dangers, its honest dangers."

"No, you haven't," admitted the Chief. "And I like you for it. I like you a mighty lot. And I want to make life easier for you. I want—"

At that I cut him short.

"How are you going to make life easier for me?" I suddenly and shrilly demanded, with Caution no longer standing there and plucking me by the sleeve. I'd seen enough of the world to know when a situation such as this had become hopeless. And in my heart of hearts I realized that I'd reached my

Rubicon, and that I had to cross it.

For a moment or two there was no response to that challenge of mine. Then we both rose from our chairs, slowly and deliberately. It was almost ridiculous. You may have noticed two pullets do much the same thing, two chicken-run combatants coming slowly up together and continuing to eye each other as they go circling slowly about with their neck-feathers all ruffled up.

“Don’t you think,” Big Ben quietly yet ponderously asked me as he rounded his desk-end, “don’t you think love can always make it that way?”

It made me gasp. And as I backed away from the big hand which he reached out toward my shoulder I saw, as clear as daylight, the cowardly advantage he was taking of his position.

“What is Mrs. Locke’s opinion of that?” I asked, trying hard to swallow the sudden choke in my throat. But that choke couldn’t be swallowed, for instead of being in my neck, it was somewhere in my heart. I didn’t want to laugh. But I *made* myself, for I knew that if I didn’t laugh I’d be crying like a baby and covering a perfectly good blue serge waist-front with spots.

There weren’t many people, I knew, could afford to laugh at Big Ben Locke. I wasn’t ignorant of what it would cost me, for the same hand that had wielded that uncouth pogamoggan was also the hand that doled out the wampum. I could see what was coming. But I didn’t care any longer. The pressure was more than I could stand. So I let the gates swing open and the flood go tumbling out. I simply blew up, as poor old Bud Griswold would have phrased it.

“Listen to me,” I said, as I faced the master of that office. “You may be a great detective, and you may control the pay envelope of a couple of hundred people, but until you’re man enough to know the difference between decency and indecency you’re never going to keep one kind of woman on your pay-list. And I’m that kind. Until you’re able to detect the difference between a girl who’s—”

“Wait!” interrupted the Chief.

“No, I can’t wait, and I won’t wait,” I flung back at him, “for I’ve waited too long. You may use what you call a down-and-outer in petticoats for a few lines of your work, but don’t make the mistake of putting me in that class because I happened to do some of this work for you. It may have called for a shell of coarseness, more often than not, and I gave you what you wanted. I *wore* commonness for you, the same as I wore this nickel badge of yours. And I may have picked up the trick of handing over your Eighth Ward style of talk because you pointed out that it often paid in your line of business. But I’ve lived clean, and I’m going to stay clean. You even thought you could break my

spirit by giving me the worst of your rough-neck work in that Antonino abduction case. I didn't even object when you used me as a plant for that Mann-Act photographer up in the Arcade Building when he advertised for figure-models. And you put me through some moves that only an honest woman would have endured when we rounded up that Brooklyn false-claims couple. But I swallowed it all because I knew I was working on the side of the law. Then it began to dawn on you that I could do the finer lines of work, and you began by dressing me up and using me as a spotter on that Fifth Avenue bus-route. Then you saw I wasn't a failure on that Rosenthal wire-tapping case and even decided to send me into society. You found you could rent me out as a guard for those Fifth Avenue weddings where the bride's family don't seem above stealing back the silver butter-dishes if they get the chance. I could go among those guests without any of them dreaming I wasn't one of them. I could live at the St. Regis for three weeks, when I had to shadow those Nevada mine-swindlers for you, without even the house-detective finding out I wasn't one of the Four Hundred. And I didn't object to any of that work. I almost liked the excitement of it. I was helping you to run down crooks. And I soon saw how clever you were at that work. You seemed to know all their tricks, and just how their minds worked, and just what they'd do under any given conditions. And now I know why. You could understand them, and forestall them, every move, because you were one of them. I know, now, that you were nothing but—"

"Stop!" boomed out Big Ben, and I had the satisfaction of seeing his color deepen.

"But you don't know women, Mr. Locke," I swept on, for the whole thing had rather gone to my head and I was as drunk as a reservation buck in the last steps of a sun-dance. "And you don't know what decency is, or you'd never have cheapened your name and your work the way you've cheapened it right here in this office. And I repeat that I've never objected to working for the law. But I do object to working for a yellow cur. And as I consider you one, I'm going to walk out of this office and this position before you can make a bluff at saving that broken-winded dignity of yours by discharging me!"

My hands were shaking and something had undoubtedly gone wrong with my knee-joints, but I managed to pull on my gloves and cross to the door as my last machine-gun of rage emptied itself against his aldermanic vest-front. And before Big Ben Locke could get his breath or sink back in his swivel chair I stepped through that door and slammed it after me, slammed it so hard that the glass rattled in the frame and little Dugmore, in the outer office, stared at me with eyes as round as saucers.

I didn't even wait to take the elevator. I walked down. And when I landed

on Broadway I felt as though I'd fallen from a Turkish-bath steam-room. I scarcely knew which way I headed. But I kept on walking, for there was a fever in my blood that made me see double.

I may have saved my self-respect, but, in the language of the worker, I'd lost my job. *I'd lost my job!* That fact kept going back and forth in the empty garret of my head, like a bat in a house attic. I'd had my say; I'd set off my fire-works; I'd eased my soul of its anger; but now there was the piper to pay.

I was more than humiliated; I was stunned. Benjamin Locke had seemed something almost bloodless to me, as cold and metallic a thing as the Sherman statue in the Plaza. It gave me sudden and sickening doubts as to my own personality, to remember how I'd been the instrument that had brought Big Ben down from his pedestal. Was I the wrong sort, after all? I kept asking myself. Were all my ideas about fair dealing and right living only talk, only the crazy ideal of convent girls who forget the turgid streams that flow through every great city? And was the fight I'd been making for a footing in that upper world nothing more than the moonshine Big Ben's overtures tried to make it? And was it even worth while, I asked myself.

Something, in that moment of stress, fell away from me, and left me half pagan again. Across two long years of respectability came some ghostly call of the wild, vaguely unsettling me, as the sudden beat of tomtoms might disturb the stateliest porter who ever wore the uniform of the Pullman Company. It took me back to the old manner of thought and speech and made me ask if it wouldn't be better to slip down to Slim Totten's hang-out and inquire if he wasn't in need of a gun-moll to gay-cat for him in his established profession of bank-sneak? Or swing in with Trigger Lennygan on his annual migration to the Pacific Coast as a hotel-beat? For I had a sudden hunger to put space between me and the scene of my humiliation. I had a feeling that San Francisco and Los Angeles would seem more home-like than this sodden Great White Way that was no more white than the flue of a smoke-stack is white.

But I knew, once I'd thought it over, that there could be no going back. I hadn't the courage, for courage is the first thing that civilization seems to take away from us. I hadn't climbed far, on that upward trail, but to get even where I had got had cost me too much to let me think of slipping back into that Black Valley behind me. When a girl is fighting for a lost position, I'd found, it's almost harder than fighting for life itself. There's always some one, when she's fighting for the latter, to throw her a life-buoy. But every buoy she gets, in the other sort of fight, comes with a line to it, a line which may look like rescue at one end but turns into something terribly like capture at the other.

No, I told myself, I couldn't go back! There were certain things now that would always make a difference. The rabbit-dog, I remembered, always had

the advantage of the cotton-tail. It's better being the hunter than the hunted,—and it's incomparably more comfortable. It's safer having a nickel badge under your coat-lapel than a record on the police-blotter that gives you prairie-squint looking for Central Office “singed cats.” I'd even grown to like the rabbit-dog side of the business, with all the machinery of Big Ben Locke's offices to back me up when it came to a tangled trail and all the majesty of the law of the commonwealth to interpose an arm when it came to a tight corner.

But I'd lost my position! That dolorous fact kept tolling at the back of my head, the same as the bells of Trinity toll above the noonday tumult of Wall Street. And I'd never been the sort of girl that had new positions forever whimpering at her heels. The only other offer I'd had was from the man with the three-carat diamond in the Asteroid Theater Building. He had told me that if I “fleshed up” he thought he could place me in a road company at twenty dollars a week. That was earlier in the year, when, like about every other empty-headed girl out of work, I considered the possibility of stepping up into stage work, very much the same as you step into an air-ship, and floating off among the stars that spell their own names to the skies in colored electric bulbs.

But I hadn't “fleshed up.” The hot weather and the worry of it all, in fact, had left me as thin as a rail, and often, in the elevator mirrors, I grimly asked myself why somebody didn't mistake me for the poison label on a medicine bottle. One thing, however, I still possessed. And that was the ironically well-tailored raiment in which the Locke office had togged me out. Those clothes, I knew, would have to take the place of the back pay which the Chief would never now surrender. And fine feathers, I also knew, usually made fine birds. So then and there I decided to go back to the three-carat diamond man and ask him to reopen that road-company offer. For above all things I was afraid of idleness. I was nothing but a sort of human whip-top, and unless something kept me on the move, always on the move, there was the never-ending danger of going over.

That decision brought me back to earth again. I looked about me, took my bearings, and resolutely headed for the Asteroid Theater Building. I drifted back down Broadway with a sudden new hope in my heart. The tide had already turned. I kept repeating poor old Bud Griswold's slogan to the effect that it always pays to keep up a good front. For as Bud used to say, I never *could* be strong on the crape and broken-column business. And I forgot to notice that that tourist's slum known as the Great White Way was as ugly as it had seemed a short half-hour before.

I was quite composed as I sent in my card to the three-carat man, who was alone in his office at the end of a day's work. Then I strolled into the room that

was blue with cigar-smoke and confronted the three-carat man in person. His name was Heydt. And he was in his shirt-sleeves.

He smiled as he swung half-way round in his swivel chair. I thought at first that it was a kindly smile.

“So you’ve come back after that road-company work, eh?” he said, as he relit his well chewed cigar. I noticed that he did not smoke with a dry lip. And his lips were thick, so the madura-brown was well spread.

“Then you remember me?” I cooed, with a flutter of self-satisfied hope.

“Sure,” was his easy rejoinder. He leaned back in his chair and looked me over. I knew then, in one flash, why I’d always hated the thought of stage work. It was that look, the look that came from all of them, the look that I knew would forever curdle my marrow. It was the look that left women merely flesh, live stock to be duly appraised by the buyer. And it made me feel that I had hives and nettle-rash and scarletina all at once.

“You’re too much of a queen to fade out of this busy bean of mine in one short summer,” he calmly announced.

He was bald and his eyes protruded. Yet in the strong side-light from the office window, I noticed, those eyes were the softest of seal-brown. I hated to meet their glance, however, for they made me think of a sleepy diamond-back rattle-snake curled up behind zoo glass. I stared up at the portrait of Rose Elton in the old-fashioned fleshlings of the old-fashioned merry-merry. I stared at her billowy lines and remembered that *she* had at some time “fleshed up” to their standard. I stared at a photograph of Flynn and Rice, and at eight pictures of a male star sprawling over eight different pieces of furniture, and at five more of a matinée idol leaning against mantels. Then I got courage to look back at the brown-velvet eyes, which seemed to be enjoying my discomfiture.

“Can you give me—give me work?” I finally squeaked out, like a field-mouse cowed by a black-snake.

“Sure,” said the man in the eternal office swivel chair. His skin was sallow, and he looked as though he had tobacco-heart. I was afraid of him, not merely because he was so sure of himself, but because he seemed so sure of me.

“How soon could you give it to me?” I managed to ask.

He seemed to be thinking this over.

“What’s the matter with our getting somewhere quiet, where we can talk things over—Carlton Terrace for dinner, eh, and then a run out to Oyster Eddie’s?”

It was about time, instinct told me, to buckle on the armor-plate.

“What’s the matter with getting down to business right here in this office?”

I inquired.

He was laughing as he got up from his swivel chair. And at the same moment that he got up from his chair I got up from mine. It brought the scene in Big Ben's office back to me, in a sudden sickening flash. Only, this time, it didn't seem to terrify me. It was more the feeling you get from a Coney Island steamer-deck when it swings around into open water, and begins to rise and fall, and make you wish you'd been a little more careful about what you'd eaten.

"Why're you getting so up-stage about all this?" he jocularly inquired, as he came closer to me.

"Can you give me work?" I demanded, as I rounded the desk, for the Big War I'd been through had taught me it was always best to have a buffer state between belligerents.

"Do you want it bad?" he asked, still smiling.

"I've got to have it," I confessed.

"You've got to," he repeated.

"I've got to," I told him.

"Then, honey-child, we're sure going to come to terms," he said, as he rocked on his heels and once more eyed me up and down. I knew, then, that the call was going in for a quick curtain. Yet even as I knew it I kept dumbly asking why lightning should strike twice in the same place. It didn't seem fair; it didn't even seem reasonable. But it's the first flare that does the charcoal-act. You can't look for a big fire on the encore play. That's the way, I suppose, old Mother Nature saves us from madness.

That man seemed suddenly a thousand miles away from me as I looked at him. The cigar smoke made me a little dizzy. I think I must have gone rather white, all of a sudden.

"What's the matter with you, anyway?" he asked in genuine alarm.

"What's the matter with me?" I heard myself repeating, and my own voice sounded like a long-distance wire on a wet night. "I'll tell you what's the matter with me. It seems like a funny ailment, but d'you know, I'm terribly tired of dogs!"

"Tired of dogs?" he echoed, staring at me with his pop-eyes wider open than ever. He had discovered, apparently, that he was face to face with a crazy woman, and not even a policeman in sight.

"Yes," I calmly explained to him. "I came up into this office looking for a man. An hour ago I was in another office looking for a man."

"A man?" he echoed.

“Yes. And both times, instead of finding one, I found a *yellow hound!*”

That was my exit speech, and having delivered it, I took my departure. I wasn't excited this time; I was merely nauseated. I wanted to get out into the open air. And I was glad to see that the elevator cage stood there waiting for me. And I was also glad that there was no one in it except a weasel-faced little runt of an old man in rusty black, for cool as I had kept myself in that smoky office, I found a foolish gush of tears streaking the talcum off my cheeks as I made my way out to the street. And I never did care to do my crying before strangers.

I walked up Broadway once more, with no sense of time or place or direction. I only knew that I was glad to mix with the sidewalk crowds, the same as a slum boy with prickly-heat must be glad to take a header off an East Side wharf-end. I had been hurt, and hurt without understanding why. It bewildered me. I wanted to be alone, to think things out. And like any other animal on two legs or four, when it gets hurt, I found myself swayed by an instinct to make for the tall timber, to go in hiding. Without being quite conscious of it I directed my steps toward Central Park. There I wandered on until I found a leafy solitude and a bench which a gray squirrel vacated as I took possession. And I sat back on that bench, deep in thought, and let my battered spirit lick its wounds.

CHAPTER TWO

WHEN a woman housecleans her heart she usually goes clear to the attic. As I sat on that green-slatted park bench, accordingly, I did a heap of overhauling in the musty corners of memory. Something was wrong, and I wanted to find out where. So I took up my whole past life, and sat there turning it round and round, like a park squirrel with a peanut. Then I took it up in a more comprehensive way, as though it were a movie-film, and let it unreel, year by tangled year. My only trouble was in finding a beginning, for things in this world don't seem to have beginnings, but just flow into one another and shift and change and pass while life goes stumbling on and those little midgets called men and women crisscross one another's trails and wonder why they're so much more unhappy than they intended to be.

But on that park bench, as at every other time I got thinking about the past, I found myself marking the first mile-stone by beginning with Bud Griswold, poor old "Carnation Bud" who always wore a pink in his button-hole, on parade, and prided himself on being as neat a dresser as Robert Hilliard himself.

I can see now that they were all cheap and tawdry and pathetic, those foolish old creeds and vanities of Bud's. But there was a time when they stood for nothing but splendor to me, just as there's an earlier time when a crimson Noah's Ark can mean grandeur and a string of coral can spell wealth. For Bud, that afternoon on Sixth Avenue when he stepped into my life, stood for everything that was princely and resplendent. Myrtle Menchen, who'd been exploring that third-rate department store with me, so weakened before a kolinsky pillow-muff that she calmly walked away from the fur-counter with the muff in her hand. But Myrtle, I found out later, had overlooked the minor detail of paying for it. When she got to the swing-doors and saw the store "flyman" on her trail, she said "Hold this, Baddie, till I button me coat!" In other words, she unloaded on me and discreetly melted away. And there I stood, with that stolen muff in my hand and that store flyman with his hand on my shoulder, when Carnation Bud came pushing through the crowd.

"You can't pinch that girl," he said with all the authority of a precinct captain.

"I've got her with the goods on—and you can do your talking with the cop that's coming across the street!" announced that sheep-nosed sleuth.

Bud talked with the cop that came across the street. He talked low and

long, and called over the flyman himself, and continued that talk inside the store. Then he pulled out a roll of bills the size of a baby's arm, paid for the muff, and handed it over to me with a bow that made me think of John Barrymore in the movies. Then he led me out and signaled for a taxi.

"I s'pose you want to go home?" he said, as we swung off down the crowded avenue.

"I didn't steal that muff," was all the answer I gave to that question of his.

"Of course you didn't," he said, as solemn as a judge. But I knew he didn't believe me.

"Myrtle Menchen stole that muff," I persisted, "and handed it on to me to save her own neck."

"Don't you want to get back to your folks?" Bud gently inquired.

I told him I had no folks.

"Well, back to your home?"

"My home's been in a Greenwich Village rooming house with Myrtle. But from this day out I live with no girl like that." And I insisted on recounting the entire affair of the muff once more.

"Then what are you going to do?" asked that gallant prince who smelt of Florida water—but in those days it seemed a fit and finishing aura for such a golden hero.

"I don't know," was my listless response. Then Bud, in his lordly and masterful way, promptly took things in his own hands. He needed a good sharp girl in his work, which was that of a lock-inspector, and took him to all the biggest cities in America. And I in my innocence didn't understand what Bud's laugh stood for. So I agreed to swing in with him, and he promised that the job could end at any minute that he didn't treat me white.

Bud treated me white—and in going back to those old days, I found I couldn't keep from phrasing things in the language of that lower world. When you talk about city wild-life, you've got to use city wild-life words. Bud treated me white, with the one exception of not explaining, from the first, just what he had meant by inspector of locks. For when Bud inspected a lock it was usually done in the presence of a skeleton-key.

I was only a flapper, in those days, and there was no woman about to whom I could go for advice. I remember the day, on the Monday after he'd sent me ahead of him to Philadelphia, when I saw him filing a key-blank and he confessed that he was really a house-man. I was so green then that I didn't even know what the word meant. He had to go on and explain that he was really a supper-worker, and a supper-worker, I duly came to understand, was the underworld phrase for a dress-suit burglar.

It took my breath away—and I think my common sense must have gone with it. But the strange city intimidated me. I felt friendless and helpless and alone, in that great town of unknown streets and unknown faces. And when Bud left me to think it out and come to some sort of decision, I was foolish enough to feel relieved when I heard his step in the hall. And that decided me. I became a chicken-stall for a confidence-man and second-story worker.

The thing that most deluded me, I think, was Bud's lopsided decency. For outside of his work he was the cleanest-minded man I had ever met. He had been true blue in his promise about being white to me, and I didn't want to add to that color-scheme by showing a yellow streak. So I was weak enough to let him surmise that I was going to stick. I'm not sure now whether I intended to or not. If the chance had come I'm afraid I might have bolted. But the chance never came. There was one condition, of course, which he very well knew I'd always insist upon. And he was wise enough to respect that. He kept me as guarded from the uglier side of life, in fact, as though I'd been his own daughter. And my sliding over into that newer world came so gradually, like a vestibuled Limited sliding out of the yards into the open, that I was under way, full tilt before I quite realized what was happening. Then the sheer movement of the thing, the activity of it, the excitement of it, got into my blood, and the need of Bud himself got fixed in my mind.

I learned to look at life as he did. I dropped into the trick of talking as he did. I got so I could face a tight fade without a quaver, and do my gay-cat part in sloughing our make as easily as rolling off a log. And all the while it seemed a sort of game, which could of course be dropped when the league disbanded and the autumn leaves blew through the bleachers. It never dawned on me then that a woman must be only what she has been, that every year of her past is the link of a chain which drags forever at her heels. But, as I've already said, I was only a flapper in those days.

We worked the Eastern Coast that first winter, all the big cities excepting New York. The bulls were out for Bud there, and he usually fought clear of the Big Burg—and the day came when I most devoutly thanked God for that, since it left me with a clear record on Manhattan Island and allowed me later on to start over again, when the chance came. Bud flossed me out with a Bonwit-Teller hand-me-down and I joined him at Albany. Then we beat it to Boston and worked the Bean-Town suburbs harnessed for a course dinner. Sometimes I'd brace the bell, and sometimes Bud would. When no one answered the ring Bud would slip in through a side window and make his clean-up. I'd play gay-cat while he dug for glass and junk. Sometimes I'd even have to do the dummy-chucker act or spill a faint, to give him a chance for his get-away.

How the old words and the old way of looking up things came back, as I

went over those days again! It seemed the only way to describe the tricks of the old trade. For instance, when an alarm went up and Bud seemed to be in for a rumble, I'd swoon. I'd wait until the crowd got big enough and then I'd flop right down, happy-hems and all. I even got the trick of making myself go white, when I wanted to. That was why my stall could nearly always work, and the hen-flock would always hang around until I came to, and start me off in a taxi or a limousine to some bloomer address in the outskirts. Bud, in the meantime, would hop the fence for a fade-away.

He specialized on glass or ice, which same means simply diamonds, and he had a pet theory that the only kind of thieving that could ever pay in the long run was diamond stealing. A diamond, he said, was always as good as money. It never depreciated. It could always be pried out of its setting and be split or re-cut and could never be traced. And it served women right, he claimed, to lose their glass, for the parading of such stones was not only a vanity but an incitement to the poor. Bud even acknowledged that when he'd got me properly trained in the business the two of us could start out as the biggest glass lifters in the world. He had mapped out some visionary plan of campaign, to take us right through Europe. We were to go only after the best stones in the land. By that time we'd have a deep heel, which means plenty of ready cash, so that we could feed our fence until the blow-over and unload in the Amsterdam markets like a regular dealer.

One point that Bud was especially careful about was always to keep me within the law. He never so much as asked me to steal a postage-stamp. He said he didn't want a blot against me, and he said it was for business purposes. Whether or not that was the truth I could never quite tell. For Bud guarded me in ways that weren't always necessary. He kept me away from what he called the "skirts" and "ribs" of his profession. He seemed to have known a good many of these women, in his time. Sometimes I used to wonder what his relations with them had been. And sometimes, too, I used to be jealous of them. At first it was of Third-Arm Annie, who had beryl-green eyes and a thatch of red bangs that made her look out of place off Fourteenth Street. But Bud told me that she was one of the cleverest "dips" and pickpockets in America, and explained how she'd got her name working as a shop-lifter, with a dummy third arm which she rested on a counter or show-case while her own unnoticed right hand was busy raking the chattels into her split-skirt pocket.

But later on it was another woman who most disturbed me, for I couldn't help feeling that this woman had her ropes laid for the rounding up of my Bud. Her name was Cookson, but in her own circle she was always known as Copperhead Kate. She was well named, all right. For she wore her hair low over her ears, and this hair was of thick copper, standing out on each side of

her head in two rounded lobes. Her nose was rather short and blunt, and these two lobes seemed to add to the receding line of her flattened profile. So when you saw her at certain angles she kind of brought your heart up into your mouth, for her head was as much like the head of a copperhead snake as any human cranium could be. This snaky feeling was carried out still further in her movements themselves, for they were languid and lazy and graceful, as a rule. There was a scaly sort of shimmer about her, too, a smoothness and quietness which seemed to mark her down as belonging more to the shadows than the open street.

When her trail would cross with Bud's I'd have to edge away and fade into the background, for it was Bud's play, of course, always to deny that I was chicken-stalling for him. He wouldn't even recognize me in public, though we had a sign-language that would have made any Sicilian black-hander green-eyed with envy. I'd have to sit back and see Copperhead Kate dragging out her heart-to-heart talk with my Bud, and even then I was in some wordless way afraid of her. I hated that touch of stealth about her movements, that air of lazy self-concernment, that pose of gliding indifference to all the world about her. Bud told me that she was an uncommonly clever woman, as much cleverer than Third-Arm Annie, for instance, as Annie herself was cleverer than the every-day shop-lifter. But he stubbornly denied that he had ever worked with her, and claimed that for several years she'd been the gun-moll of a peterman called Whispering Wat, who'd a bullet-wound in his throat that rather interfered with his talking.

Bud nursed an open contempt for yeggs and petermen and lush-dips and that brand of crooks, and it was only when funds ran low that he turned back to actual porch-climbing. He always considered that line of work as a mere apprenticeship. He had his ambitions, had Bud, and sometimes he used to talk of how he'd handle the higher lines of work, once he was ready for the job. But he was never quite sure what this was to be. At one time he'd ramble on about switching back into the wire-tapping game, explaining that it was a game that never grew old and always had a rich sucker-list waiting for easy money. Then at other times he'd talk about the high-life sloughing, and say he wanted the two of us to get so we could saunter into Tiffany's or the Newport Casino or Bailey's Beach and spot the best stones in America without letting the Four Hundred know we weren't one of them. After talks like this Bud would plant me in the highest-priced hotels, to study the women there at close range, and catch the trick of talking as they did, and wearing my clothes as they seemed to wear theirs.

I was quick enough at doing this, though it always disturbed me in a way I can't quite explain. But I knew, all the time, that my splendor was only a flash

in the pan. I knew I was only cheap plate, an impostor. And all the while, deep down in my soul, I had that never-ending ache to be the real thing.

There were times, too, when Bud himself seemed to fail in what he pretended to be. He used to seem almost pathetic to me, on my off days, for I felt then that his clothes were flashier than they ought to be, that his Lord-Chesterfield manners weren't the manners of the other men in those softly carpeted hotels, that even his affectation of a Harvard accent was actory and artificial. This never really came home to me until I met another man. And that man was my Hero-Man.

Somewhere in her life, I think, every woman must have a Hero-Man, whether he's the new minister or the kingly floor-walker in a close-fitting Prince-Albert or a movie actor with his eyes beaded or some melancholy-eyed neighbor who is supposed to be misunderstood by his wife. But he must not be too near, or too accessible, otherwise his halo is likely to wither and his glory to fade into the light of common day.

It had been that way, I'm afraid, with Bud, although I had never been able to admit it. For Bud no longer seemed the resplendent being, smelling of Florida water, that he was that morning on Sixth Avenue when Myrtle Menchen stole the kolinsky muff. And my new Hero-Man was quite different from the old one, though there was a coincidence or two in the way they both appeared over the horizon.

Bud was hanging out at the Hotel Breslau, down at Long Beach, and was putting through a coup for milking the bathing-beach lockers during the swimming-hour. The Breslau double locker room is right under the hotel and reached from the shore by passing under the board-walk and in through a tunnel. On one side is the men's locker room, and on the other is the women's, with a slim in charge of one and a flapper in charge of the other. The lockers, of course, were for the use of the hotel guests, who undressed there before piking out for the beach in their bathing-suits.

Bud decided there was good booty in those lockers every afternoon, so he planned to have me call the locker-girl away for as long as I could hold her. Then he'd work his bone-keys and make his clean-up. It wasn't work he liked, but a turn of hard luck had left the coin-coffer at low ebb, and he had to take the first decent chance that came along.

A plump actor's wife came puddling in, in a wet bathing-suit, and caught Bud in her locker. Bud apologized and explained that his wife had sent him in from the beach for her rings, and he was awfully sorry he'd blundered into the wrong cubby-hole. Then he had the nerve to open up the second next locker, still under that plump dowager's eye, unpin an emerald pendant that was fastened to a waist hanging there, relock the door, and start smilingly back for

the beach.

I didn't dream anything was wrong, at the time, until the plump person began to scream at the top of her lungs that she'd been robbed. Even then I didn't worry. I merely sauntered on through the tunnel to the beach, where I spotted Bud losing himself in the crowd. But the busty lady in the wet bathing-suit had also spotted him. I saw her coming, like a ball down the bowling-ally. I managed to brush by Bud just in time to have him pass me his loot, wrapped up tight in a pocket handkerchief. Then I ambled on, with the package stowed inside my sleazy blouse-neck as I languidly pushed in my hairpins. No one, apparently, was any the wiser. But that was where I missed my one good guess.

I sank down beside a cool-eyed young man in gray flannels. He was smiling at the scene with a detached sort of contentment. He even smiled at me. Bud, by this time, had his hat in his hand and his Lord Chesterfield heels together. He was bowing and explaining and urbanely requesting that he be searched, if need be, to put the poor woman's mind at rest. But I didn't like the looks of things.

"What are they doing to that poor man?" I inquired of the cool-eyed youth beside me. He wasn't so young, I noticed, as I first thought him.

"I rather fancy they're going to have the house-detective search him," was my companion's quiet reply. He scarcely looked at me.

"Isn't that ridiculous?" I ventured. The whole thing, you see, somewhat bored me.

"It's more than ridiculous—it's useless," said the man at my side.

I looked at him out of the corner of a very guarded eye.

"Why?" I lazily inquired. But the search, I noticed, was already under way, and a triumphant if slightly indignant Bud Griswold was enduring it without any loss of standing.

"Because his confederate now has his haul safely tucked away under her shirt-waist," answered the man with the crème-de-menthe smile.

I sat there blinking at the blue Atlantic while a little runway of chills went arrowing up and down my spine. For this quiet-eyed stranger knew that I had that stolen jewelry on me, and he had just taken the trouble to let me know that he knew. In one panicky moment I saw myself blue-birded up to headquarters, mugged and measured, and my bright young life turning turtle into the Tombs.

But I didn't intend to give up the ship, without a last gasp or two.

"Do you think she can escape?" I quietly inquired.

He thought this over.

“That all depends on how intelligent she is,” was his final response.

“I hope she does,” I sighed. “For I think we all like to see a woman get a fighting chance!”

His smile broadened. Then he grew quite serious again.

“When the engagement has every aspect of fairness,” he ventured. And that made me rather sit up again. He was intimating, of course, that sneak-thieving wasn’t exactly the noblest of pastimes.

“I wonder what she really ought to do?” I impersonally inquired.

For the second time he found it necessary to give my question considerable thought.

“I should think the easiest solution of the situation would be for her to drop the little parcel intact into the hotel mail-box,” he told me. “In that way the unfortunate lady will be relieved of all possible embarrassment and the owners of the missing—er—ornaments will undoubtedly come into possession of them again!”

I was still staring out at the blue Atlantic.

“I believe that is exactly what the lady intends to do,” I quietly announced.

“When?” he inquired.

I did not answer him at once, for Bud, who was hovering about the background, was telling me by sign-talk to stick to the stranger and follow on to the city when the way was clear.

“When?” demanded my new friend.

“Right away,” I acknowledged. For I had thrown back to Bud the high-sign that I was wise to his tip.

The man at my side turned and studied me, apparently for the first time.

“I’m sorry, you know,” he began. “But I rather think it would make it safer if you’d dine with me here to-night.”

“I haven’t been oppressed by any sense of impending danger,” I told him, with a forced laugh.

“Then perhaps it escaped your attention that the locker-girl has just pointed you out to the hotel detective?”

“That is interesting,” I said, but I wasn’t one half as comfortable as I pretended to be.

“It is so interesting that I think it will be advisable for us to return to the hotel by way of the board-walk,” he explained, as he rose to his feet. “And in case there is any necessity for using it, remember, my name is Wendy Washburn.”

He said it as though he nursed the comfortable belief that there was considerable weight in that rather silly-sounding name.

“And mine is Baddie Pretlow,” I told him, as I rose to my feet.

“Baddie,” he repeated, with a glint of humor.

“That’s short for Barbara, you know,” I explained, as we began to move forward.

“There positively ought to be a society for the prenatal suppression of impossible names,” he declared, as we mounted to the board-walk. “Imagine an able-bodied man being sent out into the world with such a name as ‘Wendy.’ And a nice-looking girl being compelled to answer to the soubriquet of ‘Baddie!’ ”

“I suspect the latter may fit a little nearer than you think,” I told him.

He stopped and stared at me, long and earnestly. Under that steady look, in fact, I could feel my color deepen.

“On the contrary,” he said with quiet decision, “I think you are entirely wrong in that intimation.”

“Thank you!” was my stammered and altogether stupid reply to his absurd declaration of faith. By this time we were back at the hotel and I was directing my course so as to lead us to the lobster-colored mail-box. I turned away from him and stooped in front of it.

“Will you pardon me a moment,” I murmured, “for I’ve a letter I’d like to mail here!”

He did not look, but I’m sure he heard the chink of metal as the little parcel fell into the lobster-colored box. And I took a deep breath as I turned around to where he was waiting for me.

“It may seem rather an absurd hour to dine, but the sooner we dig ourselves in, so to speak, the safer we may be for any possible attack,” my Hero-Man suggested. And I hadn’t eaten my second oyster before I realized the wisdom of that strategy.

It was not the house-detective, however, but the hotel manager himself who came to confer with Wendy Washburn. That conference took place just beyond my hearing. It showed that my Hero-Man, whatever he may have been, was at least a good actor. He neither lost his dignity nor over-did the part. He neither expostulated nor argued. He merely announced. And he did it so quietly that that hotel manager tucked his last suspicion into its four-poster of official politeness and apologized for what must have been a mistake of his employees.

“That’s over, I imagine,” my Hero-Man announced, as he rejoined me,

quite unruffled. And as he sat across the table from me and went on with his dinner, as calmly as though we had dined together a thousand times, I did my best to study his face. I wanted to understand him.

But that face didn't seem an easy one to understand. At first it struck me as being cold. Then it struck me as the face of one of those oldish-looking young Americans who begin to worry over things too early in life and get a sprinkling of gray over the ears while their eyes are still young. For his eyes were still young, young and eager, though the rest of his face looked tired and his smile was a half-cynical one. There was just a touch of disdain about his eyebrows, too, though you forgot that in the humor of his smile. He made that humor, I think, a kind of armor, as though he wanted to laugh at himself before you got a chance to laugh at him. And he had a funny little trick of holding back what he was about to say, for a second or two, as though he might be giving his brain time to work before he let his mental ponies trot out into the ring of talk. His lips would pucker up a little, as he did this, in a way that made you think of a kid. But that lean jaw and that straight mouth with just the tiniest twist at the end soon told you he could be strong enough, when the strain came. He had a way of looking at you critically, yet quizzically, though he made me feel that he'd be honest before he'd be kind-hearted. He gave me the impression, even then, that he was expecting a great deal from his possible friends, that it might hurt him a lot if you didn't live up to his expectations, and that in some way it would always be better to have him on your side than against you.

"I disappoint you, I see," he announced, without looking up, as I completed what I thought was a secret survey of him.

"No," I told him. "You puzzle me."

"Not half so much, I fancy, as you have been puzzling me," was his retort. "And I've just been thinking that you ought to read Browning. He'd really help you a lot!"

"Who's Browning?" I asked.

"He's the gentleman who first observed that it's better being good than bad, and that it's much safer being sane than mad—bromidic utterances, I'll allow, but then one might claim that bromides are bromides simply because they express essential truths that are so undisputed everybody has to keep on saying 'em!"

"I'll get his works!" I solemnly promised.

"*Please don't,*" implored my Hero-Man. "Or I'll find you my enemy for life. But you don't get much time for reading, I take it?"

I confessed that I didn't. I even told him that I hated to dawdle, that I had to keep on the move, that I needed excitement as much as most women needed

tea.

“Of course,” he admitted, as though he understood it all from the first. And without quite knowing it he led me out, step by step, until he had me Bertilloned and pigeonholed. And the harder I tried to explain myself, to redeem myself, the wider his eyes became.

“You poor little muddle-headed kid!” he said in a tone that gave me a funny feeling in the throat, “they haven’t handed you half a chance!”

Then he told me, in his steely yet offhanded way, that he was going to motor me back to town.

It was still easy for me to recall the smell of the sea, the sound of waves plunging under the board-walk, the lights of his high-power roadster as he circled in to take me aboard. It didn’t seem real. It was like a dream. I thought he was going to preach, on the way in, but he was silent during most of that run. I even thought he was going to say something about our meeting again, or ask, as Bud’s friends would, where he’d be able to find me when he had a day off. But he said no such thing. What he did say was something quite different from what I had expected.

“Under the circumstances, you know,” he quietly explained, after we had crossed the bridge, “it would be obviously absurd for me to give you my home address. But if you find yourself confronted by a predicament that—well, that seems in any way desperate, you might send me a line at the Aldine Club. I mean that if you actually need help, and I can help you, I’ll do it!”

I swallowed my disappointment. I was so hurt, in fact, without knowing just where or how, that I sat silent until he dropped me at the Grand Central, as I had asked him to do. The tangle of traffic there must have taken all his attention, for he merely nodded, and neither looked back nor called out to me, as he rolled away.

CHAPTER THREE

I SAT ON the park bench, thinking it all over. I sat there in the paling light, with the distant hum of the city in my ears, going over those earlier days, scene by scene and event by event.

A little old man in rusty black ambled by me, but he had come and gone before my abstracted eyes took note of him. The gray squirrel ventured back to his earlier playground, circling discreetly about the stranger who was in too deep a trance to remember that it was about time for the handing out of a peanut or two. But I was thinking of bigger things than park squirrels as I sat there with a five-reeled tangle that people call life once more unrolling before my eyes. I was busy recalling how that meeting with the Hero-Man changed me, and changed even Bud Griswold. For Bud's manner toward me, after that strange evening at Long Beach, was distinctly a different one. He was, I could see, secretly and smolderingly jealous of the mysterious and cool-eyed Wendy Washburn. He knew that this stranger had opened my eyes to things which they had never before bothered about. I didn't explain. I *couldn't* explain. But in some vague way I felt sorry for Bud. He became more morose, more self-contained. Yet he was never openly unkind, or actively critical. He seemed more discontented with himself than with me. A new fever for money seemed to possess him. This prompted him to turn back to the coarser grades of work, to take chances which earlier in the game he never seemed to care to face.

Yet in some ways he tried to stay the same. He remained the same toward me, although his temper, with other people, was apt to be uncertain. It was at Ormond Beach, I remembered, that he floored a Yacht-Johnny in white ducks for making unseemly advances to me on the board-walk, knocked him as flat as a pan-cake, and at the same time put the kibosh on our hotel coup for that night, because a federal gum-shoe pushed in through the crowd and got a bead on Bud. He seemed to remember him. So we had to beat a retreat for the orange-groves before two local constables could understand why that gum-shoe was trying to commit an assault on such a respectable-looking guest as Bud.

And in Brookline, when Copperhead Kate led Bud to one side and tried to coax him to hitch up with a mail-pouch thief called Pawtucket Fatty, he shook his head on the strong-arm work. It was the same when Hot-Weather Harry, another porch-climber who'd side-stepped into yegg-work, wanted Bud to join him and work the can-opener on the Middle West post-offices. Bud came out flat against the offer. He later explained to me that it was rube work and all

right for the rough-necks, though it wasn't until later that I learned that both Copperhead Kate and Hot-Weather Harry claimed that I was the reason for Bud Griswold growing chicken-hearted in his old age.

If this worried Bud he never opened his heart about it to me. He merely contended that he'd rather be a check-kiter, or a stone-getter, any day, than a soup-worker and a box-blower. For Bud didn't believe in force. He made it a practise not even to carry a gun. This, he pointed out, had saved him from a fall, dozens of times. He said no properly-trained supper-worker had any right to tote a "gat," which is the underworld word for an automatic. He didn't even work with a jimmy, when it came to forcing a side door, or getting a back window up. All he carried was a specially made cigar-lighter—which served him as a flashlight—and a cast-steel stove-lifter which could be tossed into any back yard on a moment's notice. You couldn't hold a man, he used to say, on an exhibit of kitchen utensils, though he worked a good many of his window tricks with a stone point and a suction-cap made from a glove-back.

Copperhead Kate dogged about after Bud a good deal that summer, and on a pretense that a run of hard luck had slimmed our heel we worked south from Boston to Sleepy-Town again, skipping New York as usual and striking for the high-toned colonies along the Eastern Coast. I wasn't sorry to be on the move, for I was more than ever afraid of Copperhead Kate. And I could see that Bud himself was restless. He knew that something had started me thinking things over, that I was no longer as placidly unconcerned about life as a lamb in a meadow, that I was beginning to have an inkling that the whole arrangement of things was wrong. But he worked steadily, all this time, and never lost a chance to turn the nut, as he would express it. And when winter came on we struck for Florida and floated down through the East Coast resorts, Little Me drifting ahead as the advance agent and Bud following on as the managing director. We never put up at the same hotel, of course, and we never appeared together in public unless it couldn't be helped.

For the first time in my life I was lonesome, lonesome for something which I couldn't name and couldn't understand. But Bud was always talking of the future, when we came together, and of the deep heel we'd have when we crossed the pond. It was at Fort Pierce that he first asked me to marry him, though he did it again, three days later, at Palm Beach. I was able to laugh at him, and accuse him of getting mealy. That seemed to hurt him. It at least put the lid down on the marriage talk for the rest of the winter. But Bud was good to me, as good as any man, whether he happened to be a diamond thief or a churchwarden, could be to a woman. He still expected me to do my spotter work, of course, and do it well. Sometimes it wasn't easy to get away with, but Bud, even from the distance, watched me like a hawk and never ventured a

move which he thought would make it harder for me.

I don't like to say that Bud went sour that winter, but my refusal to marry him left him so unsettled that he did the best sloughing of the season, sometimes making three stations in one night. He even jimmied his way into a stucco château full of King-Charles spaniels, and, take my word for it, no ordinary porch-climber is ever anxious to face that kind of dog-opera. Then when things shaped themselves so it looked like a round-up, he commandeered a gasoline launch and we did the Indian River by moonlight, with Bud dropping in on a nifty-looking house-boat on the way and gathering up a pocketful of rings before a trim little tender full of fox-trotters bumped up against one end of that boat while Bud himself slipped down over the other.

Then we doubled back and ambled on to Havana, where Bud reported the city to be a gold-mine for work like his, but where I suffered from intermittent chills and fever until an American doctor advised me to go north. So Bud gave up his gold-mine and carried me back to home country by way of New Orleans. Then we headed northward by way of St. Louis and Chicago, for Bud had worked out a new coup or two, to practise in the neighborhood of the Great Lakes.

One of his new plans, in which he had great faith, he intended to try out at Detroit, and then repeat at Buffalo, if all went well. His idea was to plant me in one of the Pullmans crossing the Line. Then, watching his chance, he was to board the train, pull on a gold-braided cap, and pose as an immigration official. He intended to come to me first, close to the end of the car, and ask if I was an American or a Canadian citizen, and what money I carried. My part of the play was to hand over a phony roll, for which he'd give me a duly-prepared official receipt, with the announcement that the money would be returned to me at Windsor, or at Buffalo, as the case happened to be. Then he'd go down the line, gathering in all he could. I was to be both a stick-up and a come-on, of course, for when the others saw me pass over my cash in hand they'd conclude a genuine immigration officer was on the job and a new inland revenue regulation was being put in force. In case anything suspicious happened, I was to throw Bud the high-sign. But if all went well he could stow his gold-braided cap, drop off the Pullman, and repeat the coup on any train that happened to be moving in the opposite direction.

It could be worked only once, Bud explained, but it ought to make good picking while it lasted. In explaining this Bud told me how he'd made almost as good money at the same points, working out a coup of baggage-check switching. He'd check a trunk full of cheap clothes from some Canadian point, go through to the baggage-car at the border, and have the trunk examined and passed. Then he'd tarry to strap it up. If he got a minute or two alone in that

car he made it a point to pick out the most promising trunk and switch claim-checks between it and his own. His own claim-check, at the end of the trip, would call for the good trunk, a transfer company would deliver it at a flivver address, and Bud would move on as soon as it came, without leaving too many traces as he went.

The new coup, Bud claimed, was the better of the two. And he was glad to get to Detroit to try it out. He was as interested in it, in fact, as a Belasco would be in a new production. But that particular performance never got to the footlights. For it was at Detroit that poor old Bud got his fall.

I was cooped at the Statler, and Bud was holding out at the Pontchartrain. He'd sidetracked there for a day, working out a slough against a Grosse Pointe automobile nabob who'd made half a million out of war munitions and was trying to spend the most of it in one dinner orgy. He was just laying the last ropes when Shy Sadie Driscoll blew into Bud's kennel and invited him to swing in with her on a turn of the old panel game with some new trimmings. Bud "threw her flat" as she put it. Shy Sadie tried to wipe out that throw-down by blowing the tout and having a fancy cop walk in on Bud when he was pretty anxious to be alone. But they had him with the goods on. The best he could do was to save me out of the ruins. He lied like a trooper, through three hours of third-degreeing, just to save my scalp. At the very first move he'd thrown me the high-sign not to recognize him, not to know him, not to be interested in him. I caught the cue, and stuck to it. And to Shy Sadie's mortification, I made good on it. But it hurt, even to have to play out that part of giving my old running-mate the cold shoulder.

It hurt me a lot more, though, not being able to get near the man who needed me more than ever before. But Bud commanded me to stand clear. He said it was the only way. He seemed to know what was coming. And it came sooner than I imagined. It was a railroad case, a through trip and no stops. They gave him Jackson for ten years.

He sent me word, later on, that he wanted to see me. He explained that the case against him was closed and that there'd be no risk in the visit.

So I went up to Jackson by the interurban. It was my first glimpse of a state penitentiary. I'd never even glimpsed the inside of a county jail. I'd never dreamed what it was that had been standing, all the while, just one turn of the road ahead of me. But that first glimpse of stir suddenly opened my eyes. I beheld a living tomb, and the horror of it, the hopelessness of it, struck deep, like a knife, into my heart.

I tried to hide this horror during my long talk with Bud, but it was no use. Bud even tried to make me see the thing in a different light, and explained that Jackson was one of the best pens in the Union, and that, on the whole, he was

lucky to be in a place where he'd get such all-round good treatment and so many chances for a commutation. But Bud had something more than his own troubles to talk about.

"Kid," he asked me, "what's the size of your roll?"

It had slimmed down to a couple of tens, and I told him so.

Then he sat studying my face.

"Well, I've been thinking about this for a long time. I could see there was always a chance of it coming. And I've gathered the gazabos to have you taken care of!"

"But I want *you* to take care of me," I told him.

He shook his head. "They've got me here—and ten years is a long time!"

The thought of it made me wild.

"But I'll get you out of here. I'll get the best mouth-piece in the profession. I'll pump brine over that governor until I wash a pardon out of his system!"

Bud only laughed, though there wasn't much happiness in that laugh.

"I'm here, honey-girl, and here I've got to stay. That's not what I'm worrying about. It's *you* I've got on my mind just now. And I want to do the right thing by you, kid."

"What *can* you do?" I asked, studying his heavy face.

"I'm going to try and square myself for hauling you down the way I did. I'm going to give you a chance at the other kind of living."

"I never kicked against this way of living," I told him, looking him straight in the eye. But there were certain things which I couldn't help remembering, although, at the moment, I was ashamed of it.

"That's just what's wrong," Bud told me. "We've both been blind to things you can't afford to side-step. And now, Baddie, you've got to get busy and have your eyes opened!"

He was so solemn that he frightened me. And I was busy wondering what he could be holding back on me.

"The first thing I want to do is get you over on the other side of the line. I'll never feel safe with you here in the States, though God knows I did what I could to keep you clear of everything. And I don't want to think there'd ever be a chance of your facing what I've got to face."

The terror of those long black years, stretching out endlessly, one after the other, and one as empty as the other, suddenly gripped my soul. But Bud made an impatient sign with his hand, for it was plain he hated to see me cry. Then he went on again.

"Baddie, you were born with brains, and you're going to have two or three

years' living among the right sort of people."

"No, I'm not," I promptly told him. "I've tried it. And the right sort of people always seemed the wrong people with me."

"That's just what I've been trying to tell you. You're going to have your eyes opened. You're going to learn how wrong you've been looking at everything!"

For a moment I thought he'd roped me in for a reform school or one of those penal farms where you grow vegetables beside a man with a pump-gun. And my heart sank.

"It's all fixed up and settled," explained patient-eyed old Bud. "For I thought this out a long time before yesterday. And you're going to have a couple of years of peace and progress in an Ursuline academy called The Pines."

"Where's that?" I demanded, getting ready to back right out of the harness.

"That's about fifty miles across the border, up in Canada. And you're going to learn a lot up there that I'd never be able to teach you. And after a while you're going to like it."

I sat looking at him.

"I'd hate it," I finally announced.

Bud only shook his head.

"You're going to have a little white room with ivy all around the window. You're going to have a clean white bed and clean people to live with. You're going to hear birds sing, and bells ring—and a different line of talk than big-mitter's slang. You're going to study music and sewing and deportment and have morning and evening chapel, and big trees to sit under, and rows of flowers to walk between, and real women to talk over your troubles with. And after the first week or two, when you get over the wrench, you're going to wake up and find that the quiet lives aren't always the empty ones."

I still sat there staring at him. For a minute or two I actually thought that stir had made him squirrely.

"But I don't want it," I cried out at him. "I won't take it. I'd rather be here with you than in a place like that!"

Bud smiled, even though his eyes were haggard. Then he sobered up again.

"I'd rather see you screwed down in your coffin than ever come into this sort of a place," he told me. "And for the next year or two you can't stay loose this side of the line. It's all paid for and settled, that new berth of yours. I've seen to that. And if you ever thought anything of me you'll take the chance that I'm trying to give you."

“Why do you say that?” I asked, struggling in vain to keep my face straight.

“Because it’ll make things easier for me here, knowing I’m trying to square for what I did to you!”

And that, I remembered, was how I came to go up to the Ursuline academy.

It wasn’t exactly the same as stir, but, at first, it seemed almost as bad to me. I don’t know what kept me from going crazy. When I tried a breakaway, at the end of the third week, they got me back before I could board a Wabash train for the Falls, got me back the same as though I’d been a lifter in an up-state reformatory.

I went back, but it began to make me bitter toward Bud. I secretly accused him of trying to hand me a dose of his own medicine. I even wondered if he wasn’t simply trying to save me for himself, if he wasn’t merely maneuvering to keep me in pickle there until he could rope a reprieve and come and carry me off. For I seemed to be in a world of sleep-walkers. They were all so quiet-voiced and sedate and so far away from my busy old world of noise. It even took Sister Theresa three days to teach me how to sit down in a chair. I’d done it wrong, all my life, without knowing it. And I had to do without my face-powder, and cut out the slang, and learn how to pitch my voice and face lights-out at nine o’clock—at nine o’clock, and Little Me the night-owl who used to hit the hay when the milk-wagons were rattling up from the ferry-slips! There were a lot of other things I had to learn, though I didn’t seem to know it at the time. There was a change taking place, though I couldn’t see it.

It wasn’t until Copperhead Kate came to see me at The Pines that I realized how great this change already was. She came heavily veiled, and dressed all in black, and she carried herself as discreetly as though she were under the eyes of twenty elbows at once. But I could feel the difference. She was snaky and brazen and hard, and all her affectations of gentility struck me as grotesque. She told me that Bud’s health was bad at Jackson, and that we ought to do something to get him out. I hated her more than ever, not only because I felt she had come to spy on me, but also because she could still speak of Bud Griswold with such a proprietary air. I think she envied me, and was glad of anything that would make me miserable. She went away saying she’d be glad to carry any message I cared to send in to Bud, and left me a Saginaw address to send it to.

I thought about Bud a great deal, the next week or two. I worried over him. It was only on the last Saturday of every month that we were allowed out, always with one of the Sisters. I had grown friendlier with Sister Angelica than with any of the others, for we both loved candy, and often, in the recreation

rooms, ate a little box of smuggled chocolates together. On the next Saturday out, instead of being in the dentist's chair where I was supposed to be, I bought a pound of Canadian maple-sugar and in Wanless' hardware store came into possession of a twelve-inch hack-saw blade of the finest tempered steel. It was so finely tempered that back in my room I was able to coil it up like a watch-spring, and wire it together with a couple of hairpins. Then I melted down about half of my maple-sugar over an alcohol-lamp and poured it into a round soap-dish. Before it hardened I dropped the coiled-up saw into the center of it. In half an hour, when I turned it out it looked nothing more than a cake of maple-sugar. Then I tied it up carefully, and bribed one of the day-scholars to mail it to Copperhead Kate for me, with a little unsigned note of instruction inside.

It was two weeks later that Copperhead Kate reappeared in the bald, white-walled, curtainless reception room of the Ursuline academy. She was still in black, but this time her veil was of heavy crape.

"Can you get rid of this woman?" she said to me between her teeth, for Sister Angelica had accompanied me to that white-walled room with its six pictures of six different Saints.

Sister Angelica, I think, read my face only too well as I asked for a talk with my caller on family affairs. But she went from the room without a word.

"Something's wrong!" I said, swinging about on Copperhead Kate the moment we were alone. She had taken a watch from her purse and was holding it in her hand. I saw at a glance that it was Bud's time-piece. And my heart began to pound.

"I guess you'd better stiffen up for a shock," my caller told me, watching my face with her sleepy green eyes.

"What's happened?" I demanded, staring at the watch.

"Bud wanted you to have this," Copperhead Kate explained as she passed the watch over to me.

"Where's Bud?" I asked, almost in a scream. Copperhead Kate warned me, by a movement, not to raise my voice.

"They shot Bud three days ago when he was trying to make his get-away," I heard the woman in black saying to me. I sat staring at her veil. All the world went misty in front of me.

"They shot him?" I echoed. The face behind the veil moved slowly up and down. I sat there a long time, without moving.

"Tell me about it," I whispered, at last. It struck me as odd that the watch in my hand should be still ticking.

"Bud had cut three bars away with a steel saw that had come in to him in a

cake of maple-sugar. He'd dropped from a wall when one of the guards caught sight of him and fired."

"How can I get to him?" I asked. I was on my feet by this time, but I noticed that my knees were shaking.

Copperhead Kate still sat studying my face. I think she was wringing a morbid sort of joy out of my misery.

"You can't get to him," she explained. "Not unless you want to dig him out of ten inches of quick-lime!"

She'd got up from her chair.

"He's dead!" I repeated vacantly, holding on to the back of my chair.

Copperhead Kate answered that question by moving her veiled face slowly up and down. I stood looking at the painting of St. Anthony. I looked at it a long time. I knew when my caller turned and moved across the room. I was conscious of her quiet and undulatory advance toward the door. I knew she was going, although she moved as softly as a snake. But there seemed nothing for me to say. As I stood there I merely repeated those two words, "He's dead!"

I was in a daze all that week. The whole world seemed to have stopped. I'd hitched my wagon to Bud, and they'd put his light out. I'd tried to help him, and instead of that I'd hurt him in the only way that was left for him to be hurt. He was dead—and I was the cause of it!

I was glad enough of my little white room of peace, during the next few weeks. I was easier to manage, after that. I still hated the confinement. I still revolted in spirit at the smallness of the world they had walled me up in. But I began to reach out for something stable, at a time when all my world seemed going like the wooden horses of a carousel. I even began to study, for I found that it made me forget. And, even more than before, there were changes taking place, although I didn't always seem conscious of them.

I often wondered if Bud knew what he was doing when he sent me to that place. I used to ask myself if he realized that he was educating me away from him, forever. For that was actually what happened. The old ways began to seem cheap, and the old grandeurs as pathetic as the cotton grape-vines they festoon road-house restaurants with. I no longer thought of the big things we might have done in that No-Man's Land of the urban outlaw, if Bud had only lived. I began to despise that sort of life. I even grew to shudder at it. I was really learning more than French verbs and how to phrase notes of condolence with elegance. I was learning to look at life from the upper side, instead of from the under. And then I got in the habit of talking things over with Sister Angelica. She was the only woman I ever knew who'd never blow the toot, as

Bud's friends would phrase it. She helped me a lot. But she could never make my world over for me. She tried hard. But that sort of thing isn't done in real life.

I stood the Ursuline academy for nineteen long months. And then I made my escape.

Why it was I don't know; but I had to get away. There was peace all around me, but there wasn't peace in my heart. Perhaps it was the hardness and the baldness of the place that proved too much for me—for deep down in my soul there was that absurd but that eternal hunger for splendor. I was blessed or cursed with a love for color, for richness. Something within me always responded to the polished surfaces of old wood, to the harmonizing tones of tapestry, to the high lights you see in silver and cut-glass. If I'd been a pawnbroker's daughter it would have been easier to explain. And I knew I could never have these things. But I had that never-ending ache to be where they were. And they were not at The Pines. So I left The Pines behind me.

I made a clean get-away, crossed the ferry at Windsor with my heart in my mouth, and caught a D. & C. boat for Cleveland. From there I went on to Buffalo. And the next night saw me heading once more for New York.

But it was a different New York that I came to. I returned a stranger to my own home town. I nursed the delusion that henceforth it would be easy, instead of merely doing others, to do good to others. I think I wanted to be a sort of female St. Francis of Forty-Second Street.

The Big City soon put me straight on that. It began by humbling me; and it ended up by humiliating me. I used to think I knew the Old Burg like a book, the same as the broads and ribs who study menu cards in the trotteries and sing *This Is The Life* imagine they understand that incomprehensible old island of unrest. I thought I knew it better than the office girls who twice a day take their subway dip and eat wheat-cakes in the dairy luncheries so they may hit the movies at night. I thought, because I'd been a cashier in a Fourteenth Street nickelodeon, and a wrapper and sales-girl in a Twenty-Third Street department store, and a feeder for a stage ventriloquist, and a chicken-stall for a successful gentleman adventurer, that I was nothing but a rabbit thrown back into the brier-patch. And I found out that I was mistaken.

Yet I hadn't been born and brought up in Minetta Lane for nothing. The city hadn't been a stepmother to me for eighteen long years without at least leaving me wise to a few of her ways. I knew how to pinch bananas from Dago Charley's fruit-stand on Fourth Street before I was knee high to a grasshopper. And at eight I was crabbing drop-cakes from the Greenwich House cooking-class. At sixteen I was hitting the Harmony Club outings and not shying at even the thought of two-stepping with a gangster who'd croaked a cop. At

seventeen I could down my second glass of suds and not miss a step on the Steeplechase floor at Coney. Things like that, in fact, made up the splendor of life for me in those foolish old days. Yet the city had taught me to be cautious. You can't float for long about the neighborhood of Minetta Lane and not learn to look out for yourself—or go under. And I never intended to go under. I don't know why. But I intended to keep on top. Bud once told me something about Indian children being thrown in the water, when they're mere babies, so as to learn to swim. They've got to swim. Well, I was thrown into the streets, in just about the same way. And to swim, I suppose, became an instinct with me. Bud realized that from the first, I feel sure, and I always respected him for at least respecting my privacy of life.

But back in that city I didn't find any jobs cutting the curb-corners to run me down. After my second day of making the want-ad rounds I began to see I wasn't equipped for anything. All I was especially trained for was a come-on in petticoats—and those are the positions that are never advertised for. Then I tried the Bureau of Social Employment, paid my fee like a man, and woke up to the fact that I couldn't budge an inch without references. And the only reference I could think of was Wendy Washburn. In a case like that, though, I was ashamed to make use of him. And a week later I was glad that I hadn't, for I met him almost face to face at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Twenty-Seventh Street. I was sure that he saw me, and I was equally sure that he avoided me. He turned hurriedly into Brentano's without so much as a smile of recognition. It hurt me more than I could explain, more than I could understand.

I turned off the avenue as sore in heart as a lost hound. I didn't want people to see my face. For this reason, I suppose, I edged in close to a crowd staring at some imported posters in Brentano's side window. Right in front of me was a white-haired old man in a gray uniform braided with black. He was a fresh-cheeked, clean-limbed, spry-looking old man, and from the bellows-wallet of well-worn pigskin which he carried in his hand I took him to be a bank-messenger for one of the trust companies just around the corner. Yet he seemed to be taking genuine delight in some of those newly displayed Parisian posters, for unconsciously he pushed his wallet down in his pocket and leaned closer to the plate glass for a closer inspection of a colored cover from *La Rire*. But I gave little further attention to that trim-figured old gentleman, for the more massive figure on my right, I suddenly discovered, was not altogether unknown to me.

It took me several minutes to place him. Then I remembered. It was Pinky McClone, the con-man, the big, blue-eyed, Irish boy who'd been the champion diver of Coethes Slip and grew up to be a lighter-thief and later worked the

bathing-beaches as a life-guard and incidentally the bathers themselves as a dip and watch-lifter, with an eye out for any bigger pickings which the day might bring forth. He and Bud, I remembered, had conferred long and earnestly that day at Long Beach when I first met my Hero-Man. But I, of course, had taken no part in that conference.

I was just marshaling these different facts in my mind when I noticed Pinky McClone's big bronzed hand creep out to the pocket that held the wallet. It was as quick and neat a bit of poke-snatching as I'd ever seen. Not another person in that closely packed crowd caught a glimpse of the move. A moment later Pinky was edging airily off toward Fifth Avenue and I was wondering just what I ought to do. Before I had a chance to answer that, however, a wail went up from the stunned old bank-runner and he was sobbingly announcing to a rather skeptical circle of onlookers that he had been robbed.

I didn't wait to feel sorry for him. For Pinky, by this time, had turned south on the avenue and was drifting down through the crowd toward Madison Square, shaking hands with himself, I suppose, to find that he'd worked such a neat get-away. But he was as easy to spot as a light-house. I followed, close at his heels.

We were well in the square when he suddenly stopped, swerved, and dropped into an empty bench on which lay a discarded newspaper. I knew that movement as well as though it were written in Roman script. That con-man had caught sight of either a bluebird or a singed cat—which latter is simply an officer in plain-clothes. And he didn't want his trail to cross his enemy's.

So I dropped down on the same bench with Pinky, with a fastidious little sigh of weariness. I could see him inspecting me out of the corner of his eye as he bent over his paper. My being there didn't seem to add to his troubles. What worried him was that plain-clothes man who walked slowly by. Pinky's nose was within six inches of the sporting-page as that singed cat drifted so artlessly past our bench. But I had seen the officer's eye take in Pinky's intent figure. I knew he wasn't so artless as he looked.

Instinct, I suppose, advised Pinky of the same fact, for he wasn't letting one move of the enemy escape him, over the edge of that newspaper. Then he turned and studied my face.

He shifted a little closer along the bench. I knew, even before he started to speak, that he had decided to take a chance. And for some reason which I couldn't quite define, I felt disappointed and disturbed at that decision of his.

"For the love o' Gawd, lady," he said in a hurried and husky sort of whisper, "will you help me out?"

I gave him the icicle-eye, pretending not to know what he was driving at.

“A big strong man like you ought to be ashamed of begging on the streets,” I gently but firmly told him. But he brushed this aside with an impatient snort.

“Lady, you can save me from ten years in a cell. You can do it by no more than a move o’ the hand.”

“What must I do?” I inquired.

He sat there with his legs crossed, and the newspaper held up in front of him. But behind that screen, I knew, he was a terribly frightened man. His bronzed face was exactly the color of old cheese.

“That man coming toward us is a policeman. Only he’s wearing plain-clothes. They’ve been hounding me since last winter. He’ll be gathering me in, and when he gets me there I’ll be frisked!”

“What difference will that make?” I asked. “And what do you mean by being frisked, anyway?” But I had to smile in spite of myself. It seemed so much like old times.

“Get this under your clothes!” he said out of the corner of his mouth. He said it hurriedly, and almost roughly, for his time of argument had already slipped by. The plain-clothes man was bearing down on him.

I could feel the man on the bench shoving the pigskin wallet in under me. I neither moved nor spoke. I merely sat tight. The singed cat had stopped directly in front of us.

“What’re you doing in over your dead-line?” that officer was inquiring of my new-found friend.

“I’m workin’!” announced the man on the bench.

“Working?” echoed the cop. “So I see—and pulling the old stuff right on the avenue! So I guess, Pinky, we’ll have to toddle along.”

The man beside me, I noticed, had taken on a heavy and sullen look.

“I haven’t set foot on that avenue for seven weeks,” he protested.

“You weren’t up Fifth Avenue there twenty minutes ago?” demanded the officer.

“I’ve been right here on this bench for the last hour and a half,” announced the other man.

“Working, I suppose?” mocked the guardian of the law. But it was plain enough to Pinky that his tormentor stood none too sure of his ground.

“Why, this lady here knows I’ve been on this bench for over forty minutes,” declared that king of liars, growing bolder with the thought of a get-away.

The singed cat turned to me.

“Do you know this man?” he inquired.

I shook my head.

“But do you know that he’s been here for the last forty minutes?”

“What difference does it make?” I stalled, pretending the whole situation was a mystery to me.

“Because this man has a police record as a pickpocket, and there’s just been a job a couple of blocks up the avenue that looks like his work.”

“What was stolen?”

“A bank-runner’s wallet full of checks and notes,” was the reply.

“And I’d be roosting here on a park bench, wouldn’t I,” broke in Pinky, “if I was heeled with a haul like that!”

“How do I know you’re not heeled with it?” demanded the officer.

“Satisfy yourself, my friend, satisfy yourself,” luxuriously announced the man on the bench. The detective dropped down on the seat beside him. I could see him pass his hands over the other man’s body, like a mesmerist. It was a startlingly adroit series of passes and touches. It couldn’t have taken half a minute. But it seemed to satisfy the officer of the law.

He was plainly disappointed, and Pinky, I could see, was enjoying the discomfiture of his oppressor. And I considered that it was about time for me to step into the game.

“Are you an officer?” I demanded.

The man standing close beside Pinky McClone explained that he was an officer, or, rather an operative for Locke’s office, and that a big part of the Locke Agency work had to do with the Bankers’ Protective Association. Pinky was leisurely folding up his newspaper, prior to moving on.

“All right,” I sang out to that operative, “*grab your man. He’s stalling.*”

It was like a horse sneezing in a feed-bag.

“He’s what?” cried that startled singed cat.

“I say he’s stalling. Here’s the wallet he stole. He tried to push it under my skirt when he saw you coming!”

The hand of that operative of Locke’s went out like a lightning flash. It wasn’t until he had a firm grip on the slack of the other man’s sleeve that he even turned to look at the wallet itself.

The other man, strangely enough, did not struggle. I had expected a fight, an out-and-out free-for-all with fists, and had edged to one side, to get a little distance between me and the dust of that engagement. But Pinky, for all his strength, offered no resistance. He looked at me for a solid thirty seconds, however, with hate in his eye. He could have cut my heart out, without a whimper.

“Excuse me, miss, but would you mind coming along to the Chief’s office with us?” that singed cat was inquiring as Pinky and I finished our stare-fest.

I went. And that was how I first came to meet the Chief, Big Ben Locke. And an hour later, after Big Ben had talked over the case of Pinky McClone, and asked me a number of questions and ventured the opinion that I was an uncommonly clever girl, he offhandedly inquired how I’d like to be an operative, at fifteen a week to begin with, and tog out in new clothes and ride up and down in the Fifth Avenue busses as a “spotter” for fare-cribbers.

I didn’t hesitate long over that offer, though I found out, later, that he was handing me the cake with the icing side up. But my triumph was clouded by the thought of Pinky McClone. I still had the habit of looking at things from the occasional offender’s side of the line.

“Will that man really get ten years?” I asked, heavy of heart, for I couldn’t help remembering what I had seen of the inside of Jackson. And ten years was a terribly big part of any man’s life.

The Chief laughed a little.

“It’ll be more like ten days,” was his retort. “But the important thing, I guess, is getting that eighty thousand dollars in securities back and getting ’em intact!”

CHAPTER FOUR

I SIGHED HEAVILY, as I sat there on my park bench, not so much at that long retrospect of a wasted young life, but more at the discovery that I was as hungry as a cracker's hound. And I also remembered that I'd surely enjoy a respectably long walk before stumbling over my next meal.

Post-mortems, as a rule, are apt to be depressing. And I'd reviewed my past and worried my brain until I was tired, yet it didn't seem to throw any light on the dilemma that still confronted me. It wasn't my nature, I know, to be morbid, but when you've got a past that you can't walk through without wearing shin-pads, it's better to keep to the open. What was over was over, and instead of carrying wreaths to the cemetery, I told that hungry soul which is so often the stepsister of a hungry body, it behooved me to hie to a lunchery where I could partake of Hamburger steak and hot coffee.

So I got up from my bench and started eastward toward Fifth Avenue. I moved quickly along the lonely walks, for the evening air had given me a sense of chilliness and the thought of hot coffee was a spur to my steps.

I was almost at the avenue when I became aware of a certain fact. Yet it was not a fact. It was more a surmise, the same as you see a lightning flash with your eyes shut. *Some one was following me.*

I did not look back until I had dodged a bus and a covey of motor-cars scurrying northward to home and dinner. Then I walked south a block, and turned east again. Then what had at first only been a question grew into a suspicion, and the suspicion merged into a certainty. *I was being followed.* And the cave-woman who still housed inside my twentieth-century skin sounded a second alarm to me in the shape of a sudden little tingle of nerve-ends.

I stopped and stared up at a house-number. The man who was shadowing me came closer, hesitated for a moment, passed by, and plainly slackened his pace.

I still found it hard to believe that I was his quarry. So, to try him out, I swung about and started in the opposite direction. The moment he saw my move, he did the same. I even crossed the street at the next corner and doubled on my tracks. The man followed me, not a hundred steps behind. Big Ben Locke, I promptly decided, was having me "tailed."

Then I swung about, and calmly sized up my shadower. It gave me a start to see that it was the same weasel-faced little old man who had watched me in the elevator of the Asteroid Theater Building.

I recognized the rusty black. Then I remembered the narrow-set eyes and the pinched old face and the air of shabby and shuffling gentility. Yet, transparent as were his movements as a tailer, there was a note of determination in those same movements, a rat-like furtiveness which made him almost funny. But if Big Ben and his office were sending out that sort of operative to shadow my steps, I decided, they might as well announce it in a sky-sign. A runaway baby from the Mall would have known what was after it, in a chase like that. And when you've chicken-stalled up and down a country you kind of get the habit of watching the rear view in your off moments, the same as a robin does, no matter how thick the angle-worms may be.

Yet I prided myself on knowing all the operatives in Locke's offices, and I felt sure this old man who walked as though he had chalk in his joints wasn't one of them. He *couldn't* be one of them. So the rage which had burned up in me at Big Ben Locke suddenly focused itself on that wizened old gum-shoe who had the impertinence to follow me for two hours about the city.

It wasn't until I stopped short for the second time, and he came ambling up, preening himself as he came, that it occurred to me my annoyer might be nothing more than a senile old lady-killer dreaming he was running down a wanderer from the squab-dumps. And the mere thought of this made me madder than ever.

He was almost up to me by this time, walking mincingly. I was so hot that I could hear my blood boil in my ears. But I walked on again, waiting until he was almost by my side.

Then I swung about on him. I must have looked like a wild-cat with bells on. I'd had too much of men for that one day.

"How dare you try to follow me, you old hound?"

He stopped up short, with a sort of startled wince.

"Oh, I say!" he squeaked, in a thin little voice, blinking at me reprovingly from under his rusty hat-rim.

"How dare you follow me?" I repeated. There must have been a look of desperation in my eyes, for he began to back away, a shuffling step at a time. But his thin old weasel face was still studying my face.

"Really, you know, I wouldn't harm you for the world," he argued. "Nothing was—"

But I cut him short.

"And how dare you speak to me?" I continued, still in my white heat of indignation. I was in a rage at the whole world. And he was all I had to take it out on.

"But, my dear young lady, I'm compelled to speak to you," persisted that

weasel-faced old man, with his shoulders uplifted and a sort of apologetic blink about his wistful old eyes. I noticed, for the first time, the look of strained anxiety, of hungry eagerness, which made those deep-set old eyes rather remarkable. But the rest of the face was as hard as nails.

“What compels you to?” I demanded, staring back at him. There was a sneer in my question, but it didn’t seem to jolt him in the least. “What do you want, anyway?” I asked with all the world-weariness I could possibly throw into the question.

I began to realize that I wasn’t being buzzed over by an zooing-bug. The old man, I began to see, was something more than a street masher. But he seemed to find it hard to explain just what his business might be.

“I wanted to—” Then he stopped short, as though the look of belligerency on my face left him a little doubtful as to what extremes I might go. Then he peered up and down the street, to make sure we were alone. Then he took a step closer to me. “The—the truth is I—er—wanted to explain something—something which, I am afraid, is not going to prove easy of explanation.”

“Then why take the chance?” I curtly inquired, for I was still an enemy to everything in shoe-leather.

But with all his timidity he had no intention of being sidetracked by any mere display of bad temper. And it wasn’t so easy to stay in a rage at that funny little man with the ferrety gray eyes. That much I was discovering, even against my will.

“Because I think you are in rather desperate straits, and I want to help you,” he explained. The old idiot had apparently thought I was considering the movie-stunt of taking a header into one of the park-lakes. Life may have looked anything but promising on that particular evening, but I certainly had no intention of messing up my permanent-wave with pond-weeds.

“And what d’you expect to get out of it?” I inquired. My iciness didn’t seem to affect him.

“I expect your help in return,” he told me.

I looked him over, from top to toe.

“Say, what’s your game, anyway?” I demanded. I think he even chuckled a little.

“It’s a most unusual game, I’ll acknowledge,” was his retort. “And it offers you a chance for a most unusual reward.”

“In this world, or the next?” I inquired.

“The one we still occupy is the only one we need take into our active consideration,” he retorted, with a touch of tartness.

“And what shape will the reward take?” I pursued, still trying to size him up. I noticed, as he took off his hat in his excited solemnity, that a fringe of silvery hair ringed his bald little head, giving him the disturbing and altogether incongruous effect of wearing a halo. At first sight it made him look saintly. But at a second glance it seemed simply to make him foolish, for there was little of the stained-glass-window effect about the face of that old fox with the scheming eyes. His thin lips, puckered close to his teeth as though he were forever holding pins in his mouth, even had a touch of cruelty about them.

“What shape will the reward take?” I repeated.

“Any shape you may desire,” he finally replied.

“Well, when I work I usually work for money!”

“Then money it shall be,” was his prompt reply. “The question is, what amount would you expect for a couple of hours of work?”

“But what kind of work?” I repeated.

He hesitated for a moment. His ferrety eyes grew narrower.

“The attesting of a document,” he explained, with an effort at a shrug, as though to intimate that all such details were insignificant.

“Attesting? What do you mean by attesting?” I promptly inquired.

“Well, perhaps the signing of a document would cover the case better,” he meekly explained.

“But what good would my name be on any such document?” I demanded.

“None whatever,” he acknowledged. “So it may be necessary for you to use a name not your own.”

He waited, to make sure what effect this would have on me. And I began to see light.

“Say, mister, my middle name is Jeremiah when it comes to putting one over on the penal code.”

“But this wouldn’t be forgery,” he calmly explained.

“Why not?”

“Because you would really be the owner of the signature you might use!” he had the brazenness to try to tell me.

“I’d be the owner, you say, of somebody else’s signature?” I snorted.

“For the time being, at least,” he announced.

“Might I, now! And wouldn’t even that be what you’d call impersonation?”

“It might be called that.”

“And what would save us from getting in Dutch, doing a stunt like that?” I

asked, trying to let him see, by my talk, that I wasn't the lambkin he might have taken me for.

"You would," was his reply. He had his nerve, that old codger, and I take off my hat to any man with nerve.

"How?"

"By acting as the clever young woman you are?"

"I guess I'm not so clever, or I wouldn't be out of a job," I told him, as certain events of that afternoon suddenly flashed back on my mind.

"It will be a long time before you will need another," he calmly informed me.

"Why?"

"Because you will be so well paid for this one!" he explained, with all the placidity of a floor-boss to a factory hand. Then he moved forward a little, with a sign for me to follow. "Will you be so good as to walk beside me, toward the east here," he went on in a lowered voice. "For I perceive a stranger approaching. And this is a case where caution is of great value."

Absurd as the whole thing was, I was beginning to be interested. So I swung in beside him as we moved on down the quiet canyon of the twilit side street. He kept walking faster and faster, until it took an effort for me to keep up with him.

"What is this, anyway?" I finally inquired. "A marathon or a free-for-all?"

"Oh, I beg your pardon," said the little old geeser, pulling up. "I must have been thinking of other things!"

We were walking eastward down a side street that was all Indiana limestone and swell-front. The neighborhood, I could see, was what Bud would have called a cuff-shooter colony. I could also see that the little two-legged rat was heading for his lair, wherever that might be, and not just meandering along to kill time. And I resented the fact that I was following him as meek as a French poodle on a ribbon-leash.

"What are we steering for, anyway?" I asked him.

"For a place where we can talk this out in quietness," was his reply. I came to a stop. That was the second time, within the last few hours, that I had experienced a designing man advocating the advantages of quietude. And solitude of that sort held no charm for me.

"We can talk it out right here. But about the only thing that can talk with me is *kudos*, known to the mob as money!"

I found it easier to talk to him in the lingo of the underworld, for the situation seemed to smack more of the Eighth Ward than of Upper Fifth

Avenue.

His ferrety little face lightened with comprehension. Then he studied my own face, critically, as though he were making some final decision as to whether or not I was going to fill the bill. The result of that scrutiny seemed a satisfactory one.

“Then the matter is easily settled,” he announced. “Would five hundred dollars seem reasonable for your hour or two of quite leisurely activity?”

I was staggered, but I tried not to show it. It was, in fact, my turn to shrug.

“That’s got to include sleeper and first-class fare to Frisco,” I amended.

The little old man’s face positively beamed at this.

“Five hundred dollars with fare and Pullman berth to San Francisco,” he agreed. “Or say six hundred dollars in cash, if you’d prefer it that way.”

“In cash sounds good,” I announced, blinking at him with bland expectancy. But he intended to nail me down before I could hit the pay-car. And the thought that I was eager to fly on to Frisco had given him great satisfaction. That was a point which did not altogether escape me.

“We’ll just step in here, where we can talk things over quietly,” he explained, as smooth as oil. He swung me about into the side entrance of a marble corniced mansion that looked like the home of a Pittsburgh millionaire. It was a palace, all right, but a palace with a sour-map, for every blind was down and every curtain drawn. There was not a sign of life in all that house-front.

But the little old ferret whipped out a pass-key and ushered me in through a narrow oak door with heavy scrolled hinges. He touched a button and a light showed. Then he turned and relocked the door, this time by sliding a Ruskin bronze bolt. But still not a sign of life showed in that house. And I was beginning to get a chill from my Achilles tendon up. I suddenly remembered that I was ignorant of both the street and the number of the house that I had entered. But I decided to sit tight, and see the game out, whatever it might prove to be.

“This way,” said the little old man at my side, swinging open a door.

I let him go first. I had my second wind of courage by this time, and somewhere just behind my frontal bone curiosity was burning like a head-light. I even forgot about being hungry. For a stronger appetite had asserted itself. I could hear the lights being switched on. And I was able to smile as I stepped into the room.

The ferrety little eyes regarded me with a sort of studious satisfaction.

“You’ve got grit,” announced my guide, rubbing his bony old hands

together.

“Sure I’ve got grit,” I calmly acknowledged, “or I wouldn’t fall for a Black Hand frame-up like this!”

He chuckled and wheezed at that speech of mine. But there was no mirth in his laugh.

“My dear young lady, this is anything but what you have designated it. It is, on the contrary, a movement that is essentially benevolent—essentially benevolent.”

“That’s what I’ve been waiting to hear about,” I told him, staring around the room. They were no pikers, the people who’d furnished that room. It had a Belasco stage-setting all to the Cammenbert. And if she didn’t peter out as one went upward, that mansion was sure the abode of some fine old mahogany and teak-wood!

My guide waved me into a chair. I made myself comfortable, watching him as he scratched his bony forehead with the tip of his forefinger. He was getting ready, apparently, for his high dive.

“You are an intelligent girl,” he said, speaking now, as he had done before, in a carefully lowered voice. “I saw that, at the first glance. And I also saw that you were a girl who could be trusted. So I might say that the most difficult part of your work, to-night, will simply be keeping your mouth shut.”

“I thank you for those kind words,” I said, clearly puzzling him a little by my careless grin. “And I guess I understand about keeping the lid on. But I’d like to understand about the side-lines.”

“You mean about what you are expected to do?”

“Exactly!”

“We merely want you to go to bed and rest—rest as though you were in your own home,” he announced, washing his hands with invisible soap.

“And then what?”

The shrewd old eyes studied me closely.

“You see, you are a tired girl, very tired! A doctor, one of the best doctors in New York, will be here to make you comfortable. Then a document will be brought to you to sign. You will do this, and before midnight a closed carriage will take you to the Grand Central Station, you and your six hundred dollars.”

I tried to put this all in order, at the back of my head.

“And what name must I sign to that document?” I inquired.

For nearly a second or two the old man hesitated.

“Clarissa Rhinelanders Bartlett,” he said.

He watched my face intently. A look of relief crept into his eyes when he

realized that the name meant nothing to me. He even began to wash his hands again with that invisible soap of his.

“And who is this Clarissa Rhinelander Bartlett?” I asked. And still again the shifty-eyed old rat hesitated for a moment or two.

“She is the owner of this house,” he finally acknowledged.

“And why should I be asked to forge her name?” was my next question.

He raised one hand, reprovably, and blinked at me over the ends of his fingers. My use of the word “forge” seemed to shock him a little. He fumbled for a moment or two in his pocket. Then he produced a folded slip of paper.

“I have here,” he said, as he unfolded this paper, “a duly executed power of attorney, permitting you to exercise that right of signature.”

I had to hold my mouth straight. But I looked the document over carefully as he held it up to me. He might have fooled a seven-year-old child with that trumped-up blind. But as I had said before, my middle name was Jeremiah with that old rogue.

“But I am not Margaret Hueffer, and this power of attorney has been made out to her,” I blandly protested.

He smiled mirthlessly, though triumphantly.

“But notice the words ‘or bearer.’ Margaret Hueffer or bearer! And clearly you will be the bearer. So that, my dear young lady, makes everything plain sailing for you, perfectly plain sailing. But this is not the point. The point is in the signature itself. I mean to say—well—er—the fact is, or rather, the question is, can you write a reasonably convincing copy of that signature?”

I leaned over the paper again, to hide my face from his cork-screw little eyes. The situation, at every step, was getting more and still more interesting.

“Yes, I could do that name to a turn,” I admitted. “But five or ten minutes’ practise would make it safer, I suppose.”

He wagged his bony head at my sagacity.

“The fact of your illness, of course, will make the situation a very much easier one to handle. A dying woman, you see, doesn’t always write copper-plate.”

I sat straight up.

“So I’m a dying woman, am I?” I asked, staring him straight in the eye.

“You are not, of course,” he explained, “but the woman you are acting for may safely be presumed to be in that condition.”

“And where is that woman?”

“Right here in this house.”

“Then why can’t she sign her own papers?”

Still again the barricaded look came in his shifty little eyes.

“She is not in a position to,” he said. I saw his jaws set like a nut-cracker. But I didn’t think much about his jaws, at the moment, for I was busy putting two and two together. It took me some time to work out that little sum. But I did my best to get it straight.

“You mean Clarissa Bartlett is lying up-stairs in bed, on the point of death, and that she simply refuses to sign the will you want her to!”

He sat there blinking. Then he took his turn at looking me square in the eye.

“My dear young lady, you are clever beyond your years! You have plainly seen much of the world, and it has brought you wisdom.”

“Oh, I’m not such a wise baby,” I flippantly interrupted.

“You are more than wise; you are clever,” he protested. “And the crown of cleverness is the acquisition of its material rewards.”

“Well, that’s what I’m after,” was my next mock-flippant retort.

“Precisely,” he said, “and that is a question which we may as well settle now, without further loss of time.”

I watched him as he took a plump and shiny billfold from his inner breast pocket. Then he slowly and carefully counted out six one-hundred-dollar bank-notes.

I looked at them hard, for it’s seldom in this life that money, real money, comes to you as at that moment it seemed to be coming to me. I knew enough of the life of the wild to know that it seldom dealt in such things. The timber-wolves of the underworld were always ready enough to pass out promises; they were always ready to slip the gilded brick into your unsuspecting mitt. They were always long on pretensions and promises, but always short on performances. Yet here was a little old scoundrel of the first water actually flagging me with real money. He was flaunting it openly in my face. And that was enough to ballyhoo aloud to the world that the case was a most exceptional one.

“Six hundred dollars,” the little old codger repeated, as solemn as an owl, as he handed the six bank-notes over to me.

I took them without a smile. Then I counted them and still again made sure they weren’t stage-money, and then backed discreetly away. I did this for the purpose of stowing that windfall deep down in my stocking top.

The little old rat, while I was doing this, stared pointedly up at the ceiling, with his clustered finger-tips rather fastidiously held over his lips. That lisle-

thread national bank was plainly something quite new to him.

The next moment, however, I looked up at him sharply. He had not been as embarrassed, I discovered, as I had imagined.

“Why did you ring that bell?” I demanded, for with all that outward air of flippancy I was inwardly as nervous as a cat in a strange garret. And I had seen him quietly reach out and touch a push-button.

“Because we haven’t a great deal of time to waste, young lady,” was his placid enough response.

But I had no chance to question him as to the cause of his hurry, for at that moment an interruption came. It came in the form of a footman, or perhaps it was a butler, who silently and quietly opened the door in front of me. Never, even on the stage, had I ever clapped eyes on anything like that figure. He reminded me of a human peacock. He was arrayed in a claret-colored coat and knee-breeches, with a silk waistcoat and white stockings and pumps. There were monogrammed metal buttons all over the coat and vest, and next to a circus-float he was the most magnificent thing that ever moved through life.



I backed discreetly away to store them in my stocking

But he seemed to take no joy in all that glory, for his colorless face, with its close-clipped sideburns, was as devoid of expression as a mask. Having come to attention, and having fixed his eyes on the empty air somewhere about the center of the room, I realized that this walking crimson-rambler was about to break into human utterance. Before he had time for that, however, he was bunted bodily aside by a little old man in black, who hobbled petulantly on into the room and directed a shaking and accusatory finger at the little old man in black already there.

“Why in damnation, sir, should I be kept waiting like this?” demanded the newcomer in a thin squeak of a voice that reminded me of a wheel badly in need of oil. It was a thinner voice even than the other’s, though those two strange figures had so much in common that I instantly took them to be

brothers. The newcomer, however, had a touch of brown in his make-up. Instead of reminding me of a weasel, he reminded me more of a chipmunk, or a red squirrel. His lean old throat was more pendulous than his brother's, his hunched-up shoulders were narrower, and his hearing seemed bad, for from time to time, I noticed, he kept cupping his left hand behind his ear, as though straining to catch what was being said to him.

"Why bark at me?" asked the other old man, with a good deal of heat. "What have I done to keep you waiting?"

The other old autocrat gave an impatient snap of his fingers.

"But, gad, sir, they're all here—all here like a pack of bloodhounds sniffing about the trail!"

"Where have you got 'em?"

"How's that?" demanded the other, with his hand behind his ear.

"I say where have you got 'em?" shouted his brother.

"In the big drawing-room—herded there like buzzards on a housetop!"

"I know, I know," was the other's half-impatient retort as he turned back to me. But he did not speak, for as he was about to do so still another figure hurriedly stepped into the room. He stopped short as he saw me. It was plain he had not counted on my presence there.

"Well, Doctor?" snapped out the little man beside me. And the other little man, with his head on one side, stood with cupped hand to catch what might take place.

The man who had been addressed as doctor, I noticed, was a good six feet in height and built on the massive lines of a well-fed pork-butcher. His face was blond and fat and his rather watery gray-blue eyes weren't the kind you'd want to trust in the dark. His forehead was wet with perspiration, and he was breathing hard, as though he had been running and had no love for the game. With a quick gesture of his huge arms he motioned away the crimson-rambler butler who had stalked into the room after him. Then, still staring at me, he hurriedly mopped his face with a large handkerchief.

"Well?" repeated the old weasel at my side, as the latest arrival stood there struggling to recover his breath.

"Yes—well?" echoed the old red squirrel at the other end of the room.

"Quick, both of you," said the doctor, making a motion for them to withdraw beyond the still open door.

"But what's happened, what's wrong?" demanded the brisker of the two old brothers. For I was sure by this time that they were brothers. The scrawnier one with the hunched-up shoulders, I noticed, had slipped over to the second

door through which I had entered the room. I saw him lock that door and quietly pocket the key. And I remembered that it marked my only visible avenue of escape.

“Come outside,” commanded the doctor. He was already backing off toward the still open door. The two little old men followed him, with creaking agility, like two rusty old crows on the wing.

I sat there with my knees crossed as one of the old conspirators reached back and swung the door shut. But the moment this closed door stood between me and that mysterious trio I darted across the room and got an ear against the panel.

“Well, what is it?” I heard in the thin falsetto of a half-querulous resentment.

“Bartlett, it’s too late!” was the other man’s answer. It was said in little more than a husky whisper, but I could hear it plainly enough, for it seemed to come with the weight of a thunder-clap.

“Too late? Why too late?” queried the squeakier voice.

“*Because she is dead!*” was the other man’s answer.

CHAPTER FIVE

AS I stood with my face pressed flat against a panel of that hardwood door a shiver of excitement went through my stooping body. I had stumbled across a bigger movement than I had dreamed of. And that movement had taken on a turn which was plainly staggering to my two old friends in rusty black. For even through my door-panel I could feel the silence that struck them dumb, for a moment, at that massive doctor's unlooked-for message.

"But that girl can't be dead!" quaveringly protested one of the old brothers. "Why, she was as alive as I am, forty minutes ago!"

"More so, probably," amended the other brother tartly. "For instead of gasping over this—this calamity, we'd better try to find out what's best to be done!"

This was followed by a moment or two of unbroken silence.

"Who knows about this?" demanded the same voice that had spoken last. I knew it was the little old man who had followed me through the city.

"Nobody but the nurse—I'm positive of that," was the doctor's answer.

Again there was a silence.

"If Brother Ezra will take a suggestion from me," began one of the piping-voiced old conspirators. But Brother Ezra shut him off short.

"Please do not croak at me, Enoch, when I'm trying to think." And I could hear him abstractedly and meditatively repeat that final phrase: "Trying to think—trying to think."

"But we haven't got time for thinking," broke in the fat doctor. I could hear the quick and decisive snapping of a finger-knuckle.

"You're right, Klinger, you're right," announced the old boy whose name seemed to be Ezra. "But we're going to take time to act. And it's still not too late for that!"

"But a dead woman can't—"

"Never mind that," I heard the thinner voice retort. "It's the live woman we've got to count on."

"Do you mean that baby-faced thing you've got in there?" demanded the somewhat incredulous Doctor Klinger.

"I mean that baby-face!" was the old man's determined retort. "For this thing has got to go through!"

“It’s gone through!” ground out the heavier voice.

“Not the way I intend it to,” shrilly corrected the other. “And if the girl’s dead the first thing we’ve got to do is to get her out of that bed!”

“Her? Who?”

“The body, of course!”

“But get it where?” demanded the other, apparently still dazed.

“Why, out of sight, up-stairs, on the roof, anywhere!”

“But how is that going to help us?”

That stodgy doctor, it was plain to see, had a tendency to travel by freight.

“Why, if that Ledwidge woman can be trusted, it’s going to do more than help us. It’s going to save the day for us.”

“I’d trust that trained nurse with anything,” announced the doctor. “She’s been on our side from the moment she stepped into this house.”

“We’ll need her there,” amended the little old man’s voice. “We can’t make a dead woman write her name. That’s perfectly true. But if you’re going to have a substitute for a sick woman, you may as well have a substitute for a dead one. And that’s what we’re going to get!”

The silence that followed led me to infer that the three of them were thinking this over. And it must have been a very interesting subject for thought. But certain inferences and aspects of it gave me a quavery feeling in the region of the midriff.

“Just a moment, until I see if this street-cat is getting inquisitive. Just a—”

I didn’t wait for more.

By the time that old weasel had the door open I was once more sitting in my chair, with my knees crossed, and a rather bored look on my face. I even yawned as he poked his silver-haloed head in through the opening.

“Just a moment or two,” he purred. Then he wagged his bony head with its silvery nimbus, wagged it vigorously and approvingly, and shut the door again. But inside of three seconds I had stolen a base and had my ear back against the panel.

“—And get her powdered up, and well covered in that four-poster. Your Ledwidge woman can help you out in this. Then have the lights lowered, and herd that string of hungry-eyed heirs, the whole tribe of ’em, right into the room. Let ’em see her, if they’re so anxious to see her. Let ’em stand there while the will is read and signed. I want ’em to think they see her sign it. Let ’em stare their eyes out, so long as they keep their distance!”

The quavery old voice spoke with such bitterness that I surmised the walls about me temporarily sheltered a family somewhat divided by enmity. But I

had little time to think this over, for the chest-tones of the big doctor once more vibrated through my shielding panel.

“But can we depend on that girl at such a time?”

“We’ve *got* to depend on her!”

“But supposing she kicks over the traces? Supposing she smells a rat and tries to queer the whole game by—”

“How?”

“Well, supposing she tried to escape?”

“Why should she?”

“About any girl of that type would. And we’ve got to figure on that.”

“But Cacciata would sandbag her before she got to the first street corner. He’s there on guard. You know that as well as I do. And we’re not here to suppose things. She’ll go through with this, by heaven, or there’ll be more than one dead woman in this house before morning!”

I began to realize that I had a very pleasant little time ahead of me. But I was more interested in what I was hearing, at that moment, than in what I was feeling. If about twenty-five hundred icy feet began to make a Jacob’s ladder out of my spinal column, I didn’t give that creepy sensation much thought, beyond surmising that I was getting into that game of theirs for keeps. For outside the door their talk was still going on, and I didn’t want to miss any more of it than I had to.

“But how can you fool those people on the *voice*? Most of them must have heard that other girl’s voice, and some of them must have known it for years.”

The little old weasel, apparently, was not to be stumped by any such objections.

“We’ll have our woman *whisper*—whisper, do you understand? She’s a sick girl. Her voice is gone. Everything she says, every word, must be in a whisper. And the weaker she can make it the better—for in half an hour, don’t you see, that girl’s going to be dead!”

“Or our whole plan’s going to be dead!” interpolated the none too optimistic doctor.

I couldn’t help thinking, as I stood there, that these three worthies were accepting the death of a woman in a very sordid and matter-of-fact manner. It meant nothing more to them, apparently, than a punctured tire means to a motorist, or a broken teacup to a flat-dweller. Yet under that same roof, within the last few minutes, a human life had gone out—and all they were worrying about was how best to get rid of the remains!

My thoughts, however, soon came back to myself, for that strange trio

were still gabbling away on the other side of the door.

“And here’s another point,” I could hear one of the old men say. “The moment the thing is over you’d better give that girl the needle. Give her enough of something to keep her under for a couple of hours.”

“But what’ll you do with her?” inquired the man of medicine. And I knew they were referring to me.

“We’ll get her out of this house and stowed away in her sleeper for the West. If she’s so anxious to travel, we’re not going to detain her any!”

“Why couldn’t Miss Ledwidge go with her—as far as Buffalo, at any rate—and make sure she’s not going to double back and stir up trouble here?”

“She’s not fool enough to wade back into this bon-fire!” was the little old weasel’s retort. “And she’s too small-minded to realize there’s seven million dollars mixed up in what’s going to happen!”

So I was small-minded, was I? And I was the sort of girl who’d goose-step away from a mystery that was tangled up with seven millions in money! And I was to be put casually to sleep while they carried me off the field, dead to the world, to wake up on the Wolverine somewhere west of the Great Lakes! Well, I decided, if I was going to do all that I was going to hand myself the surprise of my eventful young life. And as I heard a final muffled direction or two, and a hand begin to turn the door-knob, I scooted back to my seat.

I had my eyes closed when the door swung open.

“Did I dream it, or did you say you hadn’t any time to waste?” I blandly inquired, as the weasel-faced old man sidled back into the room. And I tried to look as tired as I could.

His lips were pursed up, meditatively, as he stared at me with empty and ruminative eyes. But it was only for a moment or two.

“We’ll be busy enough, my dear young lady, before the next quarter of an hour is gone. But there’s one point I want to impress on you right now. If you have anything to say, it must be said before you leave this room!”

I resented his tone.

“Why?”

“For after that, remember, I want no sound out of you, not a sound beyond a whisper!”

His wrinkled old face took on an expression of ferocity which rather surprised me. Small as he was, I saw, he might prove about one part capsicum and three-parts puff-adder. And I stared at him with widened eyes as he shook a lean and bony forefinger at me. But I was calmer, inwardly, than when he had first spoken to me in Central Park.

“Then you’d better give me a tip about what you expect me to whisper,” I ventured. “And another as to just what you’re expecting from me anyway!”

He stared at me, once more in a sort of silent debate with himself.

“There’s a trained nurse up-stairs who’ll attend to all that,” he explained. “A most estimable young woman!”

“You all seem to be that!” I said, *sotto voce*.

“We all seem to be which?” he barked back at me. And there was fire in his eye.

“What’s that trained nurse’s name?” I mildly inquired, remembering my part.

“Alicia Ledwidge, I believe,” he told me, as he moved toward the door.

And a very estimable young person, indeed, I inwardly repeated—a regular young lily-white doe, to be acting in that sort of company, a snowy lambkin with a prune in her pocket, to be holding out in that sort of house! But I was compelled to keep my thoughts to myself, for my friend the weasel was already making impatient signs for me to follow him.

He first looked out along the hall (and his attitude was startlingly like that of a rodent peering from its burrow), apparently to make sure that the coast was clear. Then he led me to an automatic elevator with mother-of-pearl buttons, told me to step inside, and sent me sailing upward like a cash-bucket in a department-store.

When the door opened—and I noticed that it opened of itself—I stepped out into a dream of a room all done in green, with hangings and curtains of sea-green faintly threaded with silver. It had green brocaded chairs, and sconces of silver set in shields of paler green. It made me hold my breath for a moment, for I’d never seen anything like it in every-day life before. There was both grandeur and good taste there, in every corner of it, and it made the motion-picture sets of Fifth Avenue homes that I’d seen look like paper roses. And this was the real thing.

But even here I had little time taking things in, for at about the same moment that I stepped from the elevator a woman in the full uniform of a trained nurse stepped through a door in the opposite wall.

I looked her over with a good deal of care, for I felt that I might see considerable of her, before that night was over. And she, too, looked me over quickly and sharply, although her eyes were about as non-committal as anything I’d seen for some time. She was not as young a woman as I had expected. And the moment I clapped eyes on her I knew that she had a mind of her own and a brain that could work overtime if it had to. She was an inch or two taller than I was, and much better-looking. I suppose it was her uniform

that made her seem so cool and calm and full of that cleared-for-action-and-what-comes-next air of hers.

“Are you Miss Ledwidge?” I meekly inquired.

Her nod told me that she was.

“Well, I was sent here for certain work which I was told you would explain to me,” I announced.

“What is your name?” she asked. She spoke coolly, and with a note of authority. But there was something about her I couldn’t help liking.

“Baddie Pretlow,” I told her.

“And you have no idea of what you are to do?” she demanded.

“The main point seemed to be for me to keep my mouth shut!” I retorted. For one short second the faintest trace of a smile played about her clear-cut lips.

“I believe you are to be a patient of mine,” she explained. It was clear that they’d also impressed on Alicia Ledwidge that the main point was for her to keep her mouth shut. So I decided to try her out.

“Excuse me, but are you a real trained nurse?” I asked her, as she crossed to a mahogany table on the right. She stopped and looked up quickly, but there was no change in her manner.

“Of course,” was her quiet reply.

She seemed the right sort, that woman, and for the life of me I couldn’t place her in that bunch of copperheads. She didn’t look like the sort of woman who could be on their side. And I’d a feeling that she was the sort I’d rather have on my side.

“And as a patient, what am I supposed to do?” I inquired.

“What most patients do. Go to bed!”

She led me through to the next room, all done in yellow brocade. I’d seen enough French farces to feel sure that it was a *boudoir*. And it was a beautiful room to be in, if you were positive as to just when and how you were going to get out of it.

“And what do I have to do when I go to bed?” I asked, watching Miss Ledwidge as she carried in a flesh-colored night-gown of hand-embroidered crêpe-de-chine with a runway of French knots along the plaza and baby-runs down the side streets. It was a dream of a nightie, the sort of cobwebby thing every woman loves to slip into. The nurse must have noticed that hungry look on my face as I stared at it, for she smiled as she motioned for me to get off my street duds.

“Honest Injun, are you a professional nurse?” I asked her still again as I

began to unpeel.

“Why shouldn’t I be?” she parried, as she moved over to the dressing-table, without much show of interest in my question.

I laughed a little.

“Well, my idea of a professional nurse is a woman who’s trying to make good by helping others when they need help. I kind of think of her as a person who’s giving up her life to do what she can for the sick and the helpless.”

“Well?” came curtly from the dressing-table.

“Well, I can’t see the Carnegie Fund pinning any medals on you for the job you’ve taken up in this particular household,” I deliberately announced, as I wormed my way into that cobweb of crêpe-de-chine. The smell of it reminded me of lilac-blossoms over a clover-field. By the time I had emerged Miss Ledwidge had turned slowly around and was staring at me.

“Perhaps,” she slowly shot back at me, “I’m doing more in this house than you are aware of!”

And having smashed out that three-bagger she once more gave her attention to the cosmetic-jars on the dressing-table.

“Perhaps we all are!” I announced, just to keep her from being too contentedly sure of her ground.

But she paid no attention to that pin-prick. She didn’t even seem interested. And still again I had the feeling of being flat up against a brick wall, when it came to the question of that woman’s actual character.

“You’ll have to take off those shoes,” she announced as she came over to where I stood smoothing out my nightie. And off they came, though I stuck to my stockings, for I remembered that I had my six bank-notes cached there.

“You *are* thin!” remarked Miss Ledwidge, as she motioned me over to the dressing-table. And as I sat there putting on the white-wash she handed to me I felt for all the world like a leading-woman getting ready for a first night on Broadway. I rice-powdered my arms and shoulders and put little hollows under my eyes and liquid-whitened my face and softened the whole effect down with a blending-brush.

Then I stared at myself in the dresser mirror. I looked like a Bernhardt in the last act of *Camille*. I was the sickest-looking scarecrow that ever escaped the morgue. And when that little old weasel had picked my bag of bones, I inwardly remarked, he had surely selected something to suit his own ends.

Then I suddenly stopped smiling at myself. For already I saw I was stumbling into barb-wire entanglements.

I looked around just in time to behold Miss Ledwidge go to the door and

hand my clothes, about every blessed rag and stitch I'd worn into that house, to somebody waiting for them out in the hall.

I was out of that chair in one jump. But the lady in the blue and white uniform barred my way.

"What are you doing with those clothes of mine?" I demanded, staring at her. But she never even winced.

"It was Mr. Bartlett's orders," she quietly explained.

"What do I care for Mr. Bartlett's orders?" I exploded. "I—"

"But Mr. Bartlett's orders are usually carried out in this house," she cut in. And she said it in a tone that reminded me of the bite of a rat-trap.

I could feel a hot wave go over me and by the time that wave had cooled off I could see what their dodge stood for. They weren't putting any too much faith in their street-cat, and they were cutting her claws for her. They were tying me down to that house until they got ready to let me go. They were deciding to keep me a prisoner there, until I carried out what they intended me to carry out.

But if they thought they had me trapped, by any cheap trick like that, they were going to find out they'd trapped a tartar.

So I stood there, waiting for my sense of humor to come back. It came, but it came by freight.

"Tell them to be sure and fumigate 'em!" I announced, as I sat down in front of the dressing-table again. "That's the procedure in most pens, I believe!"

"It is much safer, you know, to have them out of sight," explained the altogether too artful lady in the uniform. But she kept watching me, with a rather curious look in her eyes. And several times, later on, I caught her studying my face, when she thought I wasn't noticing her. Yet something about her attitude, all the while, tended to make me uncomfortable. It seemed to remind me that I was no longer a free agent. And I was right enough in this, for you can't go out and look up a cop without even a corset-cover on!

I was just deciding that I'd have to engineer that night's adventure without the help of the law when Miss Ledwidge, with a touch of impatience, reminded me that my bedroom was all ready and waiting.

"Just a minute!" I responded, as soft as silk. For as I sat there, pretending to be sniffing the faint odor of *Apres l'ondee*—at about six dollars an ounce—floating up from that nightie of mine, I decided I wasn't going to lie down in the shafts just because they had the check-rein over my nose.

On the dressing-table stood two tall and antique-looking candlesticks of

Sheffield plate. They were very handsome, and also very heavy. Each of them was a good eighteen inches in height.

So I calmly reached over, pulled the ivory tinted candle out of its socket, wiped the head of the candlestick off with a face chamois that lay on the table-top, and meditatively weighed the column of metal in my hand. It felt the way a well-balanced bat must feel to a league player when he plants his heels down beside the home-plate.

“What are you doing with that?” asked the startled Miss Ledwidge, as she stepped back from the open door to see what had been keeping me.

I didn’t answer her for a moment, for my attention was otherwise engaged. It was engaged in recovering from the rug at my feet a finger-ring that had fallen from that hollow candlestick as I so menacingly waved it up and down. It was a remarkable ring, made up of a large-sized pigeon-blood ruby surrounded by black pearls. That it should be hidden away in such a place struck me as odd. So I slipped it on my finger, stones in, until I had a better chance to look it over.

“That,” I calmly explained to Miss Ledwidge, as I took up my candlestick again, “is going to stay right with me in bed. And if any one tries to spring any second little surprise on me, I’m going to spring this on *them!*”

That trained nurse laughed openly, for the first time. She didn’t want to, apparently, but she couldn’t help it. And while she stepped back into the other room again I had time for a look at my ring. On the inside of it I found an inscription. It said, “From Wendy, Christmas, 1912.”

That “Wendy” jumped out at me like a jack-in-the-box. It was not a common name, and the only other time I’d ever heard of it, outside of Wendy Washburn, was in a play called *Peter Pan* which Myrtle and I had seen one Christmas week. But could this Wendy, I asked myself, in any way be the same Wendy as my Hero-Man! And if they were the same, these two Wendies, what was a ring which he had given to some unknown woman doing in this house of midnight mysteries?

CHAPTER SIX

I WAS STILL worrying over the problem of the name in the ring when Miss Ledwidge came and led me out of the room. She took me through a passageway lined with a clothes-press with carved wooden doors, then through a heavily furnished room with a big marble fireplace that reminded me of a mausoleum, then through a white-tiled bathroom with a Roman pool-tub, and on again into a darkened chamber. On one side of it I could see a huge bed, but that was about all I could make out, except that the room was a big one. And the shadows of that room, for some reason, began to give me goose-flesh.

“I want some light in here,” I firmly demanded.

“But Mr. Bartlett said not.”

“I don’t care what Mr. Bartlett said. I’ve just got to have some light. You can do what you like later on, but I’m going to know the lay-out of this crib before I curl up in it!”

So, plainly against her will, Miss Ledwidge switched on a few of the electrics. There seemed to be a good many of them, one at either side of the bed, one at either side of a tiny fireplace, and one at either side of an equally tiny writing-desk. And if Bud had ever seen that room he would undoubtedly have said, “Some crib, believe me!”

For that whole room, I saw, was done in old rose and cream. It had a cream and rose *chaise-longue* near an ivory colored reading-table, and rose-shaded electric reading-lamps, and a little Chinese pagoda of old rose to stow away the desk-telephone in. Then there were three rose and cream prayer-rugs and heavy rose-colored curtain draperies that reminded me of a glorified circus-wagon.

But the thing that hit my eye, from the first, was the bed itself. It was something to dream about. For it was the most gorgeous bed I’ve ever bumped into, barring not even that Du Barry contraption my old friend Leslie Carter used to throw fits on. I don’t know whether it was a Louis-Quinze relic or a prize-winner from Grand Rapids. But I know that the head of it had carved Cupids mixed up with a lot of fruit and vines and two-legged goats playing flutes and interwoven flowers and ribands and gim-cracks. And the big heavy curtains were a sort of lilac red with flashes of gold and there was a cream and rose eider-down as light as sea-foam and pillows as big as a steamer-trunk, with lace-bordered and lace-crested pillow-cases over them. I noticed, too, that the sheets were lace bordered, with the same crest worked on them, and a

blanket of creamy wool was edged with three inches of pale rose satin.

But, oh, the softness of that bed when I hopped into it; the soothing pliancy of it as I rolled over between those crested sheets! It seemed to take me in its arms and hold me there, the way that a man who really cares for a woman tries to hold her. It seemed to billow up all about me, like lazy waves that were floating me off to warm-scented islands where all the fat little Cupids could rock in the palm-tops and the two-legged goats could do lazy minuets to the drone of their own flutes.

I wormed and squirmed from one side of that bed to the other, just to get used to the softness of it all. Then I tried a stretch or two. And as I did so it came home to me how I'd always liked luxury, how I'd always nursed that absurd and hopeless ache for grandeur.

"Call me at noon to-morrow, Celeste!" I quietly announced to Miss Ledwidge.

But there wasn't the ghost of a smile on that nurse's face as she went about adjusting the covers and draping the lilac-red curtains and switching out most of the electrics.

I looked up, with a sharp word of warning. For I intended to have at least a couple of those bulbs left on, if Miss Ledwidge felt sure it wouldn't break the firm. For it seemed very still and shadowy in that big room. It made me feel creepy.

Then I suddenly remembered something, and sat straight up in that bed. I had forgotten all about the Cupids and crests and lace-bordered sheets.

"My God!" I gasped. "*That woman died in this bed not twenty minutes ago!*"

And I started to climb out.

"Hush!" warned the nurse, as she tried to hold me back.

"Do you s'pose I'm going to lie right where that dead woman must have been?" I shrilled out at her. "Not on your life! Not for all the money on Manhattan Island! Not for—"

"Hssssssh!" broke in the nurse again. And I think her face must have looked as frightened as mine. "That woman didn't die in this bed!"

"Then where did she?" I demanded.

"When I give you my word of honor that no woman died in this bed, will you believe me?" asked Miss Ledwidge. She was in deadly earnest, and she spoke with a sort of coerced restraint that made me sit back and look at her. She met my stare without flinching.

"You'll swear that?" I said. And still again it impressed me that this quiet-

voiced woman knew more of that house and its mysteries than she cared to talk about.

“I swear it,” she replied, looking back over her shoulder, for a tap had plainly sounded on the hall door.

The next moment that door swung open, and the little old weasel himself stepped softly into the room. It rather astonished me to see that he was holding a handkerchief to his eyes. I even thought I heard a whimper or two as he hurriedly shut the door. But the moment that door was shut behind him he had the handkerchief stowed away, and his ferrety little face was peering about in every corner of the room. He reminded me of a somewhat worried stage-manager inspecting his “set” before the curtain rolled up.

“What’s wrong here?” he demanded, as he sidled over to where the nurse was still holding me down in bed by the arm. I noticed a new note in his voice as he spoke, a note of power, a note of authority.

“Our patient is a little nervous,” explained the quiet-eyed woman who stood at my side. She delivered this message so casually that I turned and looked up into her face, wondering, for a moment, if she had hypnotized herself into believing I was actually a sick woman.

Her face, however, was once more as expressionless as a mask. And it remained that way even when the old weasel advanced to the bedside and pushed her bruskiy to one side. With my free hand I could feel my Sheffield-plate candlestick under the sheet. And that gave my tugging nerves a sort of wind-anchor.

“My dear,” that old scoundrel purred, as he leaned close down over me, “you do as you’ve been told to do and nothing whatever will happen to you. Nothing *can* happen to you!”

Notwithstanding that assurance I could feel his fingers close about my wrist. They made me think of the claws of a bird of prey.

“But there’s too much happening here already,” I protested. “And there are a few things I want set straight!”

“Listen to me,” retorted that old weasel, and he spoke in a sort of hissing whisper as he stooped closer over my face, “if you make one move to interfere with these plans of ours, you’ll *never get out of this house alive!*”

He was trying to make himself out the human puff-adder, all right. But there was one thing that didn’t escape me. If he hadn’t for some reason or other been as scared of me as I was of him, he would never have stooped to that threat. So I sat tight. He, on his part, tried to accentuate that threat by increasing the pressure of his claws on my flesh.

“Hold on there!” I told him, in no tempered tone of voice. “You’re hurting

my wrist. And you may as well know right now that you can't try to man-haul me and get away with it!"

"Hssssh!" he warned, desperately, with a worried look over his shoulder. And for a moment I even imagined he was going to see what choking could do to shut me off.

"Then play your side square," I told him, "or you needn't expect me to play my side that way!"

He looked down at me for a moment or two, and his eyes weren't exactly beaming with love-light. Then he took a deep breath, tiptoed to the door, peered out, and hurried back to the side of the bed.

"Now remember, it will be Mr. Scripps, Mr. Theobald Scripps who will do the reading," whispered the little old man.

"And who is he?" I demanded.

"He's the family lawyer. You must listen as he reads that will, but you must never speak—never, at least, above a whisper. When he finishes you must say 'Yes, that is what I wanted.' You must whisper that. We want the others to hear you say it, for it's our duty to convince those others that the legality of this will can never be attacked. They must see you sign it!"

"And they'll believe I'm Clarissa Rhineland Bartlett?"

"They can't believe anything else! They've *got* to believe that you are Clarissa Bartlett. They believe it now, and nothing will happen to shake that belief. They know you're not long for this world, that you're about to pass—"

"Hey!" I cut in. "Don't harp on that any more or you'll sure give me the willies!"

For just a moment the little old scoundrel looked puzzled. It was plain that he didn't know what the "willies" were.

"Then, when you've stated that the will is satisfactory," he went on, "I want you to whisper: 'I'd like Aunt Agatha Widdemer as a subscribing witness. And Miss Ledwidge here for the other witness, please!'" He looked back over his shoulder at the trained nurse. "It's Aunt Agatha, isn't it, who's the short-sighted one?" he inquired.

"*And* slightly deaf," amended the trained nurse, with an ironic flutter of her eyelids. But that was her only expression of human amusement in the incident.

The little old weasel turned back to me.

"Can you do that?" he inquired.

I nodded my head.

"Then try it," he commanded.

Since he wanted acting, I decided to give him his money's worth. I let my

head roll back and my body go limp between the sheets. I relaxed my jaw-muscles and let my lips fall apart. Then I did my whisper act. I did it brokenly, weakly, as though it was coming with my last gasp of life.

The old scoundrel nodded his head, promptly, approvingly.

“Some actress, eh?” I impertinently inquired. But he ignored that irrelevancy.

“That is just what we want, my dear, just what we want! And there’s one thing more. I mean these buzzards down-stairs who are all wondering which way the Bartlett estate is going to go. There may be one or two in that collection of—of—eh—parasites who will want to say good-by. I doubt it, after they’ve heard that will, but we have to be prepared.”

“What’ll they want to do to me?” I asked.

“Your Aunt Agatha, I imagine, may even want to kiss you.”

“Gee!” I gasped. “I’ve got to earn that six hundred, after all!”

“But don’t worry, my dear. It’ll all go off as smooth as a corps-drill. All you must remember is to lay limp—lay limp and don’t move. Let ’em kiss your hand if they want to. But keep weak. Don’t try more than a mere whispered ‘Good-by,’ a very faint ‘Good-by,’” he lilted, pinching the air between a pointed thumb and forefinger.

“But supposing one of that bunch should try to talk to me?” I demanded, sharing little of that old scoundrel’s faith in his policy of limpness.

“Doctor Klinger, of course, will be here beside you. He’ll be present, naturally, to protect his patient. And Miss Ledwidge will also help. They will see that you are not overtaxed.”

The old weasel looked up as Doctor Klinger himself stepped into the room. That man of medicine was plainly a bad color and quite as plainly far from being at his ease. He tried to conceal this, I could see, by an extra dose of professional pomposity.

“They’re getting restless—restless,” he announced in a warning whisper.

I caught sight of Miss Ledwidge’s face as she glanced at him. It flashed through me that this calm-eyed young woman had no love for that big-boned hulk of a conspirator. Why it was, I could not tell. They were certainly both in the same game. But some sixth sense kept whispering to me that she disliked the man, that she distrusted him, although she couldn’t afford to show her real feelings.

“I don’t see how we’re going to hold ’em down there much longer,” he repeated in his warning whisper.

I noticed the nurse and the old weasel exchange glances.

“Well, we’re ready for ’em!” retorted the old scoundrel, with a snap of the jaws.

CHAPTER SEVEN

AS I lay in that bed, in state, with the light very low, and the big doctor on one side of me and the trained nurse on the other, I began to feel about as important as the Queen of Sheba on fair-day in Ethiopia. It wasn't until later that the serious side of the whole thing came home to me.

It wasn't until I saw old Ezra Bartlett stand at the door, admitting the visitors one by one, with much the same apathetic resignation that Noah must have admitted the animals to the Ark, that the possibility of that situation having its darker side became plain to me. They may have been queer-looking people, that scattering of hungry-eyed relatives buzzing like wasps about a fallen pear. There may have been something ignominious in their stares of appraisal about that bewilderingly furnished house. But I was a bigger hypocrite than the rest of them. There was something more ignoble in my position than in any of theirs. I was an outsider, making profit from their grief. And I was the one who should first and last have been ashamed of myself.

But I couldn't for the life of me keep from smiling at that motley array. First came Enoch Bartlett, with his shoulders hunched up and his wizened old face as alert and furtive and veiled as the weasel's. Then came Aunt Agatha Widdemer. She wore black, and was crying openly and audibly. She started for the bed, but the watchful Miss Ledwidge came between her and the hangings and steered her gently on toward where old Enoch Bartlett was making hypocritical dabs at his eyes with a huge linen handkerchief. Yet profuse as was Aunt Agatha's grief, I noticed that she suspended her tears long enough to sniff audibly and then ostentatiously withdraw her presence from the neighborhood of old Enoch. Practically all of the newcomers, in fact, betrayed an active spirit of hostility toward that solemn and solitary figure, who stood quite alone at the far side of the room, as black and sober as a crow, while the others gathered together protectively, like prairie-cattle before a storm, in the opposite corner of the shadowy room.

That group was made bigger by the advent of two gawky young girls with frightened eyes. Then came a dandified young man in yellow shoes and yellow gloves, and a prim-faced old maid with a mouth that looked as though it had been sucking lemon-drops. Then came other shadowy figures which I couldn't make out, for either the nurse or Doctor Klinger stood between them and me.

But I could hear them there in the vague light, whispering and stirring uneasily. And I could see that they were a group of aliens, unfamiliar with that

house. I could also see that none of them nursed any love for the two old Bartlett brothers, who, fortified by the knowledge of their power, showed small concern in either the sniffs of resentment or the scowls of antagonism from that ill-assorted group.

The last to come in was a very stout woman of about forty-five. She had a red face, over-gaudy clothes, and a handful of the finest rings I'd seen in many a day. She was puffing, apparently from climbing the stairs, but she was not in any great distress of mind, for once she had crossed the room she promptly and loudly demanded a decent chair. This one of the gawky young girls, who giggled involuntarily, guiltily got for her. I could see her round red face, in the half-light, as she peered about in every corner, apparently sizing up each article of value in the room. She seemed to resent the sheep-like silence of the others, for she fanned herself in a sort of fury, and emitted a loud grunt of contempt at Agatha Widdemer's spasmodic outburst of tears.

The silence of the thing was beginning to get on my nerves and I wasn't sorry when old Theobald Scripps, the family lawyer, came sidling into the room. He fitted his name; there was no doubt of that. He was a thin-nosed, thin-haired old snipe of about sixty. A pair of glimmering glasses rode the end of his narrow nose like a jockey riding the thinnest of racers. His eyes were pale, his lips were pinched and blue, and his protruding Adam's apple had the trick of working up and down, as he spoke, in a most fascinating manner, so that you had to watch it, even though you wanted to or not.

I eyed him and his acrobatic Adam's apple from my cave of gloom as he tiptoed mincingly over to the doctor, whispered with him for a moment or two, and then looked solemnly about at that shadowy group at the far end of the room.

"This is painful, unspeakably painful," he said with a sigh, as he produced a bulky and legal-looking paper from his pocket. As he was unfolding this I noticed, for the first time, that the two gawky girls had politely anticipated my death by the use of two black-bordered handkerchiefs. And I had to bury a whoop in my pillow. I just couldn't help it.

That brought the doctor down on me, like a hawk. He made a bluff at feeling my pulse, but his fingers sank into the flesh of my forearm until they left a mark. And the next moment the yellow-faced old lawyer was at his elbow. And on the far side of the room I could hear a woman crying.

"Will she be strong enough for the ordeal?" tearfully inquired the old snipe.

Doctor Klinger looked concerned.

"I'm afraid it must be hurried. As you see, her strength is going!"

“But her mind is quite clear?”

“Quite clear,” the doctor replied.

“Your mind is quite clear?” the old rascal asked as he leaned over me. “Quite clear, my dear?”

That frog-chorus struck me as funny, but I could feel the doctor’s grip tighten on my arm.

“Clear as a whistle!” I whispered back—and I had to chuckle at his involuntary wince. It was clearly no time for facetiousness, his face said, as plain as words.

“Ah, quite clear!” he cooingly reiterated as he backed away with his document. “Then I shall read what you dictated to me day before yesterday. And if there are any omissions, or any corrections, please make a sign for me to stop.”

Then he sighed and wiped his eyes. “Poor child!” he cooed with a convulsive movement of the shoulders, plainly intended as an expression of inarticulate grief. I would have pinched him, I know, but his leg was beyond my reach. And the only people I felt sorry for was that group of anxious-eyed sheep at the far end of the room. They were, I knew, about to get the jolt of their life. They were going to see their fondest dreams of wealth suddenly go up in smoke. And all this intricate byplay, I remembered, was merely to impress on them that the smoke was genuine. Not one of them, probably, had done any more than I had to merit that wealth. But the shadow of seven million dollars is a far-reaching one. It could, I reminded myself, bring ease and affluence to hundreds. It should have poured like a great river of gold, I supposed, straight out to those hungry-eyed ones. But that mighty river was being turned from its course, was being diverted, was being sent sweeping down the other side of a great divide. And Little Me in my crêpe-de-chine nightie was the instrument that was to turn aside that colossal yellow current, by a mere scratch of the pen. It was no wonder I began to feel rather important.

I could hear old Theobald Scripps clear his throat and begin to speak. Even the woman who had been crying at the far end of the room suddenly grew silent.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said in his smooth and oily tones, “all this is, in a way, somewhat irregular, and somewhat outside the usual procedure. But as you know, the case is extraordinary. This poor child, my client, has not long to be with us. But as the sole heir and possessor of the Bartlett estate the solemn duty devolves upon her of disposing of that estate as she sees fit. For that reason and toward that end I was two days ago called in to prepare this last will and testament of Clarissa Rhineland Bartlett. And you have been called

together to witness that signature and to testify to the regularity of the procedure in even its minutest details. Is that quite clear to you all?"

Nobody answered, but the woman at the far end of the room began to cry again, quite audibly. And old Ezra Bartlett made an impatient sign for the man of the law to get busy.

"Now, my dear, if you will listen," the old lawyer said, stepping closer to my side. Then he looked over the rim of his glasses at me. "Can you hear me, quite clearly?"

"Quite clearly," I whispered back.

Then he began to read.

"I, Clarissa Rhinelander Bartlett, of the City of New York, State of New York, being of sound and disposing mind and memory, do make and publish this my last will and testament, hereby revoking all former wills, codicils and testamentary disposition by me at any time made.

"Item one: I hereby direct that my just debts, together with all expenses resulting from my final illness and funeral, be paid as expeditiously after my decease as may be convenient for my executors.

"Item two: I give, devise and bequeath to my beloved nurse, Alicia Ledwidge, of the City of New York, State of New York, as a token of my esteem and for services rendered, the sum of Five Thousand Dollars, to be free of all taxes.

"Item three: I give, devise and bequeath to my physician, Doctor Otto Klinger, as a slight token of his untiring and unsparing efforts on my behalf, the sum of Ten Thousand Dollars, to be free of all taxes."

At this precise point, I ventured a loud and lugubrious groan. But the vise-like clasp on my arm tightened threateningly, and the flat-voiced old man of law went on with his reading.

"Item four: I give, devise and bequeath all the rest and residue, and remainder of my estate equally to my two beloved Uncles, Ezra Tweedie Bartlett and Enoch Tweedie Bartlett, both of the City of New York, State of New York, the same to be had and holden by them, share and share alike.

"Item five: I hereby appoint my said two Uncles, Ezra Tweedie Bartlett and Enoch Tweedie Bartlett, as Executors of this, my last will and testament, and as such they shall have final and absolute disposal of the following described bonds, mortgages and securities, to-wit:

"\$178,000 International & Great Northern Railroad second Mortgage five per cent. Bonds.

"\$436,000 City of New York Gold exempts three and one-half

per cent. Corporate Stock.

“\$1,118,000 City of New York Gold exempts three and one-half per cent. assessment Bonds of Nov. 1st, 1916.”

I lay there listening to the singsong voice as it read on, going through a long list of names that sounded like the Wall Street page of an evening paper. There was no use trying to follow it. The whole thing only made my head swim. And the bleats of grief that broke from the sheep at the far end of the room only added to the confusion. I began to suspect that I wasn't going to be troubled by any too many and lingering farewells.

The one fact that targeted straight home to my brain, however, was the extent of the estate that snipe-nosed old lawyer was itemizing there as he stood beside me.

As I lay there with half-closed eyes I began to wake up to the enormity of the plot into which I had been dragged. It began to dawn on me that I was the leading lady in a *coup* that involved millions of dollars. I no longer felt vaguely sorry for the girl who should have been sleeping in that bed, who should be wearing my flimsy garment of crêpe-de-chine and directing this fortune, which must have been hers for so short a while, to the people she cared about, to the friends she was fond of. Her part in that drama, whatever it may have been, was over forever.

But as I lay there listening to that yellow-faced old lawyer while he went into detailed descriptions of sundry and divers blocks of stock and parcels of real estate, there was a rattle from that inevitable chain which drags at every one's heels, linking them to the past. And with that rattle an idea suddenly came to me. It seemed to start at the base of my brain, and scamper up to the top like a run in a stocking. If I was the instrument that was so airily tossing three and a half millions into the laps of each of those two old hypocrites in rusty black, why couldn't I just as easily toss a quarter of a million into my own lap? Why couldn't two play at that game? If old Ezra Tweedie Bartlett was to wallow in such easy money, why shouldn't he be ready to see me shave a paring or two off that fat cheese of his? Why, since they'd squeezed me into that menagerie, practically against my own will, couldn't I set up a little howl of my own?

Then I saw trouble ahead. I saw the foolishness of trying to will a quarter of a million to Miss Baddie Pretlow, address unknown, occupation—well, unfortunately, of such a nature that it would not bear too much official inquiry. The thing would have been easier, I remembered, if poor old Bud had only been alive. I could have trusted Bud. And he would have backed up my claim with a bunch of affidavits knee-high to the Statue of Liberty. He would have

made me out a charity worker for the Scrubwomen's Reform Association, or something quite as respectable, and marshaled an army of solemn-eyed witnesses to prove it. And I couldn't help wondering, as I lay there, if this was the sort of four-poster Bud would have put me in, if those foolish old dreams of his had worked out, and having stolen about half the crown jewels of Western Europe, he'd retired from the gentle profession of ice-gathering and lived sedately somewhere on the outskirts of Morristown or along the upper fringe of Brookline.

I came to, just in time to hear the droning voice of that yellow-faced old lawyer saying:

. . . "In witness whereof I have hereunto subscribed my name and affixed my seal, this fifteenth day of September, in the year of our Lord one thousand nine hundred and sixteen."

From the far end of the room I could catch the sound of half-whispering voices, as angry and resentful as the hum from an overturned beehive. The red-faced woman in the chair was even snorting audibly and repeatedly. And the dandified young man in yellow shoes was pacing back and forth on an imported and priceless prayer-rug which he doubtless felt ought to have been his.

I looked up and craned my neck a little, to see how the enemy was accepting those demonstrations of hostility. Old Ezra Tweedie Bartlett, I noticed, stood blandly blinking into space, as placid and austere-eyed as an undertaker. That other old winter-apple, Enoch Tweedie Bartlett, stood there quite as serenely, with his hand cupped behind his ear and an expression of patient benevolence on his wrinkled face. And the snipe-nosed old lawyer at the bedside seemed equally unconscious of his surroundings, for, having quietly motioned Brother Enoch to advance toward the bed, he proceeded to take out a gold banded fountain-pen, fold back the document which he held, and address his professional attentions to me.

"Is that, my child, exactly as you wished?" he solemnly inquired.

Ezra and Enoch Bartlett stood on one side of the bed, Doctor Klinger and Theobald Scripps stood on the other. At the footboard was posted the trained nurse.

They made a pretty formidable-looking guard as they stood there, intent and motionless, fixing me with their five pairs of eyes. But I'd had a second idea suddenly come to me. And I'd decided on my next move.

"Yes, of course, exactly as you wished!" somewhat impatiently purred the man of law, stooping down and preparing to place the document where I could sign it.

“No, it’s not!” I said.

I may have whispered it, but I said it with decision. And I could feel the sudden electric stir that crept through that shadowy room.

“It’s not?” mildly challenged Theobald Scripps. He straightened up, regarding me over his spectacle-rims, with pained and sorrowful eyes. Then his look of melancholy bewilderment slowly merged into one of actual animosity. For he saw that he couldn’t stare me down.

“No,” I whispered up to him, meeting his threatening eye with all the pertness I could throw into that look. “There’s another item that I’d like inserted.”

“But this is most irregular,” cut in the old lawyer.

“Is this my will, or yours?” I calmly whispered back to him.

“Your will, of course, my child,” murmured the old scoundrel, with an appealing side-glance at old Ezra Bartlett, who’d pressed in a little closer to the bedside.

“And it’s my dying request,” I whispered up to them. I could see old Ezra’s jaw clench. He leaned close in over the bed. His halo of silvery hair, under the circumstances, made him look funny. For I don’t think I ever saw an uglier face, in all my life, than his was at that moment.

“Sign that will!” he whispered. It was not a loud whisper. But it vibrated against my ear-drum like the hiss of a snake.

“Woof! Woof!” I whispered back. For I intended to show him that he couldn’t intimidate me.

“Sign that will!” he repeated.

I looked him square in the eye.

“Not on your life!” I whispered back.

He leaned over me again. His hands were shaking, his face was about the color of a well-ripened camembert. For a moment I thought he was going to fly off the handle and Desdemona the life out of me with a bed-pillow.

It was the calm-eyed Miss Ledwidge who gently but firmly drew him back.

“Are you feeling worse, dear?” she said out loud, to cover the maneuver. “Is it tiring you too much?” But as she fussed about me I could hear her whispering to the three old crows so close beside her. “Don’t stop things now, or you will lose everything!”

I could see those three old conspirators confer together, eye to eye. They did so without speaking a word. But I knew that a silent debate was taking place there, close beside me. I witnessed the wordless and mysterious giving and taking of messages, the clash of unspoken question and answer, the final

surrender to some mute argument which had to be faced. It was like a stage-wait, with the audience at the far end of that dimly-lighted room getting restless to understand the reason for it. But it ended in the snipe-nosed old man of law once more leaning solicitously in over his somewhat triumphant-eyed patient.

“What is it, my dear, you are asking of us?” he inquired, apparently with the forbearance of a long-suffering man being tried beyond his just deserts.

“Just about seven per cent. as a commission on the deal!” I whispered back. I said it quietly enough to carry to that little group about the bedside, but no farther. I could see old Enoch Bartlett’s face working in the vague side-light. The expression of that face made me grateful for the pillar of Sheffield-plate that reposed on that bed so close beside me.

“So please add item six to that will,” I whispered, in a slightly louder tone than before. For I was beginning to lose patience with that circle of dyed-in-the-wool hypocrites. And I intended to show them that their poor little half-wooled ewe-lamb wasn’t the thing of meekness they had thought her.

“Now what is it, my dear, that you wish inserted?” inquired Theobald Scripps, with condoning wags of the head. And he stood with pen poised, as though ready for dictation.

I gave it to them, straight off the bat.

“I give and bequeath,” I whispered, “*give and bequeath to Wendy Gruger Washburn, of the City of New York, State of New York, the sum of Two Hundred and Fifty Thousand Dollars*”—here old Ezra Bartlett emitted a low but funereal groan—“*to be paid to him in cash out of my estate prior to all other claims.*”

CHAPTER EIGHT

IT was the ring that had made me think of Wendy Washburn. I remembered that he had been generous, once before, when he might have been merely just. He had helped me once when I needed help, when to all intents and purposes I was in the wrong. If I was wrong in this bigger movement, then it was up to my Hero-Man to say so, but I intended to snatch at my chance, while that chance was still before me. I knew there were risks, but I had no time to think about them. I merely remembered that it was useless to think of using my own name. And Wendy Washburn's was the only one that came to me, in that moment of emergency. I rather relished the thought, in fact, of calmly willing a quarter of a million to a man I'd only talked to once in my life.

What he would do with that quarter of a million, I did not even attempt to answer. I was given no time to meditate over such things for the drama about that four-poster was too quick-moving to remain long neglected.

Yet I saw, once I had dropped my bomb in their midst, a change come over that little company of conspirators. I saw the silent debate resumed between those wary and guarded figures. But it was resumed with a difference. It seemed to be apprehension which I now saw on their faces. In the case of the two old uncles, for a moment or two, I even imagined I could read fear there. With Doctor Klinger it was perplexity touched with some frowning suspicion which I could not fathom. With the customarily calm-eyed Miss Ledwidge it was open and involuntary bewilderment and I was foolish enough, at the time, to think that I had overpowered them with my audacity. But there were certain things which I was destined not to find out until later.

"And you insist on this change?" the yellow-faced old lawyer was asking me, at a grim nod of the head from Ezra Bartlett. I imagined, of course, that the old scoundrel had surrendered.

"Yes," I whispered back, as he looked apprehensively over his shoulder, for the scattered group at the far end of the room were betraying renewed signs of restiveness.

Doctor Klinger and the nurse, at a sign from Ezra Bartlett, carried a small table to the bedside. The old lawyer seated himself before this table. Then he gazed at the hangings of my four-poster with an anxious and troubled eye.

"Will—er—will this be overtaxing the strength of our patient?" he solemnly asked, with his head on one side, and a smile of pained sorrow on his wizened old face.

“Don’t worry about me,” I whispered back to him, “or you’ll see your last chance slip away from you!”

He winced at that, and looked apprehensively toward the group at the end of the room.

“Oh, yes; our last chance—our last chance!” he solemnly repeated, as he placed the document on the table, smoothed it out and began laboriously penning the new lines along the top of the second page. These pages, I noticed, were tied together with red tape, held in place by the seals. You could have heard a pin drop in that room, during the next minute or two. Then the fountain-pen began to scratch.

“Will you read what you’ve written?” I whispered, when the pen-scratching came to an end.

“I give and bequeath to Wendy Gruger Washburn, of the City of New York, State of New York, Two Hundred and Fifty Thousand Dollars, to be paid in cash out of my estate prior to all other claims.”

Something about his manner of reading those words made me distrust him, notwithstanding the fact that on this occasion Enoch Bartlett gave vent to his feelings in a groan that was both soul-stirring and prolonged.

“Will you be so good as to let me see that amendment?” I whispered, looking him straight in the face.

Instead of looking back at me, his watery eye sought out the eye of Ezra Bartlett. The old weasel’s face became even more malignant than before. I saw him make a sudden sign to Doctor Klinger. I had no way of knowing what that sign meant. But I reached down under my crested sheet and took firmly hold of the Sheffield-plate candlestick there reposing. It’s the way a gun-man, I suppose, reaches for his automatic, when he sees danger around the next turn. And, I decided, one might just as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb.

Whatever movement Doctor Klinger may have intended to carry out was interrupted, however, by the sound of a quick and angry voice outside the bedroom door. This was followed by other sounds, unmistakably those of physical combat. Somebody, I promptly realized, was trying to enter that room, was determined to enter that room. And somebody else seemed equally determined to prevent that entrance.

But the combat must have been a brief one, for a moment later the door was flung open, followed by the undignified catapulting into the room of the butler in the crimson-rambler apparel. The cause of that unceremonious entrance followed close behind. I could make out the burly shoulders of a very irate young man in a check tweed suit which fitted him as though he had been melted and poured into it. I could also see, even in that uncertain light, that he

wore a necktie as bright in hue as the crimson-rambler knickerbockers which he had so recently outraged. But before I could preen about for a better view of him he strode in across the room and elbowed both Ezra Bartlett and Theobald Scripps from their places beside that four-poster.

“Where’s Claire?” he peremptorily and somewhat breathlessly demanded.

It was plain that he was a stranger to them all. But he was no stranger to me, from the moment I first heard that rich brogue. I knew it was Pinky McClone speaking. And the mystery of Pinky McClone’s presence in that house brought me sitting straight up between my crested sheets.

“Where’s Claire?” he repeated, in a voice which was clearly a Celtic challenge to any one who cared openly to deny him that information.

“Who are you?” piped out old Enoch Bartlett, in a voice shrill with resentment.

Pinky squared about on him. And I must admit that he looked magnificent, that youthful ex-river pirate with the fire of Irish anger in his sky-blue eye. But it was Doctor Klinger who next advanced to the charge.

“What do you want here?” inquired the man of medicine as he rounded the bed.

“I want the woman I’m going to marry,” stentoriously announced Pinky McClone, “the woman you’re all trying to keep away from me!”

The three old men by this time were trying to edge in between Pinky and me. But with one sweep of his life-guard arm he sent that frail-legged trio scattering. Then he flung back the curtains that screened me from the vulgar world.

I blinked at him, with my face twisted up, for it might be painful, I remembered, to have Pinky recognize me.

Thanks to the uncertain light and my tombstone make-up he showed no promise of any such intelligence. Disgust, in fact, was about all I could see on his weather bronzed face.

“This isn’t my Claire!” he announced, with a heavy frown of perplexity.

“Of course it isn’t your Claire!” old Enoch Bartlett piped out, as he kept dancing excitedly about close behind the massive intruder. On Miss Ledwidge’s face, as she stared at this intruder, I saw genuine alarm. She edged away, slow step by step, until she rounded the bed. Then she slipped quietly out through the inner door.

“Who let this madman in here?” Ezra Bartlett shrilly and angrily demanded. “Where are those fools of servants? Why doesn’t somebody get a policeman?”

But Pinky McClone was in no way disturbed by these thin-noted challenges. He strode across the room, stopped at the still open door and swung about.

“Don’t think you can get away with it, you purse-proud bunch of snobs,” he bellowed out. “You may keep me away from her to-day, but you won’t be doing it to-morrow. And mark my words on that!”

And having delivered himself of that enigmatic message, he turned about and walked majestically out through the door, slamming it after him.

This inflammatory interruption, apparently, was too much for the sheep who had been kept herded so long at the far end of the room. As they surged excitedly forward Doctor Klinger forced me bodily and none too gently down between my coverings.

“This can’t possibly go on,” he said over his shoulder, as he held me there. “I can’t allow it. It may prove fatal, at any moment. It’s—it’s overtaxing the poor girl’s strength!”

He stooped close over me, with a good grip on my arm, for he seemed to be uncertain as to just what my next movement might be. He even screened me from those peering eyes by stooping still lower, making a pretense of listening to my heart. As he did so I quietly tickled a flap of his dewy chin with the lacy edge of my pillow-slip. And for this he tightened his grip on my arm until I squirmed. I was, in fact, just getting ready to use my lungs. And he must have anticipated that action on my part, for the next moment he shut off my gathering hoot by placing one of his big hands squarely over my mouth. And with his other hand he still held me like a vise. And that was more than I intended to endure. At that, in fact, I simply blew up.

“Ah, convulsions!” he said in a muffled voice, as I began to struggle with all my strength. “Convulsions again! This is grave, very grave!”

There was an uneasy stir about the room, but I paid small attention to that, for I had more serious things to think of.

I began to have a convulsion of the real sort, just about that time, for my big doctor had taken a hypodermic from his pocket and was doing his best to get the business-end of it somewhere into the fleshy part of my shoulder. And I didn’t intend to stand for any needle-pumping. I began to fight in earnest then, to fight like a wild-cat.

“This looks bad, very bad!” I could hear him say in a somewhat strangled voice, for it was taking about all his strength to hold me down and at the same time keep one fat hand over my mouth. And while he was doing this, since he insisted on thrusting that gross thumb of his against my mouth, I closed my teeth on it. And I didn’t make it a half-hearted bite, either. It at least showed

him that I was in fighting form. For I could hear him suddenly gasp to the others close behind him.

“For God’s sake get these people away! Get ’em out of here before something happens!”

I could hear Ezra Bartlett’s thin-voiced commands to clear the room.

There was a scuffling of feet and a movement toward the door. But I scarcely knew when that motley throng had been herded out, for about that time I was having troubles of my own. Both Ezra and Enoch Bartlett had come to Doctor Klinger’s help and were doing their best to hold me down. They weren’t, however, having things all their own way. I’d broken the point off the hypodermic needle, and as these two old derelicts pawed and wheezed about me I managed to butt Ezra in the midriff. This bowled him over against the writing-table and sent both full length on the floor.

Then I started to show Brother Enoch and that fat-faced doctor just what I could do in the ju-jitsu line. Once I’d squirmed out of their clutch, I knew I could make things interesting with that Sheffield-plate candlestick of mine.

Things were made interesting, however, by quite another event. It was the hurried and unexpected appearance of Miss Ledwidge on the scene. She ran into the room with her eyes wide and her breath coming in stifled little jerks.

“What is it this time?” piped old Ezra, once more on his feet.

“The body’s gone!” she gasped, as she sank weakly into a chair.

Doctor Klinger turned slowly about. His hand was still on my arm, but the tension of his fingers relaxed, and his lower jaw fell away, as you may have seen the jaw of a dead man fall.

“Gone?” he echoed, staring at the white-faced nurse.

“The body’s gone!” she repeated, with a hopeless little moan that might have meant anything.

“It’s gone?” tremulously queried the old weasel, slowly retreating toward the overturned table. “Gone where?”

“Gone from where I carried it! Gone from this house,” was the somewhat startling answer.

The three men, the big fat one and the two shriveled up little ones, stood regarding one another in a sort of awed and heavy silence. Then, still without speaking, they turned and followed the uniformed woman out through the door, stunned, apparently, by being asked to believe the unbelievable.

CHAPTER NINE

THE moment the room was clear of that preoccupied quartet I saw my chance. It may not have been much of a chance, but I didn't intend to miss it.

I was out of that bed, in one jump. I ran to the still open hall door, to close and lock it, for I was figuring on at least a flying start. Before I locked that door, however, I stepped out into the hall in my stocking feet. The place was as still as a grave. Then something which I could not define caused me to stare upward.

High above I saw a woman's face, white as a tombstone, leaning over the stair-railing. It was a young face, but a troubled one. I knew, even in that uncertain light, that it was a face which I had never seen before. It was so thin and colorless that I could feel a stirring somewhere about the roots of my hair.

For one brief moment it stared wistfully down at me, and then it disappeared from sight. I decided, as I backed hurriedly away into my bedroom, not to go up those stairs if I could help it.

I promptly swung the door shut and locked it. The first thing I needed, I remembered, was clothes. And the next was open air, for I'd had about enough of that house of mysteries.

I made for the bathroom, remembering the passageway lined with clothes-presses somewhere on the other side of it. Those presses, I decided, ought to show up something better than a *crêpe-de-chine* night-gown for street wear.

I was, of course, still in my stocking feet, so that my flight through the bathroom was noiseless. I closed and locked its door behind me, to ward off any surprises from the rear. Then I crept on to the next door, opening it as quietly as I could.

Then I stood stock-still. For I found myself confronted by something which, for a minute or two, I could not quite comprehend.

Every light in that room with its massive furniture and its sumptuous yellow brocade was on full. But that was not the cause of my consternation, for on the far side of the room, directly under the added glow of a wall-light, I saw a woman in black, with a black hat, and a black veil rolled up around its brim. Beside her, on her left, stood a black leather club-bag. On her right, on the rug where she knelt, lay an ugly-looking blue-barreled automatic.

But she was directly interested in neither of these things, at the moment.

For before her stood the open door of a wall-safe, and the woman was intently engaged in investigating the contents of this safe.

There was something so businesslike about her movements that for a moment I thought she must be some official from an appraiser's office making out a list of the assets of the Bartlett estate. Yet as I stood there watching her I noticed that she kept dropping neatly banded papers into the club-bag beside her. Then came a drawerful of jewelry, stones of many colors, some in cases, some loose in the drawer, a string of pearls in a square of black velvet, a long and slender chained lavalier wound about a pad of soft buckskin, and a diamond sunburst in a little holder that looked like a chamois boodle-bag.

And all this loot, I saw as I stood there, was being dropped promptly and calmly into the open leather bag on the rug-end.

I didn't like the look of that woman and I didn't like the look of that automatic. But I had no time for taking chances.

I tiptoed silently across the room until I stood close behind the figure so intently stooping over a safe-drawer. I waited until she leaned forward to investigate the next compartment of that safe. Then I stooped and let my hand slip out to that automatic.

I felt better, once that gun was in my hand. It had a candlestick beaten seven ways for Sunday. And it was loaded with a full clip of cartridges.

The woman in front of the safe went serenely on with her work. Then she snapped the club-bag shut, sighed audibly and brushed the tips of her fingers together, as though knocking dust from them. I could see her carefully wipe the metal handles and the japanned surfaces of the drawer-fronts. This I knew was to brush away any telltale finger prints. Then she looked down to the rug on her right. I could see her frown of perplexity. She felt along the knee of her lisle-thread stocking, still frowning. And in the meantime I balanced the automatic in my hand and trained the barrel directly at the back of her head. Then I felt that my moment had come.

"Stand up!" I called out sharply.

She came to her feet, with a jump like a jack-in-the-box released on its spring. And as she rose she also twisted about, so that we stood face to face.

It was my turn to gasp. For the woman I stood staring at was Copperhead Kate herself.

"So you're sloughin' this beat too!" she said, before I had time to speak. There was something more than audacity on her face. It was more than antagonism; it was hatred. So I made it a point to keep the automatic still leveled in her direction.

"What are you doing here?" I demanded, with a hand-wave toward the

club-bag on the rug-end.

She laughed a hard and reckless laugh.

“Playing about the same game that you’re trying to play,” was her brazen retort as she viewed me and my flimsy apparel. “But still sleeping home!”

I didn’t worry over her one-sided smile, for I never did possess one of those three-ring brains that could all keep busy at the same time. And I had considerable thinking to do at that particular moment.

“Well, I guess you can get ready to play my game for a little while,” I told her quite casually. But I kept the gun where it was. I had reason enough for hating that woman. I couldn’t help hating her. And this was the first time in my life I didn’t have to play second fiddle to her.

“What game?” she demanded. Her smoky green eyes were staring at me sharply enough by this time.

“This sleeping sickness game,” I retorted. “For I’ve had about my fill of it!”

“What d’you mean?” she asked, studying my face and plainly showing she didn’t like the look of it.

“I mean you’ve got to take off that hat and dress,” I told her without a quaver.

“When?”

“Right away.”

“Why?”

“Because I need ’em in my business. So peel off, Katie, before the ugly side of my disposition gets to shooting off its fire-works.”

“You’re kiddin’!” protested Copperhead Kate, backing away a little.

I was right beside her in a jiffy and I had the gun-barrel close up between two of her corset-steels.

“You get off that dress!” I told her, and I said it as though I meant it. She stared into my face for several seconds. Then she looked sidewise at the club-bag.

“How about that?” she had the nerve to ask, with a movement toward her bagful of loot.

It was my turn at bat; and I let her know it.

“That’s not what you’re here to worry about. Your present trouble is whether you take that dress off while you’re still warm or I take it off before you get cold!”

Once more she gave me the benefit of her studious green eyes.

"Then you get that gun away from my ribs," she said, for I had made my stare quite as belligerent as her own. And I had the hardware to back it up.

"Not on your life," I told her. But I let her back away a foot or two.

"And then what've I got to do?" she asked, as she took out her hat-pins and tossed the hat into a yellow brocaded chair beside her.

"You're going to put on this nice silk nightie and go to bed," I told her.

"To bed?"

"Yes, to bed."

"Where?" she demanded, with a blink of incredulity.

"In the swellest bedroom," I retorted, "that you ever stretched out in."

I wasn't sorry to see that she was beginning to unpeel.

"I didn't come here to stretch out in any bed," she protested with vigor. But she flung her black waist down beside the black hat on the chair.

I was outside of my flesh-colored nightie in one wriggle. And the next minute I had the satisfaction of beholding Copperhead Kate step sullenly out of her skirt.

It surprised me a little, to see her fall into line that easy. But I had no time to ask questions. I wanted to get away from that house, and get away in a hurry.

"Now climb into this night-dress," I commanded as I pounced on that precious pile of clothing and backed away until two-thirds of the room stood between us. For it's no easy thing to get into a skirt and handle an automatic at the same time.

But neither of us spoke until the last snap was done up. And a big wave of confidence came back to me as I felt that apparel once more about me, whether it fitted or not. It left me almost light-hearted.

"Now come and go by-by!" was my triumphant command to Copperhead Kate, as I backed away toward the door and unlocked it. But every moment of the time I kept my eye on that green-eyed lady with the undulatory body movements.

"You'll pay for this," she said very quietly, as I listened at the bathroom door for a moment before turning the key in the lock.

"I *have* paid for it!" I announced, ignoring the venom in her voice. For I had too many troubles, just then, to give much time to that green-eyed gun-moll's foolish threats.

The big rose and gold bedroom, I noticed as I stepped guardedly into it, was still empty. So I ushered the sullen-eyed and languid-moving lady in the crêpe-de-chine night-dress into its splendors.

She looked the room over with a hostile eye. Then she turned to me, frowning with perplexity.

“What are you trying to steer me into, anyway?” she demanded, as I pointed silently but meaningfully toward the big four-poster. But she betrayed no immediate intention of climbing in between those crested sheets.

“Listen to me,” I said, “for my time is short.”

“So are your manners!” promptly remarked my unwilling captive.

“Well, they may get worse, if they’re tried too hard,” I warned her, with a show of anger. “But if you’re wise you’ll climb into that bed without too much back-talk!”

“I prefer staying out of it,” was her sullen retort.

“But I say you’re going to get in it!”

“Why?”

“Because it’s your only chance of a get-away,” I tried to explain to her.

“One grand little way of hitting the pike, isn’t it,” she mocked, “going to bed and dreaming you’re on a boat for Europe?”

“But I want you in that bed!”

“And how do I know what’s going to walk in on me?” demanded that suspicious-minded visitor. But I knew from that question that she was beginning to give in.

“Nothing will walk in on you,” I tried to assure her. “There’s a sick woman supposed to be in that bed, and . . .”

“Well, that must be me,” she cut in, “for this whole business makes me good and sick!”

“But if you throw the bluff of being asleep you can stay there until morning, if you want to, or at least until your chance of a get-away shows up.”

“And what are you going to do?”

“That’s my own business,” I promptly told her, for I could see that we were only wasting precious time.

She suddenly started to laugh as she stared across the room at me. But that laugh of hers was about as warm as Christmas snow on a convent roof.

“I guess you didn’t cruise with old Bud Griswold without learning a few of his lush-dip tricks!” she said with a shrug that was meant to be insulting.

“You needn’t drag a dead man into this,” I told her, and my voice shook a little as I said it.

“A dead man?” she echoed, staring at me with half-closed eyes. Then she laughed again, remembering, I suppose, that I could never quite forget what

had caused that death.

I could see that she was about to speak again, but she froze into sudden silence, arrested by the disturbing discovery that some one from the outside had plainly tried to open the door that led to the hall. I could see her green eyes fixed meditatively on the turning door-knob. But I didn't wait for more. I didn't wait to see if she unlocked that door, or if she got into the four-poster, or if she began to claw the tapestry from the walls. I retreated, when the way for retreat was still open. I slipped back into the bathroom, swung the door shut and locked it. Then I made for the next door, and repeated the operation.

When I got to the room done in yellow brocade, I crossed to the still open wall-safe, swung shut the door, and also the panel of carved mahogany that screened the metal safe-front.

The club-bag was still there. I paused long enough to open it and make sure that it still held Copperhead Kate's haul. Then I caught it up and made for the next room. I stopped only long enough in the passageway to swing open one of the press doors, snatch up a pair of suede slippers that stood there, and stick a foot into one of them to make sure they would fit. Then I tucked them away under my arm, for I knew better than to wear shoes during my transit over those polished hardwood floors. I wanted my advance to be a silent one, for heaven alone knew what I might bump into before I got down to the street-entrance once more.

As I made my way on through those heavily furnished rooms, however, I found them empty. When I crept out to the hall, too, I was confronted by nothing but solitude. I didn't altogether like the sudden silence that had fallen over that house. It seemed ominous. I didn't like it any more than I liked the thought of that ghostly face which had stared down over the stair-railing at me. I had always prided myself on being a good, hard-headed, matter-of-fact, practical-minded girl. I was never strong on the spook stuff, as Bud had once acknowledged. But there were too many mysteries under that roof to keep me there any longer than I could help. I wanted to get where you could hear the rattle of a surface car and see decent every-day citizens go about on their decent every-day business.

So, with my suede shoes still under my arm, I stole along the stair-head, stopping every moment to listen and look back.

Then, tread by polished tread, I went down the flight of steps that lay before me, with the bag in my hand and my heart in my mouth.

But still I didn't see a sign of life. There wasn't a trace of house-maid, or footman, or butler in crimson-rambler get-up. It was like going down through the catacombs. And I realized, as I started on again, that I still had another

flight of stairs to go down before I was on the street-level. It was a big house. And it may have been fitted up like a ducal palace with bells on. But I'd had all I wanted of it.

I got down the second flight of stairs, and was in what must have been a sort of reception-hall, when the first sound of life in all that descent came to my ears. Toward the front of this hall were heavy double doors of plate glass backed by panel curtains and grilled by scroll-work of wrought iron. And somebody was plainly coming in through those doors, from the street, with a pass-key.

I didn't wait to see who that visitor might be. I made an Annette Kellerman dive through a narrower door on my right, into what proved to be a cloak-room. I swung the door shut after me, and didn't even dare to look out. But I could hear the steps hurry by, loud on the hardwood floor and soft on the rugs.

I knew it was a man who had come in, and come in in a hurry. So while I waited there until the house was quiet again, an idea came to me, and I began to explore that cloak-room. I did it entirely by the sense of touch. I felt and padded about amongst the clothing hanging there until I discovered a fur coat of Hudson seal. I took it down and tried it on. It at least fitted a little better than did Copperhead Kate's black skirt. And a box coat of Hudson seal, I told myself, could cover a multitude of sins. So I put on the suede shoes, took up my bag, and crept out into the hall. There was nothing in sight, and not a sound to be heard.

I tried to move without noise, but my heart was once more in my throat as I slipped out to the street door, opened it, and once more felt the fresh air on my face.

It was so uncommonly good to feel that I scarcely noticed the fact that a fine rain was falling. For as I swung that grilled door softly shut behind me I knew that I was back in the world of realities, back in the land of sane and sensible people engaged on their sane and sensible ends. It seemed like emerging from a nightmare, a distorted and tangled nightmare of wizened old misers and white-faced ghosts and missing bodies and ravished wall-safes and yellow-faced lawyers with undulating Adam's apples.

Yet I stood there for a minute or two on the house steps, making sure that the coast was clear. Then I carefully stowed Copperhead Kate's blue-barreled automatic in the over-ample bosom of her black waist, where it promptly seemed to hang like a mill-stone about my neck. I still wanted that gun where I could get at it, however, for I had not forgotten what I had overheard as to the possibilities of a certain Cacciata and his persuasive sandbag.

But there was plainly no Cacciata in sight, so I took a deep breath, dropped

the veil about my hat-rim, and started down the wide stone steps.

I reached the sidewalk and turned eastward. I was more excited I suppose than I imagined. But I was not excited enough to expect what happened to me before I had taken twenty steps along that wet sidewalk. For as I faced the driving rain and squinted up through my veil to make sure of my bearings, *I saw a ghost.*

I saw that ghost there in front of me, as plainly as though it had been a real man, a man of flesh and blood. And it was the ghost of Bud Griswold—not the old Bud as I had known him, but a sunken-eyed and spectral and shadow-like vision of him.

For one brief moment, as he passed under a street-lamp, those sunken eyes looked at me hesitatingly, accusingly, even reproachfully. And that was about all I remembered.

For I knew, then, that that somewhat busy night had been a little too much for me. I found myself shying off across the pooled asphalt of the open street, without knowing I was doing it, the same as a frightened colt shies at a shadow.

“I’m getting ’em!” I gasped out loud. “*I’m seeing things!*”

I tried to laugh. But my throat was too tight. So I did the next best thing. I began to run.

I don’t think I’d gone fifty feet before I woke up to the fact that one of my suede shoes was missing. It had fitted none too well. And even a two-legged colt, in a panic, can sometimes cast a shoe.

I turned back, to see where that shoe was. As I stood there blinking through the rain, a closed car shuddered to a stop beside me.

“Hello, Cinderella!” I heard a man’s voice call out, as the door of this car swung open.

I still stood there on one foot, like a wet crane, staring in at the shadowy figure. But I did not speak.

“Are you going far?” the same voice asked me. It was plainly a polite question, politely put. But this time it was not the question, but something in the timbre of the voice itself, that caused me to lean forward and stare in over the running-board so close to my bedraggled coat of Hudson seal. For it was my Hero-Man himself who had spoken to me.

I continued to stare at him, a little relieved and at the same time a little puzzled.

“I don’t know yet,” I told him, with a curt laugh. “But I’m on my way.” And I noticed, for the first time, that he was holding a rather soggy-looking

suede shoe in his hand.

“Then you’ll surely let me give you a lift,” he said, as cool as a cucumber.

I heard footsteps behind me, and that decided the thing. I gathered up my box coat tails and the over-full black skirts, and climbed into the car. He closed the door as the car started forward.

“You don’t remember me, perhaps?” he said, looking down at the black club-bag which I was nursing on my lap.

“Oh, yes, I do,” I said, resenting the touch of mockery that seemed to be in his voice. “*For I’ve just been trying to will you a quarter of a million dollars!*”

That made him sit up. I imagined that it would.

“And I hope you succeeded,” he said, with a queer little laugh.

“It wasn’t my fault that I didn’t,” I told him, realizing for the first time that I was both tired and hungry. I began to see for the first time, too, what a strain I’d been under, for the last two or three hours. I felt like a whale who’d come up to breathe. And it was pretty comfortable in that big padded seat, purring safely through the city streets close beside a man you weren’t a bit afraid of.

“And having failed in that charitable effort, what was your next to be?” he inquired.

“I was going to lope for a lunchery,” I told him, still again finding a sort of perverse joy in keying my English as close to the talk of the underworld as I could.

He laughed again, easily and lazily.

“Then why not take pity on my desolation and have supper with me?” he asked.

“I’ll answer that question when you answer one of mine,” I told him.

“Agreed,” he said. “But it would be better, perhaps, if you put this on!”

He was holding my shoe in his hand.

“What were you doing on that street when you stopped there beside me?” I asked, as I took the suede shoe from him and slipped my foot into it.

He laughed again. I couldn’t help envying him his ease and coolness, though I couldn’t quite fathom the source of his amusement.

“I was decorously on my way to the Harraton, where my present apartment happens to be, and whither we are at this moment duly proceeding.”

“And you think I make a habit of eating supper with men in their apartments?” I inquired, with dignity.

“Why not, if duly chaperoned?” he asked, with a pointed stare at the black bag which I held on my knees.

“Who’s the chaperon?” I asked.

He stiffened a little at the curtness of my tone.

“I may be outrageous, you know, but my family really consider themselves irreproachable.”

I felt that he was making fun of me, in some manner, but I couldn’t see any way of getting back at him. It puzzled me a good deal, not that I gave him something to laugh at, but that I was satisfied to sit there beside him, and have him talk to me in his cool and careless tone. The solemn truth of the matter was I knew that I liked it.

Then I suddenly remembered my clothes. I’d make a hit with that irreproachable family, I knew, in Copperhead Kate’s waist that fitted too soon and a skirt with a three-inch hike. And I had a great deal more to say to my Hero-Man. So I began to hedge.

“That family rather frightens me,” I told him. “They might not care for my going-away get-up.”

“Then we immediately eliminate the family,” he announced, “since, as you intimate, familiarity may possibly breed contempt.” And still again he laughed. “And abjuring one’s family always tends to make it more interesting, and much less embarrassing, don’t you think?”

I couldn’t quite see what he was drifting at, but, luckily, we had no time for more talk, for we had pulled up at the Harraton and a uniformed doorman was touching his cap and at the same time trying to take the club-bag out of my hand. But I hung on to the bag.

“Shall we go up?” my Hero-Man asked, as he stood studying my face in the strong light of that apartment-hotel foyer. Then his eye traveled down over my outfit. I noticed his perplexed look as he took it in, box coat and shoes and all. I could feel my face turning pink, in spite of myself. I wasn’t worrying about where those clothes came from; I was worrying more over the fact that it wasn’t the sort of get-up that went with onyx pillars and plush carpets. And on that first day we had met, I remembered, I’d been at some pains to tell him about my weakness for nice things.

“Shall we go up?” he asked me for the second time.

“Sure,” I said, making a bluff at putting on as bold a face as I could.

He tried to take my club-bag, and the elevator man tried to take my club-bag, and a Jap who opened the door for us tried to take my club-bag. But I kept that club-bag right in my own hand. And I wondered, as I stepped into Wendy Washburn’s apartment, what would be the outcome of my next adventure that night.

CHAPTER TEN

AS I sat in that apartment of Wendy Washburn's I felt like a storm-battered man-of-war that had slipped into a neutral port for its legal and limited stay and before long would be once more breasting the waves of an open sea.

So as I lay in that sheltered and orderly haven, a flock of weary-eyed wishes and longings seemed to swarm up from somewhere below, the same as tired seamen might swarm to the decks of their ship as it lay beside homely green harbor-hills and sloping town-streets which they could never hope to tread.

For it was, in the first place, a dream of an apartment, with rooms enough, apparently, to house an Elks' convention. From what I could see of its lay-out, I took it to be a duplex. If it harbored other members of my Hero-Man's family, I had no chance of getting a glimpse of them. I was glad enough to rest my eyes on old brass and the dull reflection of shaded lights on polished wood and the quiet tones of tapestry which centuries of time had mellowed into urbanity, as it seems to do with everything but human beings.

Then, as we passed through into a dream of a dining-room, I found a table laid for two. I stood for a moment staring rather stupidly down at that island of white damask floating in its sea of gloom, at the silver with the light glinting on it, at the cut-glass that seemed so cold and non-committal and at the same time so warm in its prismatic flashes of accidental color. That table, I knew, couldn't have been prepared for me. It wasn't a frame-up, as Bud would have phrased it. There had been no chance for any such move. So I found myself wondering if it was always kept in that condition of spotless preparedness, like the emergency room in a city hospital. I wondered if it was set out there every evening, like a poacher's night-line, to trap each and every nibbler that happened along.

Then I felt ashamed of my suspicion. For when your bait is worth more than your catch it doesn't exactly pay to fish. I knew, as I stared down at the round island of damask, with a vase of Richmond roses flaming at its center like a tiny volcano, that it wasn't a dead-fall in disguise. And I preferred to think of it as being suddenly conjured there, by a clap of the hands. It was some final touch of midnight magic. That night, I remembered, wasn't to be judged as you judge an ordinary night of life. It was a sort of Grimm's fairytale with tassels on. It was a sort of nursery-rhyme on wheels. For I'd already

been through the Cinderella rôle, with the startled Prince finding the lost slipper and returning it to its owner,—though, of course, an eight-cylinder limousine could never quite take the place of a pumpkin shell coach.

If my Prince had turned into Aladdin the tailor's son, and insisted on rubbing his magic lamp, it was not for me to rub my eyes and question his power. I was too tired to think, and too hungry to haggle over details. And the whole thing seemed a sort of Arabian Nights' adventure where the City of Spot-Cash had got strangely tangled up with the City of Brass, and Broadway and Central Park badly mixed with Bagdad, with the Tigris twisting down past the Palisades where the Hudson ought to have been.

It was Wendy Washburn himself—still insisting on taking it all as a matter of course—who promptly brought me back to earth.

“Don't you think it would be as well to slip off that heavy coat?” he inquired.

He held it up as I wriggled out of it.

“One gets so used to fur,” I announced, for he was smiling a little, apparently at the thought of my wearing Hudson seal so early in the season.

“Yes, one does,” he agreed, as he laid the coat carefully aside. “Yet from its appearance I'd venture a guess that you haven't had it long.”

I gave him a good look, but his face was as non-committal as his cut-glass.

“No, they're not wearing them long this year,” I parried, and he solemnly wagged his head, as though that pearl of wisdom were something requiring deep thought. Then he came out of his trance.

“Hungry?” he inquired, as he held a chair for me.

“Starving,” I told him as I sank into it, stowing the club-bag close in down by my feet, where I could keep an inquiring toe against its side, the same as a cow going to market keeps a nose against her precious calf.

Then I deliberately turned the ring on my finger, so that the big ruby surrounded by black pearls couldn't keep from staring him in the face. I waited to see what he would do when he caught sight of it. But, to my surprise, he didn't seem to recognize it. So there was, I concluded, more than one Wendy in the world.

“Champagne?” he casually inquired, as he sat down opposite me and the little Jap pussyfooted into the room.

“I never drink,” I told him. I don't know whether it was the promptness or the primness with which I piped out that virtuous declaration that brought one of the heat-lightning smiles to his lips.

“Of course,” he agreed. But I turned pink again, for I still felt that he was

in some way making fun of me.

He sat studying me, in an abstracted sort of way as I began to eat. He could see, I suppose, that I was hungry, and long before the days when I used to consume untold quantities of marshmallows and olives smuggled into the Ursuline academy I had won a justly established reputation as an upstanding and honest eater. The repast confronting me may not have had all the romance of a midnight feast behind a practise-piano in a lightless recreation-room, but it made up in material what it lacked in spirit. For there was boned capon, and a *mousse* of ham, and Parker House rolls, and some queer tasting little sandwiches which my Hero-Man told me were made of caviar. But the latter I promptly passed by for a little silver boat of French bon-bons.

Then Wendy Washburn began to fish, for it was plain that I was still perplexing him.

“I suppose you feel rather done out?” he ventured, as I switched to a dish of salted nuts.

“Why should I?” I parried, wringing a perverse satisfaction out of the fact I could be a puzzle to him.

“I thought that you must—well, that you must have had rather a hard night of it,” he explained. But he did it somewhat haltingly.

“Where?” I inquired, determined not to make his investigations too easy for him.

“*That* was what I was hoping you would tell me,” he replied.

The Jap had brought in tea-things, and my Hero-Man, I noticed, was making the tea with his own hands. It didn’t seem right; yet I knew that it must be right, or Wendy Washburn would never have done it. The tea itself, however, tasted like plum-blossoms, and I didn’t skimp it, for after emptying that dish of salted nuts I found that I was terribly thirsty.

“It won’t keep you awake?” he asked, as I downed my second cup.

I had to laugh at that.

“Me awake? I’ve got other things to keep me awake!”

“Worries?”

“They were until I met you.” And I rounded up boldness enough to look right at him as I said it.

“Then for the second time I’ve been able to help you,” he said, with his quiet smile.

I nodded my head. His face looked stern, for a moment. The only thing that made it relax was my gesture of dignified disdain when his Jap servant held a cigarette-box of chased silver in front of me.

“So you’re not that sort of girl either?” said the man across the table from me.

“I hope not,” I said. I said it with all the dignity that I could command. Shocking one’s Hero-Man with the eye-opening phrases of the underworld seemed very different to shocking him by one’s actions.

“My sister-in-law, the duchess, does about forty of ’em a day!” he dolefully acknowledged. Most families, I remembered, had a skeleton or two in their closets.

“I wasn’t brought up that way,” I rather stiffly announced. And I looked up quickly to see whether or not he was laughing at me. But his face, as far as I could make out, was quite sober.

“We never are,” was his somewhat puzzling reply. But I edged away from that subject, for we seemed to be skating on pretty thin ice.

“I suppose you don’t remember some advice you gave me, that first day I met you?” I asked.

“About what?”

“About reading Browning,” I reminded him.

“Did you?” he asked, with a new light in his face.

“I did,” I acknowledged. “And it nearly drove me nuts!”

“Nuts?” he repeated. “Oh, yes; of course, nuts. By that I infer that you mean insane?”

“If you prefer it that way,” I said. But I wasn’t thinking of Browning, at the moment, for I’d just kicked the black bag to make sure it was at my feet.

“I’m afraid a great many of us are that way, if we only knew it,” generalized my quiet-eyed companion, as he reached for a cigarette.

I had leaned forward against the table, and the pressure of Copperhead Kate’s automatic under my waist made me suddenly think of other things.

“Do you know,” I told the man across the table from me, “I rather believe the whole world has gone nuts!”

He did not speak for a moment or two.

“And to what do you attribute this—er—this somewhat disturbing belief?”

“To what I’ve gone through during the last six hours,” was my prompt response.

“What has that been?” he just as promptly demanded.

I sat studying his face, for a minute or two, wondering just what I could tell him, asking myself just what he would expect of me. But there was a coolness and aloofness about him that frightened me. And I hadn’t yet discovered just

what I expected of myself.

“Instead of answering that question,” I told him, “I’d rather ask you a few.”

“For example?” he prompted.

“Who are the Bartletts?” I demanded.

“The Bartletts?” he meditatively repeated. “Bartletts? There must be a great many Bartletts.”

“Then who is Clarissa Bartlett?” I asked.

“Why?” he casually inquired.

“I said I’d rather ask the questions,” I reminded him.

“Then supposing we look ’em up in the *Social Register*,” he quietly suggested. And I remembered how Bud had once studied the starry names in that same *Social Register*, though for strictly business reasons.

“I think she’s sometimes called Claire,” I said, going back to the problem of the Bartletts.

“And has anything of importance happened to her?” the man across the table was quietly inquiring.

“Something very important,” I just as quietly responded.

Then something in his manner, something which I couldn’t define, something which I could never have explained, made me pull up short. I felt like Eliza crossing the ice, only the bloodhounds were in my own heart, instead of on the other side of the Ohio. And you can’t run away from what you carry in your own heart.

“You don’t know much about me, do you?” I finally said to that strange friend of mine, who, at one turn of a card, might in some way prove himself an enemy.

“Far more than you imagine,” he said, though I knew he wasn’t altogether sincere in saying it. “But you, on the other hand, know very little about me!”

“Would you prefer that I didn’t know more?” I asked him. And I tried to ask it honestly.

He seemed to realize that. For the first time that night a look of embarrassment crept into his face.

“I’m afraid you’d be ashamed of me, if you did,” he finally acknowledged.

“Then how about me?” I asked.

He looked at me, as solemn as a judge.

“You are still a bundle of contradictions to me,” was all he ventured to say.

“Well, I rather surprise myself now and then,” I acknowledged, a little chilled by that neutral-tinted description of myself. For every woman has a

hunger to be something positive, even though she can't be something superlative. And I couldn't get away from the impression that we were both beating about the bush, that we were merely fencing when time was too precious to be wasted on words.

That Hero-Man of mine must have felt somewhat the same, for he suddenly turned to me and asked me a question which sent a Mississippi of nettle-rash right down from the collar of Copperhead Kate's black waist to the toe in the stolen suede slipper which I was keeping pressed against the black club-bag. He spoke quietly enough, but it seemed to come like a thunder-clap.

"Did you make a good haul to-night?"

I could feel the color go slowly up to the roots of my hair as I sat staring at him.

"What do you mean by that?" I somewhat weakly inquired.

"Precisely what I said," was his answer, and his voice reminded me of a razor-blade wrapped in chamois. "Have you made a good haul?"

I sat there in silence, trying to size him up. I rather resented having ten-inch shells exploded that way in my face. I was equally shocked to find that he had merely been playing a part. He accepted me, after all, as nothing more than a gun-moll.

I must have stared into his impassive face for a full two minutes. Then, in a flash, I decided to give him a dose of his own medicine. Since he reveled in abruptness, I'd give him the once-over without any orchestra-trimmings. If he'd had all he wanted of fencing, he was quite welcome to naked steel.

I pushed my chair back a little from the table. I reached down and lifted the club-bag to my knees. Then I drew back the fastenings at each end of its top, tilted the bag so the light from the shaded electrolier would fall more directly upon what it held, and opened it.

It made a show, all right. That cave-garden of Aladdin's in which all the precious stones grew on trees would have looked like the Great American Desert beside it.

My Hero-Man promptly stood up in his place, put his hands on the table, and leaned across toward where I sat. That half-quizzical smile was no longer on his face. But it was not exactly surprise that he showed. It seemed to me more like consternation, for his eyes narrowed, as though he were in a brown study. I would have laughed, only the sternness of his face rather frightened me.

"How did you get that stuff?" he asked.

Most men would have asked me where I got it. But my Hero-Man was not like most men.

“How did you get that stuff?” he repeated, as he sank back into his chair. I had the club-bag on the table by this time, and gave him the full benefit of the string of pearls that looked as though a white leghorn had laid them. Beside them, on the table-cloth, I put a sunburst of diamonds that gave me the prairie-squint to look at in the strong light. And next came a ruby pendant, of one big stone that looked like the tail-light of the Twentieth Century Limited surrounded by about a dozen emeralds, and next the lavalier that was long enough to hang a family washing on.

“You can’t call me a piker, at any rate!” I said, with all the audacity that I could screw up. For the eyes of my Hero-Man were actually beginning to disturb me.



“You can’t call me a piker, at any rate!” I said

He smoked for a moment or two, without saying a word. I had intended to return the compliment and shock him a bit. But I hadn’t quite counted on leaving him with a face as long as the moral law.

“Oh, I say, this *does* mix things up!” he finally exclaimed, as though he

were thinking out loud.

“Of course it mixes things up,” I chirped back at him, shrinking back into my crook talk as a turtle shrinks back into its shell, “and especially for the ginks who are out their family jewels!”

He shook his head.

“I don’t mean for them,” he said. “I mean for you.”

I tried to laugh, but it fell short. I was really beginning to feel a little frightened.

“I wish you hadn’t done this!” Wendy Washburn said to me.

It seemed the first really sincere and direct statement that he had made to me all that night. It was as though, at a moment’s notice and for a moment’s time, he had dropped his mask.

“Why?” I asked him. And it flashed through me, for one wild breath or two, that this man must be in the same line of business as Bud Griswold’s, with an outsider edging in on the beat that he had picketed out for himself.

“Why?” I repeated, studying his face, which still seemed heavy with a sort of condescending I’m-terribly-sorry-for-you expression.

But the next moment the mask went up, like a shutter over a window. He even smiled a little as he reached out for another cigarette.

“You don’t happen to be looking for a partner, do you?” he inquired, as he stared rather abstractedly over that sparkling array of family junk.

“I need one badly,” I rather surprised him by admitting.

“Could I possibly qualify?” he asked, after a moment’s pause.

“I don’t think so,” I told him.

“I’m sorry,” he announced, with an almost listless motion toward the black club-bag. “For I’ve done a bit of adventuring myself along these lines.”

I looked up at him quickly, suddenly asking myself if it could indeed be true that this mysteriously calm-eyed man was by any chance what Bud and his friends would call a crook? A crook! I hated that ugly and overworked word. I hated it as much as I hated the tricks and meannesses and cruelties with which the bearer of any such brand was compelled to fill his life. For I had long since given up my girlish faith in gentleman burglars and evening-dress Raffles, who were criminals only at strictly stated hours and in strictly certain directions. I knew there was no such animal, outside the movies and the Broadway melodramas. Even poor old Bud, in his time, had tried to be a twentieth-century Robin Hood, and he had made anything but a success of it. I simply refused to accept Wendy Washburn as either a safe-breaker or a gem-thief. And I preferred steering away from that disturbing topic. I wanted my

Hero-Man to keep to his pedestal.

“Then perhaps you can advise me what to do with this,” I suggested, as a nurse says “See-the-moo-cow!” to distract a wayward child.

He stared down at the loot.

“Why, the first thing, I suppose, would be to take stock,” was his matter-of-fact enough suggestion.

“That’s exactly what I’ve been wanting to do,” I admitted.

“No time, I suppose,” he mildly inquired, as he took out a gold pocket-pencil, “to make inventories as you grab goods like that?”

“*That* always comes afterward,” I calmly explained, “especially when you do the work as I have to do it.”

He brought his chair and came and sat beside me. I could hear him gasp, quite plainly, as I lifted out the first bundle of papers. Then still again he stared at me.

“Where did those things come from?” he asked. He seemed no longer interested in just *how* I got them.

“I don’t know,” I told him. And that, to all intents and purposes, was the truth.

“You don’t know!” he repeated, as he took up one of the packages and riffled through it. “But you *do* know, I suppose, that these are what our commercial friends would call gilt-edged securities?” He did not wait for an answer, for he was checking through that first package of documents. “And this bundle, I imagine, should be worth almost a hundred thousand dollars!”

“Gee!” I said. Then I stared down into the bag. There were five more packages there very much like the first. My face must have turned rather white, for the man at my side gave me a quick glance, half of inquiry, half of apprehension. Then he turned back to the table.

I knew, by this time, that I was no longer in his thoughts. He was no more conscious of me, as he sat there with that worried look on his face, than a Wall Street magnate with a million-dollar deal to think over is conscious of the tow-headed stenographer who waits with her pad ready at one end of his desk. Yet there was nothing reproving about either his looks or his movements. He seemed more like a school-teacher who’d been stumped by a problem handed up to him by the least promising of all his pupils. And it was a problem which in some way had to be worked out.

“We’ll just tabulate these few trifles first,” he finally announced, as he reached for a sheet of paper. Then he took his little gold pocket-pencil and deftly made out a list, as neat as an auctioneer’s, first of the family jewelry and

then of the bonds and certificates in the six different bundles. Then he added up the neat little row of figures which he'd jotted down.

"Just a trifle over half a million," he announced, without a ghost of a smile. Then he sat back and watched me as I started to pile the papers and jewelry back in the bag again. I may have been as frightened as a darky in a graveyard; but I didn't intend to let my Hero-Man know it.

"These things shouldn't be left lying around loose, should they?" I offhandedly ventured. I was still altogether uncertain as to which way the cat was going to jump.

"That's truer than you imagine!" retorted my Hero-Man.

"Then what are we going to do about it?" I asked, still uncertain of my ground.

His eye met mine. I don't know what he was about to say. I wasn't even sure that he intended saying anything. But that tableau was interrupted by the noiseless entrance of his servant.

That small-bodied Oriental, in fact, came and stood close behind his master. His attitude was one of veiled expectancy, as though he had been sent for. Yet I could recall no sign or message having gone out from that room.

I saw my Hero-Man tear a small slip from the sheet of paper on which he had been inventorying the contents of the club-bag. On this slip of paper he wrote a sentence or two, in very small script. He gave it to the waiting Jap, without a word of explanation, and the Jap as silently vanished from the room.

It might have been anything, of course. But that unknown message began to worry me. It may have been nothing more than the next day's meat order, or a carriage call, or a trick to intimidate me into a freer channel of confession.

Yet I would have given a good deal to know just what was written on that departing slip of paper. I let no sign of this escape me, however, as I went on restoring that scattering of wealth to its leather receptacle. I even took advantage of an unobserved moment to slip old Ezra Bartlett's six bank-notes from their keeping-place and drop them down in the club-bag. Then I pulled off the ruby ring and tossed it into the same place. For a new impulse had taken possession of me. I wanted to cleanse my soul of the whole tangled business. I wanted none of the fruits of that night's misadventure about my body. Until then, for some reason, I had taken a sort of black joy in letting Wendy Washburn believe the worst of me that he was able to believe. Why it was, I couldn't exactly explain, any more than I can explain why the preacher's son who plays pirate loves to stick a wooden dagger in his belt. But I'd had my fill of playing pirate, and now a reaction, born of heaven knows what, had set in.

I looked up as I finished my task, to find Wendy Washburn staring at me with a slight frown on his usually placid forehead.

“I suppose you still don’t feel like telling me just how and where you got possession of all this?” he asked, with a hand-wave toward the club-bag.

“I don’t think you’d believe me, even if I told you,” was my somewhat ungracious reply.

“Probably not,” he said. But he said it with a ghost of a sigh.

“Positively not,” I amended.

“But there’s still the question of what we’re going to do about it,” he ruminated aloud.

I turned and closed the bag-top with a snap.

“What do *you* intend to do about it?” I demanded.

He looked at me solemnly, studiously, as if he imagined he could read right down to my shoe-numbers by staring into my eyes. It must have been the way the Prince of Denmark peered into the face of his altogether disappointing Ophelia.

“Especially as I don’t see a mail-box anywhere in the neighborhood!” I meekly ventured, remembering only too vividly a certain afternoon at Long Beach.

I was hoping he would laugh at that, but all he did was to stand up.

“I’ll tell you what I’m going to do about it,” he solemnly announced. “I’m going to take this whole thing into my own hands!”

“And then what?” I somewhat mockingly inquired. For there were more snarls in that tangled fish-line of fate than he had any idea of.

“Then,” he told me, “I’m going to take these things back to where they came from!”

“When?” I inquired, wondering if it would be safe to say that I regarded him as one grand little retriever.

“I’m going to do it right away,” was his answer.

“And where are you going to take them?” was my next inquiry. I could even afford to laugh, he seemed so sure of himself, and his little pilgrimage seemed such a perfectly simple one.

“To the house you came out of before you stepped into my car,” he told me as he reached for the bag.

“And have you any idea,” I inquired, “of just what you’ll bump into, in that house?”

“Perhaps not,” he acknowledged. “But the uncertainty of it rather appeals

to me!”

He seemed nettled by my listlessness. He was even ready to disregard my cynical laugh.

“And why are you doing all this?” I asked, with my eyebrows up.

“*For the sake of your immortal soul!*” was his altogether unexpected retort, as he reached over and touched the bell.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I'M AFRAID I was thinking more about my mortal body than about my immortal soul, during that ride through the midnight streets of the city. But I was bone-tired by this time, and already the stupefying fumes of my utter weariness were beginning to float like a mist before me and the happenings of the last few hours. I lost my interest in things. I didn't seem to care much how they came out. And somewhere at the back of my brain revolved a strangely mixed-up reel of weasel-faced old men and haunted houses and lavalieres and rubies and diamonds and four-posters and wills and wall-safes and boned capon and crêpe-de-chine nightgowns and automobiles that purred along wet pavements and thumped softly over car-tracks and swayed a little from side to side like the arm of a mumble-low mammy putting a tired baby to sleep. And I was the baby.

I didn't care much where my Hero-Man took me, or what happened to me, so long as I was left there in peace, against those well-padded cushion-backs. But through the soft fog of weariness that surrounded me I became conscious of several things. The first was that I was in a smaller car than before, a sort of single-seated covered roadster or coupé. The second was that the rain was now coming down in a steady pour, making the empty streets look like a city of the dead. The third was that the car in which I had been half-asleep had come to a stop. And the last one was that my Hero-Man was speaking to me.

"I'm sorry to disturb you," he was saying. "But it would be as well for you to wait here in the car until I come back."

"Back from where?" I asked, as he stepped out the car door with the club-bag in his hand.

"From there," he answered, pointing toward a wide-fronted house of Indiana limestone. Each barred window of that house was shrouded and curtained. Not a light shone from it. Even the street door stood ominously dark. But it was none of these things that left me suddenly wide awake.

It was the discovery that directly across the street from where we had stopped stood the very house from which I had fled two hours earlier. It was the discovery that Wendy Washburn had been able to thread his way back to that house of intrigue, without so much as a word of help from me. He had come back to it as quietly as a homing pigeon returns to its cote. He understood, without my telling him, the precise quarter from which I had carried off that club-bag of Copperhead Kate's. And I couldn't help wondering

just how much more he knew about that house.

“And how long am I to wait here?” I asked, as casually as I could.

He looked at the house-front a moment, before turning back to me. There was no longer any trace of flippancy about him.

“If I’m not back here in a reasonable length of time, I want you to telephone my man at the Harraton. He will know what to do.”

“But what do you call a reasonable length of time?” I insisted. “For you know I’ve got to sleep some time between now and next Christmas?”

He laughed a little at that, very quietly.

“There are a few things that are worth more than sleep,” he announced.

“Not to me,” I retorted, for I didn’t want him to think that excursion of his was troubling me as much as it did. But I scarcely believed he heard what I said, for he had turned away and was stepping quickly up the wide limestone treads.

I sat in the darkened car watching him through the falling rain. I saw him stop before the double door of heavy plate glass guarded by its scroll-work of black iron. I waited for him to ring, wondering what his reception in that strange house would be. But instead of ringing, he quietly took out a pass-key, inserted it in the door-lock, and stepped inside.

I sat there, stunned. Here was a new twist, and a twist that was a little too much for me. Why should Wendy Gruger Washburn carry a key to that house of horrors? And how could such a key come into his possession? And why was he holding back information which he could easily have given me, if he’d wanted to? And was the gift-ring which he had so calmly ignored, after all, in some way associated with him? And if so, just who and what was this Wendy Washburn? And why should he be so actively interested in my immortal soul, and snatch half-a-million dollars out of my hand, the same as a big brother snatches an especially juicy apple from baby sister on the plea that it might give her *cholera-morbus*? And was he actually taking that wealth back to its owners? And, if so, just who were its owners supposed to be? Or was there some ulterior motive in that charitable little move? Was my Hero-Man merely playing lion to my antelope, gathering in at one bound the prize which only months of browsing could have prepared for him?

I suddenly remembered what Wendy Washburn had said to me, that first day of our meeting. “I do a little in the hold-up line myself, you know!” he had announced with that half-satiric smile of his. And as we had eaten supper together that night he had tentatively though flippantly suggested that we go into partnership. Could he have been more sincere than I imagined when he put that question to me? And was he in some way associated with Copperhead

Kate's visit to that house of plots and counter-plots? Could he, after all, be a sort of Bud Griswold in a Fifth Avenue setting, going back to complete a haul which must in some way have miscarried?

Then I stopped thinking altogether. For as I sat there in the darkness of the car I caught sight of a second man in a rain-coat as he stopped before the house, looked about, and then hurried up the steps.

This second man, I saw, took out a pass-key, unlocked the door and swung it open. But the moment he did so the muffled sound of a revolver-shot rang out from the house he was about to enter.

The effect of that shot on him was instantaneous. He dove in through the door, without even waiting to swing it shut after him. And in two shakes I was up out of that seat and out of that automobile and skipping across the asphalt pools.

"Me for the firing-line!" I announced to the midnight air, as I made for that still open door.

I still had Copperhead Kate's automatic in the slack of her over-abundant waist. Never in all my life had I shot off a pistol and I doubt if I could have pulled a trigger without shutting my eyes, yet I felt decidedly better when I held that black-metaled firearm once more in my hand. For the house, as I stepped into it, was as dark as pitch, and I had no idea of what the opening of the first door might confront me with.

So I stood there for a minute or two, straining both my ears and my eyes. But I saw nothing, and heard nothing. I groped my way deeper into the house. Then I suddenly stopped, and listened again. A moment later I turned to the right, felt my way through an open door, and listened still again.

This time I distinctly caught the sound of a voice. It was a woman's voice. It was not a loud voice, for it came, apparently, from a closed room, even though that room lay somewhere in the immediate neighborhood. But it was an angry voice, tense, imperative, shrill with indignation.

I groped my way slowly onward, with fingers outstretched, like the whiskers of a house-cat, until I came to a wall. Then I felt along this wall until I reached a door. I found the knob, nursed it carefully in my hand, and slowly turned it.

The door opened without a sound. But across that door, I saw, hung a pair of heavy portières. So I parted these, cautiously, where a thin pencil of light showed along their edges. And as I did so I beheld a scene which left me all eyes, and a little flighty in the region where that heavy automatic had been hanging for so long.

For directly in front of the door, with her back to me, I saw Copperhead

Kate. She was still dressed, with my flesh-colored crêpe-de-chine nightie, which made her look ridiculous, over her other clothes, but over the night-dress she now wore a man's rain-coat hanging loose at the front. Her fringe of russet bangs was disarranged, and as she leaned forward with her head thrust out, there was something vindictive and tigerish in her attitude, something that reminded me of a cat that had made ready to spring. She was no longer like a snake; she had lost too much of her torpor for that. But what gave point to her attitude was the fact that in a close-crooked right hand, poised on a level with her breast, she held a black-barreled automatic pistol, a twin-sister, apparently, to the one which I carried in my own somewhat astounded right hand.

Close beside her, at her feet, stood the black club-bag which I so recently had seen in the hand of Wendy Washburn. But along the opposite wall of the room, distinct in the light that flooded it from floor to ceiling, stood a motley and very melancholy appearing row of men and women.

They stood side by side in that strained and unnatural position which results from holding the hands high above the head. And in that row I saw my Hero-Man himself, and close beside him Miss Ledwidge, with anger more than apprehension on her indignant face, and next to her again Doctor Otto Klinger, with beads of perspiration on his forehead and a very unhealthy color about his somewhat puffy cheeks. Next came old Ezra Tweedie Bartlett, with his wizened little weasel face quivering with either apprehension or indignation, I couldn't tell which. Beside him stood his brother Enoch, his squinting and half-closed eyes plainly burning with a light of sullen revolt. Next to this hunched-up figure again stood the butler in the crimson-rambler knickerbockers, with his white stockings visibly knocking together at the knees, while on the floor sat another man servant in uniform, tying a handkerchief about the calf of his leg where a slow rivulet of the color of raspberry vinegar stained the white stocking and flowed on down into the broad-toed patent-leather service pump. As he worried over this improvised bandage he emitted, from time to time, a loud and groaning bleat. But this bleat was pretty well drowned, as a rule, in the quick and impassioned words of Copperhead Kate as she caused her pistol-end to waver from one end of that ludicrous line to the other.

“. . . And I'm going to find that out," I could hear her cry, in a white heat of anger, "or I'm going to blow the lid off the whole bunch of you! I want to know what's going on in this house, and who's at the bottom of all this mix-up! I want to know why that calm-eyed stiff walked back in here with this bunch of swag! And I want to know why that blond porker there pumped about three grains of morphine into me when I was up on that four-poster." She swung about on the clammy and cowering Doctor Klinger with hate in her eye.

“It was some dose, my fat friend, and you’d ’a’ had me still dreaming of home and mother if I hadn’t learned to use the needle before bottle-washers got to dressing themselves in claret-colored pants and hash-slingers didn’t know enough to stand still when there was a gun in front of them! And I want to know what that rat-faced old gink meant by trying to throw me over a stair-banister, and where that baby-eyed gun-moll went with my clothes, and why all you gasoonies think just because I’m a woman I haven’t the nerve to put a half-ounce of lead through your ribs!”

I realized as I stood there that my rusty-haired friend hadn’t been christened Copperhead Kate for nothing. For they had to take it standing, and none of them showed any great love for it. But not one of them said a word, I noticed, and not one of them moved. And in the meantime Copperhead Kate, who had the whip-hand, was having her little say-so out.

“You ain’t all hollerin’ at once, are you? Well, if that’s the way you feel about it, just keep on holdin’ your traps shut. And don’t move—not a dam’ one o’ you, or you’ll sure be trippin’ over your own tombstone!” she went on with an increasing show of anger. “I’m goin’ to back out o’ this door, and if any wise guy here wants to take a chance on comin’ after me, he’ll get what Mister Pink-pants on the floor there got!”

Silence for one short moment reigned in the room.

“Just a moment,” I heard my Hero-Man say, as the woman in the rain-coat started to back toward the portière where I stood. “Would you mind telling me just why you happened to come to this house?”

“That’s my business!” retorted Copperhead Kate.

“But I have a particular reason for asking,” persisted the man at the end of that dolorous line. He was speaking with a forced politeness which, had I stood in Katie’s shoes, I’d have accepted as a danger-signal.

“And I have a particular reason for keeping my mouth shut,” announced Copperhead Kate, whose temper, that night, had already been tried beyond all endurance.

“You may think differently, the next time we meet,” ventured my Hero-Man.

The gentle Katie snorted aloud. “And when are we going to meet?” she demanded.

“Much sooner, I imagine, than you seem to anticipate,” was the other’s reply.



Every eye in that line followed her minutest movement

The woman with the automatic stepped toward him, moving forward with a slow and cat-like tread. But there was a menace in every movement. And the black pistol, I noticed, was trained directly at Wendy Washburn's head.

"For two pins I'd plug you where you stand!" she said. But she said it with an ominous quietness that gave me goose-flesh from the ground up.

"And what good would that do you?" asked the man so quietly confronting her. But he kept his troubled eyes on that barrel-end all the time.

"It might do me more good than you imagine!" she retorted with unreserved malignity.

"Then don't let me interfere with any of your personal pleasures," was the other's quiet-toned reply. It seemed to puzzle the threatening woman for a moment, for she gave a cat-like "*sphttt*" at him as she stood somewhat frowningly regarding his impassive face. Then she backed slowly away, and once more dominated the entire line with her black-metaled barrel.

"This is going to do the talking for me," she told them, with a wave of her automatic. "And it won't need to speak twice. So mind what I've told you, and

stay where you are. And the longer you stay there the safer it'll be for you.”

Still again she started to fall back, catching up the black club-bag as she did so. But never once did her eyes leave that silent line as she continued to back step by step toward the heavy portières. And every eye in that line, as she went, followed her minutest movement. She stopped only when she felt the weight of the heavy draperies against her shoulders.

I drew away, suddenly, as her left hand swung the bag back through the portières and dropped it to the floor. Once this hand was free, she began feeling for the door, padding about to find the key that stood in the lock. But all the while she was studying that closely watching line of her enemies.

It was her intention, I saw, to swing the door shut, lock it and make her get-away before they could break through. It was a well-thought-out maneuver, but it had just one defect. There was just one factor she was not figuring on. And that was me.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I WAITED UNTIL COPPERHEAD KATE had edged half-way through the heavy folds of brocaded velour, with her pistol hand still inside the lighted room. Then I decided to get ready for her.

Those portières, I saw, would keep her extended right hand from making any rapid movement toward the rear. So I reversed the hold on my own automatic and raised it above my head. As the figure in the rain-coat pushed still deeper in through the swaying draperies I brought that heavy mass of metal down on the extended forearm with all the force I could put into the blow. At the same moment I pushed Copperhead Kate bodily and none too gently back into the lighted room. She stumbled and fell forward, with a blasphemous little gasp, at almost the same moment that her pistol dropped to the floor.

I was after that pistol as quick as a lynx, and before my astounded friend Katie could so much as get to her feet, and even before the astounded line at the far side of the room could realize what had happened, I was stationed there in front of the portières with a black-barreled automatic in either hand and fire in my eye. And it was my turn, I knew, to take a hand in the little drama.

“Put up those hands,” I told the startled woman as she turned and stared at me with empty and expressionless eyes.

“For the love of Mike!” she murmured, a little stupid with surprise.

“Then get back in that line! Get back there, quick, or you’ll be swallowing a dose of the same bitters you’ve been talking about giving every one else!”

Copperhead Kate fell back, step by step, until she stood between the fat doctor and Ezra Tweedie Bartlett himself. I caught a grunt of relief from that rat-faced old rascal as she did so. But from the man in evening clothes, at the far end of that line, came a quiet but distinct sound of laughter.

I turned on him sharply, but he didn’t seem in the least afraid of me.

“This is an awfully uncomfortable position, you know,” he quietly reminded me. “And under the circumstances, I think you’ll admit, altogether unnecessary.”

My first impulse was to resent that speech, as an impertinence. Then I remembered that Wendy Washburn had his royal way of seeming right, even when he was in the wrong, and that if it came to a backdown I’d find it no easy thing to keep my position a dignified one. I remembered, too, that there was

scarcely a chance of any member of that group being armed. It was ten to one, had any of them been heeled, that Copperhead Kate's speechifying would have been punctuated by a random bullet or two. And if you think it's easy to stand with your hands above your head, for even five minutes at a time, try it just once in front of a clock!

"All right!" I announced in my grandest manner. "You can stand at ease there, the whole lot of you!" For I was tired myself and it might not be so profitable, in the end, to add to their troubles.

I could hear the sigh of relief that went up from that weary array of figures. A dozen aching arms, I noticed, were very promptly lowered.

"But no shifting in the line!" I commanded, as I gave my fat blond doctor the full benefit of a barrel-end against his vest-front. He made a stealthy move, as though to drop behind the others, possibly with a view toward bolting for the door. And I held them there like a drill-sergeant, with the two automatics wavering up and down their Little Mary's. For I meant business and I wanted them to know it.

"I guess it's my turn to put a few questions to this little party," I told them as I backed slowly away, so as to command a better view of the line as a whole. "And I'm going to get answers to 'em or you're going to dance high. Now, you," I continued, confronting the smoldering-eyed Copperhead Kate, "how did you get into this house to-night?"

"I guess I walked in," was her sullenly insolent answer.

"Right through a locked door?"

"Oh, I've been carrying a pass-key to this house for a week or more," she airily acknowledged.

"Where'd you get that key?"

"A gen'l'man friend o' mine cut it from a blank."

"And you came to-night to make your haul?"

"Sure! You know that without askin' me!"

"But what made you come to this particular house?" I demanded, determined to get a snarl or two out of that tangle while the chance was before me.

"I liked the looks of it," was Copperhead Kate's altogether unsatisfactory retort.

"But who'd told you about the wall-safe up-stairs?" I persisted.

"I must've dreamed it," she equivocated.

"Who told you?" I insisted.

"A butler who was fired from here early last winter."

“And that butler knew valuable papers were in this safe?”

She blinked at me meditatively. Then she laughed.

“Gee, no! All I was after was shiners—what your friend Bud used to call ice.”

“Never mind my friend Bud,” I called out to her, resenting the note of mockery that had crept into her voice. “But be so good as to tell me how you got hold of this second automatic.”

Copperhead Kate hesitated for a moment. Her face looked genuinely perplexed.

“A ghost gave it to me,” she finally explained.

An uneasy move went down the line.

“A what?” I demanded.

“I was lyin’ up in that four-poster when something in white, with a white face, crept into the room. It came over to the bed. It stood there, without moving. Then without a word it dropped that gun into my hand and turned and slipped out of the room again.”

Here was still another mystery in that crowded house of mysteries! And I had no reason to suspect that Copperhead Kate wasn’t telling the truth.

“What did the visitor look like?” I asked.

“Like the morgue at four A.M.!” announced the woman with the thatch of russet bangs.

“But surely you saw her face.”

Copperhead Kate shrugged a non-committal shoulder.

“There wasn’t any too much light burning in that big bedroom. And I was so glad to get the gun I didn’t ask for any identification cards!”

“You just got busy rounding up your friends here?”

Copperhead Kate stood regarding them with open contempt.

“All but that cuff-shooter at the far end there. He had the nerve to walk in on me with that club-bag of mine right in his hand. So I just took him in under my wing.”

“Is that true?” I asked, turning to Wendy Washburn.

“Too true,” was his flippantly solemn retort. He was not taking the situation, I could see, in quite the same spirit as the others were. He was still a puzzle to me. Every time I wanted to believe in him something turned up to make that belief impossible. And I couldn’t help still questioning, even as he stood before me, whether he was in a compact with Copperhead Kate or not.

Yet I couldn’t stand there all night third-degreeing that line of altogether

unwilling witnesses. So I cut things short by swinging about to old Ezra Bartlett.

“I want to know what you did with that body?” I shot out at him straight from the shoulder.

“That what?” suddenly demanded Wendy Washburn, from the end of the line.

“Could I say a word or two?” almost as promptly requested Miss Ledwidge, who until this moment had remained both silent and passive.

“No,” I told her. “It’s this human house-rat I want to talk to!”

I repeated my question to Ezra Bartlett.

“But what body?” again interrupted Wendy Washburn, with an actual note of anxiety in his voice.

“There’s a dead woman somewhere in this house,” I informed him, “and I want to know what became of her!”

“A dead woman?” he echoed, peering along the line.

“Yes, and if I’m not greatly mistaken, that woman was murdered, *and murdered by somebody in this room!*”

There was an uneasy stir along that line of anxious faces. I could even hear Copperhead Kate’s soft murmur of “Hully Gee!” and see her sleepy eyes widen with the shock of what she had heard. But I wasn’t thinking so much about Copperhead Kate as I was about old Ezra Bartlett, who stood there blinking abstractedly at the barrel of my automatic. His body never shifted an inch but his eye followed my movements so closely that it made me think of a zoo eagle blinking at a visitor on a rainy day.

“And you, you weasel-faced old rat,” I cried out at him, hot with an unreasoning indignation which I couldn’t control, “I want to know what you’re doing about that will you’re trying to put over on this house!”

“What does she mean by that?” cut in Wendy Washburn, from his end of the line. There was a note in his voice that puzzled me, a note of authority, of impatience, as though he had a perfect right to ask the question he had.

“I’m sure I don’t know,” answered the old weasel, looking me straight in the eye. “For I never saw this young woman before in my life!”

The quiet assurance, the calm solemnity, with which he made that preposterous statement rather took my breath away. The deceit of the old scoundrel was incredible. And I felt sure it would be easy enough to prove that he was telling anything but the truth.

“You know that’s a lie, don’t you?” I challenged, turning to Alicia Ledwidge.

“You ordered me to keep out of this family conference,” she coolly retorted, “and I prefer to take your advice!”

I stepped in front of Doctor Klinger.

“Have you ever seen me before?” I demanded.

“Never!” was his somewhat disquieting reply.

The whole thing was getting more and more like a nightmare. I was beginning to lose my perspective. And what was more, my arms were beginning to ache with the weight of those two heavy automatics.

The man at the end of the line seemed to notice this. I could see him smile a little as he witnessed the palsied motion which my overstrained arm-muscles were giving to the two pistol-barrels.

“Don’t you think it would be just as well to put them down now?” he calmly inquired.

“They’re not going down until you answer me a question or two,” I told him. The way in which I barked out those words came as a surprise to me. I knew that I was slowly but surely losing my sense of humor.

“What is it you want to know?” my deposed Hero-Man was asking me.

“The first thing I want to know is where you got a key to this house.”

He looked up at me, apparently perplexed.

“Didn’t you drop a key into that black bag of yours?” he asked.

“No, I didn’t. And I don’t believe you ever found one there!”

“My dear young lady, you can believe what you like. But really, you know, I don’t carry pass-keys for every house in Manhattan!”

“But you carried one for this house!”

“Which I should never have done if you hadn’t happened to be carrying the family jewels of the same place!”

He didn’t seem a bit afraid of me. On the contrary, he seemed to be enjoying some unknown joke at my expense. He seemed to be laughing at me in his sleeve, as he had so often done before. But I wasn’t playing second fiddle, that night, to anybody, and this fact I intended to make quite clear to him, even though I was beginning to ask myself just how much longer I could keep those automatics poked in their faces.

His own face suddenly grew serious.

“And the valuables you carried away from this house in that bag, I trust, are still in that bag!” he suddenly flung out at me.

It was more a reminder, I think, than either a challenge or a question. My first impulse was to resent it. But it was really meant to serve, I began to see,

as a tip on the wing. It indirectly warned me that the matter of the club-bag had passed completely out of my mind.

I remembered, with a sinking feeling, that this precious bag had been dropped out through the portières. And it was not the sort of thing one wanted to leave lying about in the dark on the far side of a door.

At the same moment that this fact came home to me I began backing away from that ragged line of captives, edging always toward those heavy portières that swung between me and the next room.

A couple of the figures in that line, I noticed, exchanged glances. It was a signal which might have meant anything. But I knew better than to take chances. And it pulled me up short.

“Any one of you trying to move,” I told them with all the show of ferocity I could throw into the words, “will get a hole put through you so quick you’ll never know what hit you!”

I could see Wendy Washburn, at the end of the line, luxuriate in one of his enigmatic and momentary smiles. But I had no time to worry over what it meant. I wanted that black club-bag back in my hand.

So I continued to veer off toward the portières, very much as Copperhead Kate had done before me.

I was taking no such chances, however, as that crimson-corniced lady of adventure, for as I edged in between the draperies, I advanced one hand with the automatic poised and ready, keeping it always ahead of me, just as with the other hand I continued to menace the patient-eyed row of figures standing for all the world like an awkward squad at the far side of the lighted room.

In two seconds, I told myself, I could be back in the lighted room with the bag in my hand. And I had them too well under cover to give them any chance for a breakaway.

What was more, I was watching them every moment of the time. My eye was on them even as I groped for the bag, found the handle, and clutched both the pistol and the bag-handle between the same fingers.

So intently was I watching them, in fact, that I saw nothing else that was taking place much closer to me.

My first intimation of this came with startling unexpectedness. It came in the form of a long arm girdling my waist, pinning my left hand to my side at the same time that it lifted me slightly off my feet. And the next moment my other arm was also in chancery.

“It’s all right! I’ve got her!” called out a deep bass voice close to my ear. And startled as I was, I knew that it was Big Ben Locke himself, who had spoken.

I knew it even before he carried me kicking and struggling into the lighted room, where that line of worthies who'd been so meek and motionless a minute before now exploded into sudden action. They came running and flocking about me, none of them exactly breaking their neck to hide their satisfaction at the somewhat undignified figure which I must have presented.

"Steady, my girl, steady!" warned Big Ben, as he held me in a clutch that would have done credit to a grizzly. Then he proceeded first to take away my two automatics, and then the club-bag full of loot.

I wasn't so interested in this, at the moment, as I was in the discovery that Copperhead Kate, taking advantage of that distracting movement, had sidled closer about to the portières and was creeping unobserved out through them. I called to the big hulk still holding me, but he was too intent on the bird in his hand to think of the one slipping off through the bush. Then I twisted about and tried to gasp out a hurried word of warning to Wendy Washburn himself.

But my one-time Hero-Man, I discovered, had also quietly and mysteriously vanished from the room. And I found something in the well-timed disappearance of those two figures which seemed to crown my darkest suspicions.

"What'll we do with her?" Big Ben was demanding, a little out of breath, for I was still fighting like a terrier to break away from that south-paw clutch of his.

It was the weasel-eyed old Ezra Bartlett who answered that question. He had been stooping before me, in a sort of a crouch, with his claw-like hands over his slightly crooked knees, staring exultantly into my face. I'd been too busy to give him much attention. But his earlier air of querulous meekness had fallen away from him. And now I could see him positively licking his chops.

"We'd better lock her up in the Lilac Room," he announced, "for there are a good many things, young woman, you still have to answer for!"

"And things we've all got to know before that girl gets out of this house," echoed old Brother Enoch, with a tremulous hand cupped behind a prominent ear, which made him look like a rabbit.

It was then that I twisted about and tried to make Big Ben Locke listen to reason.

"Chief," I gasped out to him, "you've stumbled into one of the biggest cases you ever struck, but for the love of heaven, listen to me before you do anything!"

"Listen to you!" he echoed, with a lip-curl of scorn. "Didn't I have the pleasure of listenin' to you for considerable time this afternoon? And do you expect me to holler for an encore on that sort of talk?"

“But things have happened since then,” I told him, “things that change everything.”

“Yes, it sure looks like it,” he announced, as he dropped my second automatic into his pocket.

“Bring her along!” commanded Ezra Bartlett, in his squeak of a voice, as he waited impatiently at the open door.

“Chief,” I said with all the solemnity I could summon up, “there’s been worse than murder take place in this house to-day!”

“Yes, I sure saw you meant business with those two guns o’ yours!” was his flippant retort.

“But I can explain every step of that. I was only acting as any one of your operatives would act under the circumstances,” I said, as he began to half drag and half carry me across the room. For old Ezra Bartlett had repeated his impatient command that I be brought along.

“But you’re no longer an operative of mine,” the bulky man at my side reminded me. “And we get one every now and then, you know, who turns out bad!”

“Then ask Wendy Washburn who brought me into this house!” I told him, for I was desperate now. I was desperate enough to eat crow before the two of them.

“Wendy Washburn! Who’s Wendy Washburn?” demanded my captor, staring about the room. And of course there was no Wendy Washburn there.

“He’s a friend of mine,” I told him.

“You mean a confederate,” corrected the Chief. And I saw that he didn’t intend to give me the chance I was fighting for.

“Then you’re not going to listen to me!” I said it in almost a scream, for my nerves were on edge and I saw my last hope vanishing.

“All I know, young woman, is that you’re under arrest. And that’s about all I want to know just now!” As he said this he brought my wrists together with a movement that was as quick as it was clever, and clicked a pair of nicked hand-cuffs over them.

I stared down at them rather stupidly. It was my first experience with such things. And it took the fight out of me, for the moment, as completely as the thump of a night-stick could.

“And what are you going to do with me?” I asked, still staring down at the imprisoning rings of polished metal.

“We’re going to put you where you’ll be safe until we can get you, you and one or two others in this house, down to headquarters!” Big Ben explained as

he followed the shifty-eyed old weasel up the stairway.

I had no choice in the matter. I had to go. I had to submit to the steady tug of that big brute as he led me down a darkened hallway and into a room which Ezra Bartlett had already thrown open for us.

“This’ll do!” announced Big Ben, as he ushered me into that unlighted chamber. Then he looked over his shoulder to make sure Ezra Bartlett wasn’t within hearing distance.

“Listen to me,” he said in a hurried whisper. “This is a bluff, remember. There’s a mix-up here I’ve got to get to the bottom of. And if you stay quiet in this room, Baddie, until I can come and get you, you’ll be helping me out of a hole!”

“I don’t believe you,” I told him, between puffs, for I was still fighting for breath.

“Then what’re you going to do?” he demanded in his heavy whisper. He was at least a good actor.

“Why don’t you listen to me,” I cried out at him. “Why haven’t you the brains to see a thing when it’s under your nose!”

“Hush!” he warned me, with a glance toward the door. “There’s more under my nose than you imagine. And I can’t explain things. You’ve just got to accept what I’m handing you. I want you to stay in this room until you hear from me!”

His hand dropped from my arm, and he was across the room before I could realize it.

“Until you hear from me,” he repeated in a whisper, as he swung the door shut. The next moment I could catch the sound of the key turning in the lock.

I woke up to the fact, as I stood there in the darkness, that I was crying a little, crying, I think, from sheer exasperation, from sheer helplessness. And I was so tired, I remembered, that my joints ached.

Those hundred and one aches in my body, however, weren’t half so hard to put up with as that misery of mind which came from knowing that I had made a mess of everything. Every step I’d taken had been a mistake. And the memory of it all suddenly made me see red. For a little while there in that unlighted room I wasn’t anything better than a Chatham Square anarchist on the rampage. I think I could have blown up all New York and fiddled over the ruins, like a Nero in petticoats.

But instead of blowing up all Manhattan, I mopped my eyes, groped my way to the wall, found a light-switch and turned on the electrics.

It was a very comfortable-looking room to be a prisoner in, but period

furnishings weren't the sort of thing I was trying to get comfort out of.

I tried the door, but that gave me no hope of escape. Then I noticed for the first time that the room had no window. So I went back to the door again. It was very heavy, and securely locked. I kicked on its panels with all my force, but I might as well have kicked against a brick wall. Then for a minute or so I must have imagined I was a whirling dervish, for I stood there pounding on the upper panels with my manacled hands. It made a good deal of noise, and did a good deal of damage to the highly polished woodwork. But that was the only satisfaction I got out of the performance. And I was too tired to waste energy as a paint-remover, once my foolish little frenzy had worn itself out. So I backed slowly away from the door, pondering just what my next move would be. I stood there in studious silence, trying to goad that empty head of mine into grasping an idea or two.

That silence was suddenly broken by three low yet distinct taps on the door which I had so recently been pounding. I moved toward this door, wondering what this signal might mean. Then, as I still advanced, the lights suddenly went out and I stood in utter darkness, with my shackled hands touching the wall, gropingly, for possible guidance. And as I stood there the key in the door turned quietly, and the door itself was slowly swung back.

It was not swung entirely open. The light from the hall without was quite dim. But for one shadowy moment I caught sight of a shadowy figure in white. It seemed to be the figure of a young woman. The face of this figure during that brief view, appeared to be as white as the floating white of the clothing she wore. She did not speak.

Before she disappeared, however, one thin white hand was stretched forward, toward me, I thought at the time, and was then withdrawn. The next moment I heard the tinkle of metal on the hardwood floor at my feet. I looked down, quickly. As I did so the door swung shut. A moment later the electric lights flowered into light, controlled apparently by some switch outside the room. And I stood there feeling exactly as Horatio must have felt that night in front of Elsinore Castle when the ghost of Hamlet's father gave him the once-over.

"Baddie," I said to myself out loud, "either you're seeing things again or there's something around this house that's escaped the undertaker!"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I STOOD IN the center of my ponderously furnished room which was in reality a ponderously fortified cell, trying to argue the matter of that apparition out with myself.

It was not the first thing of the kind that had confronted me that night. I had caught a glimpse of the ghostly head that had appeared for a moment above the stair-railing. Later on, I had walked past the apparition of Bud Griswold in the driving rain. And Copperhead Kate had declared that a specter had slipped into the room of the four-poster and dropped an automatic at her side, before vanishing.

What was the meaning of it all? Who was the white-faced wanderer loitering so anxious-eyed about the house of mysteries? And why was she so afraid of being seen? And who knew of her presence there? And what had that to do with the disappearance of the dead girl who had so mysteriously and disturbingly vanished into thin air? And, above all, what was Wendy Washburn's interest in those movements? And what part in that tangled drama of intrigue could the calm-eyed Alicia Ledwidge be playing?

These were questions which I found it impossible to answer. My head was in too much of a whirl even to thresh over them, one by one, until some grain of truth was shaken from all that meaningless chaff. Then, more to regain a grip on myself, and get the thought of all such specters out of my mind, I crossed to the door and started to look about for the bit of metal which I remembered had fallen there, or had seemed to fall there.

I found it lying on the highly waxed parquet-flooring, close beside one of the rugs. It was a key, small but strong, and of odd shape, and it was of polished nickel, as bright as the metal circles about my wrist.

That common brightness, in fact, gave me an idea. I held the key in my teeth, raised my hands and twisted them about. The key, I found, fitted the hand-cuffs. And with one turn of it I had them unlocked, and my hands were once more free.

The next moment I ran to the door. It was still unlocked, though the key remained in its place. But what caught my attention was a bundle of clothing which lay on the floor, close to the door.

I gave a gasp of astonishment, of relief, as I stared down at them. For I recognized that little pile as my lost clothing, from shoes to hat and gloves. That ghost, whatever her motives, was at least a most obliging one.

I looked up and down the hall, wonderingly, trying to fathom what good angel could be ordering specters about on my behalf. But nothing was in sight. The house stood as gloomy and silent as a tomb. And the mystery of it all still hung close about me, like a harbor fog on a November night.

I caught up that welcome bundle, however, took the key from the outside of the door, and retreated within my guard-room, carefully locking myself in. Then I peeled off Copperhead Kate's ill-fitting apparel, kicked off the oversized suede shoes, and thankfully and triumphantly donned my own humble duds. Then I took a deep breath, a breath of deliverance, shot through with gratitude, for whatever troubles or dangers might still await me before I once more made my way back to the world, I felt that I had a fresh grip on life, a forlorn rag or two of dignity which that frantic night had not altogether torn away from me.

But I did not linger to luxuriate in this feeling, since I was all the time being swayed by a much stronger one. I wanted to get away from that house, and get away from it for good.

So I crept over to the door, took the key from the lock, and stepped outside. There was no one in sight.

I may have been excited, at that prospect of escape, but I was not too excited to remember that it would be better not to be recognized as I left that house. So I slipped back into the room, found Copperhead Kate's heavy veil, knotted it about my hat and fastened it there by a couple of hairpins.

Then I crept out through the door again, relocked it and pocketed the key. I could hear my own heart beating as I moved slowly forward, step by step, toward the stair-head. I lifted my veil and stood there listening, to make sure that the coast was still clear, for on this occasion I preferred to have no interruptions, either earthly or unearthly.

As I stood there, straining my ears, a faint murmur of voices came to me. This sound seemed to come from behind a closed door, somewhere deeper in the house. It should have proved a disturbing sound to me. But instead of hurrying my steps, for some reason, it halted them. I crept about the stair-head and groped my way along the wall, listening from time to time as the sounds grew clearer.

Then, as I padded along the panels of a closed door, I realized that the talking was taking place in the room before me. The next moment I had my ear pressed flat against that panel, and I knew at once that it was old Theobald Scripps who was speaking. There was no mistaking those smooth and unctuous accents.

"But if there's been a murder committed in this house, somebody must

have done it!”

“Well, who did it?” demanded a querulous voice which at once made me think of Enoch Bartlett.

“Why, don’t you understand,” retorted the old lawyer, impressively lowering his voice, “that it was this street-girl who did it? Don’t you see that every reasonable evidence points to her as the guilty party?”

It was plainly old Ezra Bartlett who spoke next.

“That’s easy enough to say. But how are we going to hitch that particular crime on that particular girl? How are we ever going to frame up a case that’ll hold good?”

“The case is already complete,” contended the voice of the old attorney. “We’ve got the girl here, where we want her. What brought her here is our own business. What she did in this house will stand against her. For who will accept the story that she’ll try to tell? Who’ll swallow the explanation of how she first gained admission here?”

“Explanations be damned!” piped the angry voice of old Enoch Bartlett. “We don’t want explanations! What we want is a will, sir, a will duly signed and witnessed by Clarissa Rhinelanders Bartlett!”

“Of course you do,” acknowledged the other. “But you don’t also want ten years in state’s prison, do you? If you do, sir, simply continue along the path you have been following! For there’s a muddle here that’s got to be cleared up before any man in this room can feel clear to leave this house!”

“Fiddlesticks!” ejaculated Enoch Bartlett.

“But who got us into that muddle?” demanded his brother Ezra.

“That girl did, of course!”

“Then that girl’s got to pay for it! She’s had her fun, by gad, and now she can face the music!”

“And we’ve got Locke, haven’t we, to back us up in anything we claim?” demanded the other shrill-voiced old rascal. “And there’s Klinger here, to do the same!”

That talk was none too lucid to me, but there were a few features about it that kept my ear glued to the door-panel. For I knew as I listened that it was me, Little Me, they were talking about. And it wasn’t exactly the sort of conversation that you make soothing-sirup out of. I may have been tired in body, but I was awake to the finger-tips as I stood there in the darkness overhearing that star-chamber discussion as to how I was to be disposed of.

“But what about this man Washburn?” I heard Enoch Bartlett’s voice inquire. I waited, without breathing, to catch the answer to that question.

“Washburn?” scoffed the old lawyer. “Why, my personal conviction is that Washburn is the man who’s duping us all, and that he’s a bigger crook than the woman herself!”

“It’s not a matter of conviction,” broke in Doctor Klinger’s heavily contemptuous voice. “It’s a matter of common knowledge, a matter of fact!”

“What is?” bit out Ezra Bartlett.

“That this man Washburn is nothing but a social highwayman! That he lives by his wits!”

“Of which he has more, apparently, than a number of people in this immediate neighborhood,” piped out the irate Enoch Bartlett.

“But which of those two women was working with Washburn?” demanded the more practical-minded of the two old brothers.

“The woman who brought him back to the house—the baby-faced one! We’ve got to get her taken care of, and it has got to be for life!” announced that venomous old attorney as calmly as though he was talking of doing away with a house-cat. “And if there’s any doubt about taking care of her *that* way, we’ll have to take care of her the other way!”

“Hoity-toity!” I breathed against that polished hardwood panel. But in spite of myself I could feel a little scramble of chills go up and down my backbone. Then a still sharper needling of nerve-ends ran like an electric shock about my body, for close behind me, in the darkness, I caught the sound of a softly moving figure.

My eyes were accustomed to the darkness, by this time, and as I stood flat in the shelter of the heavy door-frame I could make out a vague Something grope slowly past me. A faint rustling of skirts told me that this something was a woman. She had groped by me without becoming conscious of my presence there, I felt sure, because there had been no pause in her steady advance. All her attention, in fact, seemed centered on making her passage along those darkened walls a silent one. And I did my best, as I followed her, to keep my movements equally silent.

It was not until she approached the vague half-light from the stair-well that I could even venture a guess as to her identity. Then, as she peered anxiously down this well, I saw that it was Alicia Ledwidge. And what startled me most, as she took her flight down that all but lightless stairway, was that she carried a black club-bag in her hand.

The shock of this, however, was submerged in a still greater shock, as a little wave is swamped by a bigger one. The situation, I realized, was not so simple as it seemed. For as that stealthy figure of the trained nurse crept cautiously down the stairway I noticed that it was being followed by another

figure, equally stealthy.

Who or what this second stalker was I could not make out. I merely surmised that it must be a man, since the second creeping shadow plainly bulked heavier and higher than the first. But it followed on after the other, step by step, with a sort of timber-wolf intentness that sorely tempted me to scream out a call of warning.

Instead of doing that altogether unwise, if natural, thing, however, I crept on to the stair-railing and followed after them. For the second moving shadow, I noticed, had drawn closer to the first.

It must have been at the exact moment the woman reached the floor below that the man following her made his spring. It was a sudden spring, but it was almost noiseless. And equally silent seemed the brief struggle that took place there in the darkness.

I could hear a faint gasp, more of pain than of fear, a sound of quickened breathing, and an even fainter sound of contending bodies. Then came a quiet thud, a thud that was more a vibration than a sound, and the louder note of hurrying steps passing from muffling rug to the polished hardwood floor.

Then still again, and with equal abruptness, the unexpected happened. Those hurrying steps were not half-way across the wide hall before the entire place flowered into sudden light.

At the same moment I beheld Wendy Washburn with the forefinger of his left hand pressed against a button-switch in the wall. In his right hand, I noticed, he held a heavy walking-stick. He held it obliquely across his shoulder, as a marching soldier carries a rifle. I surmised, from his attitude, that it was poised there, in position for striking. But I was no longer watching Wendy Washburn and his walking-stick. My eye had traveled on to the man in the checked tweed suit with the black club-bag. I could see him distinctly, in the clear light below me, as he leaped for the street door. I knew, even before I saw his face, that it was Pinky McClone.

He did not go to the door. He knew, apparently, that it was too late. He seemed to realize that he had a fight to face, before he could achieve his freedom, for he dropped the club-bag and swung about as Wendy Washburn edged in between him and his iron-grilled avenue of escape.

He swung about without hesitation and quite without fear. At the first sight of my Hero-Man, in fact, a hunger for combat seemed to seize him. It was as though Pinky, in beholding that opponent of his, beheld an old and implacable enemy. And he went at that enemy as though there were a good many ancient scores to be wiped out.

It wasn't a long fight, but it was a bitter one, and at the very beginning of it

the walking-stick went clattering across the polished floor, so that it soon became a contest of strength against strength.

I was so interested in that fight that I kept creeping farther and farther down the stairway, a step at a time, with my eyes staring and my heart in my mouth. And there was no division of sympathy on my part. I knew exactly how I wanted that fight to go. They may have both been criminals, those two, but they were as far apart in their make-up, it seemed to me, as one pole is from the other. And it wasn't the brawnier man that I wanted to win.

But I noticed, with a gulp, that this same brawnier man was doing what most brawny men do, under the circumstances. He was getting the better of it; he was, in fact, skilfully and deliberately sparring for his *coup de grace*. I saw that Wendy Washburn was going to get his, as my old friend Myrtle would have said. I saw that he was going down to defeat, ignominious and inevitable defeat, by way of the knock-out route. And being a woman, I promptly and actively interfered in what seemed to me an altogether unfair struggle. I interfered by catching up the walking-stick that lay at the foot of the stairs, poising it above my head as I ran forward and bringing it down on Pinky McClone's thick skull just above his big pink ear.

He went down like a bag of feathers.

I stood staring at him. I stood, wide-eyed, looking down at his suddenly humbled strength, wondering what they'd do with this second body in that house of horrors.

Then Wendy Washburn, who'd been wiping the blood off his face, where his lip was cut, got back enough breath to cry out a quiet "*Thank God.*"

"What for?" I asked him sharply, almost accusingly, for my teeth were doing a fox-trot of pure panic by this time. "For killing that man?"

Wendy snorted aloud as he caught up the club-bag.

"That man's not dead," he calmly announced. "But *we* may be, if we're not out of this house pretty soon!"

I felt a little thrill, a wayward little thrill of something that was both pride and pleasure, at hearing him bracket me with himself in even a common danger. It wasn't the mere thought of escape as I watched him unlatch the door, that brought a wave of relief through all my tired body. It was more the thought of having some one else beside me, of having at least something which might be construed as a confederate, of knowing that I was no longer acting entirely alone in all that tangled maze.

My Hero-Man opened the street door and peered out. Then he motioned for me to follow him.



And being a woman, I promptly interfered

But I couldn't help glancing back over my shoulder, in the hope of beholding some reassuring sign of life from the inert Pinky McClone. Instead of seeing Pinky McClone, however, I saw an altogether different figure. It was a ghost-like figure staring down from the gloom at the head of the wide stairway. It stared down with a look of wistful trouble in its hollow eyes, and as I peered back at the white face which seemed to be floating in space I knew that it was Bud Griswold's face that I had seen again.

"Get me out o' here!" I gasped to Wendy Washburn as he held the street door open for me.

It was an altogether unnecessary remark, for he was already doing exactly what I had commanded him to do. I scarcely noticed him, in fact, when he stopped short and stared about in the driving rain.

"My car's gone!" I heard him gasp.

“What difference does it make?” I rather stupidly asked, for my mind, just at that moment, wasn’t on automobiles.

“It means that we’ll have to take a taxicab,” he said with a short laugh, as he linked his free arm in mine and we started westward over the wet sidewalk, with heads down, against the driving rain. But I kept looking back to make sure that a ghostly face wasn’t floating in the air just over my left shoulder.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I NEVER COULD remember much about that ride of mine with Wendy Washburn through the rain. I don't know just where we were when he hailed a passing taxicab, and I don't know just where that taxicab took us.

But I do remember that the damp upholstery of the taxi was very smelly, and that the door-windows rattled, and that the wheel chains kept slapping against the fenders with a sort of tick-tock rhythm that made my eyelids droop. I also seem to remember Wendy Washburn passed the driver a twenty-dollar bill, if I'm not mistaken, which the man in the wet waterproof coolly and casually accepted.

I think we must have had the city pretty much to ourselves during the midnight drive through one deserted street after another, for, by the way we skidded about corners and pounded over car-tracks, I knew we were traveling a little faster than the law allows. But my bag of sensation had been shaken out. I no longer reacted to what was taking place around me. I don't think an eighteen-inch gun could have startled me. Yet I remember my Hero-Man looking back over his shoulder and then calling out for our driver to go faster. And I rather drowsily asked him why we were careening around the city that way, like a cat having a fit in a flat-kitchen.

"Because we're being followed!" was Wendy Washburn's reply; but even that statement didn't altogether waken my interest.

"But who's following us?" I sleepily inquired, as I tried to edge down into a more comfortable corner of the damp upholstery.

"I don't know, for sure," said the man beside me, "but I do know for sure that it will be better for them not to get up with us!"

"What'll they do to us?" I weakly inquired, as we skidded against the curb-stone with a jolt and went racing on again.

"Don't talk—you're too tired!" said the man at my side. I think he said it crossly. But I didn't even worry about it. For the next minute he was speaking much louder, and much more crossly to the driver in the front seat.

"They're gaining on us!" he called out, and I could feel the cab respond to the driver's dab at the throttle-lever. I could feel his old rattle-trap leap forward and go rocking and lurching along the wet pavement. Then we took a turn, with two wheels up on the sidewalk, and doubled for what must have been Central Park. A policeman in a shiny waterproof shouted at us as we swept down across the Plaza, I know; but we never stopped.

“Keep it up,” I could hear Wendy Washburn call out as we turned westward again.

“I can’t keep it up!” the driver called back. “My gas is running low!”

“Then slow down enough at Symond’s to let us drop off,” my Hero-Man called back, after a moment’s thought, “but don’t stop!”

He was staring back, apparently to make sure the lights of the car behind us hadn’t yet turned the corner, when we shuddered down to almost a standstill. We were, I think, somewhere in the west Fifties, between Sixth and Seventh Avenue. The man beside me was on his feet, with the door open, before I woke up to what he intended doing.

“Quick,” he called, as he caught me by the arm.

I stumbled out after him. In his right hand, I noticed he still carried the black club-bag. With his left hand he swung me across the wet sidewalk and pushed me in through a door.

I stood blinking about what must have been a public garage, with rows of cars, and black iron pillars, and oil-stains on the floor. Then I discovered that I was alone. It worried me a little to find that Wendy Washburn was no longer at my side. But the next moment I saw him and another man run to one of the cars standing there. Two huge doors, at the same time, swung open at the far end of the garage, which must have reached through to the next street.

I remember my Hero-Man helping me up into this car, which was a roadster with very high-backed seats. The next moment he was there beside me, with the club-bag between his knees, and we were slithering over the oily floor and across the wet sidewalk with a purposeful thump of tires that plainly announced we were still out to play ducks and drakes with the speed laws.

I found the well-padded seat of this second car much more to my liking. It seemed to fit into it as though I had been made for it, or it made for me.

I don’t know how long I’d sat there, trying to hold my head up, when I heard Wendy Washburn say: “I think we’ve given them the slip!”

I don’t think I was really much interested. I was too tired to care. I must, indeed, have fallen asleep during a good part of that journey, though I nursed a hazy recollection of leaving the city behind us, of mounting hills and going down them again, of crossing bridges and rocking over car-rails.

I woke up with a start as we went speeding through a sleepy-looking little town. I woke up to the repeated crack of a revolver, for, as I found out later, we’d nearly run down a rube constable who tried to stop us by shooting at our tires. I remember wakening and staring at the man beside me, bent so intently over the wheel. For a moment I thought it was Bud Griswold. Then my Hero-Man himself called out for me to sit low, in case one of that village

policeman's pot-shots should accidentally come my way.

I realized, as I sat there blinking up at him, that I'd at least been under fire, that I'd heard bullets whistle by my ears and that thereafter I could look upon myself as a veteran.

The whole situation, in fact, struck me as being so absurd that I suddenly began to laugh.

The man at my side was plainly disturbed at that laugh. As we were well out in the open country again, he slowed down the car and gave me a quick side-glance over his shoulder.

"So you're one too!" I said, as I sat staring through the rain-drops crawling like worms down the wind-shield.

"One what?" he demanded.

"The same as I am," I replied, suddenly dreading to use the ugly word which had risen to my lips.

"I'm worse!" he avowed, as he speeded up again.

"You're at least a good driver," I admitted. For we had traveled far and fast that night. If the next turn of the road had showed us the blue waters of Lake Ontario I don't think I'd have blinked an eye.

"You have to be a good driver, in this business," my Hero-Man finally retorted.

But even that open acknowledgment of his evil ways didn't disturb me. If your thirteenth blue-point never tastes good, as some wise cynic has observed, it's equally true that your thirteenth nervous shock in one night isn't going to come like a thunder-clap.

But we still speeded along that unknown road. And I began to be languidly interested in our equally unknown destination.

"But where do we happen to be going?" I mildly inquired. I could see the stars shining through a rift in the clouds. It was no longer raining.

Wendy Washburn turned his head and looked at me.

"Watch your road," I reminded him. The old half-quizzical smile was once more on his face as he righted the car and missed a telegraph pole by a few inches.

"Where would you like to go?" he asked.

I leaned back in the well-upholstered seat.

"I'd just like to keep on going—forever," I told him.

"Why?"

"Because I'm tired."

“Very tired?” he asked.

“Terribly,” I admitted.

He was silent for a few minutes, I could feel my eyelids once more beginning to droop.

“I’m going to take you where you can have a good sleep,” he finally told me.

“Thanks,” I said. “And then what?”

“That question we can’t answer until to-morrow.”

I could see the Hudson shining in the clear star-light. I could see wooded hills, and the vague line of a stone wall. We turned suddenly to the left, went down a winding lane, and swept in close to two gate-pillars that seemed to be covered with ivy.

As we did so the man at my side switched out his head-lights. Then, after a moment’s deliberation, he shut them all off. He brought the car to a stop, stepped out and seemed to be fumbling with the huge lock which I could just discern at the center of a pair of massive iron gates. A moment later he had the gates swung open and was tooling the car slowly in past them. Then he again stepped out, closed the gates, locked them, and climbed into the seat beside me.

We went along very slowly, this time, and he kept peering ahead through the darkness. We were no longer crunching over a hard roadway, I noticed, but weaving our way in past tree-trunks and shrubbery over the close-cut grass of a lawn. I could see dimly outlined flower-beds, and borders of bushes. Then we swung in under the branches of a huge tree, pushing our way in past screening shrubbery that brushed the side of the car. Then we came to a stop.

“Where are you taking me?” I asked, as I sat up and tried to stare out through the leafy silence that suddenly enisled us. In the distance, toward the river, I could just make out the vague gray pile of a house. It seemed very big. It also seemed to have many gables.

“Where are you taking me?” I repeated in my best Bertha-The-Beautiful-Cloak-Model tones, as Wendy Washburn stepped down out of the car.

“To the Big House up the River!” responded my Hero-Man, with the faintest sound of a laugh. And he stood waiting to help me alight.

It was my turn to laugh as I stepped down beside him. For there isn’t a law-breaker on all Manhattan Island, I suppose, who doesn’t know the Big House up the River to be the other name for Sing Sing itself.

“I thought I was headed for something like that!” I told him. He leaned close, and peered into my face, as though my flippancy rather puzzled him.

Then he led me cautiously out through the tangle of wet shrubbery, stopping and peering ahead every few steps. We were quite close to that vague and shadowy house by this time.

“This place is as empty as a church,” he explained to me in a lowered voice, “and I want you to wait here until I open it up.”

“How?” I demanded.

He showed me a bar of metal. He explained that it was the handle that fitted into the socket of a motor-jack.

“I’ll jimmy one of the windows open,” he calmly announced. “Then I’ll come back for you!”

The next moment he was gone. I was too tired to think what to do, or what I ought to do. I merely stood there, waiting, in no way amazed that my one-time Hero-Man was at that moment engaged in jimmying his way into an empty summer-home. And it seemed to take him a very long time. Bud, I remembered, would have done the job in one quarter of what it took my new confederate.

“Come on!” he whispered, as he led me toward the side of the house. A door stood open, but no lights showed behind it. I wasn’t thinking much about lights, however. I was thinking more about a bed, a big wide bed with an Ostermoor and a duck-feather pillow or two, and ten long hours far from the madding crowd.

“Whose house is this, anyway?” I languidly inquired, as I mounted the wide steps of Milton bricks with tubbed plants on either side of them.

“What difference does it make?” asked Wendy Washburn as he waited to close the door behind me. The next moment he had switched on the lights.

“It looks like a very nice one,” I admitted, as I stared about me. It didn’t interest me much more, though, than the foyer of a hotel interests a road-weary trooper on the grape-vine circuits.

“I pride myself on being a good picker,” said my guide. I noticed that he had carefully locked the door. But even this did not disturb me.

“Are you—er—nervous?” he asked.

“Not a bit!” I told him.

“Would you feel safer with this?” he next inquired. I noticed that he was holding out a pearl-handled Colt revolver.

“What am I to do with it?” I asked.

“Keep it under your pillow,” he explained. That pregnant word of “pillow” caught and held my attention. The man who had been so intently studying my face seemed to realize this.

“There’s a cream and gold room at the head of the stairway—the first door at the right there!”

He ventured this announcement with a certain vague constraint which made me smile in spite of myself.

“Thank you, Prince Charming!”

“I think you’ll find everything there—and quite comfortable,” he went on, still a little embarrassed by my steady stare.

“You seem to know this house,” I told him.

“I at least know that it is empty,” he retorted.

“You’re quite sure of that?” I asked, already a step or two up the stairway.

“Positive!” he replied.

“Then me for the hay!” I flippantly announced.

“I’ll wait here until you’ve locked yourself in,” he rather ponderously explained.

I crept up to the door that stood first on the right, with a sigh of weariness as I reached the top of the stairs. Then I quietly opened the door, subdued in some way by the sheer silence of that empty house. I was feeling about the wall for a light-switch when something arrested my attention. I stood there for a full minute, listening.

Then, scarcely without breathing, I crept noiselessly toward the center of the room, where a wide cream and gold bed stood scarcely discernible in the half-light. I stood studying that bed for some time. Then I backed as noiselessly away, and out of the room, softly closing the door behind me.

My Hero-Man was still standing at the foot of the stairs, in an attitude of puzzled expectancy. I went slowly and thoughtfully down to him.

“What is it?” he asked, in a nervous whisper.

“Is there any other room in this house I could sleep in?” I offhandedly inquired.

“Why?” he demanded.

“I don’t exactly like that cream and gold room,” I told him.

He was silent for a moment.

“Why, yes, of course,” he finally said. “The whole house is empty. You can take any room on that floor.”

“Then supposing I take one on this left side,” I suggested.

“Yes, the delft blue room,” he agreed. “That’s as good as any.”

“Blue’s more my color,” I said, as I started up the stairs again.

I don’t know whether he believed me or not. I didn’t even care. I was too

tired to worry over it. But weary as I was, I was at least wide enough awake to know that I stood face to face with a new mystery.

For in the bed of the cream and gold room of that empty house there was a young woman lying, fast asleep.

And remembering that, I not only locked my door and wheeled a dressing-table across it, but I also laid out Wendy Washburn's pearl-handled Colt, on what looked like a Louis-Seize vitrine of hand-painted glass standing close beside the bed. For I intended to sleep, even though I had to shoot a dozen mysterious females to do it!

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I WAS NEVER a light sleeper, for when I went to bed I seldom carried my worries there with me. But once my eyes were open, I was always wide awake in a second.

Just how late I slept in that strange bedroom of delft blue I had no means of judging. But I knew that I had slept well, for I wakened to find the sun high in the heavens and an absurd sense of well-being in my healthy young body. So I lay there for a few minutes, blinking contentedly about at my surroundings.

That room, I knew, was a woman's room. I knew it by the canopies of cream lace over blue silk, by the bottles and powder-puff bowl of pale azure ware on the dressing-table, by the little blue patch-box and the crystal clock in the same tone, by the *cabinet de peignoir* with silk-draped panel doors and the sky-colored shoe-cabinet with its five shelves of glass all empty.

It was the sort of a room any girl would love to lie in bed and study. But I had other things to do, I remembered, besides wriggling my toes over a nest which had been feathered for some other and some much luckier woman. I was only an intruder there, a usurper whose kingdom of grandeur might turn topsyturvy at the first touch of a bell or the unannounced opening of a door.

So I tumbled out of bed and trotted to the double window through which the sun was shining. Nowhere about the many-acred garden that sloped down to the glinting and sparkling waters of the Hudson could I see any sign of life. But this in no way disturbed me. It left me, in fact, so light of heart that I would have begun to whistle—only I suddenly remembered about the mysterious woman sleeping in the cream and gold room across the hall from me.

The thought of that mysterious woman began to worry me. It worried me so much that I silently removed the dressing-table, unlocked the door, and tiptoed out into the hallway. I stood there listening. But not a sound came to me. Then I crept on to the door across the hall, listening again, and silently opened that door.

I opened it just an inch or two. But that was enough. The curtains had been drawn, and the room was still almost in darkness. But from the bed I could hear the deep and regular breathing of a sleeper. She was still there, and still dead to the world.

I stared at the bed, but all I could make out was the tumbled mass of the woman's hair, and the vague contour of her body under the billowy

counterpane. And I had no desire to disturb that child-like and placid sleeper. On the other hand, I did not care to think of her disturbing me. So I reached in, noiselessly lifted out the key, and quietly closed the door. Then, having locked it from the outside, I slipped into the room of delft blue and proceeded to lock myself in.

After that I felt more at my ease, even though I couldn't quite shake off the thought that I was now something worse than an intruder. I was enough at home, however, not only to re-explore the ivory-white bathroom with the sunken tub of Italian marble, which opened off my room, but to unearth a cake of real *Roger et Gallet* soap and take a cold shower. After that I scrambled into my clothes and sampled the powder in the little azure bowl. For there was no knowing what might turn up, at any moment, in that house of silence.

Now that I'd had time to think things over, indeed, I felt a good deal like Golden-Locks in the house of the three bears. I was eager enough to nose about, but there was no telling when a human grizzly might appear and demand just who had been interfering with his household furniture. And like Golden-Locks, I knew I'd then have to jump from a window and make for the tall timber.

It was as I came to a standstill, half-way down the wide stairway, that the first betraying sign of life came to me from below. It may have been a disturbing sign, but it was at least an appetizing one. For I distinctly caught the smell of cooking bacon. And mixed with it, in a sort of symphony of perfumes, was the even more compelling aroma of coffee.

If it was a trap, it was at least a well-baited one. For whatever I may have expected, or may have been afraid of, I could no more resist that mingled smell of coffee and bacon than a mouse can keep away from well-toasted cheese. It drew me like a magnet down through that house of silence. And before I knew it I'd stumbled into a sort of breakfast-room where the sun was shining in through a double pair of French windows and a table with a snow-white cloth was laid for two. It looked appealing enough, but instead of a partner I found a sheet of paper propped up against the sugar-bowl. On this sheet was written:

“Everything looks safe but keep under cover until I can get back. I've put a tea-cosey over the coffee-pot to keep it hot.”

And this rather remarkable message was signed by the one word “Wendy.”

That note, for some reason, started me thinking of the night before. I sat down in a chair beside the table and made an effort to go methodically over the events of the past twenty-four hours. But it proved no easy thing to do. It left me confronted by too many tangles and confounded by too many questions

which were still unanswered. And as I pondered over these problems I absently lifted a dish-cover which was still quite warm to the touch, and unearthed a platter of bacon and eggs. Then I lifted the yellow silk tea-cosey and sniffed at the coffee. That, naturally enough, made me look about for the toast. But there was none.

I was still inwardly lamenting this discovery when a sudden sound put an end to all such thoughts. It was the quick shrill of a bell, and it brought me up short. For, at first, I thought that sound was unmistakably a door-bell ringing. As the sound was repeated, however, again and still again, I became convinced it was the call-bell of a telephone from some near-by room. So I started in search of it, for I remembered the sleeper above-stairs, and knew that the sooner that bell was muffled the better.

I found the telephone, still shrilling out its impatient call, in what looked to me like a library. I sat down in front of the rosewood table and stared at the transmitter-stand. Then I deadened the bell-shrill with my hand, debating whether or not it would be best for me to lift that receiver. Finally, as it happened with the wife of Bluebeard, curiosity got the better of mere cold feet. I put the receiver to my ear and whispered a very quiet and cautious "Hello" into the instrument.

"So you got out there all right?" asked a man's voice. There was a familiar ring about that voice, but I was unable to place the speaker.

"Yes," I guardedly whispered back.

"Have you got a cold?" inquired the voice over the wire.

"Yes," I whispered, "a terrible one!"

"Well, I'm glad you're there, anyway," answered the voice, after a pause.

I didn't know what to say, so I ventured a wild guess at it.

"But why didn't you call me earlier?" I whisperingly demanded.

"I'll explain that, me darling, when I get out there to your side," was the answer that came over the wire.

It rather made me sit up. I didn't relish the thought of that particular person visiting my particular house of refuge. For, at some undefined moment during my talk at the phone, the slightly Celtic intonation of that voice had solved the riddle for me. I at last knew my man. It was Pinky McClone himself who was talking over the wire.

"Listen," I said to him with sudden decision. "It won't be safe for you to come out here!"

"I know it won't!" was Pinky's resolute answer. "But all the powers of heaven won't be keeping me away from you!"

“I’m not thinking of the powers of heaven,” I tried to tell him, as I ventured a second wild guess. “I’m thinking of the man who’s trying to keep us apart!”

“Do you know what I’m going to do when I meet that man?” demanded the voice over the wire.

“What?” I asked.

“*I’m going to kill him!*” was the altogether disturbing reply that came in to me.

I sat there staring so blankly ahead of me that it was some time before I became actually aware of the fact that Wendy Washburn was standing at the open door, staring in at me. How much he had heard I didn’t know, and couldn’t tell. There was a smile about his lips, but his forehead wore a little wrinkle of troubled thought. I knew by his face that the eagle of curiosity was clawing at his vitals, that he was dying to know what had been said over that wire. But he was too much of a gentleman to ask me, if I was too much of a cynic to trust him. So his face was blank again as I coolly hung up the receiver and rose from my chair.

He stood waiting for me at the door. I didn’t speak to him, at first, for I was afraid the sound of our voices would carry only too clearly up that wide stairway. And there was a sleeper above, I remembered, that it would be best not to waken.

But I found it hard to keep back a chuckle. For on his arm Wendy Washburn carried what was plainly a package of breakfast rolls, a bottle of cream, and a print of butter. In his hand he held a huge bunch of violets. Wendy, it was plain to see, had been making hay while the sun shone.

“You’ve made quite a haul of it this morning!” I casually remarked, with a nod toward his parcels.

He looked down at them apologetically.

“Oh, these!” he said, with his heat-lightning smile. “To tell the truth, I really had to *buy* these. I’ve just been down to the village for ’em!”

He held out the bunch of violets to me. They were not the kind that grow in country glades. They were the kind you get at Thorley’s, and they cost more than prints of creamery butter.

“I love flowers!” I told him, as I buried my nose in them. Then I looked up at him and smiled. I was puzzling him, apparently, quite as much as he had been puzzling me. His cut on the lip from the night before, I noticed, was quite swollen and discolored. And he looked rather meek and domestic, loaded down with those parcels like a commuter. Yet he seemed determined to accept the situation quite as casually as I had been doing.

“Sleep well?” he inquired, as I followed him across the breakfast-room to

the snowy little table.

“Like a top!” I told him, though just why a top should stand as an emblem of sound slumber was quite beyond my comprehension.

“Hungry?” he inquired, as he tumbled the rolls out on the table-top. I arranged them neatly on an empty plate as I answered him.

“Starving!” I replied, and I remembered that much the same words had been used at the last meal which I had eaten with him.

We sat down, one at each side of the table. Then he suddenly got up again.

“Will you excuse me for one minute?” he said over his shoulder, as he started for the door.

“Where are you going?” I asked him, with a good deal of trepidation, and one hand firmly on the roll plate, to make sure that the best part of my breakfast wasn’t going to follow him. But he didn’t wait to answer me. And I sat there wondering if he’d gone for good, or merely slipped out for a policeman, or remembered to awaken the mysterious lady in the cream and gold room above stairs.

But I was wrong on every count. For he came back in a moment or two with the black club-bag in his hand and a look of relief on his face.

“It isn’t the sort of thing, you know, that you care to leave lying around in corners!” he apologetically remarked, as he stepped into the room and quietly closed the door behind him.

He put the club-bag close beside his chair as he sat down again.

“Shall I pour?” I asked, as I lifted the cosey from the silver coffee-pot.

“Thanks,” he said, but his eyes, I noticed, were studious and abstracted. He served the bacon and eggs. Then he nodded in the direction of the library, where I had answered that mysterious telephone call. The eagle, I knew, was still busy with its clawing act.

“Were you expecting a visitor?” he asked, in an offhanded and impersonal sort of way.

“I’d prefer not having one!” I told him, quite as impersonally.

“I trust you’ll not be disappointed in that wish,” he said. But there was a note of constraint in his voice as he spoke. And his eyes, from time to time, kept searching my face.

“And you?” I inquired, remembering the sleeper above us. “Were you expecting a visitor?”

“It would rather interfere with our plans, wouldn’t it?” he suggested.

I looked up at him.

“What plans have we?” I asked. We were both eating by this time. And I

observed that his appetite was quite as normal as my own.

“That’s something we have to talk over,” he acknowledged.

“I think we have a great deal to talk over,” I amended.

“Yes, a great deal,” he agreed, as he passed me the breakfast rolls. Then he laughed as he followed my example and took one of them. “You know, it’s years since I’ve done this sort of thing!”

“You mean—er—paid for things?” I calmly inquired, with a head-movement toward the roll plate.

He nodded his own head, almost gleefully, like a street-urchin who’d raided a fruit-cart.

“I find I fail quite often, in the little things,” he acknowledged. “It’s only the big coups that I care to count on.”

“Such as half a million in a club-bag!” I suggested.

Still again he nodded his head.

“Well I want to talk about this club-bag, and certain things that happened last night,” I told him.

He at once became serious.

“I was hoping you wouldn’t go back to that.”

“Why?” I asked him.

“Because I thought perhaps you’d had all you wanted of that sort of thing, and would prefer talking about the future.”

“I don’t think I’ve got any future,” I told him, with a gulp of self-pity that I couldn’t altogether succeed in laughing down.

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about,” he calmly retorted.

“For instance?” I said, very much on my guard.

He sat staring at me across the table for a full minute before he spoke.

“Why don’t you like me?” he asked, as offhandedly as though he were inquiring the time of day.

“Who said I didn’t?”

“Your face says so, five or six times every minute!”

It was my turn to sit and look at him. For it suddenly came home to me that I was enjoying this novel tête-à-tête much more than I had imagined. He was a man easy to talk to, was Wendy Washburn. He was natural and unaffected, and there were times when you seemed to fit into his humor as easily as you fit into an armchair. There was a quiet impersonality about him that put you at your ease. He never reminded you of your sex. There was no smirking gallantry about him. Even in spite of the fact that there were a good many corners in his

life that he'd kept covered up, he suggested, in his apparent openness, a young and healthy boy. He always seemed to be doing the right sort of thing. It may not have been the right sort of thing, of course, but he had a way of doing it which made it seem right. And he would always be easy to get on with.

"You oughtn't to trust my face," I finally told him.

"But I do," he said with the utmost solemnity. "I trust it more than you do yourself."

I couldn't quite catch what he meant by that. But I didn't think any the less of him for saying it.

"Go on," I mocked. "Tell me all about myself."

He seemed to jump at the chance.

"All right, I will. And you can tell me whether I'm right or wrong. You've always rather liked nice things. If I'm not greatly mistaken, you always secretly revolted, even as a young girl, at the thought of life in a pigeonhole on one of the sidestreets. You've always had a sort of ache to be in touch with the splendor of life—to swim with the swell push, as some of our Center Street friends might express it."

He declined to countenance my interruption.

"Now, pull down those Elsie Ferguson eyebrows until I finish, please," he went on. "I don't mean the white lights and lobster-palace floaters and fifteen-carat diamond rings, by the splendor of life. But no girl is as fastidious as you are about her clothes, and about her hair, and about herself altogether, without having that streak of fineness extending right up into her mind. It has to be a part of her. Now, wait, don't interrupt! I'm not trying to flatter you. You clipped the wings of anything like that one afternoon down at Long Beach. But what I *do* acknowledge is that the whole thing puzzles me, that I can't quite square you, as you sit there at that side of the table, with what happened that day at Long Beach, and with what happened, well, last night, if we don't want to go back too far."

I think I both liked him and hated him for the things he was saying. I didn't bother to ask myself why. But he was breaking into that high-walled garden which has "Personal" written over its gate-arch. And it had become an instinct of life with me, I suppose, to resent all such intrusions.

"You seem to be rather interested in me," I observed, by way of a "No-Trespassing" sign.

"I *am*!" he promptly acknowledged. "I'm tremendously interested in you!"

"And how far back does this interest extend?" I coldly inquired.

"Back to the first day I ever met you," he had the candor to acknowledge.

“And how far does it promise to extend into the future?” I asked, more unsettled by his solemnity than I had been by his flippancy.

But Wendy Washburn did not answer my question. Instead he asked me one of his own.

“You don’t worry much about things, do you?”

“What’s the use?” I retorted.

“You rather surprise me, on that point,” he ruefully admitted.

“Then it may surprise you to know that at this very moment I *am* worried, and terribly worried.”

“About what?”

“About everything!”

He smiled a little.

“You don’t look it.”

“I was always told to keep up a good front,” I explained, as that old streak of perversity, which kept tempting me to key my talk down to the underworld plane, reasserted itself. And I could see my Hero-Man’s mouth harden.

“The sentiment may be admirable, but the phrase strikes me as rather obnoxious!”

I had always been too much of a pepper-pot, I suppose, to take criticism like that with folded hands and a meekly bowed head.

“It seemed good enough for the man who taught it to me,” I said. And I had the satisfaction of beholding a hope fulfilled, for his face clouded up in spite of himself.

“What man?” he inquired.

“Bud Griswold,” I told him, with a touch of malice. “Bud always claimed that a good front helped out in our line of business!”

“Our line of business!” echoed Wendy Washburn, in a sort of groan.

“Well, isn’t it about the same as your line of business?” I demanded.

He looked at me vacant-eyed, for a moment or two. Then he sat back in a brown study.

“I think I resent, more than anything else, that man’s influence over you,” he finally asserted. He even sighed, I suppose at the memory of my misspent life.

“There was one thing that Bud was rather particular about,” I said with all the sugary indifference that I could command, “and that was to respect the dead!”

“The dead?” he echoed, batting his eyes with perplexity. Then he seemed

to waken up to the fact that I had been hurling a harpoon at him, for he looked self-conscious and awkward.

“But so many of us are half dead without quite realizing it,” he lamely contended, doing his best to emulate the humble cuttlefish.

“Thank you!” I retorted.

“On the contrary, I couldn’t accuse you of not being alive,” he protested. “I think, perhaps, that you’re rather too much alive. But I can’t help feeling it’s been a foolish sort of liveliness, like the kind you see in a squirrel-cage.”

“Again I thank you!” I solemnly told him. But he refused to be shaken out of his seriousness.

“What I mean is that you’ve never lived up to your potentialities. You’ve never given yourself a chance. You’ve never really risen to your opportunities. You’ve wasted your time on the small caliber things of life. Instead of conquering, you’ve merely fretted. Instead of using that restless brain and body Heaven gave you, for one big end, you’ve let them blow like a leaf in the winds of chance!”

“I don’t quite follow you,” I coldly affirmed, trying to throw dignity up, like a guard-arm, to ward off the blows that were beginning to hurt.

“I mean that you’re too clever a woman, yes, and too fine a woman, to be doing the things you have been doing,” he said, still speaking without heat.

“I’m afraid I’m a very stupid woman, or I wouldn’t be letting you say the things you are saying to me,” I said, meeting his gaze. I was even able to laugh at him, though there wasn’t much merriment in that laughter of mine. For there was only too much truth in many of the things he had been saying. He was quite right in suspecting that I was a sort of whip-top, that I could only keep my balance by being kept forever in motion. He was also right in suspecting that I’d always nursed a secret and absurd ache for grandeur, a sort of vague homesickness for some splendor which I couldn’t quite define. Often, even as a youngster, I’d imagined myself a changeling. Many a lonely hour of my childhood had been spent in devising romantic fictions as to my origin and ancestry. But every rose-crowned avenue of romance had led me wearily back to Minetta Lane. Yet I’d always loved beautiful things, and hungered to explore beautiful houses, and yearned foolishly after even beautiful clothes.

It was because Bud Griswold had first brought me into touch with these things, I remembered, that I had been weak enough to swing in with him. He had brought me into touch with them crazily and accidentally, perhaps, but it had seemed the only way open to me. Bud had never been able to give me a home. But he’d been able to let me come up like a spoon-bill to breathe in the tawdry beauty of a big hotel. He’d been able to *rent* splendor, for at least an

hour, by dining in state, for instance, at the Biltmore. But we were always renters, and nothing more. Once our bill had been paid we lost our claim on that Island of Enchantment just wide enough from one white damask boundary to the other to hold up two pair of elbows. We were royalty, for an hour, whereupon some other listless-hearted flat-dwelling lady promptly took possession of my chair, reminding me that I was only one in a procession of self-deluded impostors.

Wendy Washburn, who had sat there studying my face, began to look concerned.

“I don’t suppose,” he finally ventured, “that you know why I’m preaching to you along this particular line?”

“No, I don’t,” was my reply. “But I *do* know that preaching isn’t ever going to make any difference with me, or even do me any good!”

My note of revolt seemed to disturb him. He even colored a little as he stared across the table at me.

“Oh, I say, you mustn’t imagine I’m trying anything so stupid as that!” he cried. “We don’t suddenly turn good that way, of course—except in the Elsie books, or at Billy Sunday’s revivals!”

“Then why talk about it at all?” I inquired. But that question, apparently, he preferred to leave unanswered.

“By the way, would you regard me as clever as Bud Griswold?” he somewhat startled me by asking.

“You’ve had more chances, I think, than Bud ever did,” I told him. “And you may laugh at me for saying it, but outside his work Bud was the cleanest-living man I ever knew.”

“You mean you always considered him that?”

“Always,” I affirmed.

“Of course you would,” he agreed.

“Why the ‘of course’?” I demanded.

“Otherwise you’d never have worked with him,” explained my Hero-Man, with a frown of trouble on his fastidious-looking forehead. “But with all due deference to this same Bud, I can’t help feeling that his vision was limited. As far as I can estimate him, he was big in just one thing. And that one thing was his treatment of—no, not exactly his treatment of you, but his appreciation of you!”

I felt in no way flattered over that left-handed compliment.

“You never knew Bud Griswold as I knew him,” I retorted, trying to speak as calmly as I could. “He may have been nothing better than a confidence-man,

but in his own blind way he was always trying to grope up to better things. His thinking may have been all wrong—I suppose the thinking of every criminal has to be wrong—but even at that sort of work Bud tried to keep as clean-handed as he could. I can remember when a porch-climber friend of his steered him into a chance to clean out a four-family flat-house in Cleveland. He merely said, ‘Nix on the wage-earners!’ And he meant it. For he always drew the line at robbing the poor. But he felt that he had a sort of right to shake down the rich, now and then, and I’ve seen him make his rounds as though he were a tax-collector after arrears. I think he even took a sort of joy in setting an over-dressed dowager back a couple of marquise rings and a sunburst or two!”

Wendy Washburn sat studying me quite soberly. But for some reason or other there was humor in his eyes.

“I like you for being loyal to Bud, no matter what he was,” explained the man across the table from me. “But what I’ve been trying to get at is that all these activities of his were pretty small affairs. They could only lead to failure, in the end. In fact, they did lead to failure. They weren’t big enough to justify themselves. Bud, I mean, may have been the most upright burglar who ever jimmied a back window, but to the local police he would always be a burglar!”

I resented that description of Bud, and it made the tone of my retort rather bitter, I suppose.

“While you do your work along such sweeping lines,” I suggested, “that the chance to pack a jury is never overlooked and an ex-judge can always be retained to confirm the acquittal!”

He laughed at that, quietly and a little bewilderingly.

“Well,” he retorted, “I’ve at least kept out of jail, however I do my work!”

“So have I!” was my prompt counter to that retort. “And what’s more important—”

Instead of completing that sentence, however, my voice trailed off into silence. For, closely as I had been looking at the face of the man across the table from me, I became vaguely conscious of a movement not many feet beyond the spot where that man sat.

Without actually looking at the door in the wall directly behind him, I became aware of the fact that this door had slowly swung back, as though moved by a listener hidden in its shadow.

I didn’t betray that discovery by any sudden movement or start. But my first thought was of the unknown woman I had seen asleep in the blue and gold bedroom up-stairs.

The thought of that unknown woman, however, did not stay long in my head. For the door, swinging still wider, had allowed that unseen interloper to

pass into the room itself. My gaze was still directed on Wendy Washburn's face. I did not actually look away from him. Yet somewhere on the vague borders of vision I received an impression of a moving shadow. I knew that some one had opened the door, had silently entered the room, and was advancing across the floor.

Wendy Washburn was speaking again, but I had no idea what he was saying. His words became a meaningless jumble of sound, and I lost all thought of him, as that advancing shadow moved more directly into my line of vision.

My first shock came, as I slowly raised my eyes, when I discovered the intruder was not a woman. My second shock came when I realized that this intruder carried a blue-barreled automatic in his right hand. But the third shock, and the greatest of them all, came when I saw that this intruder was a man whom I had been taught to think of as dead.

For standing before me I saw, not a ghost of Bud Griswold, but Bud Griswold himself, Bud in the flesh, Bud with the prison-pallor still on his gaunt face, Bud clad in soiled linen and ill-kempt clothing, and Bud with a look in his deep-set and slightly glazed eyes which brought me half-way up from my chair, with a foolish sort of squeak of terror, which I could no more control than I could control my circulation. For I had learned to know that look, and I was afraid of it.



I saw, not a ghost, but Bud himself

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

AS I stood there staring past the head of Wendy Washburn I called out the one word of “*Bud!*”

But that white-faced man who had come back so suddenly to the world of the living paid scant attention to me. He didn’t even look at me.

“Stand up!” he barked out at Wendy Washburn as the latter, startled by my gaping face, twisted interrogatively about in his chair. I noticed that the automatic no longer wavered, but was leveled directly at the other man’s head. And the look in Bud Griswold’s eyes still frightened me.

“*Bud, don’t shoot!*” I gasped out, as Wendy Washburn rose to his feet and stood with his back against the table. Even then, for all the blind ferocity on his face, I felt sorry for Bud. There seemed something so unreasoning and animal-like about that face. It was childish. It was pathetic. And stronger even than the terror that was tingling through my body was the sudden surge of pity for this man who had always misunderstood life as the living had misunderstood him.

Then my wits came back to me, and I pushed my way in between the two men so coldly eying each other.

“Bud!” I cried out. But he refused to look at me.

“Well, what d’you want?” was his none too gentle reply.

“Bud, they told me you were dead,” I went on, desperately intent on distracting him from any wild end which he might have in view.

“I was as good as dead, I guess,” he retorted, with a movement for me to step aside. But I stayed where I was.

“What are you doing here?” I demanded.

He stared at me with a look of hostility in his haggard eye.

“That’s a question I want *you* to answer,” he retorted.

I realized as I stared back at him, that it takes time to digest a mental shock. I still found it hard to think of him as a flesh-and-blood human being. For over two years the habit of accepting him as dead had been fixing itself in my mind. And it wasn’t easy to break a habit as fixed as that.

“Then that woman lied to me!” I called out to him.

“What woman?” he evaded. But his eye no longer seemed able to meet mine.

“Copperhead Kate,” I said, and into that name I threw all the scorn I could

command. For I hated her now, more than ever. And for the first time in my life I saw a hang-dog expression on Bud Griswold's face. He looked like a sheep-killer on the morning after. And he knew that look was there. He tried to hide it by shuffling to one side, on the pretense of more directly confronting Wendy Washburn, who all this time was standing silent and studious behind me.

"Then it was that woman who worked the ropes for your pardon, or your parole, or your commutation, or whatever it was?" I declared, with the double-edged spear-head of jealousy cutting my soul in two. And there was excuse enough, I suddenly saw, for all those vague old suspicions which had once yelped in my heart like hunting-dogs in an express-car.

"I didn't come here to talk about that woman," was Bud's unexpectedly blunt retort.

"Then what did you come for?" I demanded.

My eye followed him as he backed away from me. There seemed something almost symbolic in that movement of his.

"I want that club-bag," he said, pointing to the satchel which stood half under the edge of the table-cloth.

"Why?" I asked. I tried to be calm, but all the while I had that odd sickening feeling, just under the corset-cover, which comes to people when they feel their first earthquake, when they learn for the first time that the one solid thing on which they had depended is no longer worthy of that dependence.

"You know why as well as I do," was his sullen-toned answer.

"Then you and that woman are working together!" I cried out at him, hoping against hope that he would be able to deny it.

"Well, what about you and this man here?" scoffed Bud. "Aren't you working with him?"

"Am I?" I demanded, swinging about on Wendy Washburn. His face was a little paler than usual, but outwardly he was quite calm. "Am I?" I repeated. But he declined to answer that question.

"Supposing the three of us sit down and talk this over," he quietly suggested.

"I didn't come here for any afternoon-tea séance," announced Bud. "I want that bag, and I want everything that's in it!"

A second great wave of pity for that white-faced man with the automatic pistol in his hand swept through me. I don't know exactly what it was, or why it was, but I felt so sorry for Bud Griswold as he stood there that I could have

leaned on his shoulder and cried like a baby.

It wasn't so much that he was taking something away from me which I couldn't define, that he was roughly obliterating me from his existence, that he was humiliating me before the one man whose scorn would always be doubly hard to bear. It was more that he was humiliating himself, denuding his poor pathetic figure of its last shred of dignity, robbing himself of every hope for the future.

I wondered, as I stood staring at him, if for the first time in my life I was seeing him in his true light; if, during the last two or three years, I had indeed learned to look on him and his kind, and all they stood for, as I had never been able to look on them before. And I felt a sudden lump in my throat as I stood there asking myself these questions.

"Bud," I began, with a quaver in my voice which I couldn't control, "I want to talk to you. I've *got* to talk to you. You're trying to do something you'll be sorry for, something you can't help being sorry for, all your life. This whole thing's too tangled for me to explain it to you here. But I want you to believe in me. I want you to know that I'm being sincere with you. If you take that stuff you're—you're going to spoil my life. And I know you don't want to do that."

He looked at me, with his deep-sunken eyes, but there was a glitter in them which I had never seen there before.

"I guess I'm not the zany who can do any spoiling along that line," he retorted. He said it roughly, but I thought, in my blindness, he was doing that only to hide his real feeling.

"But it could have been yours, Bud," I told him, trying in vain to keep my voice steady. "And I want you to believe every word I say when I tell you it can be yours still. I'll go with you, Bud, wherever you say, wherever you want, if you'll only do what I'm asking you!"

There was a movement from the man behind me. But I was not, at the moment, interested in that man. I was too intently watching Bud Griswold's face. I was looking for something, but I looked in vain.

"Nix on that reform stuff," he said, and his own voice was a little unsteady as he said it. "Let me tell you something. I tried that game, and it wouldn't go down. I tried that after I got out. I hit Chicago and stumbled into the Pacific Garden Mission there, where old Harry Monroe used to hold out for all the jail-birds like me. Well, I tried the dope. I hit the trial, and got drunk on oratory the same as other down-and-outers get drunk on gin. But they couldn't do the Billy-Sunday trick with me, for they couldn't show me how to live on big talk. And I've got to live. And I only know one way of doing it!"

“But is it *living*?” I asked him.

“Well, whatever you want to call it, it’s about all I’m going to get,” was Bud’s ungracious retort. “And I guess we’ve wasted enough time on this spiel about our souls. I’m not worrying about the hereafter. What I want is something that’s going to keep me more comfortable right here on earth!”

I had never before heard Bud talk in that strain, and it was a shock to me. It worried me even more than the ugly-looking automatic which he still kept poised in front of him.

“And where are you going to get it?” I asked, even while I felt the hopelessness of trying to argue with him.

“What’s in that club-bag there will do me a considerable time,” he announced. His flippancy hurt me even more than his sullenness. It felt like the flick of a whip-lash in the face. It startled me into a sort of desperation.

“Bud, if you give me that automatic I’ll go with you, wherever you want,” I told him, as I stepped closer to his side.

But as I advanced he backed slowly away.

“Not on your life!” he said with grim deliberation.

“You mean you don’t want me?” I cried.

“I mean I don’t fall for any trick like that!”

“Then you don’t trust me?” I demanded. “You’re through with me? You don’t even want me to go with you?”

He shook his head.

“You couldn’t come if you wanted to,” he said with a derisive bark of a laugh.

“Why couldn’t I?”

“This guy here wouldn’t let you,” he explained, with a pistol-wave in the direction of Wendy Washburn.

“What has that man got to do with me?” I demanded.

Bud laughed out loud, with his deep-set eyes fixed on the other man.

“Why, *that guy went mushy on you over two years ago!*” was the half-sneering but altogether unexpected reply that came from Bud Griswold’s unhappy lips. “*That man’s in love with you!*”

I turned slowly about and stared at Wendy Washburn. But his face was a mask.

“That’s not true!” I gasped.

“Then who’d you s’pose coughed up for all that convent life of yours?” inquired the white-faced man with the automatic. “You don’t suppose *I* had

heel enough for that, do you, when I couldn't even come across with enough to buy off those Michigan cops and keep out of Jackson?"

I looked from one man to the other. It was too much for me to believe.

"But this man is a bigger crook than you are," I tried to explain to Bud.

"Only he seems to do a neater line of work," was Bud's sneering comment. "And if you knew more about this house you're in, you'd be a little wiser about what I mean by that!"

Before I had time to say more he pushed me to one side and stepped in closer to Wendy Washburn. The end of the automatic-barrel was within two feet of where a slender gold and platinum watch-chain crossed Wendy's vest-front.

"No talk from you, now: not a word!" Bud said to him, with a savagery which was as unexpected as the movement itself. "All I want from you, remember, is this bag!" He stooped and caught up the club-bag from the floor, placing it on the breakfast-table close beside the coffee-pot. I could see his left hand fumbling with the catches as he kept his eye on Wendy Washburn.

Then he suddenly stopped short.

"Back up against that wall," he bruskiy commanded.

There was nothing for the other man to do but fall slowly back until his heels clumped against the wainscoting.

"Now stay there!" was Bud's order, as he placed the automatic close beside the club-bag on the edge of the table. It was so placed, however, that his hand could fall on it at a moment's notice. He intended to make sure of the contents of that bag, and it was plain that with only one free hand he had been unable to manage the catches. He could not afford to look down at them, for his eye, all the time, was bent on the silent man against the wall.

So intently was he watching that man, in fact, that I saw my chance, and took it. I weighed it all over, with a frantic sort of deliberation, and then I got busy. I was able to creep up behind the man with the bag quite unobserved. I even reached out my hand and had my fingers clamped about the butt of that heavy and ugly-looking firearm before Bud had any knowledge of my intentions. And then it was too late. For I had the gun in my hand and had dodged back from the table before he could so much as lift a finger to interfere with me.

But he didn't even try to follow me. He blinked down at the opened bag, for a moment, and then he deliberately snapped it shut again. Then he stood blinking across the room at me. It wasn't antagonism I saw on his face. It wasn't even resentment. It was more a quiet and unemotional determination which disturbed me more than the blackest outburst of anger could have done.

It made me in some way afraid of that sunken-eyed man with the club-bag in his hand.

“What are you going to do?” I demanded, holding the automatic up in front of me.

“Do you really want to know?” he inquired, as he turned his head and looked back at me slightly over his shoulder, for he had already rounded the table.

“Yes, I want to know,” I said, and my own voice sounded as thin as a seventh carbon-copy. For all the while I was puzzling that empty head of mine as to what the cause of this new-found fortitude of Bud’s could be.

“I’m going out through that door,” slowly asserted the man with the club-bag. “I’m going out through that door, and out of this house, and you’re not going to stop me!”

“Why can’t I?” I demanded. Without even being conscious of the act I raised the pistol on a level with my eye.

“Wait!” pleaded Wendy Washburn from where he stood against the wall.

“Why can’t I?” I repeated with my eye on the man with the bag.

“Because,” retorted Bud with his one-sided smile, “if you remembered me and the way I work a little better, you’d know I never went into a job with a loaded gun, in all my life. It’s too risky.”

I looked down at the heavy automatic. I sprung open the clip-chamber and found it as empty as a last year’s bird’s-nest.

“It may be empty,” said a voice behind me as I looked up just in time to see Bud, with the club-bag in his hand, pass out through the hall door, “but this one isn’t, and you two high-brow Robin Hoods would’ve found it out, if you’d made one move to stop that man!”

It was a woman’s voice, and the owner of that voice stepped in through the inner door opposite the hall at the same moment that I swung about and stared at her. It wasn’t the revolver in this interloper’s hand that made me gape at her with such stupid and empty eyes. It was the discovery that the woman was Copperhead Kate herself.

“Stop her!” was my foolish and frantic cry to Wendy Washburn as that woman with the snaky green eyes and the revolver in her hand strode insolently across the room to the other door.

“Try it!” challenged Copperhead Kate. “Try it—and the next clothes you put on won’t come from me; they’ll come from an undertaker!”

“Stop her!” I repeated in a gurgle as she passed out into the hall.

“What’s the use?” quietly inquired my Hero-Man. “Since they insist on

traveling together, why not humor their whim?"

"But don't you see what this means?" I somewhat shrilly and somewhat desperately demanded.

"It means that their journey can't possibly be as long as they anticipate," was Wendy Washburn's quiet-toned reply, "for there's a cordon of plain-clothes men about this place and not a soul can leave the grounds without them knowing it!"

I stared at him, wide-eyed and wondering.

"Then what's going to happen to *you*?" I demanded.

He laughed a little.

"To me?" he asked. "To be perfectly frank, if you'll excuse my absence, I think I'd better slip out and make sure those men are on their jobs. For I had 'em put there, and when you're paying for a thing, you know, it's always better to get it done!"

I stood there, trying in vain to marshal my tangled impressions into some sort of order.

"Wait a minute," I called out to my Hero-Man as he reached the door. "Did you know there was a man coming out to this house to-day for the particular purpose of killing you?"

"That's interesting," he acknowledged with a twinkle in his eye. "And it would be equally interesting, I imagine, to know his name."

"His name is Pinky McClone!"

"I never heard of any such man in all my life," he solemnly averred.

"But you will," I warned him.

"Quite likely," he acknowledged, with a smile, "for we seem to be having more visitors than we ever expected!"

"We have!" I agreed to his vanishing back, as he hurried down the shadowy hallway. For I had suddenly remembered about the mysterious woman in the cream and gold room up-stairs. And I had also remembered about the pearl-handled revolver which I had left up-stairs under my pillow.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

IF for a moment I was swayed by an impulse to follow Wendy Washburn out of that somewhat bewildering house, I at least had the sense not to succumb to any such impulse.

It was plain enough, in the first place, that I wasn't wanted. In the second place, it was equally plain that I couldn't be of much use to that somewhat compromising Hero-Man of mine. And in the third place, since my sojourn under that particular roof carried every evidence of being rather limited, there was a situation or two which I preferred to investigate in person.

As I stood alone in the morning-room, beside our dismantled breakfast-table, I hesitated for only a moment. Then I made for the silent hallway, slipped up the stairs and hurried quickly to the door of the room where I had slept. My movements, under the circumstances, were as noiseless as I could make them. For I had a few things to settle in my own mind before parting company with those silent and shadowy upper regions.

Once I was assured my own room was empty and would make a convenient port of refuge in case of interruption, I rescued my pearl-handled revolver from under its pillow. Then I tiptoed across the hall to the door that opened on the cream and gold room.

I fitted the key in the lock and turned it slowly, without making a sound. I was equally careful in turning the knob. Then I swung the door back a few inches. And then I stood stock-still.

For I saw that my unknown sleeper was no longer in the bed. And that discovery rather stumped me.

But even as I stood there staring in at the empty bed, with its telltale tumble of white linen, a door on the far side of the room was slowly opened. The next moment a woman stepped through it. I could see her quite plainly. Yet what made me catch my breath was the discovery that this woman was the same white-faced woman I had seen in the city house with the limestone front.

I stood so motionless that she failed to catch sight of me. For she hesitated a moment, with her eyes downcast, apparently in an attitude of listening for something. And that gave me a chance for a more leisurely survey of her figure. She was wearing a peignoir of white corduroy-velvet, with swan's-down at the throat. And as she stood with one hand against the open door she reminded me of a silver birch. She was so thin, in fact, that she looked gaunt. About her downcast eyes was the same expression of fixed melancholy which

had so disturbed me when I first saw her staring down over a stair-railing. This, together with her hollow cheeks, made her seem pathetic, pathetic in a way which I found it hard to explain. Yet, I noticed, now that I had a chance to study her at my leisure, that her face was not a dead white. There was a touch of yellow in it, just enough to give it an ivory tone.

I stood there in the doorway, waiting to see what would happen next. I watched her as she crossed the room, lifted a brocaded satin candy-box from the writing-table and took off the cover. I could hear a petulant and quite earthly exclamation of "Pshaw!" as she saw that it was empty and tossed it back on the table. And ghosts, I knew, were not given to eating bon-bons.

I saw her turn and stare studiously about the room. But I had no intention of retreating. So it was not long, naturally, before her eyes fell on me. This time, however, she did not vanish into thin air. She did not even start. She merely stared at me in a petulantly bewildered sort of way.

"So you're here too?" she finally said. She said it in an amazingly matter-of-fact tone, more as though she were thinking aloud, indeed, than addressing a stranger.

"Yes, I'm here," I announced, following her cue as to matter-of-factness, "and until I find out certain things, I think I'm going to stay here!"

She merely stared at me with her rebelliously reckless and mournful eyes. Then she sank into a chair that stood beside her. She succeeded in making the movement an altogether listless one. It seemed to signify that although boring her I would probably have to be put up with.

"In the first place, I want to know how you got out here?" I demanded, realizing that I had to do something more than dally at the heels of that languid-eyed young lady in the peignoir.

She looked up at me from under her bent brows. It was more the look of a spoiled and wayward child than of a woman.

"You're not going to be disagreeable about all this, too, are you?" she petulantly inquired.

"I only want to know the truth," was my retort, as I stood there, with one hand still on the door-knob.

She gave a sigh, half weariness, half relief.

"That's what I'd like to know myself. But I don't seem able to straighten things out. And I *hate* to think!"

I promptly decided to help her along that line.

"Then suppose we begin by clearing up the point as to just who you are," I calmly suggested.

She stared at me with mild resentment, as though to imply that she had been burdened by little of the mystery of her own identity. I could see that she was by no means the docile and yielding young thing which her artless languor might have led one to expect.

“I’d rather like to know who *you* are,” she finally announced.

“Haven’t you any idea?” I asked.

“Not the least,” she told me.

So I decided to drop a shrapnel-shell into her encampment of unconcern.

“I’m Clarissa Rhineland Bartlett!” I announced.

This statement quite failed to startle her. She was even able to laugh a little at it.

“Then there are three of us!” she quietly observed.

“Three of us?” I echoed.

She nodded her head. “At least, there *were* three of us,” she amended, “as far as I can make out.”

“And how long have you been one of them?” I inquired. I stepped into the room and shut the door behind me. Then I sat down facing her. She was giving me a good deal to think over.

“From the day I was born,” she explained, with a perverse enjoyment in my perplexity.

“Are you ever called Claire?” I asked.

“Yes, since it happens to be my name.”

“But Clarissa Bartlett, the real Clarissa Bartlett, is supposed to be dead,” I tried to tell her.

“I’ve been as good as dead for the last few weeks,” was her somewhat embittered answer.

“But how did you get out here?” I inquired, going back to my first question.

“I got in a car and motored out,” she calmly explained.

“But why did you come here? Why did you come to this particular house?” I persisted.

She hesitated. And still again I repeated the question.

“I’d go anywhere to get away from that awful house,” was her final acknowledgment.

“Why do you call it awful?”

Her reply was at least a startling one.

“Because Wendy Washburn made it that way for me!”

It took me several seconds to steady myself against the shock of this.

“Then you know Wendy Washburn?” I asked, as calmly as I could.

“I’m at least beginning to find him out,” she replied. And still again there was an unmistakable note of bitterness in her voice.

“Find him out in what way?” I insisted.

The girl shifted in her chair.

“That he’s everything that’s abominable!” was her impassioned reply.

“Why do you say that?” I went on, determined to make hay while the sun shone.

“Because he’s cruel and deceitful, as you’ll very soon find out, if you haven’t done it already.”

“Then you—you know the sort of work he’s been taking up?” I ventured.

“Yes, I know it—to my sorrow!”

I felt that somewhere at the far end of a long and untraversed tunnel I was at last seeing a little light.

“And Ezra and Enoch Bartlett,” I continued, “are they your uncles?”

“I suppose so,” she listlessly admitted.

“You suppose so?” I repeated. “Don’t you *know*?”

“I never thought much about it.”

“But why should your own uncles think you were dead, when you seem to be so very much alive?”

“I think I would be dead, if a few of those people had their own way about it!” was her morose comment on that question of mine.

“And you include Wendy Washburn in that circle?” I asked.

“He’s worse than any of the rest of them!” was her spirited retort.

“Is he—in any way related to you?” I inquired, remembering certain things.

“In more ways than one, unfortunately.”

“But how?” I persisted.

“He happens to be my cousin, in the first place.”

This gave me still a second shock to digest.

“Go on,” I prompted.

“And when mother died in Florence, three years ago, he was made my guardian-at-law.”

“Wendy Washburn was?” I incredulously demanded.

“It does seem absurd, doesn’t it?” said the morose-eyed girl. “But it’s

true.”

“And you know, you even acknowledge, that he’s the worst of the lot?”

“You’d agree with me, if you knew him as I do!” was her retort.

“Why do you say that?”

“Because he’s trying to keep me from marrying the man I love,” was the reply that came from the smoldering-eyed girl in white.

I sat back and let this sink in. It was a case of three strikes and out. It was a new twist to the tangle that left me more perplexed than ever. I began to feel like a blue-bottle fly in the web of a warrior-spider.

“But why should he do that?” I weakly inquired.

“Because he’s thinking of only his own selfish ends,” was the other’s answer.

“What ends?”

The girl looked up at me.

“You don’t seem to know my family,” she ejaculated. There was on this occasion both pride and scorn incongruously mixed together in her tone.

“As far as I understand it,” was my dignified reply, “I believe the Bartlett estate is valued at about seven million dollars.”

“My estate!” corrected the moody-eyed young woman confronting me.

“And you mean to say this man is trying to rob you of this estate?” I demanded.

“It’s worse than that!” was the other’s reply.

That hint of things too dark to be unearthed gave me a vague sinking feeling in the region where I had so recently pinned Wendy Washburn’s bunch of violets.

“You don’t mean he’s—he’s trying to make you marry him?” I asked, with a sort of in-this-way-madness-lies clutch at my bosom.

That morose-eyed young woman sat studying my face for a moment or two. The incredulity which she must have beheld on it seemed to do away with her hesitation.

“Yes,” she finally admitted.

I don’t know whether I had really expected that or not, but when it came it made me blink a little, the same as you blink when a forty-candle power bulb is suddenly turned on in front of you. Then, thin and sweet, above all the tumult of the discoveries that were roaring like machinery about my dusty brain, a voice of relief kept repeating that Wendy Washburn was still an unmarried man, kept repeating it insistently, foolishly, like a song-sparrow on

the eaves of a busy cotton-mill.

“And everything that’s been happening in that awful house in town,” I limply inquired, “has all that happened just because of this?”

“Wendy,” she declared, “was at the bottom of everything!”

“But what good is it doing him?” I asked, wondering what moment the subject of our talk might step up into that room in person and add to my perplexities.

“No good whatever,” declared my stubborn-eyed young friend, “for he’ll never, never, be able to do what he intends to do!”

“Of course he won’t,” I concurred. “But tell me about this other man, the man you want to marry.”

“He’s everything that is brave and strong!”

“They always are,” I promptly agreed. “But tell me something more definite. Where is he? And what is he?”

I could see a smile of disdain on her moody young lips, at that practical American question, as she sat there, apparently weighing in her own mind what she ought to tell me and what she ought to keep to herself. I suddenly remembered the unwelcome visitor who had forced his way into the room of the four-poster. And the possibility of the coincidence almost took my breath away.

“That young man’s name doesn’t happen to be McClone, does it?” I asked.

“No,” was the girl’s decisive reply.

“Then what is it?”

“It’s O’Toole—Michael O’Toole,” she admitted. But the admission seemed to cost her an effort. It was plainly not an easy name to say.

I could place no Michael O’Toole, I felt sure, among the starry names that dotted the *Social Register* which Bud and I had once so carefully studied. But I kept my nose to the ground, like a beagle after a cotton-tail.

“That’s a grand old Irish name—O’Toole,” I admitted.

“Yes,” agreed the girl. “One of his ancestors was a king in Ireland, he told me.”

“There must have been an awful bunch of kings in that country at one time, if all I hear is true,” I remarked.

“Michael is as much a king as any of them,” she proudly protested.

“They—they don’t ever call him Mike, do they?” I had the impertinence to inquire. For I was beginning to realize that this pathetic little cabinet-piece, whom I’d thought of as a Dresden china rarity, housed up from all the ways of the world, was not without a mind of her own.

“Yes, I think they do! But what about it?” was the reply from my suddenly sullen-eyed antagonist. There was revolt, black revolt, in her smoldering eyes as she put the question to me.

“There’s nothing about it, I suppose, if you can only get used to the prospect of some day being called Mrs. Mike!”

Her face colored with a flush of anger.

“That sounds as contemptible as some of the things Wendy Washburn said,” she announced with considerable heat.

“Such as?” I prompted.

“That he’d break his neck the first time he tried to walk across a waxed floor! And that he’d probably have to be taught the difference between asparagus-tongs and an oyster fork!”

I realized that I was beginning to find out things about Michael O’Toole. And they were throwing not a little light on the problem confronting me.

“But surely the man’s not a boiler-maker?” I inquired.

“Of course he’s not!” was the indignant response.

“Then what is he?”

The heavy look went out of her thin young face.

“It doesn’t matter with me what he is. All I know is that last summer at Long Beach he saved my life!”

“At Long Beach?” I said, with a gulp. For lightning, after all, was again striking twice in the same place.

“Yes; he swam out and saved me, at the risk of his own life!” was the reply that rapt-eyed young woman made to me.

“But surely he doesn’t make a profession of that sort of thing?” I calmly inquired.

“Oh, yes, he does!” the girl just as calmly retorted.

“How do you mean?” I weakly inquired.

“He’s a life-guard at the beach there. And from the moment I felt him take me in his arms, and carry me up to the hotel, I knew that I could never love anybody but him! I knew it from the first! *And nothing will ever change me!*”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I SAT STARING at the girl with the swan's-down about her swany young neck. She seemed to feel that I ought to agree with her. But it wasn't easy for me to go on. For I knew, now, that Pinky McClone, the con-man and ex-river pirate, and Michael O'Toole, the rescuer of pin-feather heiresses, were one and the same person.

"And you," I finally ventured, "you seemed to feel that you owed him that?"

It began to dawn on me that this long-muffled young lady was not altogether sorry to encounter a sympathetic listener.

"He deserves it!" she said with decision. "He did a noble thing. He did the only big thing that ever happened in all my life. He did everything, risked everything, to save my life. And I knew that I ought to be ready to risk everything to make him happy!"

I looked at that young girl in white, with the swan's-down about her neck, and I pondered how much of her poor little hothouse life must have been spent behind glass, how the glass of limestone mansions, and well-warmed landaulets, and softly-cushioned limousines, must have sheltered her and shut her off from the roughening and strengthening winds of the world. And as I thought of her and her Michael I couldn't keep a wave of pity for poor Wendy Washburn from sweeping through me.

"And Mike—I mean Michael," I said, perhaps with malice aforethought, "how does he feel about it?"

"If he loves me, it's only for me, myself. It's for my own sake. It's not for what I may have!"

That, I remembered, didn't altogether sound like Pinky McClone. Pinky, plainly, was playing for big stakes, and the worldly-wise Wendy Washburn, it was plain, was not altogether ignorant of that fact.

"He risked his life for me," my emotional young companion was reiterating. "And that's more than those namby-pamby chocolate-fudge men I've always known would ever do! It's more than those milk-and-water dinner-dance boys who can only talk about musical-comedy stars would ever do!"

I was beginning to see a little more light, so much more light, in fact, that it brought on a tendency to make me squint.

"And Michael, I suppose, is big and strong and bronzed, like a Greek

god?”

“Yes, like a Greek god!” the appreciative-eyed young emotionalist before me promptly agreed. And I began to see how impossible it was going to be to throw the cold white light of truth across that well-swept altar-stone of adoration.

“And I suppose in his off-season he does something? When the weather is colder and he’s not saving lives, I mean?”

Our eyes met. But her face remained quite serious.

“He is a pattern-maker, I believe,” she had the courage to acknowledge.

I thought this over.

“Then you haven’t seen much of him?” I ventured.

“They haven’t let me. They’ve even kept me a prisoner against my will.”

“That’s the way most prisoners are kept, I imagine. But who do ‘they’ happen to be?”

“Wendy Washburn,” was the girl’s answer.

“But what gave him the right to go to extremes like that?” I patiently inquired.

“He took advantage of the fact that he happened to be my guardian. He claimed the law gave him the power to keep me from making a fool of myself!”

“But there’s no law to give him the right to keep you a prisoner, is there?”

“Of course not! He merely took a cad’s advantage of something I said in a fit of temper.”

“What was that?”

She forced her glance to meet mine.

“I said I’d burn the house down, unless I was allowed to do certain things!”

“You merely said this?”

The girl hesitated.

“Well, I may have been—been excited enough to make him believe I was going to do it. But I didn’t intend to be bullied.”

“I see! Then your cousin clearly doesn’t approve of Michael?”

“He doesn’t understand him. He doesn’t even make an effort to understand him. He keeps saying over and over again that Michael is only an adventurer trying to impose on my ignorance.”

I knew it would pay me to be as patient as I could. But it wasn’t easy.

“Has Mike ever given him any cause to say that?” I inquired.

“Would you mind calling him Michael, please!” requested the slightly indignant young heiress confronting me. “No, it was all based on nothing but blind prejudice. And when I saw he was set on keeping us apart, I decided to get even by starving myself. And it wasn’t easy!”

“But did it succeed?”

“It didn’t seem to. So I threatened to make a will, and leave everything I owned to Michael, and then kill myself. That made Wendy persuade even our old family lawyer to go against me.”

“Theobald Scripps?” I asked.

The girl shook her head. The name, apparently, was unknown to her. The owner of the pendulous Adam’s-apple was plainly a substitute.

“He did more than that,” she continued, as though intent on easing her soul of the injustices which had been rankling within it for so long, “he said he’d put me in a sanitarium. I told him I’d contest his right to be my guardian. He said he hoped I would for he was sick of the job. So I took him at his word, and said he couldn’t get me another any too soon. Then he found out father had left two half-brothers I’d never even heard of, who’d jump at the chance. Mother, you see, had never let me have much to do with father’s family. But these were two old men, horrid old men. When Allie saw them—”

“Wait!” I interrupted. “Who is Allie?” For this was too important to be neglected.

The girl laughed. It was a constrained laugh, with a touch of bitterness. It reminded me of a lemon-drop.

“That’s my keeper—Alicia Ledwidge. She really wanted to do everything she could for me. She distrusted those two old men, from the moment they came to the house.”

“Why?” I asked.

“She found out, in some way, that they were going to have me make a will in their favor. I think she was afraid they might be able to persuade me to do something like that. So she told them, at first, that I was too ill to be seen. Then they brought in an odious fat-faced doctor of their own. That made it harder than ever for Allie. But we had a house-maid who was very ill—with Bright’s disease, I think it was. So, until she could do something, Allie decided to pass this maid off as me!”

“As you?” I echoed.

The girl nodded. Then she went on again.

“But the poor thing got worse, and some time early last night she died. I wasn’t allowed to show myself, but I suppose that’s what all the row was

about. They'd been keeping me locked in, you see. But when every one else was so busy, and the whole house seemed to have gone crazy, I saw my chance to get away and send a message to Michael!"

"Then it was you who took Wendy Washburn's car?" I exclaimed.

"It was standing there when I slipped out of the house. And the only thing that worried me was that I wasn't able to get my things out of the wall-safe!"

"What things?" I demanded.

"I'd sent word to my bankers to send up certain securities of mine which I knew they held. Then I had the safety-deposit people send up all the family jewelry. When these came back they were all put in the wall-safe."

"But what did you intend doing with these securities and this jewelry?" I asked. She seemed to be contentedly purring at the thought of her own rare ingenuity. But, under the circumstances, I couldn't see my way clear to sharing in that purr.

"I knew Michael and I would need them!" she said with the utmost simplicity.

I felt, at the precise moment, that what she needed much more than either stock-certificates or jewelry was a good spanking. But I was denied the luxury of telling her so.

"Need them where?" I inquired, forcing myself to a quietness of tone I found hard to command.

"When we ran away."

Her face was quite serious when she said this. She even glanced over at me a little pityingly, as though I had proved rather denser than she had hoped for.

"But why did you hide those things away in a wall-safe?"

"To keep Wendy from knowing!" was her listless answer.

"From knowing what?"

"That Michael and I are going to run away!"

"Are you?" I asked, as sober as a judge.

"Michael is coming out here for me this afternoon," she announced.

"What for?" I asked.

"To marry me!" she coolly explained.

"To marry you, of course," I meditatively repeated. I tried to appear as unconcerned as possible as I got up from my chair. "Then it may interest you," I quietly suggested, "to know just who brought me out to this house."

"Not Michael?" she demanded, with a quick cloud of distrust on her wilful young brow.

“No, it was the man that your Michael *has promised to kill!*” I retorted. She didn’t seem to understand me.

“But you’re all so mistaken about Michael,” she complained. “He isn’t that type of man. He’s nobler than that. He doesn’t take lives; he saves them!”

I stared at her, suddenly realizing the gulf that yawned between us. There was, I felt, no bridge of human understanding that could even span that gulf. To argue with her would be too much like trying to powwow with the planet Mars.

I wakened to the fact that I was wasting time with a moon-struck *ingenue* when just outside those walls of cream and gold the stern realities of an uncommonly stern world were waiting for me. Clarissa Rhineland Bartlett, I saw, was in for a jolt or two. But some one else, I felt, would have to face the problem of opening that young lady’s eyes. I had no intention of ruffling her swan’s-down. I felt too much like the Brussels ball when the first cannons of Waterloo started to boom, to sit any longer in that chair.

“What are you going to do?” demanded the girl, as I got to my feet. She must have noticed some sudden change in my face, for her eyes widened with wonder.

“I’m going to get out of this house!” I told her with decision.

“But there are so many questions I’ve got to ask *you*.” demurred that wide-eyed young woman.

I had, however, already crossed to the door.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “but it’s too late!”

“Wait!” she cried, as I stood with my hand on the knob.

“Well?” I asked, as she hesitated.

A hungry look had come into her large and shadowy eyes.

“Would—would you mind sending me up a five-pound box of Page and Shaw from the village, as you go?” she rather anxiously inquired.

That strange request brought me up short. I stared back at her, with a very superior smile of scorn on my lips. Here was a woman, I told myself, whose soul was so small it couldn’t rise above a chocolate bon-bon. Here was one of your hothouse flowers who’d always been surrounded by those soft airs of splendor after which my own foolish young heart had yearned—and this was the best it could all do for her! She rather pitied me, I knew. She looked down at me with that querulous condescension which marks the many-ribboned King-Charles spaniel in the motor-seat when it sniffs down at the ragged-eared street-waif that has had to scurry about the world for its daily bones. But I knew life. I knew which hand would be likely to toss a crust, and which one

would heave a brick. I knew how to save my precious young neck. But about all your King-Charles could do was whimper for a softer cushion and a platter of fork-dipped chocolates! And for the first time in my life I didn't feel sorry that I'd been born little better than a street-waif.

"All right!" I amiably agreed as I swung the door shut behind me. And I even continued to feel rather superior as I went quietly down the broad stairs and strode determinedly on through the silent hallway. I tried to convince myself that I was thoroughly at my ease. I even stopped to button my glove, with a show of deliberation.

Then I went on again. And then I stopped for an altogether different reason.

I stopped because a shadow had fallen across the curtained door that stood between me and the outer world. The afternoon sunlight made this shadow quite distinct, and for a moment I suspected that Wendy Washburn was quietly returning to the morning-room where he had so abruptly left me.

I decided to make sure of this, however, before opening that door, for a latch-key was already fumbling in the lock. So as the shadow bent lower I squinted out through the drawn-work hem of the curtain.

I saw there, not the spare figure of my Hero-Man, but a much lustier figure in a checked tweed suit. This figure, I further saw, now wore a fawn-colored necktie with a gold horse-shoe in its folds, and a brand-new fawn-colored Fedora hat, to say nothing of sulphur-colored gloves with black stitching. The face that bent down so close to the door, I further saw, was shaved close, with a distinct pink and copper tone showing through a generous brushing of talcum powder. And then I understood.

It was Michael O'Toole, got up regardless, come to carry off his true love in swan's-down. It was my old friend Mike, alias Pinky McClone, venturing forth to do away with one Wendy Washburn whom, doubtless, he had as yet failed to meet, judging from the immaculate condition of his apparel and the somewhat irate expression of his face. For the skeleton-blank with which Pinky was so busily trying to open that door was not behaving as it ought to behave. And to make sure that it would continue in that line of conduct, I quietly reached over and doubly locked the door with its safety-catch. Yet before doing this I had to fight down a strong impulse to do just the opposite thing, and even assist Pinky in his illicit entrance into that house. For one moment, in fact, I was greatly tempted to slip back the latch and duck for cover, leaving Pinky free to step into the presence of his lady-love and let that sartorial fricassee of his do its worst. But this was driven out of my head by my suddenly catching sight of a layer of court-plaster along a well-defined bump just above Pinky's left ear.

Had I been less interested in that bump, and in its origin, I suppose, Pinky himself would never have caught sight of me. But Pinky, suddenly flattening his nose against the glass, clearly saw me on the other side of the door and as clearly concluded that I once more lay at the root of his troubles.

He acted with both despatch and determination. In other words, he suddenly backed off and “shouldered” that door the same as a patrolman shoulders open a flat-door when he finds smoke coming out through its cracks. There must have been nearly two hundred pounds of brawn behind that bull-like charge, for the lock-bar splintered away the woodwork, with a crash, and the hinged frame set with glass swung back and left me staring at Pinky the same as a small boy’s guinea-pig in a cigar-box stares at its owner when he suddenly lifts the lid.

But Pinky was in no mood for mere contemplation. There was both hate and rage, the blind unreasoning rage of the Celt, on his russet-jowled face as he stood there, breathing hard and spasmodically opening and closing the brawny fingers encased in the sulphur-colored gloves.

“So it’s you!” he said, with a swear-word almost as sulphury as his gloves themselves.

I could see his face twitch, and an iron look of cruelty narrow his pale blue eyes to almost a pin-point. My prophetic bones told me what was coming, as plainly as though he had told it to me in so many words. I could see the blind fury that was gathering for the final eruption. And I knew there was no use in arguing about it, just as I knew it was too late to try to escape. There wasn’t even time, I remembered, to get the pearl-handled Colt out of its hiding-place.

“So it’s you—still at it!” he repeated, with his nostrils dilated like a running-horse’s and a tremor shaking the brawny hulk of his body.

“You coward!” I gasped, in little more than a whisper, for I knew by this time that my words would be few.

His hand shot out and caught me by the throat. He held me there, masterfully, easily, the same as a marketman holds a chicken by the gullet. Painful as that grip was, and terrified as I stood, it did not keep me from hearing the shrill call of a voice from the stairway behind me.

“*Michael!*” sounded that call of horror, of warning, of unutterable unbelief. And I knew that it was the girl in the swan’s-down who was speaking.

Her Michael, however, was intent on other things. That call was repeated, this time with a tremolo of resentment, of disgust. But all Michael’s thoughts were centered on one movement. I knew what that movement was going to be, yet I had no way of stopping it, no way of even countering it. For in that movement, I could see, he intended to pay back more than one old score. It

was a fool's way of doing it, but it was the only way he saw open to him. And it wasn't fear that made me wince as I saw the sulphur-covered hand suddenly draw up into one compact clump, it was more the thought of the absurdity of the movement and the almost pathetic and harebrained blindness of the man behind the movement.

Then I must have shut my eyes, for I knew what was coming. The next moment that brutal mallet of a fist in the sulphur-colored glove struck me full in the face. It did not hurt, for the world went suddenly black about me and I seemed to be wafting gently downward at the same time that about a thousand feather-ticks seemed to be emptied all about me to ease that fall. I felt nothing, after that. But through that sudden descent into dreaminess I once more heard, or seemed to hear, the tremulous scream of a woman, a scream of incredulity and repugnance, a scream of loathing and enlightenment. And then I sank down into a gray and feathery nothingness where there was neither sound nor light nor sulphur-colored gloves.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

I DON'T KNOW how long it was afterward that I woke up. But gradually I became conscious of a very pleasant swaying and rocking motion. It seemed like being lulled on the topmost branches of a pine-tree waving in a sleepy evening breeze. It left me so contented that I was quite willing to lie there. Then the lazy whispering of pine branches merged into a louder sound, and one much more like the purring of machinery. So I finally decided to open my eyes and investigate.

It startled me a little to find that I could only half-way succeed in this effort. For one eye, I discovered, altogether refused to open. And that shook the last of the drowsiness out of me.

“Where am I?” I asked of nobody in particular, as I made an effort to sit up in the swaying leather seat into which I was wedged by means of three or four heavy sofa-pillows.

I could open one eye, but that was all. For across my other eye, I discovered, there was a linen bandage. And under this bandage, I further found, was a generous slice of raw beefsteak. But with that one good eye I was able to see that I was in an automobile and that this automobile was once more taking me down through the streets of what was unmistakably New York.

Bent over the wheel, close beside me, I could make out a clear-eyed and firm-lipped young woman. And my second blink at her convinced me of the fact that it was Clarissa Bartlett herself.

That made me sit up. It was not so easy as it sounds, for my head seemed to be the size of a Zeppelin and I could feel a distinct sense of burning under the sticky surface of the raw beefsteak.

The next thing that came to my attention was the fact that the girl driving the car wore a very familiar-looking coat of Hudson seal. The memory of where it had come from brought the past suddenly back to me.

“Feeling better?” asked the girl at the wheel. She seemed inclined, on the whole, to give me little attention. Things of more moment, it was plain, were occupying her mind.

“Yes,” I told her. And I might have added that I was also feeling a little less superior. But instead of doing that I readjusted the slab of beefsteak over my blackened eye.

“Do you need anything?” was the next question from the young woman at

the wheel.

“Another head,” I grimly acknowledged.

We went on again in silence, for several blocks.

“Would you mind telling me just what happened back in that hall?” I finally asked. That question was prompted, I think, more by a desire to have her relate with her own lips the misdeeds of Michael O’Toole than by any mere desire for information.

“I’d rather not talk about it,” was Clarissa Bartlett’s very decided answer. But there were certain things which did not and could not escape my attention. She was with me, and not with her Michael. The earlier look of languor and revolt was no longer on her face. She was very pale, I could see, for she was a woman who’d had a sudden and vast awakening. And there was a newer note about her as she adroitly tooled her car down through the more crowded areas of Broadway, a note of decisiveness, a note of firm-lipped determination to face the worst that life might have in store for her. And it was a good deal of a change from what I had seen earlier in the day.

“Where are we going?” I asked, for I noticed that we were once more rounding Central Park.

“Home!” was the girl’s brief reply.

“Why?” I inquired.

“We’ll know that much earlier than you expect,” announced Clarissa Bartlett. The next minute she had swung in beside the curb and brought the car to a stop. I glanced up, with my one good eye, at the limestone front of the house that towered beside us. I knew it at once. It was the house of intrigue which I had so hurriedly left the night before.

“Shall I come?” I asked the girl who was already getting down from the car-seat. For something about the newer demeanor of hers tended to leave me less self-assertive than I had been.

“Of course,” was her curt reply as she stepped across the sidewalk. She passed within two feet of what I knew to be a plain-clothes man posted there. But she ignored him as completely as though he’d been a gargoyle, or a newel-post figure belonging to the limestone steps up which she was so purposefully striding.

I could see her finger play on the electric bell. It pressed again and again. It prodded there. It jiggled and danced and see-sawed. But it was several minutes before there was any response to that authoritative summons.

Then one of the heavy front doors opened, ever so little, and two timorous and quite colorless faces peered out through the aperture. And for the life of me I couldn’t keep from laughing as I squinted up at those two apprehensive

old faces. They made me think of a couple of white mice peering out between the bars of a cage. For I saw at a glance that it was old Ezra Bartlett and his brother Enoch. Those two old brothers, however, now looked more than worried. They looked unhappy and harried and altogether uncertain as to what new calamity was about to befall them. And I feel quite sure they would have slammed and locked that door in our faces, had not Clarissa Bartlett been a little too quick for them. She defeated that intention, as book agents do, by occupying the door-opening with her own slender body.

“Come on!” she commanded, with a motion over her shoulder to me, for she was already in through the door by this time and silently but deliberately defying any movement to close it.

I none too willingly followed her into that house of complicated uncertainties. She strode across the hall and opened a door on the right. Then she made a motion toward the two timorous-eyed old spirits hovering about in the shadowy background.

“I’d like the three of you to wait in here until I come down,” she announced in what I was beginning to see might be called a constitutionally imperious manner.

She did not tarry for more. Things of moment, apparently, awaited her above stairs. And I could see my two old conspiratorial friends sidle silently into the room after me. We all sat down, watching the door.

It was old Ezra Bartlett who spoke first.

“You’d best beware of that young woman,” he proclaimed in a venomous yet guarded whisper.

“Did you happen to be addressing me?” I inquired, attempting to fix him with a cold and haughty stare. But it’s no easy thing to be cold and haughty when you’ve only got one eye.

“I tell you that woman’s an impostor,” hissed out the old man, anxiously watching the open door.

“And what do you two old blisters regard yourself as?” I coldly inquired.

“What does she say?” demanded old Brother Enoch, with one hand cupped behind his ear.

“She insinuates that we’re a couple of impostors,” Ezra Bartlett peevishly explained.

“Well, ain’t we?” demanded the other.

But Brother Ezra ignored that interrogation.

“By gad, ma’am,” he told me with unexpected heat, “if you don’t see that you’re being hoaxed, if you don’t understand that you’re being duped and

deceived and made a Jumping-Jack of, you're a bigger fool than I took you for."

"And whom do you hold responsible for all this?" I calmly inquired.

"No one but that man Washburn!" was Ezra Bartlett's sibilant answer.

"And a pretty kettle of fish he's got us in for!" concurred Brother Enoch.

"Well, what do you intend doing about it?" I inquired.

My tranquillity seemed to exasperate Ezra Bartlett beyond all endurance.

"Do about it?" he piped, in an ecstasy of rage. "Do about it? I'll tell you what I'm going to do about it. If they don't let us out of here inside of half an hour, *I'm going to burn this house down!*"

Incendiarism seemed to be a sort of habit with the occupants of that incomprehensible mansion.

"I really wouldn't do that," I quietly explained to him. "For that's what the girl up-stairs tried to do. And it only ended in having 'em lock her up!"

"Well, they can't lock us up!" the old scoundrel announced with much vigor. "If anybody's going to get locked up for all this, it's that young Washburn!"

"But where is this man Washburn?" wearily demanded the other old scoundrel.

That question remained unanswered. For a woman had crossed the hall and stepped into the room. She wore the uniform of a trained nurse. And I could see at once that it was Alicia Ledwidge.

She stopped and stared at the three of us, with a look of wonder in her customarily tranquil eye. Then she stepped over to my side, stared at the bandage about my head, and slowly turned my face to the light so that she could see it better. Her look of wonder, I found, had deepened into one of indignation.

"Who did that?" she asked, still looking at the bit of beefsteak so neatly embedded in linen.

"Michael!" was my grim response, with an upward movement of the head. "*Her Michael!*"

She stood there for a moment or two, without speaking. But I could almost hear the wheels of her brain going round, like a watch with its case open.

"Does—does she know it?" the woman in the uniform finally asked.

"She ought to," I announced. "She *saw* it!"

I could perceive a slow change creep up over that intently studious face. The look of questioning uncertainty merged into one of deliverance, of relief, of gratitude.

“Thank God!” she devoutly and quite impersonally exclaimed.

I didn’t altogether resent her spirit of gratitude. What I mostly resented was being the involuntary and casual instrument of it.

“I’m sorry I can’t see things the way you do,” I somewhat icily explained.

“No, of course you can’t! But don’t you understand how it’s made her see things? How it has brought her light, when she was so blind, so terribly blind?”

“You mean opened her eyes by closing one of mine!” was my somewhat embittered comment.

But the abstracted gaze of the woman in the uniform continued to ignore me.

“What a beast!” she ruminated aloud, rolling the word triumphantly about her tongue, as though it were a chocolate-drop. “Oh, what a *beast!*”

And then, oddly enough, as though that mention of the beast had been able to conjure him up out of thin air, the subject of our conversation suddenly appeared in the doorway.

He appeared side by side with Copperhead Kate, and it wasn’t until I swept them with a second glance that I discovered they were handcuffed together.

That enforced union, I could see, was as distasteful to Pinky McClone as it was to Copperhead Kate herself. But I no longer gave them much thought, for the next moment I saw that they were being herded into the room by Big Ben Locke himself.

“Sit down there!” was his curt command, as he pushed his two prisoners toward a Louis-Seize sofa of brocaded silk. And they sat down on that fragile-legged sofa, eying each other with open hostility.

Then the Chief seemed to see me for the first time.

“Hello, Baddie!” he said as easily as though he were accosting me over his office desk.

“Hello!” I guardedly replied, for at that particular moment there were quite a number of things worrying me. In the first place, I was wondering what had become of Wendy Washburn. And I was perplexed as to Bud and what could have happened to him. And I was further troubled by the thought that the black club-bag was still nowhere in sight.

“That’s a great piece of work you’ve been doing for the office, Baddie,” acknowledged the airily approving Big Ben, with a frown over his shoulder at the couple on the sofa, who were still jerking so fretfully at each other’s clinking wrist-bones. They reminded me of twins in a nursery bed, accusing each other of trespass on private territory. And they looked as if they would gladly and readily have bitten each other’s ears off.

“Whose office?” I inquired.

“Our office, of course!” was Big Ben’s prompt retort. But I was thinking of other things.

“Where’s Bud Griswold?” I demanded.

It wasn’t Big Ben who answered that question, but Copperhead Kate herself.

“Oh, it’s up to that king of snitches to keep himself safe,” she announced with her mirthless cackle of a laugh that made me think of a guinea-hen. “You can bet he wasn’t going to let anything interfere with his fade-away!”

“He’s gone?” I gasped.

“Sure he’s gone—gone where this bunch will never see him again. And what’s more, he took your bag of junk with him. Trust Bud for that!”

I knew what this would mean. Bud had always been a “clean” worker. I remembered his method. He never left any loose trails. When he took gold, he always melted it down, no matter what it might lose in the process. And when it came to Tiffany ice he always picked the stones from their settings and disposed of them singly. That, in fact, was why he had always preferred ice. A pearl was always a pearl, and a diamond always a diamond. It could be deprived of its identity by removal from its setting, but its commercial value remained the same. And if Bud had carried off that club-bag it was only too plain that it was gone for good.

“Is this woman lying?” I asked Big Ben. And I could see the flash of hate from Copperhead Kate’s pale green eyes as I put the question to him.

“That woman’d better keep her trap shut,” was the answer of the Chief, ignoring both my question and his prisoner together.

“But what I want you to do, Baddie, is to get after this guy Griswold, and get after him right away. You know his tricks. And you know his trails. So the sooner you slip out on the job of rounding him up the better!”

I squinted up at Big Ben with my one good eye.

“Why should I go after Bud Griswold?” I demanded.

“Because I—because our office wants him rounded up,” was the Chief’s matter-of-fact reply.

“Well, what am I to you, or your office?” I inquired, remembering my last quarter of an hour in that same office.

“My dear girl, we’re both going to forget about that little flare-up of yours,” he condoningly announced.

“But I haven’t forgotten about your little flare-up,” I pointedly reminded him.

“But, good heavens, Baddie,” he contended, with a great air of injured innocence, “you don’t s’pose I was responsible for that, do you? Now that you know the lay of the land? Now that you see things straight?”

“That’s just the trouble,” I told him, “I haven’t been able to see things straight!”

He looked at me with well-feigned astonishment, almost with impatience.

“Well, what happens to be stuck in your craw?” he inelegantly inquired.

There were a good many things stuck there, and I intended to let him know it.

“In the first place, whose house was that up the Hudson,” I demanded, with a gesture of contempt toward the morose-eyed Michael, “where you gathered in this big-hearted wop with the East Fourteenth Street get-up?”

I had the satisfaction of seeing Pinky wince at that unflattering reference to his attire.

“That was Washburn’s summer home!”

“Wendy Washburn’s?” I demanded, with a gasp.

“Of course!” replied the Chief.

I let this sink in. Then I asked my next question.

“Then what was this crook McClone doing up at that house? And at this house, too?”

“Working a blackmail scheme for which he’ll get about ten years,” was the Chief’s curt retort.

“Not on your life!” morosely yet vigorously interpolated Pinky, who, apparently, like so many of his kind, prided himself on nursing a working knowledge of the law.

“Then what brought this woman to this particular house to rob the wall-safe?” I inquired. And I could hear Copperhead Kate’s snort of anger at my contemptuous phrase of “this woman.”

“That,” said Big Ben, “was what you’d call a coincidence, and nothing more. She and that jail-bird working-mate of hers got an inside tip that there was good pickings here—and she happened to sneak in when there was considerable else going on around the premises.”

“Did that tip come from these two old weasels here?” I demanded, designating the two old uncles who sat so wistfully and yet so peevishly hunched up on the far side of the room.

“Hey?” cried Brother Enoch, with his hand behind his ear.

“What’s that?” snapped out Brother Ezra, with war in his faded old eye.

“Those two old feebs!” was Big Ben’s none too flattering exclamation. “Hasn’t it ever struck you that these two old ginks are a little nutty?”

It had not. But I found no chance to deny it, for that indirect accusation had brought Ezra Bartlett out of his chair like a hornet out of its nest.

“Nutty?” he piped in his shrill and tremulous falsetto of indignation. “We’re no more nutty than you are. We may have been paid to come here and act the fool, but we didn’t come here to be called crooks and accused of stealing out of wall-safes and killing young women! We—”

“The less you two old guys talk the better!” Big Ben Locke vigorously reminded him.

“But I’ve stood too much of this without talking, and now I’m going to have my say out. D’you understand? I’m going to say what I’ve got to say and I’m going—”

“Just a minute,” I broke in, as soothingly as I could. “Who was it paid you for this work?”

“That man Washburn did,” was the old weasel’s retort.

I remembered what Clarissa Bartlett had told me, and once more I found considerable to think over.

“Then do you mean to say that Wendy Washburn also paid you to waylay me after leaving that office in the Asteroid Building?”

I could see Big Ben’s eyes challenging the smaller man. But it was plain that he wasn’t to be intimidated.

“He did.”

“But how did you know I was going to be in that building, or at that office?”

Again Big Ben tried to silence the little old weasel. But things had gone too far for silence.

“I didn’t know you were going to that office. I’d been posted outside of this man Locke’s office and told to follow you.”

“You’d been posted there?” I repeated, turning slowly about on Big Ben. “Then this old man knew I was going to bump into just what I *did* bump into, on that particular afternoon?” I demanded, facing the big detective.

Big Ben shifted uneasily from one foot to the other.

“What’s the use o’ messing around with small stuff like that,” he demanded, “when we’ve got real trouble right here under our nose?”

“I want you to answer my question!”

“What question?” he equivocated.

“I want to know if you knew that just what happened in your office the other afternoon was going to happen?”

“Well, what about it?” he evaded.

“There’s just one thing about it; if that whole thing was a frame-up, I want to understand just what it was for?”

Big Ben tried to brush me aside.

“Say, Baddie, you’ll sure make one grand little sleuth, with that grand jury style o’ yours!”

“What was it for?” I repeated.

My one good eye met both of his somewhat puzzled eyes. Then for an uncertain moment he looked back over his shoulder, toward the shadowy hall. Then he looked back at me.

“*It was for the sake of your immortal soul,*” was his sudden and somewhat reminiscent answer. “And if that’s not as clear as mud to you, you’d better ask young Washburn himself, for I see he’s just coming in through that door!”

CHAPTER TWENTY

I REALIZED, AS I looked up and saw Wendy Washburn step into the room, that one of the biggest crosses a woman has to bear is to find herself unable to be indignant with a man when she wants to be indignant with him.

I had every reason to know there was a reckoning ahead for Wendy Washburn, a reckoning which would show him up in colors which he couldn't possibly be proud of. But even while I told myself that I ought to abhor him, I couldn't help feeling wordlessly and foolishly glad that he was safely back in that room.

As I glanced at him the first time, even in that uncertain light, I could see that he looked pale and tired and worried. But it wasn't until I glanced at him a second time that I saw he was carrying a black club-bag in his hand. And I knew, by the quietly triumphant light in his eye, that this bag wasn't empty.

Yet before any one there could change his position or speak to him Alicia Ledwidge had stepped to his side. She did so with a note of quiet authority which, for a moment, I was tempted to resent. But I had no way of knowing what happened between them as they talked together, low and earnestly. Once, and once only, he turned and stared at me. But he did so with a look of pale abstraction which convinced me that he was thinking of entirely different things. And I realized that things were continuing to shape themselves, that day, to make me feel much less superior than I had felt.

So I sat there, looking meekly around me. I realized, as I did so that we were a very interesting collection, on the whole. But I realized at the same time that I'd seen about enough of that collection. I was tired of them, from Copperhead Kate and her green snake's eyes to the little weasel in black and Pinky McClone in his sulphur-colored gloves. I was tired of wearing a compress of beefsteak on one eye. I was blue and lonesome, and felt pretty much like a dying duck in a thunderstorm. I was homesick for something which I couldn't explain, even to myself, although a still voice somewhere under my fifth rib kept whispering there was a better place for beefsteak than over one's cheek-bone.

And it was Big Ben Locke's sonorous chest-tones that brought me suddenly out of myself.

"D'you mean to say you got your stuff back?" he demanded of Wendy Washburn, staring at the club-bag.

My Hero-Man slowly moved his head up and down.

“But how’d you do it?” insisted the Lil’ Old Bill-Pinkerton-Of-The-East.

“I had the chance of grabbing Griswold, or the family junk, when Griswold passed the bag to a lady confederate of his.”

“What confederate?” demanded Big Ben.

“She answers to the name of Third-Arm Annie. And I chose the junk!”

“That cat!” cried Copperhead Kate, with a quick note of jealousy in her voice. But I was paying little attention to Copperhead Kate’s personal feelings, just then, for I was carefully watching Wendy Washburn’s face, and Wendy Washburn was in turn carefully watching mine. For I knew, as plainly as though he had said it in so many words, that he had deliberately allowed Bud Griswold to make his get-away, when he might have done just the opposite, had he so chosen.

“And how’d you get Annie?” pursued the matter-of-fact Big Ben.

“I got her at the exact moment when she was trying to check the bag at the parcel-room in the Grand Central Station. It was a very clever dodge, and, I suppose, they had hit on it beforehand. But when I stepped up for the bag the woman simply melted away and lost herself in the crowd!”

“So he’s ready to slough with that snake again!” Copperhead Kate venomously and audibly meditated. Like all other women, she clearly disapproved of rivals. But her meditations were cut short by a querulous question from one of the old weasels.

“You may have got your bag back,” he quavered, “but what we want to know is: Where is that body?”

“Body?” echoed Wendy, not understanding the question.

It was the quiet-eyed Alicia Ledwidge who interposed at this point.

“He means the body of that poor maid, the girl called Margaret Hueffer,” she pointed out to my Hero-Man. Then she turned to old Ezra Bartlett.

“That body was taken away by the undertaker, as happens with quite a number of bodies in this city,” she calmly and prosaically explained to the two round-eyed old conspirators.

“Then why were we told to claim that this young—this young whipper-snapper of a girl here had killed her?” demanded irate old Brother Ezra.

“We’d better cut out this wrangling!” suggested Big Ben Locke, as he moved over toward where his two prisoners sat on the Louis-Seize sofa. He made a curt motion for them to get to their feet.

Wendy Washburn, at the same moment, stepped over closer to the chair where I sat. I could not see the expression on his face, for I refused to look at him. But something about that expression, apparently, was distasteful to

Copperhead Kate. For as she rose to her feet she emitted a loud and fearless hoot of derision. Then she swung about and faced me.

“It’s just like you wax-doll ribs,” she called out with a snort, “to freeze on to something worth about half a million!”

“Worth about half a million?” I repeated, being so wide of the mark for a moment that I thought she was still harping on the club-bag and the loot it held.

“What do you mean by that?” I asked her.

“I mean that guy there,” she retorted, pointing straight at Wendy Washburn. “And you know what he’s worth, or you wouldn’t be workin’ overtime ropin’ it down!”

I don’t know whether I changed color or not. But I could feel a wave of blind rage sweep right through me, from top to toe, and I did my best to wither that woman with a look. If I wasn’t altogether successful in this, it must have been because of the beefsteak bandage.

“Roping it down?” I repeated, feeling that my nerves were at last getting the better of me. “Well, the whole lot of you can take it from me that I’m going to get out of it now, and get out of it for good. For I say again that I’m tired of it, and tired of everybody in it. I’m tired of being carted around and being man-hauled and being made a catspaw of. I’m tired of being lied to. *I’m tired of crooks and cowards, and if from this day, there’s any way of getting through life without linking up with that breed, I’m going to find it!*”

My voice was unsteady, and a little shrill from excitement, I suppose, but it didn’t seem to have the electrifying effect I had looked for.

All it did, in fact, was to bring a sudden and quite unlooked-for exclamation from Wendy Washburn.

“Clear out of here, the whole pack of you!” he coolly commanded, “for I want to talk to this young lady!”

There was a note of authority in his voice which I couldn’t help resenting, just as there was a ring of triumph in it which I couldn’t quite understand.

“Lady?” scoffed the departing Copperhead Kate, over her shoulder. But that open scorn of hers was cut short by the sharp tug on the wrist with which Pinky McClone favored her. I could afford to ignore the taunt. But I wasn’t sorry to see her go.

I knew that Wendy Washburn was standing in front of me, waiting to speak. But I had no intention of looking up at him, for I could feel my underlip trembling, and I didn’t want him to find it out.

That silence lasted so long, however, that it began to seem silly to me. So I

decided to break it.

“What do you want to talk to me about?” I demanded, though for the life of me I couldn’t make it sound as stern as I wanted to make it sound.

“About the most important thing in all the world,” was Wendy Washburn’s perfectly solemn reply.

I looked up at him, at that. I couldn’t help it, for I wanted to make sure of his meaning. And I noticed, as I looked at him, that he seemed suddenly different. He seemed to be taking his turn at appearing less superior, less sure of himself. But it wasn’t this air of humility that disturbed me. It was the discovery that he looked tired and worn, a little old and drawn about the eyes. And that made me sorry for him, in spite of myself.

“What do you want?” I asked, trying to make the question as hard and curt as I was able.

“I want you to help me,” was his answer. He spoke very quietly, but something about his voice started a pulse going on each side of my neck just above my coat-collar.

“But surely you heard me say that I was tired of people who are deceitful and crooked and cowardly,” I reminded him, steeling my heart against that unfair spirit of humility with which he was trying to outflank my will before it could dig itself in.

“And you put me in with that class?” he quietly inquired.

“You put yourself in with that class,” I reminded him, recalling the things that had come to me during those last two days of storm and stress.

“Listen to me,” he said, with a return of his more authoritative tone, “you’ve just said you were sick and tired of dishonest people, of crooks, as you called them. Well, that’s the one thing I’ve been wanting to do, I’ve been trying to do. You thought that you could only live by excitement—and I thought it would be easy to show you that this wasn’t true, simply by—well, by giving you an overdose of it. Then things got muddled up, as you see they have. Whether I was right or wrong, *I wanted* to make you tired of all that other kind of life. I *tried* to make you tired of it. But I never dreamed these other things were going to happen to you!”

“Then you knew I was in Locke’s office?” I asked him, compelling myself to calmness.

“Yes, I knew it—and I wanted you out of it,” he meekly acknowledged.

“Why?”

“Because I wanted you to help me,” he replied, after a moment’s pause.

“At what?” I asked.

“At the most dangerous calling a man can possibly have—that of doing nothing!”

I was thinking of the girl above stairs; and the thought of her was like an asbestos curtain between us.

“It seems to me that you’ve been doing rather too much,” I amended.

“Baddie,” he pleaded, “don’t be too hard on me!”

But there was too much to remember.

“And you knew, all along, that Bud Griswold wasn’t what I had imagined him to be?” It was a hard question to ask, but I had to purge my soul of it.

“Yes, I found out certain things. And when he got his conviction, in Detroit, I was hoping that it would be giving you your chance.”

“But why couldn’t you have been open with me about it?” I demanded.

“I knew it was hopeless,” he admitted. “And the way you feel about it now proves me more than ever right.”

I was more afraid of his humility than of his masterfulness. I resented the way in which he seemed able to appeal to my sense of pity. For no woman can feel sorry for a man and hate him at the same time.

I stood up, with one hand on the back of my chair, though I hadn’t intended to make the movement a dismissive one.

“I’m afraid I’ve been a trouble to you,” I said, trying to give an imitation of the Sphinx on an autumn night, “almost as much trouble as that cousin of yours up-stairs!”

“Claire?” he said, with a troubled brow.

“She has told me of your intention to marry her,” I went on, though the words didn’t come easy.

“And you believed that?”

“Why shouldn’t I?”

He stood for a moment, silent and thoughtful.

“Did Claire also tell you that I was everything that was evil? That I was hard and cruel?”

“I think she did.”

“And did you believe that?” he asked, reaching out for my hand.

I didn’t want to seem afraid of him. So I had to look him honestly and openly in the eye.

“Did you believe that?” he repeated.

“No!” I finally replied. Yet it wasn’t what I had intended answering.

“And are you going to believe those other foolish things of me?” he went

on. He was much stronger than I was, so I had no way of keeping him from drawing me closer to him.

“Are you?” he repeated.

“No!” I said in a whisper, beginning to feel like a snow-man in a March rain-shower. He was no longer humble, by this time, but his old masterful self again.

“And do you hate me?” he demanded, taking me in his arms.

I tried to speak calmly, but I wasn’t able to.

“No,” I said, with a sob of surrender. And having only one eye, at the time, I had no way of knowing when Clarissa Rhineland Bartlett walked majestically into the room and found my empty little head on the shoulder of her quite unabashed guardian-at-law. And I felt sorry for her. For she had *lost* her Hero-Man and I had *found* mine.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Some illustrations were moved to facilitate page layout.

[The end of *The House of Intrigue* by Arthur Stringer.]