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The Huddle

Carolyn Wells

Chapter I The Quartet

“I HAVE said, and I still say, it’s too soon to begin any definite work. Plans, yes; action, no. Why, the whole project is still in the air. It may fall through entirely.”

“Now, now, Curtis, don’t be a sister to the hen,” Allenby returned. “Don’t throw a wet blanket over our burning enthusiasm. As I’m putting up most of the money and as I’m not entirely inexperienced as a promoter—”

“Inexperienced!” Barton chipped in, “you’re a born promoter, Ally. I’ll bet you arranged and promoted the little matter of your arrival into this world.”

Munson Davis spoke seriously. “Promoting is a fine enterprise,” he said, “if you don’t promote too hard and too fast. Allenby is our kingpin, our mainstay, our very backbone, but at the risk of being unpleasant I am going to ask him to throttle down now and then, as he promotes at top speed.”

The quartet had gone into a huddle at the home of Robert G. Allenby, financier and promoter of their enterprise. In New York City the room they occupied overlooked the East River at a desirable point.

It opened into the hall and also into Allenby's bedroom. Intended for a den or smokeroom, it had become a well-appointed office where the financier put over much of his lucrative business too confidential for his downtown office. The subject of their confab was not at all an unimportant one. It was regarding a concession from the President of the proposed World's Fair that would allow them to show an exhibit that promised to be a vast money-maker as well as a popular gesture.

Allenby, by reason of his great wealth, his sound judgment and his widespread general information, was at the head of the undertaking, but the other three were able to contribute some money and much definite skill and knowledge absolutely necessary for the success of the venture.

"I want the matter kept quiet," said Allenby, "for if told about, it's sure to be misunderstood. Unless fully explained to them, few could see any difference between our sports and a regular circus. After we're further along, we can unfold our plans and obtain such help as we may require."

"We'll want help all right," asserted Barton, in his easy-going way. "I'm free to confess I think we've most likely nibbled off just a mite more than we can masticate. That doesn't mean I want to renig. Difficulties always stir me to further effort. But I do think we ought to look before we leap."

"None of us being actual morons," Charles Curtis declared, "I feel that we all hold that same opinion."

Now, what's to be done first? Can't we have our jobs parceled out to us?"

Allenby smiled. He was more than good-looking; he was really handsome. His large face, framed in soft gray hair, was almost classic in its contours, and its habitual expression was that of gentle beneficence.

This, however, did not entirely prove a meek and lovely spirit, but it did prove that Allenby wanted the world to think so. And helped along judiciously by many of his kind and generous deeds, he had built for himself a reputation of much the same architecture as Sir Galahad's.

He was optimistic, at times visionary, but his never-failing talents for money making and money spending made him an ideal promoter for the projected exhibit at the World's Fair.

Allenby knew and admitted that he had no sense of moderation. He spent his money lavishly, carelessly, almost unconsciously. Therefore, granted a brake of some sort, he was the ideal head and front of the project. As a matter of fact, he had three brakes, for all three of his companions were willing to do their best to divert his money spending into the right channels. And though not yet entirely in agreement as to these diversions, they buoyantly hoped that sooner or later their great minds would run in the same channels.

And there was plenty of time. Only Allenby himself was in a hurry. And he was always in a hurry. Without mentioning the matter, the three felt their oneness of opinion on it, and felt sure that a dilatory three could hamper the pace of a headlong, streamlined one.

Allenby's smile at Charlie Curtis was appreciative.

"That's the talk, Curtis," he said. "Get busy, that's what we must do. It's bad policy to sit around and say, 'lots of time yet.' The thing to do is to work as if we were desperately cramped for time."

"Go to it," cried Barton. "I'm all for getting busy. What matter that we've nothing to work with, no place to work in, and no work to do?"

"Don't be silly," and Munson Davis looked up from the tiny cameo-like caricatures he was drawing on scratch paper. They were humorously like the men who sat around him, and all save Allenby were dawdling in idle positions, while their chief prodded them with a long Satanic-looking fork.

"All right," Allenby said, answering Barton and ignoring Davis, "I'll tell you as briefly as possible my general views on what we can do in the way of immediate work, and you can tell me your opinions. I made some notes of what I want to say to you—they're in a safe in my bedroom. I'll get them."

He rose and went into the next room, leaving the door slightly ajar.

At once, in lowered voices, the men began to talk. "Let's humor him," said Davis. "Let's kid him along. We don't want to make any definite plans today; I mean any decisions that can't be changed. We'll just listen to his lecture, then pick out some minor points to work up into an

argument that shall last the rest of the afternoon. You see what I mean? We want to know what he has in mind before telling him what we have in mind. And we can't tell him anything today. We must talk it over by ourselves."

"I don't like this division," said Pete Barton, rather crossly. "I don't like having Allenby put up by far the biggest lot of the money, and then we talk about him behind his back."

"Oh, Lordy, Pete," Davis growled; "what's the matter with you today? You blow hot and blow cold. We're not saying anything unkind about Ally, but you know how he splurges and we must have some check-rein on expenditures."

"Yes, I suppose so," and Barton looked more amiable. "I want to speak to him a minute, not about this business, but something else. Excuse me, fellows."

Barton rose and stepped through the door Allenby had left unlatched.

No sooner did he close the door, than the talk turned on him, and Curtis and Davis, the two left, began to gossip as two women might do.

"They say Pete Barton has lost a lot of money lately. Maybe he's going to touch Allenby for a loan," Davis remarked.

"He'll get it. Ally's a perfect fool about such things. But it's lowdown of Barton to bring in a thing like that when we're all for fixing up the show."

"Barton's not very meticulous when it comes to a matter of a loan," returned Davis. "He's a queer duck. I don't know whether I like him or not."

"Oh, sure, we all like him," and Curtis smiled carelessly. "He's sort of sympathetic, don't you know. When I have those nervous spells and he's around, he seems to straighten me out."

"Abracadabra, or just Coué business?"

“Neither, you lunatic. It isn’t like that. But he’ll say, maybe, ‘Too bad, old feller,’ and then he’ll talk about something else and I’ll get all over that fuzzy feeling.”

“Marvelous! The wonders of auto-suggestion! And so he just says he’s sorry for you, and then diverts your mind. How clever!”

“Oh, hush up! You’re trying to say he just changes my thoughts.”

“Yes, that’s what I mean, and your attack, being all imagination anyway, is forgotten. Here’s Barton back. Was your errand successful, Pete?” Davis grinned.

“It wasn’t an errand. I’d picked up a bit of news about an old friend of ours, and I wanted to tell him about it alone. It was a bit of a shock.”

“What’s he doing?” Curtis put in.

“Hunting for those lists. Says he must find them. He’ll be out in a minute. I think things are coming on all right, don’t you?”

“So far as they’re coming on at all, I s’pose they are. I want to speak to Ally, too. Just thought of it.” Without haste, Curtis pushed back his chair, rose and went into the bedroom.

Davis and Barton looked at one another.

“Well, what about these private interviews?” Davis said. “Is it quite the thing?”

Barton laughed.

“Aren’t you sort of suspicious?” he said. “Allenby and I didn’t mention the Fair business at all. You can ask him when he comes back.”

“Oh, I don’t mean anything. And if there’s one chap on earth who will never have his opinions changed by anybody unless he wants to, that same is Robert G. Allenby.”

“And why should he? I’ve never known his pronounced opinions to be wrong. On important matters, I mean. Of course, in trifles he may think

or speak too quickly, but when it comes to serious questions, I call our Robert a Grade A business man.”

“Sure, who doesn’t? But to my mind his greatest worth lies in his enormous bank account and his willingness to devote a lot of it to the Plan.”

Barton nodded.

“That, of course. But I have a feeling that Ally wouldn’t be so lavish in his ideas, except that he foresees getting his money back with ample addition.”

“I hope he’s right. I only put up a tenth of his figure, but it was all I could collect for the purpose.”

“You’re all right, Davis. Your hyper-super ability to dig up the things we want is gigantic. You have a positive flair for scenting them out.”

“I hope it will prove so,” Davis returned; “I’m willing to work, Lord knows, but my part involves a great responsibility—”

“Whose doesn’t?” and Curtis stepped back into the room in time to catch the words. “Don’t put on airs, Munson. Ally has found his lists and he’s coming right along with them.”

“I want to speak to him,” Davis said, rising; “you fellows both have, and I claim the same privilege.”

“Now, now, wait a minute, Munson,” Curtis stopped him, “don’t go in there just now. Allenby is adding a postscript to his paper, and he’ll bring it to us in a minute. It’s a new idea and a good one.”

“I suppose you gave it to him,” Davis flung back. “Seems to me there’s too much log-rolling going on—”

“Just what do you mean by that?” and Charlie Curtis flared up. “I’ll say I’ve got a right to make a suggestion, if I choose.”

“Yes,” Barton agreed, “but it ought to be in the presence of us all, and not privately.”

“I don’t see why. We all have the same privilege.”

“That’s what I think,” and Davis got up again. “And I’m taking my privilege right now. You two chaps had a private interview with our chief, and as Curtis says, we all have the same privilege. So it’s my turn. Maybe I have a new idea and a good one to offer him.”

“No—” began Curtis, but Barton interrupted. “Oh, let him go. It is his turn, if he’s got anything private to say to Allenby. Go ahead, Davis.”

And Davis went ahead.

“Good fellow, Davis, but quick-tempered,” Curtis observed, as the bedroom door opened and closed again.

“Due to his non-success, I suppose,” Barton returned.

“In what way?”

“His pictures. He draws really lovely ones, but when he tries to sell them, he’s told they are dated.”

“Aren’t these his?” Curtis picked up the papers scattered on the table where Davis had been sitting. “They’re terribly clever, I think.”

“That’s just it. He dashes off those things when he’s thinking of something else, and then when he draws for the market, his stuff looks stilted and over-elaborated.”

“You know him pretty well?”

“I’ve known him for years, but we’re not what you can call chummy. I like him well enough, but we don’t talk the same language. He’s of the artistic type, and I’m not. But he’s going to be a big card in our planning, he has just the right ideas of color and effect and atmosphere and all with an eye to the popular taste and demand. He’s taking his time for his conference with Allenby.”

Barton glanced toward the closed door.

He was a heavy man, but, to his own chagrin, not tall enough for his weight. If by taking thought he could have added one cubit to his stature,

he would willingly have paid a round sum for the privilege of thinking. His face was plump and good-natured, a condition due less to a meek and quiet spirit than to an indifference to small bothers and a habit of ignoring them.

Curtis, on the other hand, was a long, lank individual, a smart dresser and fastidious as to his surroundings and companions. His features were on the general outlines usually ascribed to Sherlock Holmes, with perhaps a trifle more of sinister effect.

Not that Charlie Curtis was sinister, but a physical botheration kept him worried about himself and had begun to impair his naturally good disposition. Davis returned, unaccompanied by Allenby. "He'll be here directly," the artist said. "I say, what do you chaps think of calling our place the Vermilion Pavilion? Have it all red, you know."

"Call it vermilion and have it all red," repeated Curtis; "what a clever idea!"

His pleasant smile served to take the edge off his sarcasm, but Davis, who was sensitive, reddened and turned silent.

In an effort to be tactful, Barton said:

"Good name, Munson. Catchy and all that. Draw us a scrap of a sketch of the festive structure."

He pushed a pad over to Davis, and then drummed on the table with his stubby good-natured fingers.

Curtis caught the suggestion of impatience.

"I'm going to pull him out," he said; "no sense in his staying in there by himself. Why doesn't he have the meeting in there if he wants to? We'll listen to the first part of his monologue and leave the rest, if it isn't ready now, for the next meeting."

Davis looked up from his drawing. "Go in," he said; "make him come out. No sense in wasting the whole afternoon."

Curtis went back into the bedroom, leaving the door open.

In a moment they heard him call out.

“Come in here—somebody—” were his words, but his voice—it was more of a gasp—was scarcely intelligible.

“Curtis is having one of his spells,” said Barton, already sprinting for the door.

Davis followed more slowly, almost timidly, and stopped suddenly at the threshold, sickened at what he saw.

Curtis, who had dropped into a big chair, was breathing quickly and noisily, while great shudders shook his long thin frame.

Barton, standing by Curtis, his hand on the sufferer’s forehead, was dumbly staring across the room at Allenby, who lay on a couch, flat on his back, with a red blotch on the bosom of his shirt. As always, Munson Davis rose to the occasion in an emergency, and without a word, or a second glance at Curtis, went at once to the couch where Allenby lay.

“Dead,” he said quietly, after a moment’s examination. “Stabbed to the heart. What does it mean?”

Leaving Curtis, Barton came and stood beside Davis.

No word passed between them, but each was thinking back over the occurrences of the afternoon.

Curtis left his chair and came toward them with a nervous shudder.

“They say I look like Sherlock Holmes,” he said, with a queer, unnatural little laugh; “but really I haven’t a bit of the detective instinct. What have you fellows got to say?”

Barton stared at him, and Davis said:

“Let’s be careful what we say.” He spoke seriously, almost solemnly, and went on. “We are confronted by a fierce proposition. Anything we say now must be hasty, unconsidered and perhaps regrettable. I hope you’ll both see this as I do. I don’t mean we can say nothing and do nothing, but I do mean that personal remarks may be disastrous and irretrievable.”

Peter Barton nodded his head.

“I see,” he agreed. “Any personal remarks or questions would be a mistaken move. Let’s turn our whole attention first, as to what we must do right now, and do it. We’re all burning with curiosity, but our duty is plain. Forget that, and set to work.”

“But,” Curtis reminded, “of course, first of all we must call the police. And when they come we must have a story ready to tell them, and our stories must agree.”

Davis turned on him.

“Why?” he demanded. “Why must our stories agree? We will each tell the truth—or not, as we prefer—but we certainly do not purpose to churn up a yarn that shall ‘agree.’”

“I didn’t mean that,” and Curtis began to tremble again.

“Leave Charlie alone,” said Barton, speaking gently. “He’s none too well, and this excitement won’t help matters any. And as Davis says, we must each tell our own story without regard to the other two. I don’t see how they can differ much, but never mind that now. Of course, we must call the police, but first I suggest we find out who’s in the house. Allenby has a daughter, you know, and there must be a biggish staff of servants. I can usually take a sudden jolt with my eyes open, but, well—this has rather dazed me. As a starter, though, I suggest we ring for somebody—whichever may come.”

“Better go back to the other room,” Davis said, and they went, slowly and reverently away from the death couch.

“Just a minute,” Curtis said, as he sat down, “I don’t want to butt in, and you are quite right about telling our own stories, but shall we tell it all to the footman or whoever answers our call, before we tell the police? That doesn’t seem right to me.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Barton agreed, looking thoughtful. “How about it, Davis?”

“I see no reason to confide in servants. Perhaps we needn’t even tell them the master is dead.”

“Oh, yes, of course they must know that. And then, we must hunt up Miss Allenby—his wife isn’t living, is she?”

“No.”

“Tell you what, Barton,” Davis suggested, “we can’t all talk to the servants, let’s have one spokesman, and let it be Curtis. He knows Allenby more familiarly than we do—did, and we can listen in, and speak, if advisable.”

“Good!” Barton consented. “Don’t be nervous, Curt, this is where you can shine. Take it easy, we’re back of you. Shall I make the call?”

“Yes, do. If I say anything wrong, check me up.”

“You won’t say anything wrong. We’re not on the defensive, we’re nonplused, but we’re following our duty to call headquarters.”

Barton looked round the room again to find a push button, but saw only light switches, so took up a small instrument, which he felt sure was the house telephone.

“Yes, sir,” a man’s voice responded.

“Is this Mr. Allenby’s butler?”

“The second man, sir. It’s the butler’s afternoon out.”

“I see. Will you come in here, please—to Mr. Allenby’s office?”

“At once, sir.”

“He’s coming right away,” Barton reported to Curtis. “I’m glad you have yourself well in hand. Take it easy.”

Curtis nodded, and awaited the ordeal.

The man appeared, a quiet, capable-looking person, whose usual calm was a trifle disturbed at this call from a guest instead of the master.

But he stood at attention, glancing from one to another, as if seeking the one who had called him.

“I am Mr. Curtis,” he was told. “We have been holding a meeting regarding some very important business. Mr. Allenby was with us during the meeting, and afterward, he stepped into his bedroom to fetch some papers from his safe.”

The man, whose name was Lawson, listened, and said, “Yes, sir,” in acquiescence.

Though his friends rather expected Curtis to stammer over his next announcement, there was no trace of hesitancy, as he went on:

“As Mr. Allenby did not return, we waited a reasonable time, and then we went into his bedroom. The door was not locked. We found—be prepared for a shock, Lawson—Mr. Allenby lying on his couch—dead.”

“Yes, sir,” said the man, and though sheer routine training allowed him to speak in his usual tone, his startled eyes and his clenched hands betrayed his intense emotion.

“Sit down, Lawson,” Curtis said, kindly, but the man seemed not to hear him.

“Yes, sir,” he said again, and with a quite evident effort he remembered his duty, “What are my orders, sir?”

“Magnificent,” said Davis to himself and they all fully appreciated this man’s self control.

“I want you to call the Police,” Curtis told him. “Not here, go in some other room. Don’t mention the name. Merely give the address and tell them to come at once to investigate a homicide case.”

Chapter II

Rosella Comes In

“Of course he’ll have to give the name,” Barton said, as Lawson disappeared.

“Yes, I know,” and Curtis nodded. “What I meant was not to say who was dead. You know the death of Robert G. Allenby is going to make a stir in more circles than one.”

“Of course. The reporters will swarm in as soon as the news is out.” Davis looked apprehensive as he spoke. “And,” he went on, “I think we’re overdoing our timidity act. Of course, we needn’t disturb the body, but I propose we look around in the bedroom, in search of some sort of information. The tragedy we’re up against is a big one, but to my mind the mystery is bigger. Why do we avoid questioning one another? Why not discuss it among ourselves? Surely we have every right to do so.”

Curtis looked alarmed.

“You fellows go back into that room, if you like, but don’t ask me to. I just simply can’t!”

“All right, Curt, you needn’t,” Barton said quietly. “No use your getting stirred up more than you need. But what about each of us telling plainly and truthfully just what happened when we each went in Allenby’s room?”

“Go ahead,” Davis said. “You went in first; what happened?”

“Why, nothing. As I told you, I heard at the Club that Tom Perry, an old friend of ours, had committed suicide. I knew Ally would be interested so I wanted to tell him before our confab began. He was shocked, of course. We didn’t say anything about the Fair business, definitely, except that he said he couldn’t find one of his papers, and I came along out, leaving him pawing through his files.”

“You went next, Charlie,” Davis reminded. “What was your experience? Did you make a proposition?”

“Yes, only a minor suggestion. Ally didn’t pay much attention. He was adding a codicil or postscript or something to his notes. He as good as told me to clear out, and he’d come along in a minute.”

“Well, Davis,” Barton asked, “speak your piece.”

“Small potatoes. I may as well own up, I went in to ask Ally if he would help me a bit with a picture exhibition I’m planning. But he was absorbed in his notes and just mumbled he’d rather let that matter wait till another time, so I came back. I must sell some of my pictures, or I’ll go to the dogs.”

“That’ll be nice for the dogs,” Barton smiled. “But look here, these statements of ours, and of course, they’re just what we knew they must be, show us positively that the man who jabbed Allenby must have arrived in that room soon after Davis came out, he must have put through his work swiftly and departed at once.”

“How?” Davis asked. “Is there a door to the hall from the bedroom?”

“Oh, yes,” Curtis said. “Of course there is. And there’s a bath and dressing-room—maybe the man was hiding in the bathroom—”

Lawson reappeared then, with the word that an Inspector would arrive immediately, also the Medical Examiner.

“Is Miss Allenby at home?” Curtis asked of the man.

“No, sir,” Lawson told him, “Miss Allenby is out, she has gone to a matinee. Do you wish to see her maid?”

“No,” Curtis decided, “we’ll leave everything until the authorities get here.”

And in a few moments they came, Inspector Brice and Medical Examiner Enders meeting in the elevator.

Lawson ushered them into the office, and Curtis addressed them.

He told them briefly who they were, and why they were there. He told them of the discovery of Robert Allenby’s dead body, and of their own ignorance as to the details of the murder, if murder it was.

“Any weapon visible?” asked the Inspector.

“I never thought of that,” Curtis replied, and looked at his two partners, inquiringly. They both stated they had seen none but that they had refrained from actual search.

“Queer proposition,” Brice said, as he started toward the closed door to the bedroom.

Curtis hung back, but the other four men entered the room.

Doctor Enders went directly to the couch and after a moment, said, “Stabbed through the heart. I see no sign of a weapon. You say you’ve seen none?”

“No,” Barton told him, as Curtis had remained in the office. “But we have not made definite search.”

“Why not?” asked Brice.

“For one reason,” Barton said, “because we were not quite sure just how far our privileges extended, and we thought best to get the police here as soon as we could. We waited some time for Mr. Allenby to rejoin us and, when he delayed so long, Mr. Curtis re-entered this room and found him dead, just as you see him.”

Then arrived Commander Lovell of the Homicide division and the story was told over again.

Lovell gathered the three men in the office, and began his questioning. But the more he learned, the more mystified he became.

“About the strangest death I’ve ever had any connection with,” he said, looking distracted.

“Strange enough,” Davis said, moodily, “but after all, it’s only a question of finding out who went into the bedroom after we all came out, and for reasons of his own killed Robert Allenby.”

“Have you any evidence of this intruder?” Brice looked round the group. “Any sight or sound that suggested his presence?”

“No,” Davis returned. “But a sight of him could not be expected, with the connecting door closed, and a sound—well, he’d scarcely be likely to make much noise.”

“What was the occasion for this meeting with Mr. Allenby, here in his home?”

There was a silence and then Barton said, “We hope, Commander Lovell, that you won’t insist on an answer to that question just now. The meeting was to discuss a really important enterprise which we four men were planning. Of course, Mr. Allenby’s death changes our whole outlook, makes an entire revision of our plans necessary, involves possibly the discontinuance of the venture. These matters cannot be settled until we can have a business meeting of those of us who are left. And you can readily see that whatever the outcome of our discussion, it would be a grave disaster to have the plan, which we have, so far, kept inviolably secret, given a premature publicity.”

“I see that, Mr. Barton, but I must also call to your attention the fact that the death of your most important colleague—the murder, as it unmistakably is—automatically sets aside all other considerations until the person or persons who are responsible for it can be found.”

“But,” Curtis interposed, “can you not look after that investigation and come to your conclusions without knowing the actual details of the plans we were making or the progress we had so far made? Can you not feel assured that the business was important, since Robert G. Allenby was at the helm, and may I not add, that we, his three partners, are not entirely unknown to the business world of Manhattan?”

“I am not altogether satisfied to leave it thus, but I will do so for the present. Tell me, then, some more about the commercial side of the affair. It was to be a money-making proposition?”

“We hoped so. It is said that Mr. Allenby had always a Midas touch, and any project he favored was sure of success. He was to provide the lion’s share of the initial funds put up, but we three were to do our part in certain ways wherein we are specially capable.”

“You must see, Mr. Lovell,” Davis said, “that a big proposition like ours cannot be tossed aside or given unwanted publicity without doing it great damage. I am sure we can tell you the whole story within a few days, and meanwhile you can proceed with your search for Mr. Allenby’s murderer.” Lovell looked at him, gravely.

“It may be,” he began, “that the police will not prove so certain of this hypothetical murderer, as you all seem to be. There must be, of course, thorough investigation. Have the servants been interviewed?”

Davis spoke a bit shortly.

“Do try to realize,” he said, “that nothing has been done. We three are not very familiar with this house and household, and as we concluded to do no investigating until you came, we naturally have not talked with the servants. Indeed, save for Lawson, who let you in, and who previously let us in, we have seen none of the servants.”

“Call Lawson back here,” said Inspector Brice, who was wandering about the room.

Barton picked up the house telephone and gave the call.

Lawson returned, still calm of face, but with nervously twitching fingers and quavering voice.

“How many are there in the house staff?” Brice asked him.

“This apartment, or the whole house, sir?”

“This apartment—Mr. Allenby’s home.”

“Four in the service, sir. James, the butler, and me and the cook, and a waitress—oh, yes, and a chambermaid—that makes five. Then, there’s Mr. Allenby’s man and Miss Rosella’s maid.”

“Where is Mr. Allenby’s man?”

“He’s out, sir. It isn’t his reg’lar day, but Mr. Allenby gave him the afternoon, sir.”

“When will he be back?”

“About five, sir. It’s quarter of five, now.”

“Did you tell the other servants of Mr. Allenby’s death?”

“Only the cook, sir. She’s my wife. Am I to tell the rest?”

“If you like. They will all be questioned shortly.”

“Questioned, sir!”

“Yes, it is customary in such cases. You’d better tell them, and warn them not to leave the house until given permission. Wait, tell me if you think an intruder could get into this apartment, and reach Mr. Allenby’s rooms without being seen entering?”

“Well, yes, sir, I think he might, if he knew about the back way.”

“There is a back way?”

“Yes, sir. You come up the fire escape, and there’s a little back hall, and if you can get into that without being seen, you can go right on into Mr. Allenby’s bathroom. Was that how he was killed, sir?”

“We don’t know. Say nothing about it to anyone. Come, show me the back hall.”

The two men left the room, and Lovell resumed his queries.

“Do you have reason to think, any of you,” he said, looking closely at the three, “that Mr. Allenby anticipated the attack of an enemy?”

“I knew nothing of it,” Davis said, and Barton echoed, “Nor I.”

“I have a feeling he feared something,” Curtis observed, speaking slowly. “He seemed apprehensive this afternoon, I thought.”

“Nonsense, Curtis,” and Davis shook his head. “You’re imagining. When you get one of these nervous turns of yours, you can imagine anything.”

“Never mind about imagination,” Lovell said, “what was Mr. Allenby’s disposition? Calm and placid or excitable?”

Curtis answered this. “While none of us was on intimate terms with Mr. Allenby, I think perhaps I knew him best of us three. Anyway, I’ve known him the longest. And I describe him as one of the most equable men I’ve ever known. Even-tempered, balanced judgment, widely informed, he was a skilled and experienced promoter and it was a pleasure to work with him or under his direction.”

“Well put,” Barton agreed. “You’ve ticked off Ally to a dot, Curtis.”

“I take it, then,” continued Lovell, “he was not a man likely to put an end to his own life?”

“Suicide?” exclaimed Davis; “not a bit of it! If Robert Allenby ever had any leanings in that direction, he wouldn’t do it until he had fought and conquered the troubles he had run up against.”

An animated voice was heard, an excited exclamation, and a girl came suddenly into the room.

“Where is my father?” she cried, staring at the men she saw. “What has happened?”

“Do you not know?” Lovell spoke gently.

“No, I just came in and Lawson said for me to come right up here.”

“Then it is a sad bit of news we have for you. You are Miss Allenby?”

“Yes. Tell me, please.”

She was a large girl, good-looking without being beautiful, and possessed of a thoroughbred air that commanded attention.

Her big gray eyes took in the group and she looked to Lovell for an answer.

“Your father is dead, Miss Allenby,” Lovell said, gently, feeling this was the sort of girl who would prefer the truth at once.

She sat down on a chair which Barton offered, and said, “Tell me everything.”

“We have, as yet, little to tell, but I think you would prefer to know all we know. These gentlemen were here in conference with Mr. Allenby, who went into his bedroom for some papers that were in his safe, and while there, was—was killed by some unknown hand.”

“May I see him?”

“Will you not wait a few moments for that?”

As the girl seemed to make no objection to this, Lovell introduced the other three men by name, and then she spoke.

“I am Rosella Allenby, the only child of my father. We live here alone, and have done so for years. My mother died when I was a schoolgirl. I am quite capable of meeting this situation, and I prefer not to refer to my grief. I should like to be advised as to my duties, and I wish to be consulted in reference to such arrangements as have to be made.”

“Hard-boiled,” Barton thought to himself.

“Up against it, but determined not to give way,” was Curtis’ mental comment. While Davis covertly gazed at the girl, wishing he might sketch her.

Lovell set himself to his conventional catechism.

“Was your father subject to despondent moods, Miss Allenby?” he said.

“By no means. He was of a fine temper and quite ready to meet any emergency. He was brave and fearless and a stickler for justice. Are you perhaps implying that he—that he took his own life?”

“That possibility must be considered, Miss Allenby.”

“It need not be, for I can tell you he would never do that. I have not known my father all my life to be mistaken in his character. But—why do you think of that? How was my father killed? Why may I not see him?”

“Because the Medical Examiner is still with him. He will be here directly. Would you not like to have someone with you? Some woman—is there no one in the house?”

“I’ll call my maid,” and Rosella took up the house telephone. “She was my nurse.”

And the kindly, motherly looking woman who responded sat down by her charge with an air both respectful and affectionate.

Doctor Enders returned just then, and made his report to Inspector Brice, who had also reappeared.

“There is a very slight possibility,” he began, “that the death blow might have been given by the victim himself. But the likelihood is so remote that it can scarcely be taken into consideration. And, too, the weapon is missing. That contradicts the idea of suicide, unless someone has found and removed it.”

“What, presumably, was the weapon?” Brice inquired.

“A sharp blade of some sort. Dagger or knife. But shall we not exclude Miss Allenby from our recital?”

“No,” said Rosella, firmly. “I want to know all the details of my father’s death, as I expect to take my part in the investigation of the crime.”

“Very well, then,” and Enders proceeded. “There is little to be gathered from the scene of the crime, or at least I see no clue of any sort. A detective may learn more. That’s up to Lovell.”

“And to me,” said Rosella, decidedly. “I shall probably have more to do with this investigation than you policemen expect. I hope this will in no way offend you.”

“I am quite sure,” Brice said, courteously, “that we can object to no measures taken by the daughter of Robert Allenby.”

“Tell us further details,” Lovell asked of the Examiner.

“The stab wound was straight to the heart,” Enders said. “I should say the blade was not a long one, maybe four inches or less.”

“Driven, then, by someone with a knowledge of anatomy,” and Lovell wagged his head with an air of knowledge.”

“Maybe,” said Enders, “though I’ve known most ignorant men to pull it off.”

“Can’t I see father?” Rosella asked again.

“Come with me,” Enders told her. “I’ll let you see him, and then we must—must send him away.”

“Yes, I know,” said the girl.

They went into the bedroom, and the doctor allowed her a look at the calm, white face of Robert Allenby.

“Tell me,” he said, after she had turned, dry-eyed, but tensely quivering, “do you not know those men out there? You don’t seem to.”

“Dad’s friends, you mean?”

“Yes, his three partners in some enterprise they have under consideration.”

“I don’t know them well, personally, but I’ve heard father talk so much about them I feel acquainted.”

“Your father liked them all? Trusted them?”

“Oh, yes. Father never went into business deals unless he had absolute confidence in his colleagues.”

“I see. Then you think they cannot be considered as suspects?”

“Oh, no. The three of them are all wrapped up in the project they are working on.”

“You know all about the project?”

“Yes, indeed. But I think I may not talk of it until I see my father’s lawyer, or consult with some of those men themselves.”

“You are your father’s heiress?”

“To a large extent, yes. I suppose I shall be questioned about all these things?”

“Probably, yes. But you are right in consulting your lawyer as soon as you can. Shall you remain here—or perhaps go to stay with some friends?”

“You’re taking father away?”

“Yes, very soon now. It is a peculiar case, as there is no one to consult, save yourself.”

“Thank you for your interest, Inspector, but I am accustomed to judging for myself. I shall stay here, yes, and perhaps get someone to stay with me. But first, I have to think matters out for myself. It’s a big emergency for a girl to meet. But I know I can count on the advice and assistance of those three men out there. Any friends or associates of my father would, I am sure, help or advise me in business matters.”

“I am glad you feel that way. Now you must realize, Miss Allenby, that there will be a lot of unpleasant interviews, a lot of painful questions and probings and much that will seem to you impertinent and even rude. But that has to be met with in a case of this sort. Have you no relatives? Uncles, cousins—or anyone who could act for you?”

“No,” she replied, with a look that showed both sadness and caution. “You see, while I have some relatives, I know too much about their hopes and their greed—this sounds terrible, but you must know what I mean.”

“I do, and you are right to recognize the situation. May I advise you to put yourself and your affairs in the hands of a trustworthy firm—but doubtless all that is attended to in your father’s will.”

“Yes, I feel sure that it is. But I am not so anxious about my inheritance as about this tragedy that has come to me. My first work shall be the discovery and punishment of the man who killed my father. My next endeavor, to carry on and bring to final success this venture that he was so interested in. But first, the murderer must be found—and punished.”

Doctor Enders looked at the girl in mixed admiration and doubt. But after all the detective work was outside his jurisdiction, and he could merely resolve that he would keep a sort of watch over her and help her if ever he could find a way to do so.

The two returned to the office, and found Brice still questioning the three partners.

A stenographer had arrived, also the camera men and finger-print experts.

Curtis was the most urbane of the partners, and willingly gave answers to questions. His colleagues smiled a little as they noticed how affably he

replied, yet gave little or no real information. None of the three wished to conceal facts or reserve details, but they felt it their right to confer alone and plan for their immediate future, before revealing the secrets which belonged primarily to Robert Allenby.

They were allowed to go to their homes, and they agreed to hold themselves in readiness for future interviews when called by the authorities.

Hecker, the butler, returned from his afternoon out; and Linus, Allenby's valet, came back also.

With the other servants, they were interviewed by the officers, who gave them their orders. None of them must leave the house that night, and tomorrow they would be advised of further plans.

Matilda, naturally, was put in charge of Rosella. But the charge was the other way, and, as always, the girl took charge of the woman. Rosella was kind to her old nurse, often asked her advice, sometimes followed it, but was never really chummy or affectionate. She gave orders and they were obeyed. She was always just and always considerate, but their relations were not those of companionship.

Rosella was self-sufficient, monarch of all she surveyed. That was her nature.

Chapter III

Rosella Takes The Helm

AT dinner that night, Rosella Allenby sat alone in her usual place at the table. She forbade herself to think about the dear companion who had for so long sat opposite and smiled at her across the flowers.

Matilda had urged her to send for some friend to dine with her, but the girl refused. Only twenty-two, she had the *savoir faire* of a much older woman, and all the wisdom and experience of the younger generation of today.

The dinner was served with the punctilio that always characterized the Allenby menage, and though Rosella was deep in thought she ate the food that Hecker brought, with her usual appetite.

An odd girl, Rosella. She had inherited her father's fine traits of justice and of generalship, but from her mother she had a vein of obstinacy that made itself strongly felt at times. This had amused her father, who had not tried to eradicate it, but had taught her to use it to advantage. Her name, which she hated, was an example of her mother's determination, and, combining the names of her two grandmothers, was wished on the child, in spite of her father's disapproval. And now she was meeting the situation which had come to her. She decided at once to grasp the tragedy and plan her dealings with it, before she let herself succumb to the grief and desolation which lay ahead of her.

Her father was dead—was murdered. She must consider him first, must discover and punish the wretch who had done this thing, must avenge the crime. Then she could feel sorry for herself, could consider plans for her future, could take up life again.

Systematic, as always, she planned her first moves at once. Calling Hecker, she bade him telephone Mr. Fenn, her father's lawyer, and ask him to come to see her as soon as possible.

He said he would be there in half an hour, and Rosella calmly went on with her dinner.

“Hecker,” she said, as he brought her coffee, “you will have new responsibilities now. There will be dreadful consequences following the death of my father. There will be horrible publicity, which we cannot avoid, and there will be unfortunate disclosures and anxious questions which will be hard to meet properly. I know I can depend on you, you have wise judgment and quick wits. I'm not asking you to stand by me, for I know you'll do that, but I want to ask you to keep a close watch on the other servants. No one else has the opportunities you have to watch them and study them. I do not, now, suspect any of them of any wrongdoing, but—they say, a man's foes may be of his own household—so I want you to report to me any least thing that seems to you peculiar about their behavior.”

“I understand, Miss Rosella, and since you speak so kindly, I feel sure that I don't have to tell you that I will do everything I can to help you in any way possible. You may trust me.”

The simplicity of his last words carried conviction and Rosella gave him a nod and a sad little smile and said no more.

When the lawyer came, she received him in the office where Robert Allenby had held his last confab that afternoon.

She wore a simple black silk frock, and met David Fenn with a dignified air that quite made him change his proposed manner of address.

He had expected to treat her in a protective, guardian way, but found she looked for nothing of that sort.

She listened to his first expressions of sympathy, but as they were expanded with voluble emphasis, she interrupted him.

“I know you will understand, Mr. Fenn, when I tell you I’d rather not speak of my grief. It is too new, too much of a shock for me to talk calmly about it just yet. Please talk to me tonight on a business basis.”

A little bewildered, Fenn said, “Yes, of course, Miss Allenby,” and wondered if the tragedy had affected her reason.

“A few questions, first,” she said. “How much do you know about my father’s death?”

“Only what Hecker told me, when he let me in just now.”

“Very well. I can tell you all I know, in a few words. My father had a business meeting in this room, this afternoon. He left the other men to get some papers from the safe in his bedroom, and was stabbed to death while there. That is all I know, so far. Now I propose to track down the murderer and avenge the crime. And I must do it in my own way, without advice or assistance, except as I ask for them. I put this plainly, for if you are willing to act as my lawyer, with this understanding, I shall be glad to have you do so. If not, I shall have to employ someone else. I know you think me young and ignorant, but you will find that is not entirely true.”

Rosella looked wistful, and again Fenn restrained his impulse to tell her that she could not assume the part of dictator in legal matters.

He said, “I have been your father’s legal advisor for many years, Miss Allenby; he had confidence in me, as perhaps you know. Should you care to have me, I shall be glad to serve you, and I should not presume to advise you other than in strictly legal matters.”

“That is satisfactory, Mr. Fenn, and I shall have the same confidence in you that my father had. Now, I am right, am I not, in assuming that I am the chief beneficiary under my father’s will?”

“Yes, Miss Allenby. Save for some minor bequests and payments, you inherit the bulk of his property—a very large fortune.”

“All my own, to do exactly as I please with?”

“Yes, entirely so.”

“Then please see to it that I always have a large sum of ready money where I can draw on it, with no delay. This does not mean that I am unduly extravagant, but that I want to have cash always at my disposal.”

“I see. And rest assured it shall be just as you wish. But are you sure your father did not put your affairs in the hands of a guardian or trustees?”

“I am sure he did not, for I asked him not to, and Dad had a way of humoring me.”

“I’m sure he did not, too, for I drew up the will, and he left the money to you absolutely, with no strings of any kind tied to it. You have relatives, you know, Miss Allenby?”

“Yes, but we are not congenial. I suppose father left them proper bequests.”

“Yes, generous ones, indeed. But not enough to make any dent in your residuary.”

“Oh, I wasn’t thinking of that. They are welcome to whatever Dad thought right. Now, Mr. Fenn, as I said, I’m going to track down my father’s murderer, and while I do not ask your assistance, I do want your authority and your backing. I propose to employ a superior detective of whom I have heard, a Mr. Stone. Do you know him?”

“By reputation, yes. He is one of the best. Expensive, they say; but you probably know that.”

“Yes, and I don’t mind, if only he succeeds. I will engage him, you understand, I will make the arrangements and I will work with him so far as possible, but I want you to stand up for me. If you hear criticisms of my strange behavior, just say that I am wilful and even obstinate. That I have every right to do as I choose, and that I am actuated by no motive but to avenge the crime of my father’s death.”

“Yes, I understand and sympathize with your intentions, but I warn you you may attain a publicity that you will not enjoy.”

“That is my own affair and I will chance it. If this Mr. Stone is as clever as he is said to be, he will conduct the investigation of the crime. I shall not, probably, do anything definite.”

“You may. Young people are amazingly active these days. May I ask you, should you find yourself in any quandary, or even uncertainty, that you will refer to me? I assure you I shall not be insistent or dictatorial, but I might render you timely assistance.”

“Thank you, Mr. Fenn, I may be very glad to avail myself of your offer. I don’t want to get into any mess, for that might reflect against Dad’s memory, and, too, I want to preserve my own dignity. But I am stubborn and I do like to have my own way. So, since you have promised me what I want from you, may I ask you to come again to see me at some other time, for, as you may suppose, I need rest after today’s experiences.”

“Yes, I will go now. But, Miss Allenby, what about other questions? Will the news be in the morning papers? You will be swamped with reporters, you will be besieged by tradesmen and specialty houses, the insurance people will turn up, friends will come, you must have some help.”

“Yes,” she said, equably, “I have thought of those things. I shall have my father’s secretary come here tomorrow. He is a capable man, and knows all about Dad’s business affairs. Also a nice young woman who has been in his office for years. They will see reporters, and take care of business callers. A dear friend of mine will come to attend to social duties, and I think I’ll manage all right. I shall have a talk with those three men that

were here this afternoon, and see what to do about that Concession affair.”

Realizing that he had found a new specimen of modern femininity, Fenn went away to think it all over and to get busy on the settlement of the affairs of the late Robert G. Allenby.

Rosella set about her own plans. She called up the friend from whom she had heard of Fleming Stone, and at whose home she had once met the detective. Then, guardedly, she told her of the death of her father, and asked her to call Fleming Stone, and urge him to take the case and to begin the first moment he could do so.

The result of this quick action was that Fleming Stone was sitting in the Allenby library within half an hour.

With a grave yet kindly face he listened to Rosella Allenby’s request for his help.

She looked at him straightforwardly.

“You mustn’t think I am crazy,” she said, unsmiling, “but I have a feeling that if my father’s murderer is found, it will be due to your starting in right at the beginning. He was killed by a man who entered the apartment from the rear, stabbed his victim, and was out again so quickly that he left no trace. Can’t you pick up a clue now, right now, that maybe you couldn’t find later on?”

“Your idea is a good one, Miss Allenby, but I think it likely that a man who put across such a masterly crime is not leaving a trail of evidence behind him. I will take the case, and I will have a look around tonight, as you suggest, but I’ve little hope of any findings of a material nature. Still, such a thing might happen. Let us go in there now, and discuss matters more fully afterward.”

Rosella took him to the office which adjoined the library, and across it to the door which led to her father’s bedroom.

She showed him where her father lay when she last saw him, and Stone looked carefully at the couch, which was covered with jade green damask.

It was overstuffed, with deep tufts and Stone ran his hand carefully along the crevice between the back and the seat.

When he pulled out his hand, slowly and carefully, it held a knife, blood-stained and gruesome looking.

“Doubtless the weapon,” he said, watching the girl.

But she showed no uncontrollable emotion, only a solemn sort of wonder as she stared at the blade.

“An old-fashioned jackknife,” Stone went on. “Brought here by the intruder, perhaps—used, and then quickly hidden in the couch and the man went swiftly away.”

“I suppose so,” she said. “Now, how can you ever find him?”

“I doubt if I can do much toward it tonight. This weapon must be given over to the officer who is left here in charge. It may be a helpful clue. Now let us go back to the library, but first, show me the general plan of the apartment.”

“A simple plan, you see,” said Rosella, as she opened the door from the bedroom to the hall. “A large, square central hall, and rooms on all four sides. Father’s room we just left and next is a guest room, and then turning the corner there is the breakfast-room, the dining-room and the kitchen and servants’ quarters. Turning again, my rooms, another guest room, and then, across the front of the house, the drawing-room, a small reception-room and the library, a corner room, and we are back to the office again.”

“I see,” said Stone, as they walked round the hall, “a beautiful home. Let us go into the library, and then I shall keep you but a short time. We must wait till tomorrow for more definite plans.”

They sat down in the dignified and well-furnished library, and Rosella said, “I don’t believe you ever took on a case under such strange circumstances, Mr. Stone.”

“No, I never did. But the only strangeness is beginning so quickly. And, too, it is strange to have for my employer a mere girl, with no older people to share her responsibilities.”

“But I am really more than a mere girl, Mr. Stone,” Rosella spoke seriously. “I mean I have taken care of myself so long, living without any other woman in the house except my maid who was my nurse, that I feel able to meet emergencies and take care of my affairs. I do not want to be assertive or bumptious, but I want to help you all I can in your work, and also, if possible, take my father’s place in the enterprise he hoped to carry through.”

“I wish you would tell me more of that matter. It isn’t strictly secret, is it?”

“Not from you, certainly. But the plan is not to be made public until more fully developed. Though of course, I don’t know just what will happen now. My father was president of the company, which included only three other men, three friends whom father had known for many years. They were all enthusiastic about it, and though it has to move slowly, it has already made good progress. It has to do with the World’s Fair, and though that seems a long way off, yet lots of concessions are being arranged, and father’s great influence in many ways made him a marvelous one to manage the thing.”

“These men, then, felt sure that the Fair is to be held, and were willing to start in on that assumption?”

“Oh, yes. They would only get the concession and lay their plans first, and if the whole project should fall through there would be no great harm done, and father was willing to underwrite it, or whatever you call it.”

“I see. And do you care to tell me the nature of your father’s plan? It might be of great help in my work on the case.”

“Then, of course, yes. And you won’t broadcast it, will you?”

“No,” Stone said, smiling at her. Rosella was a most likable girl, and almost always made good with older people. They liked her self-possession, founded on a confidence in her own power of doing

whatever she set out to do. For Rosella Allenby seldom began anything without feeling that she would be able to finish it.

And, already interested in her father's Fair plans, she determined to carry on if possible, after the investigation of his death was well placed in capable hands.

"You see," she began, "the trouble is, it's such a peculiar idea that anyone hearing of it would imagine it all wrong. Now, if I mentioned a collection of circus freaks, fat woman, living skeleton and all that, what would you visualize?"

"Except that you have warned me that I shall imagine it wrong, I'd say my mental image would be a side-show like that of a circus, including an Albino, a bearded lady, and the usual program."

"That's just the point. It is to be a sort of side show of such people, but they will not be of the usual character. They will be fat or lean, dwarf or giant, but they will not be the common, ignorant sort, usually seen in such shows. Can you imagine a Fat Lady, really enormous, but refined, educated, and of gracious manner? Can you picture a Living Skeleton who will be of gentle birth, scholarly and an interesting talker?"

"A glorified lot of Freaks?"

"Not quite that, but a group of men and women of intelligence, sophistication and good taste, correct manners and even the right sense of humor?"

"I begin to picture it, as you tell me of it."

"Well, that was my father's idea; a group of such people, each having some physical peculiarity like the circus people have, but in no case repulsive or unsightly. No two-headed girl, no bearded lady, but a dainty dwarf, a wholesome, pleasant giant and a smiling, winsome Albino. I don't describe them as he did, he could make you see the charm of the plan at once, but I assure you the idea is right, and carried out as he meant it to be, and as I hope it will be, it means success."

"Yes, I can see the fine idea, and perhaps your father's partners are sufficiently familiar with his plans to carry on."

“With my help, not without,” and Rosella looked a bit stubborn. “You see, my father is by far the largest stockholder. I’m not sure if that’s the word, but he has already put in oodles of money, ten times what the others did, and if I withdraw that, and break up the whole game, they would have to give it all up.”

“Such matters are in the hands of your father’s lawyers or trustees, I suppose.”

“Oh, yes, that’s all in the air, but I want you to understand about the Sports.”

“Sports?”

“That’s what they propose to call them. It will really be a side-show at the fair—Midway Plaisance idea, you know—and they don’t want to use the term Freaks at all. Father suggested Sports, meaning a deviation from type, like a sport on a rosebush, not the ordinary sporty idea.”

“I’m getting it—peculiar physically, but admirable mentally.”

“Yes, that’s it. When you know more about it, you’ll see the cleverness of it, and the surety of its success. It will be a wonderful show and a positive money-maker. But there’s time enough for that, and the three men left may not care to carry on alone. But I want you to know the situation.”

“I’m glad you’ve told me. Now give me just a few words of description of the partners. They’re all your father’s long-time friends?”

“Oh, yes. Mr. Curtis, the eldest, is a fine man, with a positive genius for exploring and finding things. He was terribly interested in the opening of the tomb of King Tutankhamen, years ago, you know. He was there at the opening, and though I was a little girl at the time, I remember hearing him tell about it, and seeing all the wonderful treasures he brought home from Egypt.”

“Not from the tomb?”

“I don’t know about that, but he had lots of gold and silver things and curios and trinkets. He gave me a whole big box of beads. Well, ever

since, he's been interested in Egyptian curios, and he knows a funny old Sheikh or something over there whom he's going to bring over for the show."

"I think I know Charles Curtis. Sort of invalid, isn't he?"

"Not quite that, but he has spells occasionally, when he's nervous and twitchetty, and he isn't very strong. But he's terribly clever, and father greatly admired his judgment and opinions."

"And Peter Barton. He's a live wire, isn't he?"

"Oh, yes. He's younger, but he has travelled everywhere and knows a lot about business methods and organization. He and Munson Davis are chums, and father once said the two of them had enough energy and ingenuity to run the whole Fair. Father liked them both."

For some reason this reference to her father stirred the girl's heart to fresh realization of her sorrow, and she said:

"I think we won't talk much longer, tonight, Mr. Stone. I shall not break down under this great sorrow that has come to me, but I think I can't stand any more tonight."

"I think not, too. Are you alone, Miss Allenby?"

"Yes, except for my nurse. She looks after me like a mother, and I am accustomed to fending for myself. One more thing, Mr. Stone. Will the police officers object to my asking your aid? As if I were setting them aside, you know."

"No, don't fear anything like that. The police and I are on friendly terms. But I hope you will advise me of anything you may see or hear that has or may have any bearing on the case."

"Yes, that, of course. And—may I speak freely?"

"Yes, indeed, I hope you will always do that."

"Then, don't let the police think there is any possibility of any one of those three men being implicated in this tragedy. Of course, it was nothing definite, but I fancied I heard a tone or saw a look this afternoon

that made me feel a fear that Inspector Brice felt a trace of suspicion of—no, it was, I am sure, only my imagination.”

“Of which one of them?”

“Why, it seemed that the Inspector looked at Mr. Curtis with a glance different from that he gave the others.”

“Let me advise you, in all kindness, not to jump at conclusions. I am sure Brice couldn’t have formed any suspicions in so short a time, and I am also positive he would not have showed it, had he done so. You have much to learn in this field you are about to enter, the field of crime and its investigation, and first of all, get it firmly fixed in your mind that if experienced detectives give what seems a tacit opinion, rest assured it may well be either a mistake on your part, or an intention to mislead on their part. You understand, don’t you?”

“Yes, and I’m glad you told me that. Tell me another thing. Will it inconvenience or annoy the police if I work with them and try to help?”

“To be frank, I must say, yes. That is, unless you turn out to be a genius, an infant prodigy, who can find evidence unknown to others and can deduce correctly from it. I don’t know you very well yet, Miss Allenby, but from my present acquaintance with you, if I were asked to describe you in one word, I’d say—headstrong.”

“You’d be about right,” Rosella told him. “Do you advise me, then, not to try to help?”

“I don’t say that, but I do say you must ask and follow advice from older and more experienced people. You have a lawyer?”

“Yes, my father’s lawyer. He will, of course, have charge of my affairs and will advise me—if I want him to.”

“Do want him to,” Stone said. “You are in a conspicuous position, and I want you to realize that anything you do that is ill-advised may reflect on the memory of your father.”

“You have struck the right argument, Mr. Stone. I shall remember *that* and act upon it.”

Chapter IV

Fleming Stone Tackles His New Case

REACHING his home, Stone sat down to think things over. He congratulated himself on having an interesting case this time. Not but that he was always interested in his cases, but this promised some unusual features, and perhaps a chance for his ingenuity.

He was tormented by a subconscious wish that Miss Rosella Allenby could be transported, in the words of the old song, 'far beyond the Northern Sea.' But he realized that without her, he would not be on the case at all, and, too, though now an unknown quantity, she might develop into a principal and he must watch her step.

The problem itself was one of those deceptively simple-looking affairs that seem so easy of solution and then present little, unexpected bothers that quickly expand into appalling obstacles.

Viewed superficially, one would say that the murderer of Robert Allenby was, necessarily, one of his three colleagues or the hypothetical intruder who came into his bedroom 'the back way.'

Yet that was a slipshod decision. There was equal chance of any of the servants having done the deed. Or any person admitted by the servants, either innocently or in connivance. Or a tenant of one of the other apartments in the house. Or someone who had been concealed in the bedroom for hours, awaiting his victim.

Any consideration of motive was futile, until some hint of the identity of the criminal could be found. If connected with Allenby's wealth, it might be someone who would benefit under his will. His daughter? Not likely, but possible. The servants? Probably not. Game not worth candle. The secretary? Conventional routine, but improbable time for a reasoning murderer to choose. Tenants of the house? All guess work and waste of time.

Determining to begin his methodical search the next morning, Stone let his thoughts drift to the heiress of Allenby's great wealth.

With a certain reluctance he admitted to himself that he didn't quite get her. She showed no signs of grief, but he fully believed that was because

of her natural reserve which shrank from exposing her emotions to a stranger. She evinced a surprising haste in the matter of investigation, and her immediate call for him, before any other details of the tragedy were attended to, was a gesture hitherto unknown in his experience.

Did such an extraordinary performance point to her own guilt, or any participation in the crime?

Fleming Stone had long passed the stage where any assumption, however shocking, could be classed as impossible, unless material facts denied it.

Girls had been driven to crime because of a thwarted love affair, or other grave injustice, and to put it mildly, Rosella was an odd sort.

She was nobody's fool, that was patent, but what was she?

Like all detectives, Fleming Stone considered motive and opportunity of primary importance in blocking out an investigation.

Yet he had encountered occasions when motives were so complicated and opportunities so obscure, that he had come to recognize when he met it a case calling for quick attention to its own presentation of evidence.

Here, he had a man killed, with three other men in the next room. The three had gone in, singly, to speak to him, and each returned in a few minutes. This cleared the first two, leaving the third a possible suspect. But the third was Davis, the somewhat colorless Davis, the one least likely to commit a crime.

Naturally, Stone knew that by all the laws of the Medes and Persians, the least likely man is your proper suspect. But, he also knew that nine times out of ten this rule fails to work.

Far more likely the unknown intruder, who was not one of the happy hopeful, high-spirited trio, working in harmony with their patron and leader. A rank outsider, of course, who had his own reasons for wanting to rid the world of the well-known financier. Or a more personal acquaintance of Allenby's with a long-nursed private grievance that had just now broken bounds.

Well, his part was to hunt and search and ferret and pry, until some tiny spark, some half-caught sound should give him a hint which way to look.

Next morning he went first to see Grant, the secretary of the murdered man. He found him in the many-roomed office suite that held Robert Allenby's various business interests.

Grant had already been apprised by the early-rising Rosella that she had engaged Mr. Stone's services, and also that she looked to him to give the detective any and all assistance he possibly could.

"I am so glad to see you, Mr. Stone," the secretary said. "I feel like the lone survivor of a stranded ship, and I don't know which way to turn."

"Mr. Allenby was singularly alone in all his business interests, wasn't he?"

"Yes, but that was all right so long as he was here himself. Now, it seems everything must drop to pieces and fall apart, without his personal presence."

"But he had three partners—"

"Three partners! He had no partner."

"Mr. Curtis—"

"Oh, you mean the Fair proposition. That is a thing by itself. Those three men are connected with Mr. Allenby only in that one matter. Not at all in any other way."

"But, of course, he left his affairs in order? His lawyer will know all details?"

"To a certain limit, yes. But there are new matters claiming immediate attention that the lawyer knows nothing about."

"You'll have to have expert assistance, I assume. Now, Mr. Grant, I am engaged by Miss Allenby to try to find her father's murderer, and I am starting my inquiries right here. I want you to tell me anything you can that may have a bearing on the case, but first explain to me the

exhibition to be shown at the World's Fair. Is that to redound to Mr. Allenby's benefit, financially, or is it of a philanthropic character?"

"Oh, it is planned as an enormous money-making proposition. Mr. Allenby is the originator, and he asked men he knew to help him because they were just the ones for the parts he assigned them."

"Did he propose to add to the number?"

"That I don't know. Few knew Mr. Allenby's plans in advance. He was a powerful man, and he could get concessions and permissions from the heads of the Fair committees with ease. His plans were progressing surely, if not rapidly, and yet he had things so arranged that if the scheme fell through, little harm would be done."

"I see. Now, these men. Will you give me a brief and merely superficial description of them."

"Surely. Mr. Curtis is the salt of the earth. He's not a well man, at present, and his illness has somewhat impaired his disposition. But Mr. Allenby consulted with him on all subjects, and he was just about the first Gold-stick-in-waiting, where the show was concerned."

"Who came next in Mr. Allenby's estimation?"

"Oh, they weren't definitely graded. Barton is a wide-awake sort of jack-of-all-trades. He was ready to do anything to further Mr. Allenby's plans, and made good ones of his own. Also he is a good financier. Mr. Allenby took up the money matters with him, because of his quick appreciation of the commercial value of this or that and the probability of gain or loss it offered."

"And Davis?"

"Munson Davis was the brake. Whenever the other three lost their heads, and planned to import the Sultan of Sulu or Mussolini, Davis just turned a stopcock and made them see that they were going ridiculous. Oh, they were a fine quartet, with Mr. Allenby keeping everything happy and peaceful, putting up more and more money as it became necessary, and getting anything he asked for from the Powers That Be."

“So we can’t look upon any of the three as a suspect?”

“No more than the King of Siam. I suppose you have to take such things into consideration, unthinkable as they are. Must you suspect the house servants? Rosella? Me? The other employees here? Get through with them as fast as you can, and get down to brass tacks. Maybe I can help you.”

“You’ve sized it up about right. I do have to consider the servants, also Miss Allenby, also yourself. But granting them cleared of suspicion, who is in your mind that will be of help to me? Who is your brass tack?”

“Nobody, for certain. But there are two or three of Mr. Allenby’s friends—so-called—who have such an enmity against him that it would not be at all surprising to learn that they had lost their heads and gone the limit.”

“That is an interesting statement, and I shall be glad to learn more about it. Just a minute, first. Had Mr. Allenby no relatives that he cared for? No kin, however distant?”

“A few persons, yes. But so really distant, so nearly unknown, that they cannot be considered. And why would they kill their far-removed cousin? What would that get them? There was nothing in his will for them. Better come here and try to curry favor with him.”

“But we have to consider some such individual, who might think he could do away with his rich cousin and then contest the will, or make some claim for recognition.”

“Not likely. But possible, I suppose. Has he shown up?”

“Not to my knowledge. Now, back to the Fair Show for a minute. You know the business side of it, is it a Stock Company, or just a group of four private citizens?”

“More like that, but not either, exactly. There’s an agreement drawn up, of which each holds a copy. They promise nothing more than general fealty and honor to the enterprise and to one another. It provides that should one of the four die, the three survivors would carry on; if another died, or in any way fell by the wayside, two should stick it; if a third was

removed, the sole survivor could do whatever he liked with the whole business and with whatever money remained.”

“Fair enough.”

“Oh, yes; they didn’t bother much about the terms, they knew anything Robert Allenby was at the head of would be above criticism.”

“And they anticipated big returns?”

“They did that! You see, Mr. Allenby had always been sort of fond of the Freaks in the circus sideshow, but he hated anything coarse or illiterate. And you know yourself, the usual Fat Lady is seldom a genuine Vere de Vere. Well, sir, that man was so intensely absorbed in this game of his that he planned to educate a Fat Lady, to find a living skeleton who is also a highbrow, and a clown who is a gentleman.”

“Marvelous ingenuity! I wish I might have known Robert Allenby.”

“He was a One-er! Aside from anything else, he had a gentle, kindly nature. He’d do anything for anybody, unless they offended him and then he’d see that they got what was coming to them. I say, Mr. Stone, do you—er—do you know Rosella’s plans?”

Not being entirely dense, Stone grasped the situation.

“No,” he said, “I don’t. But I do think she should have someone to look after her. She’s a fine young woman, but too young to be left so absolutely on her own.”

“Oh, I don’t know. The younger generation isn’t too young for anything. They can put over what older and wiser people would balk at. Rosella Allenby can swing more than a murder mystery and a big fortune. I’m mighty glad she called you in, though I’m greatly surprised. It’s a wonder she didn’t insist on doing her own sleuthing. I’m in love with her, of course. Probably she knows it, but it won’t bother her any. And I shan’t bother her. I know better than to blink at a star of her magnitude. I am willing to do all I can in the way of settling up Mr. Allenby’s affairs, and then raise my hat and walk off down the path. Now, if I can be of any help to you, just say so, and if not—well, yes, I am busy.”

Stone smiled but refused to act on the hint.

“Can’t let up on you yet,” he said; “a few words more about the Enterprise—what do they call it?”

“Oh, just the Fair Show, now. They’re going to invent a name.”

“Then the three will carry on?”

“Can’t say for sure, but that’s the understanding. I rather think they will.”

“Who will be at the head of it?”

“Dunno. Maybe Curtis. He’s a big man.”

“But ill?”

“Yes, that is true, though I don’t notice it much. It’s a weird illness, you know.”

“I don’t know. Tell me.”

“Ask Rosella, or better still ask Curtis himself. Personally, I think the Fair racket a fool business. Only the genius of Robert Allenby could have pushed it across. But it’s not my affair. My salary pays for work in this office and I’ll do it as long as required.”

“This death will make a stir in lots of circles.”

“Oh, yes. The stock market will wobble around, but it will get its balance again. The funeral will require some engineering, the Insurance people will soon begin to buzz around, and the trustees or executors will soon have troubles of their own with death duties and inheritance taxes. Everything must be referred to Rosella, there’s no one else, but she can swing it. What bothers me is her going in for detective work. Talk it out of her if you can. She has good sense, but in her zeal she may stop at nothing and maybe go too far.”

“I’ll do my best to restrain her and I doubt if she raises any very great ructions. As a first move I’m going to interview the three partners. Give me their addresses, will you? My first port of call will be Curtis.”

“Handle Curtis gently. He’s a fine chap, but touchy of late. Jump all over Davis, he needs it. Milquetoast, you know. Just talk sense to Barton. He’s set in his way, but open to conviction. Going? Good-bye for now. Glad to see you again when you can make it convenient.”

Fleming Stone went away with a question mark in his mind about Mr. Grant. He seemed all right, probably was all right, but he showed a sort of satisfaction in his suddenly attained duties that lacked any visible sign of an accompanying sadness or regret. One couldn’t expect him to weep over the loss of his friendly employer, but Stone rather resented the eagerness with which the secretary was sorting out his duties and getting busy about them.

He hailed a taxi and went to see Curtis, who lived several blocks away. The apartment was an older one than the Allenby’s and had a warmer, cosier air.

Stone was shown into the library, where his host joined him, greeting him with a grave, almost solemn, expression.

Charles Curtis was a tall, thin man. Thin, not in the sense of slender and gracile, nor yet scrawny and emaciated, but lean and gaunt with big bones that seemed insufficiently padded under his dark, leathery skin.

He didn’t look really ill, and Stone wondered what Grant had meant by speaking of a weird illness.

The two men were soon talking earnestly about the possibilities of discovering the murderer.

“We’ve got to find him,” Curtis continually repeated. “I’m glad you’re on the job, but I want to help. I—am a bit on the occult side, you see. I’ll bet that shunts you off me, but if I can help you, you won’t balk at my methods, will you?”

“Not if it’s real help. Now, as a starter, tell me exactly what you saw when you went into Mr. Allenby’s bedroom. You went in first, didn’t you, after he went in himself?”

“No—Barton went in first. He’d just heard of the death of one of their mutual friends and wanted to tell Allenby about it alone. We other chaps didn’t know the dead man.”

“All right. Then Barton came out and you went in?”

“Yes. The door was a trifle ajar and I walked in. Allenby sat at a small table, near an open filing cabinet and was engrossed in his search for the missing paper.”

“How did you know that?”

“I didn’t know just that, but I could see what he was doing. Then, too, Barton had told us he was doing that.”

“What did you want to see Mr. Allenby about?”

“I had a new idea for one of our stunts and I wanted to ask him about it before I told the others. It meant an expensive equipment.”

“What did Mr. Allenby say?”

“He only listened absent-mindedly. I don’t believe he sensed what I was talking about. He just said, ‘I see,’ and ‘Unh-huh,’ in a vague way. I came away because I saw it was no use trying to discuss my new idea then.”

“And you left him. Where?”

“Just where I found him. Sitting beside the filing cabinet, pulling papers out and pushing them back again.”

“And then you rejoined the others in the office?”

“Yes. And we sat there so long it got on my nerves.”

“You’re a nervous man, anyway, aren’t you?”

“Yes. I suppose no man likes to admit he’s nervous, but I am and I own right up to it.”

“Any definite reason for it?”

“Well, yes. I think so. But we won’t talk of that now.”

“All right. Well, then, Davis went in to Mr. Allenby’s room?”

“Yes. He knew we had all been in, and he ought to have an equal privilege.”

“What did he want to see Mr. Allenby about?”

“Well, you see, Davis is always hard up. And he’s always trying to sell his pictures. He can’t do it, but he keeps on trying. Every once in a while he has an exhibition and works off a few that way. He’s planning one now and he wanted to ask Allenby for a little help. Allenby was a generous chap, and he liked Davis, and ordinarily he would have offered to pay for the rent of a gallery for the exhibition, or something like that. But Davis says he was so absorbed in hunting for some paper—a contract or something—that he scarcely paid any attention to Davis’ plan for selling his pictures, and so Davis left him and came back to us.”

“Davis look upset, or anything like that?”

“Well, yes, he did; but by that time we were all rather upset by Allenby’s long absence.”

“What did you do?”

“Nothing, just sat there. Davis drew some scraps of sketches, I got up and walked round the room—couldn’t sit still. Barton drummed on the table with his fingers—that always drives me frantic! So at last, at the limit of my patience, I went in to drag Allenby out.”

“And found?”

“Found him lying on the couch.”

“Did you know at once that he was dead?”

“There was a red splotch on his shirtfront, but I think I should have known anyway. His eyes were staring; one hand hung limply down, and the red stain—well, I called out—”

“In fright?”

“I can’t say I was frightened, so much as shocked, stunned—well, flabbergasted.”

“The others came right in?”

“Yes, and I recovered my wits partially. I realized what had happened and what we had to do. For some reason they put the brunt of the situation on me. I was willing, God knows, but it was all so awful—”

“I understand,” Stone said kindly. “Never mind yourself. What did the others do?”

“Oh, I don’t know. We called the servants and they called the police—”

“At your direction?”

“Yes, I think so. It all seems vague to me.”

“I’m sorry to have to prod you, Mr. Curtis, but these questions must be asked and answered. Did either of your companions seem uneasy or frightened?”

“As if they were implicated, do you mean?”

“Yes, that is what I mean.”

“Then, no, sir. They did not. They acted as any two very much surprised men would, in the same circumstances.”

“I see. So, there seems no possibility but that some enemy came into the bedroom after Davis left it, and swiftly stabbed Mr. Allenby and disappeared. I know you were knocked silly by the dreadful discovery you made, and at first could scarcely pull yourself together, but you quickly recovered, didn’t you?”

Curtis looked up sharply.

“Are you doubting any part of my story?”

“Yes,” Stone said, “I am. But go on. You can probably make all clear. Then when the police came, they addressed themselves to you?”

“They did.” Curtis had put on an added dignity. “As the oldest of the quartet, and as a longtime friend of Mr. Allenby, they seemed to think me the best one to take the helm.”

“Quite right. It seems that way to me. It was brave of you to conquer your nervousness sufficiently to take charge of things. Shall you three continue the plans for the Fair Exhibition?”

“I hope we can do so, but I do not want to be at the head of it. I am willing to work, but not to assume the primary responsibility.”

“No, you are hardly well enough for such an undertaking.”

“I’m not ill!” and Curtis bristled as if he had been affronted. “I’m perfectly well, save for this slight nervousness.”

“It isn’t slight. Tell me how you acquired it.”

At will, Stone could show a winning sympathy that almost always made a man confide in him. Moreover, a man of Charles Curtis’ temperament is usually pleased and proud to discuss his own indisposition.

“It’s a curse,” he said solemnly.

For once, Stone was startled out of his calm.

“A what!” he said.

“A curse. A heathenish, diabolical, Oriental curse.”

“Wished on you?”

“Not exactly that. I brought it on myself.”

“How?”

“You’ll laugh at me, if I tell you.”

“Perhaps I shall, but tell me all the same.”

Chapter V

The Strange Illness Of Charles Curtis

So Curtis told him.

“It was this way,” he began. “You remember when the tomb of King Tutankhamen was opened—in Egypt?”

“Oh, yes; about a dozen years ago, or more.”

“It was in nineteen-twenty-two,” Curtis said, a faraway look in his eyes. “I was among the first to visit it after it was opened. I had a letter of introduction from some high muck-a-muck that let me through the lines.”

“It was a wonderful sight?”

“No words can express it! Of course it was a scene of wild disorder. Gold furniture and chests and armor and trinkets of all sorts, though many of the treasures had already been shipped to the Cairo Museum. But it was the awe of the scene, the great mummy cases, three of them, one inside another, the marvels of alabaster, the ornaments and decorations—why, there were a hundred and forty-three beautiful pieces right in the coffin with the mummy.”

“You’re an archaeologist?”

“Yes, and an antiquarian. If I had my health, I’d be back in Egypt right now. That’s the place for thrills! The sight of those things is enough to turn a man’s head! Just to see that great gold diadem, positively encrusted with jewels, the gold masks, of marvelous skilled workmanship, the daggers with gemmed hilts, alabaster perfume boxes, gold and jeweled headdresses, and furniture—well, that was beyond all description!”

“And you got in on the ground floor?”

“Oh, yes, I had a friend at court. But who didn’t? You’d have been amazed to see the tourists who turned up with impressive-looking documents signed by powers of all countries. They had to be let in, with the result that work on the tomb was greatly impeded and took far longer than it should have. However, I cared little for all that so long as I had my privileges and could wander in and out at will. I’ve always been like that—wanting to investigate things for myself. My life’s desire has

always been to dig down into Shakespeare's tomb at Stratford. You know the epitaph says:

*Blest be the man who spares these stones,
And curst be he who moves my bones.*

"But I've always wanted to investigate. However, my enthusiasm diminished when I read, the other day, that his grave is seventeen feet deep."

"Why so far down?"

"I'm not sure, but I have my theories. Anyway, I'd brave the curse if I could get at the grave."

"Then you braved a curse, going into the tomb of the Egyptian King?"

"Yes, and I'm suffering from it now."

"Mr. Curtis, are you serious? Do you really think that experience of fourteen years ago resulted in this semi-invalidism you are now enduring?"

"Certainly I do. You don't know how many people were affected by that curse that hung over the intruders on the privacy of the great king, Tutankhamen."

"I know pretty nearly the number who think they were affected or may yet be affected."

"You do! How do you know that?"

"Well, to get it, I'd find out from the Cook Agencies how many took passage to Egypt that year, and allow half as many again for those who went on private excursions, and I'd arrive at a fair estimate."

"Oh, pshaw, you're being funny. But if you'd been there, you'd have understood the awfulness of the desecration. No wonder a curse rested on the daring marauders! Why, the head ones were stricken down shortly after the opening of the tomb."

“But not necessarily because of it. And the archaeologists don’t like to hear of those deaths.”

“Of course they don’t. And not only deaths; some are cursed as I am with shattered nerves, failing strength, weakening intellect—”

“Oh, come now,” Stone interrupted, “that’s all foolishness. You’re a bit run down, but a tonic or a vacation will soon set you up.”

“It isn’t like that. I have a first class doctor, and he admits he can’t understand my case. He wants to send me to a sanitarium, but I won’t go. They try to feed me up, but that does no good. They’re going to try blood transfusion, oh they’re not neglecting me. But I can’t respond to any treatment. Doctor threatens psycho-analysis, but I’ve no use for that sort of thing.”

“What does the doctor call it?”

“Some sort of anæmia, but a variety new to him. Never mind about me. Tell me how you’re going to set to work to discover the killer of Robert Allenby. There was a great and good man!”

“You admired him?”

“More than admired him—I almost worshipped him.”

“You’re an enthusiast, Mr. Curtis, but all speak well of him. Now, I’m addressing you as the one best acquainted with him. To your knowledge was he inclined to make enemies?”

“Not inclined to, no, I should say not! He had enemies, who hasn’t? but they were people who were jealous or envious of his continued successes, and who sometimes thought he took successes that should have been theirs. This was not so, never was a fairer or juster man than Robert Allenby.”

“I’ve never heard anything contrary to that statement. Now, as to the Fair plan. He expected to reap a harvest from that?”

“He did and he would have done so had he lived. I don’t see how we can carry on without him, but the other two men are younger and more active than I, and they think we can swing it. But they want me to take

the command, the dictatorship. Well, that is as it should be. I am the oldest, I knew Allenby more intimately than they did, I know far more of his plans than they do and my experience has trained me for such a post better than either of theirs. Yes, if the plan proceeds, it would be better all round for me to take Allenby's place."

"Would you then have charge of the finances?"

"That we would attend to together. Barton was sort of treasurer, because he has a natural aptitude for figures, but we share the responsibilities equally."

"Of course, Mr. Curtis, you doubtless assume that in my investigation I must consider the possibility of one of you three as the criminal. I speak frankly, because that is my usual way, and while I have no definite suspicion, I must follow a logical routine."

"Oh, I understand all that. Go ahead with your questions."

"Then, have you any suspicion of either of your two colleagues?"

Stone spoke almost casually, and Curtis answered in the same key.

"No, I haven't. I admit there must be such a possibility, but I know of nothing pointing toward it."

"Would you tell me, if you did?"

"Yes, I should. If any of us three murdered our head, I want to see him receive his just deserts."

"You are noble to include yourself, and I may as well tell you, frankly, that I propose to ask each of you three as to the other two. Tell me, then, can you throw any light on the motives of Mr. Barton and Mr. Davis?"

"You take my breath away!" Curtis looked startled. "Most certainly there was no motive for any of us. We were all happy to be in the affair, and all happy to have Mr. Allenby at our head. His wealth, prestige and capability assured a success, which none of us could attain without him. Of course, now, we know his plans; we have his money; we are on our way; it is possible we may make a go of it, but not to the extent of success Mr. Allenby's presence would have insured."

“To return to the scene of the tragedy. How long was Mr. Allenby in his bedroom before Mr. Barton went in?”

“Hard to say. We were talking and time flies. Maybe ten minutes, I’d say.”

“Long enough, then, for the killer to come into the bedroom, accomplish his awful errand and go out again, before the next man went in?”

Curtis looked dazed, and drew his hand across his forehead.

“You mean, Robert was murdered before Barton went into the bedroom?”

“Mightn’t he have been?”

“And then, Barton came out, and—and I went in—and saw Robert—”

“No, I suppose it couldn’t have been that way. But it seems strange for Mr. Allenby to be so long looking for papers that he should have had all ready for you.”

“Yes, but I don’t understand. If the man came and killed him, and Barton went in and found him dead, why didn’t he make an outcry? I did—”

“Not the first time you entered the bedroom.”

“Mr. Stone, what are you getting at? Are you accusing me of murder?”

“By no means. But, if you know the ways of detectives at all, you must know that we can’t always feel sure of the answers we get from our witnesses. And, too, I don’t mind telling you that it is my way to ask questions, and then, more from the manner of my witness than from his words, deduce the truth.”

“You’re fussing me all up, and then you’re going to take advantage of my being rattled, hoping I’ll say something I didn’t intend to say?”

“You’re not stating that quite fairly, but, if such procedure would bring out the truth, I’d willingly try it.”

“I’m disappointed in you, Mr. Stone. I had assumed you would feel more faith in three men selected by Robert Allenby to be his faithful assistants.”

“I’ve expressed no unfaith. I’m simply going about my business in my usual way. Well, size up your two partners for me, and I’ll stop pestering you. I know in your state of health, you ought not to be troubled with mental problems more than necessary.”

“My state of health is all right,” Curtis grew testy, “but I’m not sure I want to tell tales against my pals.”

“You have tales to tell against them, then?”

“Not especially, but I know you don’t care for tales in their favor.”

Fleming Stone laughed outright.

“One to you, Mr. Curtis. And you’re right. Tales in their favor would be a pleasure to hear, but would be of small help in my work. If you don’t know anything about them to their detriment, I’ll be jogging.”

“Oh, well—not for one single minute could I possibly suspect either of those two men, but I can say Barton will be a little relieved to do as he likes, without Allenby to interfere with him.”

Stone smiled quizzically.

“That’s a light on Barton’s nature,” he said, “but surely, not enough to found a suspicion on.”

“Who’s founding suspicions?” Curtis snapped; “not I, I’m sure.”

“No indeed. And Davis? Isn’t he the sort of man of whom people say, ‘He wouldn’t hurt a fly’?”

“Yes. He’s a hesitater. He’d never get us anywhere, but he has positive inspiration when it comes to decorative effects and proper settings.”

“He couldn’t kill anybody then?”

“A question like that cannot be answered,” Curtis said shortly; “some wiseacre has said ‘We are all capable of crime, even the best of us,’ but who knows if that is true? I can’t imagine Davis killing anybody—”

Stone interrupted him.

“Imagination is limitless—” the detective said. “We can imagine the cow jumped over the moon, though we know it is impossible. Had Munson Davis disagreements now and then with Allenby?”

“Oh, yes, in fact they often disagreed. But it was only about trifles, a matter of costume or interior decoration. They always settled things amicably. But I reckon you’d better choose Barton or me as a suspect before Davis.”

“I’m not choosing,” said Stone. “Suspects make themselves as a rule.”

Mrs. Curtis came into the room. She was an odd-seeming woman who sat with her eyes cast down, raising them suddenly, on occasion, with a piercing stare.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Stone,” she had a nice voice, “but can’t you postpone further questioning of my husband? He is very nervous today and I want him to have a rest.”

“He is ill, Mrs. Curtis?” Stone looked sympathetic.

“He is, and he always will be, as a result of that awful Egyptian experience of his.”

“Oh, come now, you don’t believe in that foolish poppycock about a curse, do you? The age of superstition is past.”

Mary Curtis looked at him with a slight air of condescension.

“Egyptians have strange cults,” she said, “not foolish superstitions, but ancient laws and traditions which they regard with awe and respect, and they deeply resent any scorn or ridicule of them.”

“And you think that some such resentment is being visited on Mr. Curtis and causes his illness?”

“I’m not ill!” Curtis declared.

“Yes, you are, Charlie,” said his wife, flashing a reproving glance at him. “And you’re getting worse every day.”

Stone thought her suggestions were helping along the illness, and he said:

“I fear I can’t agree with you, Mrs. Curtis, that your husband’s indisposition comes from the malevolence of the ancient Egyptians.”

She flashed her eyes at him.

“Mr. Stone,” she said, very seriously, “perhaps to you the idea of danger to human life from unwarranted intrusion into a sacred tomb may not appeal, but you must admit, for it has been proved, that very real physical menace is hidden in the atmosphere of those old tombs and actual, if mysterious, forces are liberated and take vengeance on disturbers of their sanctity.”

“And this noxious and supernatural force remains active through the centuries, and attacks its victims at will?”

“Yes, Mr. Stone,” Curtis said gravely, “but I agree with my wife that it is time I went to take a rest, so I’m going to ask you to cut this interview short and renew it later on.”

“All right,” said Stone cheerfully, “and I’d like it if I might call on you some time and hear you tell of your Egyptian experiences without mention of detective work.”

“Do,” Curtis said heartily. “Now, anything more of real importance before you go?”

“One thing more, rather personal, and perhaps I’d better address Mrs. Curtis.” He smiled as the lady’s eyes flashed a glance of inquiry.

“It’s this,” Stone went on; “is either of the other two members of your Fair Committee in love with Miss Rosella Allenby?”

“Both of them,” Mrs. Curtis said promptly; but Curtis demurred.

“Oh, I don’t think so,” he declared, “not Barton, anyway.”

“Yes, Barton, too,” the lady insisted. “But, Mr. Stone, if you’re going to interview those two men, you’ll doubtless find out for yourself. Rosella is an attractive girl, if she is of a bossy sort. And her newly inherited fortune, which is, of course, enormous, must attract any man.”

“That’s true enough, but I meant to ask only regarding Mr. Davis and Mr. Barton.”

“How about Rosella for a suspect?” Mrs. Curtis’ strange eyes flashed up and fell again as she said this. “I am not one to denounce my own sex, but Rosella does want to marry Fred Stafford, and her father wouldn’t hear of it.”

“Bosh!” exclaimed Curtis. “That’s merely a childish fancy; Allenby often told me so. And Stafford is no man for Rosella!”

“Girls of twenty-two don’t have childish fancies,” his wife said; “Rosella would have eloped with him long ago, but that she so loved her father. And she is a strange character. She might have—”

“Hush, Mary,” her husband bade her, and uninterested in this conversation, Fleming Stone went away.

He had really no suspicion of Rosella, and to think she would have gone up the back way and struck down her father while the three men were in the next room was preposterous.

He went straight on to call on Barton.

Peter Barton was an architect, and a good one. Some said his assistant did most of his work, but if so, it was only the routine work. The inspired ideas that Barton often had were all his own.

He had planned the way he thought Allenby’s show ought to be housed and, with David’s genius for decoration, the outlook was admirable.

He welcomed Stone, dismissed his assistant and sat down for a confab.

“Let’s talk about Allenby first,” he began. “Tell me what you think of the possibilities of catching the murderer and how you’re going to set about

it, and how we fellows can help, if at all. And we'll talk over the Fair plans after that. I've heard great tales of your work, and if you can solve this problem, it will be a feather in your cap, unless your cap is a war-bonnet already and in no need of feathers."

"I hope I can do this job," Stone said. "Every new case I take up seems to me the most enthralling I've ever had, but this is a fascinating lay-out. How about your three partners, Mr. Barton? Can you vouch for all three?"

"Only for one, positively," Barton looked serious. "I think I know Davis and Curtis, but sometimes I find myself surprised at the acts of my most intimate friends and I'm not sure I can vouch for anybody except Peter Barton."

"I'm glad you speak frankly. But as you say, let's talk of the victim first and suspects afterward. Mr. Allenby wouldn't attempt suicide?"

"Oh, Lord, no! And the fact that the weapon wasn't found in his hand precludes that."

"I know. You don't think he could have stuffed it down in the couch, after using it? There are on record cases where a man has lived a few moments after a fatal stab."

"Of course I'm not an expert judge of such points. Those must be decided by the medical people. But I know Allenby would never have wanted to kill himself. He had too much to live for and he was too fond of life. He loved his home, adored his daughter, liked his friends and was avid for pleasures of many sorts. No, sir. Cut out all thought of suicide. Call it murder, as it must have been."

"Very well," Stone agreed. "Now, still sticking to our subject, did Mr. Allenby leave directions as to what should happen to his Fair plans in the event of his death?"

"They were not exclusively his Fair plans. We were an organized body, perhaps a bit irregular in some of our ideas, but duly and legally bonded and recorded. Curtis and Davis always studied over the contracts and things before signing, but such matters are confusing to me, and I just

signed anything they did. I knew whatever Robert Allenby and the two other partners agreed to was all right by me.”

“But you’re an expert mathematician, I hear.”

“Too strongly put. I have a head for figures, and can keep books accurately, but I’m no wizard.”

“Then you are treasurer of the association?”

“Not definitely, as yet. You see, though we were organized, we were not at all in working order. Our meetings were entirely informal, and we just talked. But things were focussing, and Mr. Allenby would have pulled up the drawstrings very soon, had he lived. We three who are left must have a meeting soon, and see where we are. I’m not at all sure we can go on with the plans.”

“You would prefer to do so?”

“Oh, yes, we all would, I’m sure. Curtis would have to be at the head.”

“Why?”

“Best one for it. Davis is too ignorant of any business proceedings, I am too impulsive and incapable of looking ahead, but Curtis is wise, experienced, and sound of judgment. He’s nearer like Allenby than any of us and he’s the one for the presidency.”

“Ill, isn’t he?”

“Hypochondriacal, if you call that ill. Thinks he’s hobbled by witchcraft or something demoniacal.”

“Connected with the experiences he had in Egypt?”

“He thinks so, but it’s all imagination.”

“Do the doctors say that?”

“Probably not to him. He’s a profitable patient. They coddle him along, to keep the case.”

“Do they dose him?”

“With aspirin and pyramidon and suchlike mild nostrums.”

“I see. You have complete confidence in Mr. Curtis, then, if you want him for your president?”

“Confidence! Why not? Of course we have. Look here, Mr. Stone, you’re not really suspecting any of us three men, are you?”

“Suspecting you of what?”

“Of being implicated in the death of Robert Allenby!”

Barton spoke with astonishment rather than anger, and Stone said, calmly:

“I can’t suspect till I have some evidence and I haven’t seen any yet.”

“Well, when you do, you just let me know. You hinted at us three before, but I didn’t think you meant it.”

“But you must know I have to look everywhere, and when you tell me of your plan of making Mr. Curtis president, I at once set it down in my mind as a word in his favor.”

“If you’re looking everywhere, as you say, you’ll surely strike a suspect far more likely than Charlie Curtis.”

“I daresay I shall. But I consider everyone in any way connected with the case. Even Miss Rosella.”

“If that’s a joke, it’s a pretty poor one.”

“It isn’t a joke. Women have been suspected and convicted before this.”

“Mr. Stone,” Barton spoke earnestly, “if in your work you are compelled to suspect Rosella Allenby, you will of course investigate the possibility of her guilt. But let me ask you to be very sure that you have real and positive reason to suspect her before you open the matter. Will you promise me this?”

And Fleming Stone promised.

“You doubtless argue from that request,” Barton went on, “that I am in love with Miss Allenby. And so I am, but I never shall tell her so. I am too old for the girl, and she scarcely notices me, but all the same, I mean to look after her welfare in any way I can, now that she has lost her father’s care.”

“Good for you,” said Fleming Stone, “I’ll help all I can.”

Chapter VI

The Great Project Of The Sports

AFTER his interview with Barton, Stone went to see Lovell.

“Where do you stand,” Stone asked the Commander of the Homicide Bureau, “as to the three men who are so especially affected by Allenby’s death?”

“I don’t believe any of them had a hand in the killing, if that’s what you mean.”

“That is what I mean. Why do you dismiss them at once?”

“Logic tells me to. Those three men were in for great good luck. To be in any deal with Robert Allenby is good luck for anybody, and to be his actual partners in an enterprise as big as their Fair proposition is a Godsend. Not one of them would want to remove the keystone from a structure that must now fall to pieces.”

“The three may continue the plan.”

“They may try to, but they can’t succeed. No, they are all three smart enough to know that the loss of Allenby means the destruction of their hopes.”

“I don’t think they do feel that way about it.”

“Well, they ought to,” Lovell scowled. “They’re like a ship without a captain. Curtis is the best balanced of the lot, but he won’t live forever.”

“You think he’s seriously ill, then, from his Oriental curse?”

“I think he’s seriously ill, but not from that cause. He’s suffering from some sort of pernicious anæmia, the reason for which is not known. It’s a disease that puzzles the doctors, but they seldom are able to cure it. Everything possible is being done for Curtis, but he’s a doomed man if I ever saw one. He’s what the people in my old home-town used to call ‘struck with death.’ ”

“He has that look. But I’ve known such cases where the patient lived a long time.”

“Not after he reached the stage Curtis is at. And, too, look at the circumstances. Allenby was shut in his bedroom. Barton went in first, found him all right, left him all right. Curtis went in next, found him all right, left him all right. Davis went in last, found Allenby all right, came out and left him there—still all right. Then, after a wait, Curtis goes in and finds Allenby dead. He screeches for the rest and they all rush in. Now of course, somebody got in the room and killed Allenby after Davis left. An outsider, of course. He could have got in easily from the back passages, or he could have been in the bedroom cupboard or in the bathroom all the time.”

“Or Curtis could have killed him—if he had wanted to, after he went in the second time.”

“No,” Lovell said, decidedly, “I questioned them all, and the body was growing cold, when they entered. If Curtis had just stabbed him, it would have been at natural warmth.”

“Maybe you take their statements too literally. However, we have to admit that if any of the three did do it, it looks like Curtis.”

“Curtis!” Lovell said, scoffingly; “a grand suspect! Why, Curtis was Allenby’s right-hand man. He stood nearer to the boss than any of the others. And he had a cinch, owing to his illness. He had no real work to do, just sit up and give his opinions on this or that, and use his expert judgment as to the selection of the freaks. A silly plan, I’ll say! A bunch of highbrow Freaks! If anybody less than Robert Allenby had suggested it, I’d say he was a subject for a lunatic asylum. Circus Freaks we’ve known all our lives, but modernized, refined, brought up to date. Ridiculous!”

“They all think Allenby could have put it over.”

“And I don’t say he couldn’t, I’ve never known him to fail in any attempt. But Curtis can’t swing it, nor Davis, nor Barton. Nor all three together. Nor can they get a boss like Allenby. Mark my word, Mr. Stone, there’ll be no exhibition of Superior Freaks at the Fair—if, indeed, there is a Fair.”

“I understand it is all tentative, dependent on having the Fair, and all ready to be cancelled if the World’s Fair project should be given up.”

“Yes, all of that.”

“Then what we have to do is to find the man who had it in for Mr. Allenby, whether in connection with the Freak affair or not.”

“Or the woman.”

“Meaning Miss Rosella?”

“Heavens, no! what an awful suggestion! Do get that out of your mind. I mean some woman with a grievance against Allenby, some private affair, you know—”

“Allenby doesn’t strike me as a man who would let his private affairs get to such a point as that. He was too far-seeing to let a lady friend get wrought up to the point of killing him. And, how could she get into the house?”

“Anybody can get in the back way, if they know the ropes. And, it might have been someone living in the house. I don’t mean a tenant, though that’s not out of the question, but, perhaps one of the maids or housekeepers. Oh, Lord, there are too many ways to look. But how dare you mention Miss Rosella?”

“Don’t be silly! That’s no daring venture. Surely you know that all people who had any connection with Allenby must be considered. They say Miss Allenby favored a suitor unacceptable to her father.”

“And if she did, it could have been arbitrated somehow. Rosella Allenby was a most devoted daughter to a doting father. She never killed him in

favor of a suitor of any sort. She might have eloped, but never would she raise her hand against her beloved parent.”

“No, probably not. Well, how about suspecting the suitor? What’s his name?”

“Fred Stafford, I suppose you have in mind.” Lovell’s expression showed he held no very high opinion of said Stafford. “He’s a decent chap, but not good enough for the handsome Rosella.”

“An heiress, too.”

“Oh, Stafford’s rolling in money himself. But he’s an inert, lackadaisical sort, and Robert Allenby liked ‘em snappy.”

“Well, we have plenty of digging and delving to do—”

“All in one spot. I’ll stake my reputation that the murderer was concealed in the bathroom or a cupboard nearby, all the time the partners were going in and out of the bedroom.”

“And I,” returned Stone, “will stake my reputation that he wasn’t. If he had been, he would have struck sooner. Why stay in hiding so long? If he meant to stab, anyway, why not get about it quicker?”

“Have you seen the three partners?” Lovell inquired.

“I’ve seen two, and I’m now going to interview Davis. I don’t hope for much. If any of the three is guilty, he’s clever enough to hoodwink me. I’m not infallible. People impute to me more mystic power than I possess. I can’t see through a brick wall.”

“Any favorite among the Powerful Three?”

“No. Curtis had opportunity at the last, but I can see no motive for any of them. But I think it a waste of time to search too insistently for a motive. Take care of the results and the motives will take care of themselves. When will the funeral be held?”

“Thursday, I’m told.”

“And it’s Tuesday now. I doubt we’ll jail our offender quickly. He’s a slick bird, I think.”

Stone left and hailing a taxi, went at once to see Munson Davis.

He tracked him down at his club, an artists’ organization, including only members who believed that they believed the best there was to be believed in matters of art.

It was a pleasant place, and Davis took Stone to a small room where they could be alone and undisturbed.

“Tell me, will you, Mr. Davis, the simple story of this plan for an exhibition at the World’s Fair.”

“You’re on the case, and you don’t know all about that yet?” Davis said, in surprise.

“I’ve heard a lot about it, but I’d like a short story from you on the subject.”

“That’s easy. Mr. Allenby was a life-long lover of circuses and side-shows. He yearned to get up an exhibition of—er—of curious people for the New York World’s Fair. He detested anything common or sordid, and wanted his curious people to be of a more refined type than the usual circus freaks. So he was planning a collection of—of people not quite normal, but of good mind and at least fair education.”

“He had succeeded in finding some?”

“Oh, yes, quite a number.”

“Where are they?”

“In their homes, mostly. But under our jurisdiction and care. We don’t exploit these, of course, but they are safe in our custody, awaiting the time.”

“This is most interesting. Tell me of one or two, in detail.”

“Well, there’s the fat boy. He’s a charming young fellow, about eighteen, very fat, of course, but hating all exercise or athletic sports, and inclined

to read or play sedentary games. Mr. Allenby made terms with him, to continue his inactive life, to read books that would benefit him, without being too prosy, and above all to eat heartily, and under the direction of an interested physician, to continue to gain in weight without injury to his health.”

“For the first time I begin to get the idea. And a living skeleton is similarly under orders.”

“Yes, and delighted with the chance. He’s a great walker—strides along for miles every day. Has a very small appetite and eats no fattening foods. This is no hardship to him, as he likes green salads and citrus drinks. He sleeps little, and over him too, a doctor watches, to be sure he isn’t overdoing things. Well, I’d rather not tell you more of that sort of thing, but Mr. Allenby was so interested in his finds that it was a pleasure to see him look after them. He supported them, of course, but to a man of his wealth that meant nothing.”

“Most interesting. Is that the fat boy?”

As usual, Davis was unconsciously or subconsciously drawing on a scrap of paper he had taken from his pocket.

He had, without thinking, produced a picture of the Fat Boy.

“He is, indeed, an attractive piece of humanity,” Stone said, appreciatively. “Good wholesome flesh, not undesirable fat.”

“Yes, everything Mr. Anderson had to do with was well done. What a pity he had to be snatched away from his work, or his play, whichever you choose to call it. He loved the game, and if the Fair proposition fizzled out, as some think it will, he was already planning for a series of exhibitions on his own hook.”

“Nobody in the list of his already engaged exhibits had any grudge against him, I suppose?”

“Far from it. They all adored him, were grateful for the employment and were trying sincerely to do as he wanted them to.”

“Which of you three is best fitted to continue the work of hunting out the right people for exhibits, and getting the further ones that may be necessary?”

“Lord, I don’t know. Not I, anyhow. I’m no good at that sort of thing. But the other two could. Barton could dig ‘em out, and Curtis could negotiate for them. I’m only good at dressing them up and fixing a scrumptious place to show them off in.”

“You’re planning a pavilion?”

“Yes, and it will be a beauty, if it ever gets built.”

“You’re dubious as to the prospects, then?”

“All of that. Of course, I can’t tell until we three partners have a consultation—”

“Have it now, and let me be at it.”

“Now and here? Good! I’ll go you. Shall I call the other fellers at once?”

“Yes. We may get somewhere.”

Inside of half an hour, the three partners and Fleming Stone were in conference.

The detective had put it squarely to the men as to whether they wanted him to stay or not.

“If you prefer a private session,” he suggested, “just say so. Of course I shall learn about it afterward, but perhaps you’d rather be alone now.”

“Not a bit of it, Mr. Stone,” Barton said. “We’re mighty glad to have you here. Maybe you can advise us, for we’re far from certain as to our immediate course of action. I’ll bet my partners here agree to that.”

“I do,” Curtis said, in his slow, dubious way. “For my part, I’m in favor of giving up the whole proposition. It’s up to us now, and you all ought to see that we can’t put it across successfully, without Allenby.”

“How about finding a man to fill Allenby’s place?” Stone asked.

“Can’t be done,” Barton declared. He spoke moodily, as if he felt Curtis was right and they would have to give up the project, and yet he couldn’t bear to do so.

“An informal vote,” said Davis, in his quiet way. “Each of us must say definitely and positively whether he wants to go on with the plan or drop it. No stipulations or arguments, just yes or no. What’s your say, Curtis?”

“No,” was the monosyllabic reply.

“Your vote, Barton,” Davis went on.

“Yes,” in a decided tone.

“Then my vote decides it,” and Davis smiled as he said, cheerfully, “and my vote is yes. Will you make it unanimous, Curtis?”

“Certainly, and I’ll do all I can. But I tell you frankly, this illness of mine, whatever it is, is getting the better of me. My doctor says I must go away, and if I go away, on a cruise or something, I can’t be of much help to the cause.”

“Well, you won’t start right off,” Barton said. “We can get matters sort of settled, and then you can go on your cruise, and we’ll hold the fort till you get back again, all cured of your megrims, or whatever they are.”

“Don’t be gone too long,” Davis objected; “and don’t get out of the way of telegraph and telephone. Barton accepts with a slick equability this responsibility, but I don’t. I hate to take the initiative, I like to follow orders.”

Barton laughed.

“Don’t worry, Munson,” he said, “if we have to run this thing in Curtis’ absence, we must just do the best we can. And for the present there’s not much to do, except looking after our Sports that we have, and trying to get more. That isn’t going to mean any great responsibility, as we’ll communicate with Curt before making a contract with any Tattooed Man or clown. And you can go ahead drawing your pictures and plans for our building, and we may develop greater capabilities than we know we have. In all seriousness, I feel sure Mr. Allenby would have wished us

to do the way I am suggesting, but if anybody doesn't agree, just speak right up."

"I agree to that," Curtis told them, "and it's the only argument that has any weight with me. If it weren't that I know we are carrying out Robert's wishes in going on with his cherished plan, I'd resign at once."

"Don't do that," begged Davis. "That would put the kibosh on the whole thing, of course. We must all stand by the ship. I'm not greatly in favor of putting in a stranger that would have sway over us all, as Allenby did, but if such a one could be found, I'd be willing to march under his banner."

"On the face of things," Barton remarked, "I'm sure it would be impossible to put a man in Allenby's place. It would mean one who had the real personal interest in the freaks that Allenby had, and you seldom see a man with such a hobby. And if one should be found, it's hardly likely that he would want to go into the venture with his whole heart and soul as Allenby did. Nor would he have the knowledge and judgment to keep up the high level of taste and sense of values that has been so far observed. Of course, there may be such a man, but a needle in a haystack would be child's play compared to finding him."

"About this time may we not expect a word from Mr. Stone?" said Curtis, smiling.

"It seems to me," Stone began, "that Mr. Barton is right. It would be next to impossible to find a man who could really fill Mr. Allenby's place. But there is an alternative. While you all agree to his fine and high-minded ideas about the mental worthiness of his Sports, may it not be possible that he overestimated the necessity for such mentality? I yield to nobody in my admiration of education and culture, but perhaps such philanthropy could be better used in some other environment. With no disparagement of Mr. Allenby's theories, now that he is gone, would you not be justified in paying less attention to that side of the Sports you are gathering up, and looking out for decent, well-behaved people with possibly no great degree of intelligence, yet far from being morons?"

There was silence a moment and then Barton said:

“I have had similar thoughts to that, Mr. Stone, but I have hesitated to speak out, lest I be thought disloyal to the man we all loved and respected. But since the idea has occurred to you, I’d be glad to know how it strikes the other members of our Committee here.”

“I’m sorry to disagree with you, Mr. Stone, and with you, too, Barton,” Munson Davis said, quickly. “But I don’t see it in that light at all. It was the chief desire of Mr. Allenby to have these Sports really intellectual, at least to a degree, and I, for one, won’t consent to lowering the high standard he had set in that matter. If you can’t bring the minds in question up to a given mark, you can’t help that, but to say deliberately that you don’t propose to try, seems to me disloyal and dishonest.”

“Dishonest?” cried Barton. “How do you get that way?”

“It’s dishonest,” Davis explained, “to go ahead carrying out Mr. Allenby’s plans, with his money, left for the purpose, and yet so change those plans that, could he know of it, he would strongly disapprove.”

“But we are unable to carry them out to the extent he intended,” Barton insisted.

“You don’t know that you are. You haven’t given it a trial. At least, you should make an endeavor.” Davis spoke coldly.

“We haven’t heard from Mr. Curtis regarding this point,” Stone observed.

“I fear I am influenced by my own selfish desires,” Curtis said, slowly. “I do want to do all things as my friend wanted them done. But I am not strong enough to go about looking up these queer people, or interviewing them after they are looked up. This is a great sorrow to me, for I’m no shirker. But all I would be able to do in the choosing would be to pass upon the appearance and manner of the candidate, and take your word as to his or her mental attainments. This is regrettable but true, and if I continue to decline as I have of late, I may not be able to do even that. Don’t think me a whiner, but I have to face the facts, and if, as my doctor insists, I must go away for a long trip, I doubt if I could be of much help by telegraph or telephone.”

“Your help is needed,” said Barton gravely. “Davis and I can’t work without you, that’s certain. I propose that we make no further definite decisions at present. Let’s leave it that we are going on if we can possibly do so. Let’s make no further plans until we learn whether Mr. Curtis is going away or not. Let’s take care of the Sports we have in charge, just as Mr. Allenby wanted them cared for. And as a proper business move, let us have a meeting soon, and have present a lawyer and a certified accountant, and from the contracts we have with Mr. Allenby, draw up a new set of contracts for the three of us that shall be satisfactory to us all, whatever happens.”

Stone looked at him.

“You are thinking of possible future tragedy,” he said.

“I am, Mr. Stone,” Barton replied. “It is foolish to be over-apprehensive but if some evil-minded villain took the life of our president, it is not altogether impossible that he may strike again. Anyway, it can do no harm to be prepared.”

“That’s right,” Curtis agreed. “In any case, the financial side of the committee’s work must be attended to for many reasons. We are all business men, and shouldn’t preside over any organization whose finances are not in proper shape. The executors of Mr. Allenby’s estate must have a complete report of our income and expenditures and that, I’m sure, will be attended to by Mr. Barton, who is, as we all know, an expert at figures. The report will not be a complicated one, as, so far, most of our disbursements are only in our imagination. But some contracts have been signed, for the Sports themselves, and, tentatively, with the Fair Committee. There are payments to be made, and, if we are to carry on, even temporarily, I suggest we take these matters up at once.”

“That’s the talk, Curtis,” Barton approved; “and as your head mathematician, I’ll see Mr. Allenby’s lawyer about the will and all that, and I’ll make up a tentative contract for us to consider, and I’ll make a schedule of what we are bound to pay, under existing conditions, and what we can discontinue or eliminate if we choose, and then we can go into a huddle over it, and have our slate all nice and clean when the executors or trustees come after us.”

“You have all contributed to this general fund of yours?” Stone asked.

“Yes,” Curtis replied. “Of course, Allenby put in most of it. In fact, he had so far put seventy thousand dollars into our general treasury, and we three put in ten thousand each. One hundred thousand at our immediate disposal, meant free play in money matters. But don’t think Allenby a lunatic. He had full charge of the money. He trusted us all, but we were duly and properly under bond, and everything was and is in apple-pie order. His death has made an enormous difference in conditions, but all is planned for. The funds remain the property of this committee, in equal shares, and if we give up the whole plan of the exhibition, we divide evenly, after paying all outstanding bills, or contracts, and are each fully entitled to one third of the residuary. That, to me, seems the best plan, but as our two younger members want to go on, I agree to do so to the best of my ability. And now, that we find no more immediate discussion of that necessary, let us turn our attention to tracking down the killer of our president.”

And I’m sure you all feel,” Stone said, “that that is in my care. Now so far as any suspicions I may have are concerned, my outlook is exceedingly limited. I know nothing and have as yet learned nothing of Mr. Allenby’s life outside this circle right here. I must search out his other friends and acquaintances, and from them learn of any enemies he may have had, or any reason for the attack that was made upon him. The possibilities are wide enough to include a large circle of suspects. So, if any of you men here learn of any clue however slight, I hope you will tell me.”

And they promised they would.

Chapter VII

Young Stafford

FLEMING STONE went home to his luncheon, and afterward sat in his library, investigating.

He had no scorn of material clues, or of personal interviews with possible suspects, but as he grew older and his experience increased, he became more and more convinced that the successful detective is the thinking detective, and that most of his successes had come from his clear-headed consideration of human impulses and their results.

And now, a sort of repetitory chorus rang in his ears, and he seemed to hear its droning recital—Curtis could have done it! Curtis could have done it!

Yes, he said to himself, humoring this persistent thought, Curtis could have done it, but why?

The answer to that was easy. If Curtis had been of a notion to kill his old friend, it would have to be because of some strong personal reason. And that pointed to Curtis' physical condition. Whatever ailed the man, he was in no condition to work and needed to retire and spend the rest of his life travelling, or resting in some quiet, happy place, with no cares of any sort. This he could do, if Allenby could be induced to give up the Fair proposition, and let his partners resign from the committee with their share of the money involved. But this could not be done if Robert Allenby continued to live and work. Only after the death of their president could the other partners give up the whole plan and retire each with one third of the net exchequer. Did Curtis bring this about?

To say that this would be out of keeping with Curtis' fine character and loyal friendship, was to impute to Curtis a high standard that Fleming Stone had no reason to believe existed.

Charles Curtis impressed him as an honest and honorable man, of steady allegiance to his own high principles and loyalty to his friends. But was this a true rating? The detective knew nothing of Curtis save what these intimate friends had told him, and what he had gathered from his call at the Curtis home.

But while there, he had gathered that Charles Curtis, though a rich man, did not possess all the money he would need to retire from business and live on his income. He was more or less of a politician, and had led a strenuous life. Now, at fifty-four, he was surely afflicted with some sort of wearing disease, which Fleming Stone felt certain was some kind of anæmia, and which would finally carry him off, probably at no distant day.

Then, too, Curtis had opportunity.

Perhaps the others had, but not so clearly.

Allenby left the room to get some necessary papers. That was all right.

Barton followed him to tell him of the suicide of a mutual friend, dear to them both. It was not a subject to discuss before strangers. That was all right. Then Curtis went in, to—what did Curtis go in for? Never mind, if he went in that bedroom to kill Allenby, whatever excuse he gave would be a sound one. Trust him for that. Then he came back. All right so far. Then Davis went in, frankly, to ask pecuniary assistance. He came back and that was all right. Of course, any one of them going in and finding Allenby dead would have made an outcry.

Then, after a long wait, Curtis, of his own motion, went into the bedroom again, to see what Allenby was so long about.

In a few minutes he called out, and the others went in.

There was his chance. Had he killed Allenby in those few minutes, variously guessed at by the others as two, three or four minutes? Had he become keyed up to it by the circumstances, and put it over with nervous haste, calling to the others in a husky, choked voice, and ready to collapse himself?

It was all possible. He could be said to have had motive, opportunity and means, for that old-fashioned jackknife might have been carried in his pocket for days, awaiting the right moment.

If Curtis, wearying at the thought of the work ahead, longed for a respite from active labor or serious thought, longed to be free to go where fancy led him, and alleviate or recover from his affliction, that was the way he could do it.

And Curtis was smart enough.

Aye, but so were the others. How about Barton and Davis?

No, Stone couldn't see either of them wanting to stop the proceedings. They were younger, about forty each, he judged, they were both fond of adventure, of excitement, of novelty. He could think of no motive for either.

And yet the thought of Curtis wasn't quite as satisfying as he would like. It seemed absurd, on the face of it. Still, if he didn't go back to kill Allenby, what did he go back for? They were not the sort of men to show such impatience at the delay of their chief. He had watched the three of them, and they were self-possessed, self-controlled and self-confident. And Curtis most calm and equable of all.

It seemed clear to Stone that Curtis went back to the bedroom for some definite and important reason.

But he was not ready to settle on this without looking in other directions, and he let his thoughts drift.

They hinted, after a time, of Fred Stafford, and Stone remembered here was a chap he wanted to cultivate.

He picked up the telephone, called Stafford and asked for an interview, explaining who he was.

Somewhat to his surprise the young man readily consented.

"Just what I'd like," he exclaimed. "Let me come to your place, won't you, then we can be uninterrupted."

"Right," Stone agreed. "Get along over here, as soon as you can make it."

Stafford, on his appearance, turned out to be not quite as Stone had pictured him.

He had been told that Stafford was a lackadaisical sort of young man, and though that word hasn't a very definite meaning, it didn't seem to fit the detective's caller.

"Awfully glad to have a talk with you," the visitor said, as he sat down, "and I've so much to say I hardly know where to begin."

"Are you here to give information or to get it?" Stone asked, smiling.

"Both," but the young man did not smile.

He was a big, somewhat sporty-looking chap, and Stone thought that physically, at least, he was a fine companion for the handsome Rosella.

“You see, Mr. Stone,” he began, “Rosella and I are beaux, but her father didn’t like me—”

“Why not?”

“I mean, not as a husband for his daughter. He seemed to like me in other ways, but he put his foot down against Rosy and me being engaged.”

“Why?”

“He never put it into so many words, but I know it was because he didn’t think me good enough for her.”

“Do you think you are?”

“That’s not a very sensible question, but I’ll answer it. Yes, I do. The fact that Rosella loves me and thinks I’m worthy of her hand seems to me to make it so. I’m a decent American citizen, a college graduate, engaged in a reputable business.”

“What is your business?”

“I own a drug store. I am an expert chemist, and I carry only the best line of goods, and employ skilled and dependable assistants. I make a good income, though I’m not a rich man like Mr. Allenby. But I am progressing, and I have one or two notions that may some time very favorably affect the drug industry to my fame and profit.”

“And your direct errand with me?”

“Is to ask you if you suspect me of having had any hand in Robert Allenby’s death, and if not, if you will say so to the police, who are on my trail.”

“How can I have any opinion as to your guilt or innocence, when I know nothing of you or your circumstances?”

“Are you always intimate with your suspects? I thought you just questioned and probed into the probabilities, and used your bean.”

“That is not unlike my usual procedure,” and Stone began to take an interest in this plain-spoken youth. “Suppose I question you.”

“Oh, do, and though it may not impress you, I promise to reply truthfully.”

“Very well. Are you fond of detective stories?”

“I like to read them, as entertainment, but they mean little to me, and I should not base any opinions about Mr. Allenby’s murder on any book I have ever read.”

“Why not?”

“Well, coming in real life, as it has, this tragedy seems altogether different from fiction. I mean, not to be judged in the same way, not to be looked upon as an entertaining puzzle, but a fearful thing, a problem that must be solved, a crime that must be discovered and punished. I’ve been, all my life, rather an easy-going sort, not taking things very seriously, but now, faced with this horror, I want to help in its investigation, and I’m not offering you the services of a silly, over-enthusiastic boy, but the expert services of a chemist, if you can use them, or a willingness to do anything else in my power to help you. I know how presumptuous I must sound, but if you come to know me well, and I hope you will, you’ll soon see that I am not the criminal—you’ll be sure of it, from your own understanding.”

“Yet the death of Mr. Allenby leaves the way clear for your marriage to his daughter.”

Stafford showed his disdain.

“I hardly expected that from you, though that is the best hope of the police. They think that very obvious motive is sufficient to condemn me at once. I don’t believe you think that. I believe that remark made itself automatically, because it seemed the inevitable thing to say.”

Fleming Stone gave his caller a long look. “If you don’t break up as you go along,” he said, “I believe I am very favorably impressed with the way your mind works. But why offer me the assistance of an expert chemist? Mr. Allenby didn’t die of poison.”

“No.” And Fred Stafford returned in kind the long look Stone had given him.

“You are willing to help me in any way I ask?” Stone said, after the pause.

“Any way.”

“Have you spare time?”

“I can make it spare. My time is my own.”

“Then have you sufficient diplomacy to learn something of the private life of the three partners Mr. Allenby left in charge of his Fair projects?”

“I think so. At any rate, I can try. You’re looking that way?”

“Among other ways, yes. And what do you think, on the whole, of the Sports Exhibition?”

“I think it one of the biggest pieces of foolishness I ever ran up against. It is only my deep and sincere respect for Mr. Allenby’s judgment that makes me feel there must be some sense to it. Of course, if it goes on, I stand ready to help in any way I can. Mr. Allenby expected to leave some matters to me, and I was glad of that. You see,” he added ingenuously, “if I had been able to help him a lot, he might have begun to realize my sterling worth.”

“You possess that, do you?”

“Yes, to a degree. Are your suspicions confined to the three surviving partners of Mr. Allenby and myself?” Stafford smiled.

“By no means. Mr. Allenby’s wide circle of enemies offers many ways to look—too many, in fact. He had far greater and more important interests than the Freak Show, yet that seems to me to be implicated. You know Mr. Curtis?”

“Oh, yes. Very well. He’s not long for this world.”

“On account of an Egyptian curse?”

“Egyptian grandmother! He’s failing perceptibly, but the cause is physical, not mental nor occult.”

“Then Egypt had nothing to do with his illness?”

“I don’t say that. In my research work I sometimes run up against mysterious causes, but they are real, material.”

“Explain.”

“I mean,” Stafford explained, “I can think it possible that Mr. Curtis contracted some insidious disease, when he was floundering around in those Egyptian tombs. I’ve never been to Egypt, but I’m ready to admit that the fetid, dank atmosphere of those long-closed tombs may have a deleterious effect on a human constitution that increases with time, and may prove fatal.”

“You’re not talking at random?”

“No, but neither am I backed by actual and accredited facts. My work has led me to think these things may be true, but I can’t, as yet, prove it. If Mr. Curtis dies, I think the other two will carry on. It will result disastrously, I feel sure; for though Allenby could have made a success of it, and though Barton and Davis might have succeeded with Mr. Curtis’ help and advice, they can’t do it alone. If they insist on going on they’ll sink a lot of money and make nothing.”

“In general, I agree with you. Mr. Curtis is in the hands of a reliable physician, I suppose?”

“Oh, yes. Doctor Crosby is a specialist in nervous diseases, as well as heart troubles, and kindred affections. He is going to try psycho-analysis now. That may bring some enlightenment, but it can’t cure Curtis of his trouble.”

“You admit he has a real illness, then?” Stone asked.

“Not being a believer in Oriental curses, and seeing the man’s condition, I am forced to the belief that he is suffering from some definite and curable disease.”

“Not only that. I think he is, though not to excess, a drug addict.”

“Yes, Mr. Stone, I think so too. Which complicates matters.”

“It does. But those questions are for doctors, not detectives. Here’s a plain question. To your knowledge has Mr. Curtis any feminine entanglements that he ought not to have?”

“Gracefully put. No, not to my knowledge. But how often do we find our knowledge at fault in such matters?”

“Can you find out if there is any such?”

“I can try.”

“Go to it, then, and report when you learn anything. And as to the police suspecting you of killing the father of the girl you love, I think I can put that notion out of their heads, because I know it isn’t true.”

“How do you know that?”

“Only by my general omniscience. Close observation of you, during this interview, convinces me that whatever your sins, you draw the line at murder. I suppose you will marry Miss Allenby?”

“I hope so. I shan’t bring up the question at present, but after the funeral and all that, I shall ask her right out if there’s any hope for me. It’s terrible to ask a millionaire girl to marry me, but I can make enough money to take care of us both, in a comfortable way, and if she has money, too, I can’t help it. She can say No, if she wants to. Rosella is by way of speaking her mind, on occasion.”

“She’s favorably inclined toward the freaks—or sports, I believe they prefer to call them?”

“Yes, that term makes all the difference in the world. Mr. Allenby made a great point of it. His Sports, hand-picked and carefully polished, were to be quite a different proposition from the freaks who make up the side-show of an ordinary circus. Unless the critters are kept right up to his specifications, the whole thing will be a flumpo.”

“Yet, you say, Curtis will soon be out of commission, and Barton and Davis can’t run the thing alone.”

“No, not alone. But with Rosella, yes.”

“And you.”

“And me, if they’ll have me. And if I’m Rosella’s fiancé, of course they will have me. So, it all depends on the lady’s favor.”

“I see. And as you suggest, it is wiser to ask her about it, a little later on rather than just now.”

“Exactly so. Now, I’ll be marching, and if, when and as I find out any deeply hidden secrets about the three musketeers, I’ll report. And you tell the police I’m not the man they’re after.”

Fred Stafford went away and Stone thought him over.

The detective definitely concluded that young Stafford did not kill Robert Allenby, and he would most certainly advise the police to take his view of that matter. Stone often felt uncertainty about the guilt or innocence of a suspect, but once he had decided on his innocence he seldom if ever changed his mind.

And now, though he still felt uncertainty regarding the three partners, he had no slightest suspicion of Rosella Allenby or her friend, Fred Stafford.

And he went to see Rosella and tell her so.

She received him graciously, even eagerly, asking if he had seen Stafford.

“Yes,” he said, “and you may set your mind at rest as to his being suspected of guilt. If the police have a leaning that way, they will soon see the folly of such suspicion. Probably it was merely the result of having no other way to look.”

“Are there other ways to look?”

“As many as your father had names in his address book. Someone stabbed him, with premeditated malice, and that someone must be found. But it will take time. Think of the cleverness the murderer showed. He dared come into this house, and into this apartment, while your father had three friends at his side. He accomplished his villainous

work with speed and success. This argues either a man your father knew well, or a man who gave at once a plausible reason for his appearance. Otherwise there would have been loud words and quick discovery. Again, the criminal was clever enough to go away as swiftly and silently as he came, knowing that every moment that passed before his deed was discovered gave him an added chance for escape. He may have come in at the time he committed the crime or he may have been there in concealment. But so clever and bold a man, as he undoubtedly was, would be smart enough to leave no clues and we have found none. This man, I surmise, has nothing to do with the Fair Committee, and must be looked for elsewhere.”

“It sounds difficult, if not impossible, but I hope you can find him. After my father’s funeral, I want to help in some way, myself, but there are so many unexpected matters cropping up all the time that must be attended to.”

“I am sure there must be. Now, don’t be discouraged, I feel certain we will yet corral the criminal we are looking for, and send him to his just penalty. I trust Mr. Curtis will soon get better. Do you propose to go on with the Fair business at once, or let that wait for a while?”

“I don’t want it to drag, because father’s principle was always, ‘do it now.’ But it must necessarily progress slowly. When the time comes, I shall call a meeting of the partners, and we will settle all questions and take up such work as is ready to be done. Meantime, every energy must be devoted to tracking down the man who killed my father. I don’t know just what you want by way of help, if any, but if you need reliability, and general widespread information, Fred Stafford is your man. Let him help you, if you find it convenient.”

“You are going to marry him—some day?”

“Oh, yes. My father was not entirely in favor of it, but he would have been if he had known Fred better. And, besides, all my life he taught me how to judge for myself, how to choose carefully, when in a quandary how to appreciate relative values, and I should fall short of his teachings if I didn’t decide thoughtfully on the important question of whom to marry. So, I think it will be Fred, though I am not announcing it yet.”

“And meantime, you will live here alone?”

“Yes. Unless I have a social secretary or something of that sort. I don’t want a companion. I am twenty-two, and so I don’t need a chaperon, but I’m thinking of taking my father’s confidential secretary, Suzette Gale, to help me out. She will be grand at answering my social correspondence, and also at looking after minor business letters. Father thought her exceptionally capable, and she’s a nice sort, besides.”

“Sounds fine, I hope you’ll do that. Now, forgive me, but it must be said. Had your father, to your knowledge, any especial woman friend—anyone who might have reason for enmity about sentimental matters?”

“I understand. Don’t hesitate to ask any necessary question. But as to this one, I can’t tell you anything definite. My father was no Puritan—that I am sure of. But further than that, I wish you would ask Mr. Grant, and, if you choose, Miss Gale. They will know more than I do, and will both be fair in telling it. Unless necessary, don’t report to me on the subject.”

“Very well. Now, one word about the Sports, as I am told your father called them. Do you know any of them personally?”

“One or two only. Father took me to see the Fat Lady, because he knew I would think her charming, and I did. He is expecting a contortionist soon, from Paris, who is reputed marvelous. I shall interview him, and if I approve, will turn him over to the Committee. If the work is to go on, it must not be neglected.”

“Mr. Stafford is not entirely enthusiastic about the Sports?”

Rosella answered calmly. “No. That is because he doesn’t quite understand the plan. When I explain it to him he will view it differently. Now, Mr. Stone, I hope it won’t be necessary for me to see you again until after my father’s funeral. I am holding my own, but I don’t mind confessing to you that I am on the verge of a nervous breakdown. I do not think it will happen, but I know I am wise in avoiding any important conferences until after Thursday.”

“You are quite right, Miss Allenby, and I shall hope to have a report for you when you are ready to consider it. I am assuming that I have your permission to come to this house whenever necessary, and attend to any errand I may have, without disturbing you?”

“Yes, certainly. And if Miss Gale is here, as she probably will be, she will see you, and take any message for me.”

“You are wise in getting her. Just the sort of help you will need, I think.”

“Yes, and she is a very pleasant personality besides. Good afternoon, Mr. Stone.”

“Good-day, Miss Allenby.”

Chapter VIII **The Back Way**

A WEEK had rolled its seven days away.

The ashes of Robert Allenby had been carried to their last resting place, and his daughter ruled alone in the home.

Rosella now had with her Suzette Gale, who gladly accepted the position of secretary to the heiress, and who made good.

Though no announcement had yet been made, Rosella and Fred Stafford were engaged, and this happiness greatly consoled the girl's grief at the loss of her father.

The police were zealously hunting for the wretch who killed Robert Allenby, and were just now making strenuous efforts in the direction of Henry Grant, the confidential secretary of the late promoter.

Grant was, as yet, unaware of these suspicions, and Fleming Stone, though unwilling to subscribe to them, knew they must be taken into consideration.

Charles Curtis, who had insisted on going to his friend's funeral, and did go, was very much worse physically after that solemn occasion and had been ordered by his doctor to take to his bed and remain there. This, in Mrs. Curtis' opinion, argued her husband's malady more acute and she declared she should take him away and look after him herself.

Barton and Davis, alarmed at this outlook, begged that Curtis would come to a meeting of the Committee before he went on the Southern trip that his wife decreed.

Rosella then took a hand in the arrangements, and said the meeting must be at her home, and in the same office that other meeting had been held.

This plan was vetoed by Dr Crosby, who said that Curtis could not go to any unnecessary exertion and could be at the confab only if it were held in his own home.

This Rosella agreed to, and said she would go to the Curtis home, that Mr. Stafford would go with her, and that Mr. Fleming Stone would also be present.

No one made any objection and the Committee convened on Saturday afternoon.

Rosella explained to the others that she was there in her father's place, personally but not officially. She said neither Mr. Stafford nor Mr. Stone were to be considered as members of the Committee, they were there merely by her invitation. She hoped the three remaining members of the original Committee would carry out their own plans, and would let her help them if possible.

The three were not at all disturbed at the girl's intrusion, and proceeded at once to their business.

Davis spoke first.

"Mr. Barton has asked me to do the talking," he said; "the business of our meeting is this. If this committee, organized by Robert Allenby, is to carry on the work he planned, it must be, in a way, reorganized, or at least readjusted. I think we want to consider this suggestion and act upon it at once, as I feel we do not want to tire out Mr. Curtis, who, for the moment, is not feeling well."

"And it seems to me," Barton went on, as Davis paused, "that we can do with informal voting, and not have recourse to too much red tape."

"That's right," Davis said, "let's start right off. Do we, as a committee, and I include now, Miss Allenby, Mr. Curtis, Mr. Barton and myself, do we four want to carry on the plans interrupted by the death of our chief?"

“I must amend that,” Rosella told them, “I do not wish to be anything but an honorary member. I do not want to represent my father definitely, but I want you three men to feel that you can call upon me for any assistance I can give, socially, financially, or in any way. I do not want to attend your conferences or hamper your plans, but merely assist upon occasion. I can tell you a great deal that you do not know as yet, regarding the Sports he hoped to get and other matters of interest. So now, you three go ahead without reference to me.”

“I’m for taking you at your word, Miss Allenby,” Davis said, “and I will put it to an informal vote. Do we three surviving members of the Fair Committee agree to carry on the plan as nearly as possible as Mr. Allenby wished it done? Raise your hands if in favor.”

Three hands spoke for their owners.

“That insures the continuation of the plan then. Now, shall we ask Mr. Curtis to be the president of the committee, in place of Mr. Allenby?” Barton and Davis raised their hands for this, and Curtis merely bowed an acknowledgment.

“Shall we ask Mr. Barton to be our Treasurer, and will you accept my services as general secretary?” and Davis smiled at his own informality.

Again three hands were raised, and Davis declared the business all attended to.

“Further details must be worked out with a lawyer,” he said, “and after that we must just take up the work and push it along to the best of our ability.”

“That’s all right,” Barton agreed. “Now, Mr. President, are you really going away? And when? And for how long? I don’t want to be intrusive, but I know you realize that we must have your signature to many papers and documents, and if you will arrange for a Power of Attorney, or something of the sort, it may save our troubling you too often.”

“I know, Barton—I know, and I will—I will at—attend to it—attend to it—as—as—as—”

“As soon as you can,” and Mrs. Curtis called to her husband’s valet, who was in the next room, and with Fred Stafford’s help, they took Curtis to his room.

After a silence Rosella spoke.

“You see, Mr. Davis, you were none too soon with this meeting. I am greatly distressed at poor Mr. Curtis’ illness, but I do want my father’s work carried on, and I am glad you accomplished as much as you did before Mr. Curtis collapsed. I do not think it is serious, and I hope he will be all right tomorrow, but I do not think that man will ever be really well again. However, you have your committee organized for the present.”

“I fear,” Fleming Stone said, “you may look forward to another reorganization in the near future. Even should Mr. Curtis recover from this seizure, I cannot think he will ever be able to do active work on your committee.”

“I’m sorry to say I agree with you,” Davis said, “and for that reason I think we ought to get Curtis’ signature to our three contracts right now. He may be better tomorrow, or—he may not be able to write at all.”

“Good work,” Barton said. “You go to him and ask him to sign. Even if it’s an effort for him, it ought to be done. And you’ve more tact and a gentler manner than I have. Go on, Davis.”

“No, you go. Of course, I’ve more tact and a much prettier manner than you but I’ve often heard Curtis say how good you are to him, and that you have a way of calming his nerves or easing his pain or something.”

“All right, I’ll go—it is really a necessary errand—if I can cajole Mrs. Curtis into letting me see him.”

“Fred’s there,” Rosella said, “he’ll be wonderful help.”

Barton went to the room where the sick man lay on a couch.

“I’m all right,” he whispered as Barton entered, “I’ll be up in a few minutes.”

“No, Chuck, you lie still—” Barton looked at Stafford, who understood, and with a mysterious word or two, he drew Mrs. Curtis out into the hall to tell her a secret, he said.

“I want you to sign these three contracts,” Barton went on. “Make an effort, old boy, you know how important it is.”

“Yes, I know. Give me your fountain pen.”

“Want one of your tablets first? Where are they?”

“In the bathroom there. In the medicine cupboard.”

“All right, here we are. And here’s a glass of water. Now, shall I put the phial back—and so forth?”

“Yes,” Curtis said, smiling, “yes—and so forth.”

He roused himself on his elbow, and signed the three documents with a clear legible signature.”

All right, boy,” Barton said, cheerily. “Now, you lie back and rest. You’ve done your good deed for today. And, forgive me, Chuck, but you don’t think—that anything harms you—do you?”

“Nonsense, of course not. You’re mighty good to me, and I’m grateful; scoot off with your contracts—”

“Where shall I put yours?”

“In that table drawer. I shall be all right tomorrow, and we’ll have a more workable huddle.” Barton went out, collected Fred Stafford in the hall and returned to the others.

“All right?” asked Davis.

“All all right. Curt signed like a lamb and legibly, too. He understood it all, and is pleased with the whole game. Says he’ll be all right tomorrow, and will soon meet with us again.”

“I’m glad you have your contracts,” Fleming Stone said. “It will save a lot of trouble if Mr. Curtis doesn’t get better.”

“Now, we’re going,” and Rosella picked up her Fred. “I’ve the big car, can I set any of you down?”

“Yes, take me,” Stone said, but the other two preferred to walk.

“Funny arrangement, that Committee business,” Stafford said, as they went down toward Stone’s home.

“Yes,” the detective agreed. “I feel sure Mr. Curtis won’t live to take any further part.”

“I think that, too,” and Rosella looked sad. “I wish I knew what ails him.”

“Pernicious anæmia,” Stone suggested. “But I never saw such a dreadful case before.”

“Aggravated by the Egyptian curse,” Stafford opined.

“Why, Fred,” Rosella looked her astonishment. “I didn’t know you believed in Heathen curses!”

“I don’t. And no heathen curse is bothering Mr. Curtis. But he thinks it is, he thinks he’s affected by the miasma or whatever it was that vitiated the air of those old stale tombs, and the belief in his terrible fate has made it seem so real to him, that he just succumbed to it.”

“What’s this about Grant, Miss Allenby?” Stone inquired. “I’m told one of your servants saw him in the house about the time of the murder.”

“Yes,” Rosella looked disturbed. “Hecker saw him. If it had been any of the others, I might have thought they were mistaken, but Hecker never makes a mistake.”

“What does Grant say?”

“We haven’t seen him,” Stafford answered for her. “But Lovell told me that Henry Grant was in the house and Hecker saw him go up the back way, while the gentlemen were talking in the office.”

“How did Hecker know the gentlemen were talking in the office?” Stone inquired.

“Why, I don’t know,” Rosella looked perplexed. “I suppose he heard them there.”

“Hecker wasn’t over on that side of the house, was he?”

“I don’t know. Would you like to talk to him, Mr. Stone? Come on back home with me.”

“No, not now. You question him, or, if you’d rather not, I’ll be glad to do so. Could you send him down to see me this evening, Miss Allenby?”

“Yes, indeed. At what time?”

“At your own convenience.”

“Very well, then, say nine-thirty.”

“Exactly right, and thank you for bringing me home.”

Promptly at the appointed time, the impeccable Hecker, as Robert Allenby used to call him, arrived for a session with Fleming Stone.

Hitherto, the detective had felt little active interest in the butler, but some fresh ideas had come to Stone and he was glad to see his visitor.

“Sit down, Hecker,” he said, cordially. “Forget your professional decorum for the moment, and answer my questions as man to man.”

“Yes, sir,” and Hecker showed a calm self-possession that pleased Stone.

“I’ve heard that you’ve stated to the police that you saw Mr. Grant in the Allenby apartment on the afternoon of the tragedy. Now, I had previously been told that that was your afternoon out, and you were not in the house when the gentlemen of the Fair Committee held their meeting. How about it?”

“That’s right, sir. It was my afternoon off and I was out. I went to the Pictures.”

“And what did you tell Inspector Brice?”

“I told him that I was out, that the second man, Lawson, was in charge, and that Lawson told me he saw Mr. Grant coming into the Allenby apartment by the back way.”

“This back way—it’s really the fire escape, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir, but it’s used a lot by the tenants and their friends. Mr. Grant nearly always goes up that way, instead of by the elevators.”

“I see. Now, the point is, the Inspector says you told him that you saw Mr. Grant.”

“The Inspector is mistaken, Mr. Stone. I told him that Lawson saw Mr. Grant, and that Lawson told me he saw Mr. Grant. The Inspector must have heard wrong or misunderstood me, for I had already told him that it was my day off, and I had gone out. There would be no sense in my telling him that I had seen Mr. Grant, when I had just told him I was out.”

“No. As you say, he must have caught the wrong idea. Just what did Lawson tell you?”

“About Mr. Grant? Only that he was there while the Committee was in session. He had an important errand with Mr. Allenby.”

“How did Lawson know this?”

“Mr. Grant told him.”

“Where were they?”

“As I make it, Lawson heard someone in the hall, and looked out from his pantry, and saw it was Mr. Grant. And Mr. Grant said it was all right, he was going to see Mr. Allenby on an important matter. So Lawson sees Mr. Grant tap on Mr. Allenby’s bedroom door, and sees it open, and he goes back to his pantry and that’s all he knows about it.”

“At what time was that?”

Hecker looked resentful.

“That Lawson!” he said, angrily, “he never knows the time! Now, I always know the time—it’s second nature to me, but Lawson has no idea of time unless he has just looked at the clock and not always then. Mr. Allenby gave him a fine wrist watch so he’d always have the time handy, but half the time the watch is out of order, and the other half he forgets to wind it. Anyway, he doesn’t know what time Mr. Grant was there, only he says the committee were there for he could hear them talking.”

“Not a clear situation,” Stone commented. “If Mr. Grant killed Mr. Allenby—”

“Oh, my Good Heavens! Mr. Grant never did that! Why, Mr. Grant fairly worshipped Mr. Allenby!”

“Yes, I know. He wouldn’t be likely to kill him, would he?”

“Likely! He *couldn’t* do such a thing, sir!”

“No, probably not. But you see how necessary it is for us to get the time element settled.”

“Time element?”

“Yes; now, Hecker, I want to know just what time Mr. Grant was in the apartment that day, and I must find out. Can you help me? Since Lawson is so stupid about time, can’t you find out from someone else? Who let Mr. Grant in, downstairs? People can’t just step in, unchallenged, can they?”

“Oh, no, sir. The back doorman must have let him in, but seeing it was Mr. Grant of course he’d let him go on up, the way he often does. It’s only three flights.”

“I don’t get it,” mused Stone. “Even if it is only three flights, why should anyone want to go that way, instead of in an elevator like a Christian?”

“I don’t know, Mr. Stone, but they do. Mr. Stafford ‘most always comes up that way.”

“Well, all right. Now, Hecker, use your wits. What time did Mr. Grant come in? Or about what time? You and I together ought to be clever enough to ferret that out. And it makes a whale of a difference to me.”

“Why not ask Mr. Grant, sir?”

“He might be as forgetful as Lawson. No, you think up a way to find out from someone in the house. Is the chap who opens the back door a regular doorman, or has he other duties?”

“Well, he does look after some other jobs. He isn’t always at the door. You see, it isn’t the tradesmen’s entrance. In fact, it isn’t an entrance at all, it’s an exit in case of fire.”

“I begin to think, Hecker, that the people who use this back way do so because they prefer to make an inconspicuous entrance and not be announced from the housetops as having arrived.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Do you mean yes, that’s right?”

“Sometimes, Mr. Stone. Mr. Stafford used to come that way to see Miss Rosella. And some people come—came that way to see Mr. Allenby in private.”

“The plot thickens as it grows clearer. Well, Hecker, all I want of you is to get hold of that time information. Can do?”

“I don’t know, sir. I’m sure Jimmy—that’s the back doorman—would be glad to help in any way he could to find the brute who killed Mr. Allenby, but I doubt if he’d tell anything against Mr. Grant.”

“But this may not be anything against Mr. Grant. In fact, it might clear him of all suspicion. You might ask Jimmy.”

“Very well, sir. I’ll do that. I mean, I’ll just ask him the time. But I expect he’ll be as stupid as Lawson, that way. How shall I let you know what he says? And he won’t be there when I get home. He won’t be on again until tomorrow morning.”

“Very well. You ask him the first chance you get. I shall be at the house to see Miss Allenby some time tomorrow, and you can tell me then.”

“I’ll do so, sir. And shall I report to the police?”

“If they ask you. If not, do not volunteer any information. This is a very serious matter, Hecker, and must be handled carefully. I do not at all suspect Mr. Grant of any wrongdoing, but the accusations against him must be disposed of. Say nothing of it to anybody or you may do the greatest harm to Miss Allenby and to the memory of her father. Always answer the police truthfully, but tell them nothing unasked. You are in a responsible position, Hecker, and I hope you will prove true to the trust we all place in you.”

“Thank you, sir, I’ll do my best.”

After the man had gone, Stone thought things over, and concluded he had fresh woods and pastures new to investigate. Pastures, as a rule, are easily scanned, but the woods that loomed before his bewildered vision appeared pathless and impenetrable.

A bit of reconstruction now.

Suppose, just in a flight of fancy, suppose Grant did come while the four men were in huddle. Suppose he waited in the bedroom, perhaps concealed in the bathroom, and Allenby came into the bedroom to look for his papers. Perhaps Grant asked him for more money, which, Stone had been told, was a sore point just then between secretary and boss, and perhaps, knowing Allenby’s death would mean a fat legacy for himself, perhaps Grant out with his trusty jackknife and stabbed his employer and fled.

To go on.

Perhaps Barton came in to tell of the death of their mutual friend and found Allenby dead. Perhaps, fearing he might be thought the guilty one, he returned to the group in the office and said Allenby would be with them in a moment.

Then, Curtis went in, and was confronted by the awful sight of his dead friend. Surely a man of Curtis’ nervous condition would have gone to pieces, but suppose Curtis hung on to his courage and bravado, and went back, also saying nothing of the tragedy. Also, for the very plausible reason that he might fall under suspicion.

Well, it was growing absurd, but to carry on the flight of fancy to its own *reductio absurdum*, then suppose Davis went in. Seeing the terrible sight, Davis could only suppose it to be the work of Curtis, who must have suddenly lost his mind, and suppose Davis said nothing to the rest.

Well! Then, as he knew, Curtis couldn't stand the waiting, and he went to investigate. Then, he did make an outcry and they all rushed to the scene.

Proving?

Well, proving that, unbelievable as it seemed, things could have happened that way.

Or, for the matter of that, if Grant had come later, he might have committed his crime between any of the two successive visits the three men paid to the bedroom. Or he could have stayed concealed in the bathroom, until after Davis' visit, and then, all the stories of the three men being true and uneventful, as they reported them, Grant could have stepped out, stabbed Allenby, and disappeared just as Curtis came in for the second time.

It all depended on the exact time when Grant came and went.

But, as Fleming Stone still preserved his sanity, he thoughtfully concluded that no mortal human being could go into a room, find dead the man he expected to see alive and calmly return to his fellows with no hint of surprise or excitement on his face. And three men did do that, if Grant killed Allenby early.

Stone thought over the men.

Barton, possibly, could have accomplished the calm return, if he had been in fear of the electric chair otherwise, but next came Curtis, and Curtis, nervous as a witch, could never have faced the awful scene and returned quietly to his place at the council table without a bleat.

Davis—but since Curtis couldn't do it, Davis didn't have a chance to do it. Maybe Davis found Allenby in his room, entirely all right, amending his papers, and inattentive to Davis' plea for a loan, and maybe Davis

was so infuriated that he impulsively went for the millionaire and did for him.

Whereupon Fleming Stone told himself he was growing senile and had better go to raising strawberries.

But, he concluded, to himself, aside from Grant, Curtis had the chance to kill off Allenby on that second trip of his.

Chapter IX

How About Grant?

The next morning Stone went to see Henry Grant and learn for himself the time of that young man's visit to Allenby.

He found Grant busy in the office, papers spread all over his desk and a look of exasperation on his face.

"Things going askew?" the detective asked.

"Very much so, and all because of the absence of that very useful piece of property, Miss Suzette Gale."

"Stolen from you by Miss Allenby, I understand."

"Yes, who else? Well, have you come to arrest me, too?"

"Maybe. Who else yearns for your incarceration?"

"All the king's horses and all the king's men. The rumor is increasing that I am the hideous villain who killed Mr. Allenby, a man to whom I gave my entire respect and admiration and whom I served with my best effort. What are they thinking of, Mr. Stone? Do I look like a murderer?"

Grant's face was vindictive with anger toward his accusers, and his hands were clenched as if with a desire to get at them, while in his big dark eyes smouldered a baleful glare.

"I'm not entirely sure how a murderer ought to look, but it strikes me you're acting it out pretty well. I say, Grant, what were you doing at Allenby's that day he was killed? And why haven't you said you were

there? And at what time were you there? And did you kill Robert Allenby?"

Henry Grant relaxed his taut features into a grim grin.

"Personal and private business. Wasn't asked. About four o'clock. No."

"Can you prove your statements?"

"Dunno. Guess not. Why?"

"Stop that staccato talk. I don't like it. And sit up and take notice. It's to your own advantage to tell me about your doings that afternoon, unless you want to get into serious trouble. Are you a gambler?"

"Not with cards or dice; only—the sweepstakes."

"And your luck didn't hold, and you went to see Allenby for financial reasons?"

"That pretty well covers the ground. But no real harm in it. Nothing to make the guardians of public safety look askance at me."

"Not unless you took vengeance on Robert Allenby when he refused your request."

"No, I didn't do that."

A straight, sharp look from Grant's eyes into his own, brought Stone conviction that the young man was telling the truth, but he had had convictions before in his career that went agley.

"All right. Now what time were you there? Don't say you don't know!"

"Of course I know. I was there at four o'clock—I told you."

"I know. But do you mean exactly four, or quarter of or quarter past?"

"I mean I was with Mr. Allenby, in his bedroom, at four precisely, because a little clock chimed the hour while I was there."

"Were his friends in the next room? the office?"

“I suppose so. I heard voices.”

“Then you asked Mr. Allenby for money? Go on.”

“I did, and he told me to wait till the next day and he would then take up the question with me. I begged a little, but he was positive, and told me to clear out, he was busy.”

“He told you to clear out?”

“Yes, that’s why I knew he wasn’t vexed with me. He spoke pleasantly enough, and I felt sure he would help me, the next day, so I came away in a happy frame of mind. Likely I’d have killed him after that!”

“I see, but can you induce our friend Lovell to believe your tale?”

“I don’t see why not. It’s straightforward enough. I went there to ask Mr. Allenby to lend me some money, and he told me he’d see me about it the next day. So I left. What’s incredible about that?”

“Nothing, except that it coincides with the presumable time of his murder—”

“Let ‘em presume again, then. He wasn’t dead when I got there, nor when I came away. And that’s all I know about it.”

“You went in the back way?”

“Yes, the fire-escape way. I often do that when I want to see Mr. Allenby alone.”

“Didn’t he mind?”

“Not he. The boss was the most easy-going chap alive, unless somebody ran up against his pet notions or fads. Let someone make fun of his collection of Freaks and he’d get mad all right. No, Mr. Stone, I didn’t kill him—he was a good friend to me.”

“But if you had killed him, you’d say you hadn’t, all the same, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes.” Grant looked a little startled. “You mean I may have some difficulty in proving I didn’t kill him?”

“I mean just that. To be trite, you had motive, means and opportunity.”

“What do you mean, means? That wasn’t my jackknife he was stabbed with.”

“Can you prove that?”

“Of course I can’t. You can’t prove a negative. But common sense ought to tell you I wouldn’t kill a man who was going to lend me money the next day!”

“Yes, but if you got your legacy from the reading of his will, you’d have a whole lot more money.”

Grant’s whole manner changed. He lost his independent air; he looked crumpled and washed out.

“I say,” he began, but stopped without saying anything further.

“What is it, Grant?” Stone asked, kindly. “Are you losing your grip? I don’t believe you guilty, as yet, but if you keep on acting so queer, I shall not know what to think.”

“I don’t blame you. I suppose I am acting weird. But I didn’t kill him, and it never occurred to me till just now that people could think I did. I’ve no way to prove my innocence.”

“Forget it. If you really are innocent, I’ll find a way to prove it. Just now, I want to talk to you about these freaks, as you called them, though I understand one should say ‘Sports.’ ”

“Yes, that’s right. Sports. What about them?”

“You have charge of Mr. Allenby’s expenditures, had he already put much money into his scheme? Paid out much for the Sports, I mean?”

“Oh, yes, lots. He is practically supporting two of them while he educates them.”

“An expensive procedure?”

“Not quite so much so as it sounds. They live simply, they are eager to learn and grateful for the privilege. They worship Mr. Allenby—if that’s what you’re thinking of.”

“Those two, yes. Are there any others already engaged and under the care of the Allenby estate?”

“Two more, an India Rubber man, and an Albino.”

“Tell me about them.”

“The man, he’s a wonder!”

“As a contortionist?”

“Don’t get them mixed up, Mr. Stone. An India Rubber man and a contortionist are not the same.”

“They do the same stunts?”

“Not exactly. The India Rubber chap ties himself up in knots—he seems to be all soft flesh, with no bones. But the contortionist, he’s just a mass of muscles, wiry, and bony. He is athletic, the rubber one is twisty, but not lithe—I seem to be running out of words!”

“I get your drift. The India Rubber chap rolls into his work, the Contortionist springs to his.”

“Yes, that’s more like it. Well, the Rubber boy, a very good one, is being held, more or less on approval. He’s well behaved and of decent folks, and Mr. Allenby promised him that if he behaves all right for a year, he’ll engage him. Pays him part salary while waiting. You see Mr. Allenby’s ways. He expected to keep this lad in good condition and proper behavior until he’s ready to use him, and if all goes well he’ll be a star performer, and if not he’ll be fired, but better off financially and none the worse physically than he was before.”

“The contortionist likewise?”

“Not yet. You see he’s getting in tomorrow. He learned his contorting in France—that’s where they contort best, and he’s coming for trial day after tomorrow.”

“Who will meet him and look after him?”

“I’m not sure, but I think Mr. Barton and myself. Mr. Curtis isn’t well enough to make the exertion and Mr. Barton is a better man for the job than Mr. Davis. But Mr. Davis is already planning gorgeous costumes. You know contorters are dandy dressers.”

“Yes, I believe they are.”

“Oh, yes, all cheap velvet and gilt lace and that, but Mr. Davis isn’t going to have the old-time costumes. He’s planning modern hifalutin’ rigs that will smite the audience in the eye.”

“When you meet this Frenchman, where shall you take him?”

“The committee will pick out the hotel or maybe a place on a farm, something like that, and we put the new freak there to live. I mean, after we’ve seen him and decided he’ll do.”

“I’d like to be in on this meeting. I’ll see Mr. Barton about it, and I expect he’ll let me meet the twister somewhere.”

“Of course he will. Why not? Why don’t you and Miss Allenby see him at his first exhibition performance?”

“That sounds all right. And, Grant, did you pick up any information as to Mr. Allenby’s lady friends, if any?”

“Not any information touching on and appertaining to his murder, Mr. Stone. I don’t say Mr. Allenby didn’t now and then take a girl out to supper or a dance, and I don’t say she might be the sort of girl he’d introduce to his daughter; but no scandal of any sort, no disgraceful carrying-on, all nice and proper in its way. And there’s not a woman in the world who can ask for any money from Mr. Allenby’s estate, or who would have wished Mr. Allenby any harm, let alone killing him.”

“And you didn’t kill him, Grant, I’ve reached that conclusion while I talked with you. And, beside, if it’s any gratification to you to know it,

you've helped me to confirm a small suspicion of my own that is too absurd to believe in and too tempting to discard. Now I'm going, and if I don't happen to see Mr. Barton today, you fix it up about my seeing the contortionist put over his trial performance."

"I will. Do you want to see the Albino? She's right here in the city."

"Why, yes, some time. This is mere idle curiosity, you know. I don't want to talk to these people especially, but the plan of the Sports, and the way it's being put over is a marvel in itself."

"It's all of that. And you'll like the pretty Albino girl. She's a peach. Want to go to see her this afternoon? She can't talk English, you know."

"Not a word?"

"She's being taught. I'm not sure how she's progressing."

"I don't know what the day may bring forth. If I can go, I'll call you up. You'll be here?"

"All afternoon, yes."

Stone concluded he did want to see the Albino girl.

Without knowing exactly why, he had a vague feeling that perhaps a knowledge of these Sports might be useful in one way or another. He felt that he needed all the side lights he could get on the murder of Robert Allenby, and he was overlooking no chance. Besides, he felt an interest in the queer specimens of humanity that were to be so superior to the often unpleasant-looking freaks in circus side-shows he had seen.

But he had some business to attend to first.

And that was to learn the financial status of all concerned in this so far baffling case.

Visits to various banks and calls at the offices of some Government Tax Receivers brought him the general knowledge that the four men on the Committee were all well-to-do.

Allenby himself was a multi-millionaire. Curtis was what is called well off; Barton about the same; and while Davis was the least wealthy of them all, still he had enough for the comparatively simple life he led.

This knowledge didn't in any way further Fleming Stone's secret hope that he might get something on some member of that committee. He had absolutely nothing on which to stake his haunting theory of the guilt of one of the three partners. It was absurd, on the face of it, for the loss of their kingpin spelt disaster, if not failure to the whole plan. They were trying to carry on, to be sure, but they had no chance of the great success that would have crowned the enterprise had Robert Allenby stayed at the helm. He had powers they didn't possess, he had influence they could never attain, he had money ready to pour into the treasury as fast as called for, so why, in the name of all the gods at once, would any of them desire the removal of the boss?

And at last, Fleming Stone owned up to himself that the very idea was absurd, and that he clung to it merely because it appealed to him as a dramatic denouement, and more attractive hunting than suspecting Grant or Fred Stafford or some hazy outsider who had an old grudge against Allenby.

But after learning that none of the three partners was in actual need of ready money, he decided to dismiss them from his mind and seek for the real criminal. To be sure, Davis was all for asking Allenby to finance a new exhibition for him, and went into his bedroom to make his request. But Allenby didn't refuse him, he merely showed no interest, and Davis decided to wait for a better opportunity. Like Grant, who wanted money to get him out of a gambling scrape of some sort. Neither of these chaps would kill a goose who would soon present him with a golden egg.

So Stone's thoughts turned back to the mythical enemy who had a big grievance against Allenby. Or could it be one of the freaks? All very well to say the grateful creatures adored Allenby and felt happy and thankful at their fortunate lot. Maybe they did and maybe they didn't. Maybe one of them, say the Living Skeleton, harbored some sort of resentment the others didn't know about. Thin people are seldom of happy, kindly disposition. Rather a rubbishy argument, but more foolish ideas than this had sometimes led Stone to the truth.

Anyway, he would make the acquaintance of such freaks as were available and he would start that afternoon with the Albino. She had been described to him as a sweet-tempered little person, but who could know the workings of her heart.

How could she get into Allenby's room that day?

Well, she needn't have gone herself, she could have sent some ambassador who could have made an entrance as easily as Grant did.

He called up Grant, and made an appointment to go with him that afternoon to see the sweet-tempered Lolita.

She lived with a pleasant, rather attractive woman, who had been discovered by one of Allenby's agents, and who was just the right sort to take care of the queer child.

Grant, who had been there before, introduced Stone to Mrs. Foster, and the good lady received them with old-fashioned cordiality.

When she went to bring the girl to see them, Stone said, "Nice sort. Is she teaching the girl English?"

"I think there's a tutor, also. Unless he has left. He threatened to, unless his salary was raised. Here they are."

Stone looked with real interest at the pretty girl. She was sixteen, but looked younger. Like all her kind she was very white, not only pale, but with pure white skin, like milk. Her hair, too, was snow white, soft and silky of texture, and her light eyes, though pink-rimmed, were attractive to look at. The whole effect was not at all ghostly, but more like an image made of snow or marble.

But her gay smile and her happy demeanor gave her a very human appearance, with no hint of angel or wraith.

"Speak to the gentlemen, Lolita," her guardian said and the girl said, "How-do," in a pleasant, though foreign-sounding voice.

"I don't want her to talk pidgin English," Mrs. Foster said, "but she picked up that phrase and I let her use it."

“What nationality is she?” Stone asked.

“She came from a small Russian village,” Grant answered, “miles away from any civilization. She talks a sort of jingling patois. Will she sing a Russian song for us, Mrs. Foster?”

“Oh, yes,” and singing a few bars herself, she gave Lolita the idea and the Albino sang an unintelligible, but musical little carol.

“There you are,” Grant said, with something the manner of a showman, “that’s all there is to her now, but if Mr. Allenby’s program is carried out, she will be a finished product by the time we are ready to exhibit her.”

“I think she’s charming,” Stone said and smiled at the girl, who seemed to realize what he was saying.

“She’s very quick,” Mrs. Foster told them. “She catches on to much that is said. But it all helps, and I am sure she will go right along and soon talk good and fluent English. Will the exhibition plan go on, Mr. Grant?”

“We think so, Mrs. Foster. Not everything is settled yet, but matters are progressing. You may count on this job for another year, at least.”

The woman gave a sigh of relief.

“I’m glad to hear that. I’m very fond of the girl, and if I can keep her another year, I think she will be talking perfectly and can get a job of some sort.”

“I’d be sorry to see her go into an ordinary circus show,” Stone said, sincerely.

“She’ll never do that,” the woman cried. “I’ll keep her here always rather than have that happen.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Grant told her. “Mr. Allenby left money for such emergencies unless Lolita takes the bit in her teeth and runs away, or is led away by rapacious people who will trade on her peculiarity.”

“I hope to train her to beware of such things. But it is very hard to know just how to train her. If your Fair scheme should be given up, I should want to send Lolita back to her own people.”

“It seems,” Stone put in, “there are ethical problems connected with the care and feeding of these Sports.”

“All of that!” exclaimed Grant feelingly. “If Mr. Allenby were here, he could handle everything. But we lack his knowledge and wisdom and we’re more or less afloat. Come along, Mr. Stone, we must be moving. Give us a little exhibition of Lolita’s progress, Mrs. Foster, though I know you don’t like to instill any show-off spirit.”

So the girl was allowed to say some English words she had learned, and which she used fairly well, with a few mistakes now and then.

Leaving the house, Stone asked if Grant had time to take him to see another, and was told they could call on the Fat Lady.

This pleased Stone, who was getting interested in the project more than before.

They found Mrs. Russell in an apartment of her own, with a capable maid as attendant.

She was strikingly handsome, being of the blue-eyed, golden-haired type, with fine features and easy carriage.

She greeted them as might a society queen, and after a few gracious words with Grant, she turned to Fleming Stone.

“I am very glad to meet you, Mr. Stone, for I am a detective story fan, and I want to see if you’re at all like those detectives in the story books.”

“Oh, yes, Mrs. Russell,” he returned, “I’m exactly like them. I am omniscient, transcendent, conceited, positive and very apt to be mistaken in my decisions.”

“Bad man!” she shook a fat forefinger at him. “You say all that just to be contradicted. I shan’t humor you! Now, you tell me a story of some important case you have had. I’d love to hear about it.”

“No, no, Bonnie, Mr. Stone hasn’t time today for anything like that. Some other day, maybe,” Grant decreed.

“Maybe not! Some other day is no day.” The blue eyes drooped a little and the red lips quivered.

Stone nearly lost his gravity, for the enormous woman was not at her best when she tried to look pathetic. Her pink cheeks with their deep dimples, her flashing white teeth and a roguish gleam in her eye were all better adapted to smiles than sadness.

He began to think that this Sport of Mr. Allenby’s choosing was certainly not of even average mentality.

When she suddenly startled him by saying: “Now, Mr. Stone, don’t think me a fool, as I see you are inclined to do. Honestly, I’m not one. Let’s talk about books. Have you read that new one on the art of Amedeo Modigliani?”

“No, I haven’t,” said Stone a little taken aback. “Have you?”

“Oh, yes; that is, I’ve nearly finished it. I’m delighted with it. It’s written in such a sympathetic manner, and shows such perfect understanding of the subject.”

“I get little time for reading—” Stone began, apologetically, but she interrupted.

“Now, now, you know anyone can get time for what he wants to do. You probably feel little interest in the subject. What is your favorite hobby?”

“My work,” said Stone sincerely. “Most of the books I read are informative in one way or another. At least they are to me.”

“Ah, yes,” she sighed. “What a thing it is to have a hobby, and a hobby that is one’s life work. I don’t mean the silly hobbies people babble about nowadays, but a real life interest in something.”

“Haven’t you?”

“An interest, yes. I care very much for science, real inventive genius that produces wonders, but I can only read about it. I have no one to talk it over with, and I do so wish I had. I read scientific works until I think my brain will burst for want of an outlet, a chance to talk about it with some

kindred spirit. When I get all fussed up like that, I read a detective story to straighten out my wits.”

Stone smiled to himself at the mistake he had made in thinking this woman an ignoramus.

He went home after this visit and carried with him a more definite idea of Robert Allenby's plan of a collection of educated freaks than he had held heretofore.

If these were samples of the lot, it promised to be a well worthwhile show.

Chapter X **The Clever Contortionist**

Arrangements were made to have the contortionist give his first exhibition at the Curtis apartment.

Charles Curtis was, on the whole, growing worse.

But not steadily. He had his good days, and days not so good. His doctor, perplexed, had called other physicians in consultation, and while all had agreed on pernicious anæmia, none had diagnosed the exact element in it which made it the baffling case it was.

Not one of them would listen to hints of an Egyptian curse, but they failed to find any explanation in the science of healing or the practice of medicine.

The man was simply fading away before their eyes, with no discoverable reason for it.

Psycho-analysis had brought neither explanation nor cure.

Yet, seated in a large armchair, in the living-room of his home, Curtis placidly awaited the coming of the new applicant for admission to Robert Allenby's collection of freaks.

In the group were Mr. and Mrs. Curtis, Rosella, Fred Stafford, Fleming Stone, Peter Barton, and Doctor Crosby.

“I warn you all,” the physician was saying, “that if I feel it is best to do so, I shall take my patient away from the meeting and put him to bed. His condition must be considered, if you want me to get him up in shape to go on with this work.”

Fleming Stone thought the doctor spoke with more optimism than he really felt, but all agreed that if necessary Mr. Curtis must leave the decisions to the others of the committee.

At last, Davis came, bringing with him Henry Grant and a stranger, a man of light build and of decidedly French appearance.

Grant introduced the newcomer, M. Pierre Lamar, and the Frenchman bowed superbly.

He took the seat offered him, and perfectly at his ease, began to talk in well-chosen English.

He expressed a word of sympathy for the death of Mr. Allenby, with a sad glance at Rosella. He also regretted Mr. Curtis' malady, and was sure it would soon adjust itself.

Then he paused and seemed to await some suggestions as to his own part in the great plan.

Mastering his weariness and exhaustion, Curtis took the lead, and asked M. Lamar regarding his professional ability.

“It is not for me to say,” and the Frenchman smiled a little. “But I bring written words from Great Ones which will tell you of my work.”

He offered several letters of appreciation and praise for his exhibitions in various foreign countries, and sat smiling contentedly as the members of the committee read them.”

“These sound all right,” Curtis said, as he finished the last one and passed it over to Barton. “And now, monsieur, will you give a short exhibition of your work? I say short, because I am not feeling well and must soon go to rest.”

“But, yes,” and Pierre looked round the room. “May I step into another room and don my costume?”

Mrs. Curtis touched a bell, a man answered, and then took the visiting artist to a dressing-room, carrying his bag with him.

“I like him,” cried Rosella. “I hope he contorts as well as he behaves. He has charming manners, like the best sort of French society. Oh, I’m all in favor of going on with the freaks. I mean sports, Daddy hated to hear me say freaks.”

“Rosella,” Curtis said slowly, “I loved your father for many long years, and I still love and revere his memory. But I think he exaggerated his ideas of the extent to which sports should be educated. Decent manners and proper English is all they really need to make them acceptable, if they do their acts well. Now, if we all agree that this Frenchman is really a superior contortionist, I think we needn’t be too exacting about his choice of reading or his taste in music. I’m not setting aside Robert’s fine ideas concerning this, but I fear without Robert’s energetic persistency in that direction we can hardly keep the lot of them up to par in a literary quiz. I propose we let them have their own hobbies and follow their own tastes, with a general oversight that shall keep them in the way of politeness and ethics, without insisting on a college extension certificate.”

“I’m with you, Mr. Curtis,” Davis began, but just then Pierre returned, ready for his act.

He wore a beautiful Harlequin costume, with tumbling frills at wrists and knees, and a belaced hat with a long, curling ostrich feather. This hat he used to make sweeping obeisance to the ladies, and then tossed it aside as he began his performance.

“I could have some music?” he asked, looking longingly at a piano, but scowling at a radio cabinet.

“Yes, indeed,” and Rosella, following his unspoken thoughts, seated herself at the piano.

“Two-time, please,” he said, “and then the three-time.”

Without being a great pianist, Rosella understood, and in three minutes was entirely at one with the performer, and improvised as she learned more and more of his requirements.

His work was true art, a finished, competent bit of graceful manipulations that charmed the audience and evoked very real applause.

“Bravo!” Curtis said, at last, and waved his hand for the performance to stop. “I’m all for Monsieur Pierre. But I must leave you now—I am not feeling well. Do the rest of you arrange matters with this true artist, and I will pass on your findings tomorrow. Good day, all. Come, Mary.”

Mrs. Curtis rose, and led him from the room. There was a silence and then Pierre said:

“An ill man, your President—yes?”

“He is,” agreed Barton. “We hope for the best, but sometimes I’m pretty anxious about him.”

“Ah, yes, it makes for anxiety. It is because of an Oriental curse, yes?”

“Of course not. Don’t air such views here, I beg of you, M. Lamar. We do not believe in such mummery,” Barton spoke sharply, “and neither do we want to discuss it. Now, sir, I’m sure I speak for us all when I say your work is truly superfine. We shall be glad to have you in our collection of Sports, if you are willing to agree to our terms and submit to our stipulations. Shall we discuss details now, Davis, or wait until tomorrow?”

“Don’t forget I’m here,” Rosella put in, with her winning smile. “I’m speaking for my father when I say I want to settle things here and now. Where are you living, M. Lamar?”

“Oh, call me Pierre, mademoiselle, I pray of you!”

The Frenchman turned a glance on Rosella that made Fred Stafford stare at the offender.

Barton, too, glared at Lamar, and said, sternly: “Of course, we shall all call you Pierre. We do not dignify our employees with titles.”

It was not a nice speech, and Barton looked stern and forbidding; but Lamar took it calmly.

“As you say, sir,” he returned. “You must pardon my inexperience in this so strange a country.”

The Frenchman’s English was good. He had a Gallic accent, and his idioms were not strictly correct, but on the whole he was understandable and pleasant to listen to.

“Have you a place to live?” asked Davis, repeating Rosella’s question.

“I am staying for the moment, with a very good friend of mine at the Bagatelle, a tiny house in this your so enormous city. But I am at your orders naturally.”

“All right, Pierre,” Davis said. “You go back there now. That’s a nice little Inn. I know it well. Then, tomorrow, either Mr. Barton or I, or both of us, will call on you, and make final arrangements. I warn you, we are somewhat strict in our requirements and we expect obedience.”

“Which I shall gladly give, monsieur. Then, may I say *au revoir*,” and with another courtly bow, he picked up his feathered hat and left the room.

“Queer dick,” Fred Stafford said, the rest being rather quiet.

“Yes,” Barton returned. “Mr. Stone, you hardly spoke a word. What do you think of our new find?”

“As a snapshot decision, I should say he will bear watching.”

“A little too quick on the uptake?” asked Davis, shrewdly. “I don’t cotton to him altogether, but he is one star performer! I’ve seen a lot of that twisting and twirling—done by experts, too, but I never saw a slicker bit of what the Mock Turtle called ‘drawling and stretching and fainting in coils.’ ”

“And he said, ‘reeling and writhing’ too,” added Rosella, “which Pierre also does.”

“I didn’t like his face,” Stafford said.

“Only because he looked at me,” Rosella told him. “Yes, that. But also, he has a black, quick-darting eye, that bodes ill for one he dislikes.”

“Well, we’re not making a friend of him,” Barton reminded. “We engage him for his stunt, and if he does that and makes no real trouble, why worry? Don’t go too near him, Miss Allenby, I wouldn’t trust those so good manners of his.”

“He’s just like an eel,” mused Rosella, “no, not an eel—more like a beautiful gliding snake, slithering through a fairy jungle—”

“Oh, come now, Rosy,” Stafford chided her, “don’t be silly. You get too much interested in him, and I’ll have him shipped back to his old home town, Paris—if he did come from Paris?”

“He sure did,” Fleming Stone declared. “He never got that special and particular air of his anywhere else. I don’t like him very much, but I hope the committee takes him on, for I’ve never seen such a skilled contortionist or one with more natural grace. If he doesn’t fall in love and elope with the little Albino you have two gems of first water right there.”

“The Sports are not acquainted with one another,” Henry Grant said. “Mr. Allenby thought it better they shouldn’t be. He was right, too. Idle people are great gossips. And may I remind you men that while it may be just as well not to have our sports overstuffed with culture, yet they must have some occupation, or they will get into mischief. That’s why Mr. Allenby always tried to get people with brains, so they could be given studies or something to do in which they would be really interested. Not just do their work to get it done.”

“You certainly have your work cut out for you,” Stone looked serious. “I had no idea there was so much to be done and thought of with the managing of our abnormal friends.”

“Yes, there’s lots of hard work still to come,” and Barton looked careworn.

“Oh, chirk up, Mr. Barton,” Rosella said. “You and Mr. Davis can carry along, until—until Mr. Curtis gets well.”

“I wouldn’t bank too much on that,” Stone said; “I don’t want to be a crepe-hanger, but Mr. Curtis, I fear, will do little more active work on the Fair business.”

“I think we all agree to that,” Barton said, “though we hesitate to admit it. But, meantime, we must go ahead, just as if Mr. Allenby were here, and Mr. Curtis entirely well. My motto is Buck up or Shut up. And as we’re decided to keep on, we must buck up.”

The apartment was a duplex, and Barton ran up the short flight of stairs to see Curtis a moment before leaving.

Fred Stafford followed at his heels, and the two entered the sick man’s room together.

“Vamoose, Fred,” said Curtis, “I want to see Mr. Barton alone.”

“All right, sir, just looked in to say good-by. Hope you’re better tomorrow.”

“I’m all right. Good-by, lad, run along.”

Stafford went along, but he didn’t run, and as he left the room, he looked back just in time to see Barton stealthily putting something in the medicine cabinet, which hung on the bathroom wall, in plain sight, as the bathroom door stood open.

“What’s he doing?” Stafford thought. “He has that furtive air, as if he were up to some mischief. I’m going to tell Stone about it; he ought to know.” Back in the living-room, he found only Stone. Rosella had gone to find Mrs. Curtis and Grant and Davis had gone home.

“I say, Mr. Stone,” young Stafford burst forth at once, “between you and me, do you think Pete Barton is all right?”

“All right?” echoed the surprised detective. “Do you mean mentally, morally or physically?”

“Well, tell me this then.” Stafford looked belligerent. “Could Mr. Curtis’ illness be brought about by—er—poison?”

“Why? Is Mr. Barton feeding him aconite?”

“Don’t make fun!” Stafford looked hurt. “But couldn’t some sort of harmful drug bring about his wasted condition?”

“None that I know of. And he isn’t taking any drugs. His physicians tells me there is no medicine that can help him. They try such means as feeding and stimulating him; and I believe they’re sending him away.”

“I hope he’ll go soon then. He’s in danger here.”

“Look out, Stafford,” the detective spoke sternly, “you can’t hint such implications. If you’ve any evidence or any reason to think Mr. Curtis is being poisoned you must speak right out, or you may find yourself in trouble. What’s on your mind?”

“Well, I will speak out. Mr. Barton and I just now went up to see Mr. Curtis and, as they wanted to talk, I stayed only a moment. But as I left the room, I saw Mr. Barton secretly putting something in the medicine chest which is on the wall just inside the bathroom door. He had a sly look, as if he were doing something wrong—”

“And you concluded he was putting some poison tablets in the little cupboard, that Mr. Curtis might take them, with fatal results. If, as you’ve said, you have detective instinct, you didn’t show it then. In the first place if Mr. Barton were doing some such thing, he’s cute enough not to do it while you were still where you could see him. Also, Mr. Barton is a close friend of Mr. Curtis, whose death would be a sad blow to the Fair Committee. Also, again, there is no drug that could bring about the conditions from which Mr. Curtis is suffering. I have consulted several famous physicians regarding this and they all tell me the same thing. Mr. Curtis has a bad case of pernicious anæmia, from no known cause and with no known cure. Personally, I think he cannot live much longer, but modern science is very wonderful and some way of saving his life may yet be found.”

“You don’t subscribe to the curse theory, then?”

“I most certainly do not. Now, Stafford, you are young and enthusiastic. Don’t let your theories run away with you. Keep a tight rein on your imagination or you’ll spoil whatever talent you may have for detective work. I’m going now. Come round and see me some time, and we’ll talk these things over further.”

Stone rose to go, and just then Barton reappeared, so the two men went down together in the elevator.

“Smart chap, young Stafford,” said Stone, as they reached the street; “but he lets his cut-and-dried notions of how a case ought to progress interfere with his discoveries of how it is progressing.”

“Too callow for me,” rejoined Barton. “I have to confess I don’t care for very young men—they know too much that isn’t so.”

“Yes, that’s youth all over. But we can’t be born middle-aged.”

“No, worse luck. Come into my club here, won’t you, Stone? Let’s have a little chat about Curtis. Near the end, don’t you think?”

Stone didn’t answer this question until they were seated in a small room by themselves.

Then he said:

“Did it ever occur to you, Barton, to think of Mr. Curtis in connection with the death of Mr. Allenby?”

“Curtis—Charlie Curtis do for Allenby! That most certainly never occurred to me, Mr. Stone.”

“Yet Allenby was killed by one of his committee, and Curtis seems to be the only one who could have done it.”

“Why was Allenby killed by one of the committee? Why could only Curtis have done it? Why couldn’t I have done it? Or Davis?”

“You hadn’t the opportunity. When you went into the bedroom, and returned in a few moments, Curtis followed you in. Can you suppose for a minute that if he found his friend there dead, he would have come back calmly and sat down, without a word about what he had seen? All this applies equally to Davis. But when Curtis went in the second time, he had full opportunity to kill Mr. Allenby, and then make an outcry. You two rushed in, and in the haste and excitement, I doubt if any of you could tell exactly what happened. I doubt if you looked at the body or felt of it, to make an estimate of how long it was since death had occurred. I don’t say you would be expected to do this but it would have been a great help if you had done so.”

“Do I understand, then, that you are accusing Mr Curtis of the crime, Mr. Stone?”

“By no means. But it cannot be denied that he alone of you three had opportunity to do it.”

“And his motive?”

Stone shrugged his broad shoulders.

Barton, too, had broad shoulders, and he shrugged his.

“Who can tell that?” Stone asked, musingly. “A murder occurs. Everyone says, ‘look for the motive.’ But nine times out of ten, that motive cannot be found. A private feud, a petty jealousy, a fancied insult, a money squabble, all these things have brought about murder, yet the motive was not apparent to outsiders.”

“You don’t think Mr. Curtis’ illness has affected his mind, do you?”

“No,” said the detective, “I certainly do not. The great doctors I have consulted say that the severest cases of pernicious anæmia do not affect the brain. It is a bodily illness.”

“Then he never killed Robert Allenby!” Barton spoke decidedly. “In his right mind, Curtis could no more kill his long-time friend than he could kill his own mother. Try again, Mr. Stone.”

“Not just now. Has Mr. Curtis any friends who believe in this Egyptian curse they talk about?”

“Not many. Some do, and say so, and I think others do, but won’t own up to it.”

“Yourself being one of those?”

“Yes, I suppose so. I don’t fully believe in it, of course, but strange things have happened.”

“Such as what?”

“Well, look at all the deaths that occurred among the principals, soon after the Tomb of Tutankhamen was rifled.”

“Not so many.”

“The discoverer of the Tomb himself died shortly after the mummy case was opened; several of his chief assistants quickly followed; many visitors and tourists died, and in every case the curse was cited. I don’t say I believe in that curse, but I know I wouldn’t go into that Tomb for anything on earth!”

“But there was no such curse. One of the chief workers told me he read every inscription, and there was positively none of a threatening nature.”

“There was—there was, Mr. Stone, but he didn’t tell of it. They desperately strove to keep it secret, but it leaked out. Of course, there was a curse, a fearful one, but not always did it mean death. It carried to the despoilers a promise of long and painful illness, misfortune, disaster and dire evils as a penalty for intrusion on sacred things.”

“I know. All that is legend and has grown and fattened by repetition until the original lie is lost in exaggeration. I was among the first to brave the fabled dangers of entering the Tomb, yet I never had an uncomfortable moment because of it. Now, Mr. Curtis is, to my certain knowledge, a born believer in all sort of supernaturalism. He swallowed all the yarns about that curse, and aided by a nervous constitution and a disposition to accept suggestion, he has made himself the broken, pitiable creature that he is.”

“And you accuse him of murder!”

“No, Barton, I haven’t accused him, or anyone else of Mr. Allenby’s murder, but I think the members of the committee are the natural suspects.”

Barton looked at Stone, long and steadfastly.

At last he smiled.

“Old man,” he said, “I believe you’ve been pulling my leg! I believe you put forth all those arguments to see what I’d say!”

“Well,” and now Stone smiled, “what do you say?”

“I say just this: if you really think that one of us three men killed Robert Allenby—if you think we were so stupid and so short-sighted as to kill our best friend and benefactor, to cut off our chance of making a small fortune, to sever an alliance with the best business man in the city, the finest promoter in the country and the greatest manager in the world, then I say you have no right to call yourself a detective.”

“And suppose I still claim the right to be called a detective, and suppose I declare I will discover the motive that actuated the one of the committee who was so stupid and short-sighted as to kill the goose that laid the golden eggs, what would be your comment then?”

Barton’s manner changed a little, and he said, thoughtfully:

“If you are in earnest, Mr. Stone, and I think you must be, perhaps I’ll have to readjust my beliefs and opinions. It had never occurred to me that one of us three could be suspected. But since you put it as strongly as you do, I shall have to give it my attention. It seems to me useless to tell you I did not commit the murder. I didn’t, but I suppose if I had, I should say I didn’t. That you must look into for yourself. However, I feel it my right to say that I consider I have a well-balanced mind and a sense of relative values. This being so, I can’t reconcile the idea of my being the remover of the very head and front of the greatest good fortune that has come to me for many years.

“But, as you know, it is futile for me to proclaim my own innocence, you must prove that for yourself. I will, however, tell you anything I can as to the other two of our committee, and if you can persuade me to suspect either of them, I will join your efforts to get at the truth. But if Charles Curtis seems to me an impossible suspect, Munson Davis seems even more so.”

“Yes?” said Fleming Stone.

“Yes, and yes, and yes!” cried Barton, stirred up at last. “And I’ll bet that, before long, we three will seem as impossible to you, as to me!”

Chapter XI

The Three Partners

“That strikes me as a bit of a challenge,” Fleming Stone said, looking quizzically at Peter Barton; “now, I’ll lay my cards on the table. The first words I heard about this crime—Miss Allenby told me of it first—gave me the impression of Robert Allenby being killed in his bedroom while his partners sat in the next room. No other person was mentioned then, no other possible suspect was suggested, so I naturally turned my thoughts to those three men. Of course, I didn’t suspect them. One cannot suspect with practically no knowledge of the candidates offered. Then Grant stepped into the picture and I had to concede that he had opportunity, and perhaps motive. Young Stafford was spoken of, with a hackneyed and unlikely motive. That boy is not fool enough to think he could murder a big financial magnate and then marry his daughter! The odds are too much against him. Rank outsiders came into the question. Light-hearted ladies, ugly business enemies, house servants, and others.

“Impartially, and with an open mind, I investigated all these possibilities. But I found no definite evidence, nothing by way of real proof, and I cast my net farther afield, if I may be allowed to mix my metaphors.”

“And then what did you drag in?”

“The same old disappointing nothing! But I’m not discouraged. With a clever criminal, such as we must agree we have to look for, it may take months to track him down. The police are pretty much baffled, too. But I’m as sure of eventual success as I am sure the sun will rise tomorrow morning.”

“Where shall you look next?”

“Before I try a new route, I’m going to review what I have done. It could easily be that I overlooked some point, that I missed some detail, which I might notice on another round.”

“Going to quiz the committee all over again?”

“Yes, I think so. I might learn some little thing. You know today’s detective doesn’t listen to a suspect’s glib recital and then say, ‘Ah, yes, that has all the earmarks of Silky Sam’s work!’ and then go and arrest the criminal. We’re more likely to say, ‘Fairy tale! Not a word of truth in

it.' Yes, I shall re-examine you three men, but, I confess I hate to bother poor old Curtis."

"He isn't so old."

"Pretty well along. About Allenby's age, I judge."

"Yes, I think so. They were at college together. Well, Mr. Stone, now you have me here, why don't you put me through my paces now?"

"Have you time?"

"Heaps of it. Go ahead."

"Very well. First of all, are you supplying Mr. Curtis with any secret pellets or medicine of any sort?"

"Good Lord, no!"

"Then you can deny the report I have heard, more than once, of your opening his wall cabinet and slipping in a small parcel, while you looked furtively about, as if afraid of being seen."

"No, I cannot honestly deny that."

Barton looked very grave, and gazed steadily at his inquisitor.

Stone showed no surprise at what seemed to be a confession, and waited for further enlightenment.

"You want to be told about that, I suppose?" and Barton's tone was a little truculent.

"Yes, if you choose."

"I suppose that means that if I don't tell you, you'll find out for yourself."

"It doesn't exactly mean that, but I should probably try."

"And you'd find out and find out wrong, so I'll tell you. Frequently, when I'm in Charlie Curtis' bedroom, I do step into his bathroom, I do open the medicine cabinet on the wall and I do put inside a small packet

which I have brought in my pocket. If that makes for suspicion, go ahead with it.”

“Don’t be silly! Of course it’s no wrong-doing, or you wouldn’t be so willing and anxious to tell me about it. What’s in your precious package? Gum-drops?”

“You’re a one-er, Mr. Stone! Here you have a dire mystery presented to you on a platter, and you toss it aside without a smidge of curiosity.”

Stone merely smiled and waited.

“Well,” Barton said, “it’s all a very simple matter. What I stealthily, or secretly, or slyly, or furtively place in Mr. Curtis’ little cupboard is merely a package of cigarettes.”

“Of a special kind?”

“Of a special kind.”

Again Stone sat silent. He was not asking questions just now. If Barton chose to tell him, very well. If not, he could discover for himself.

“You would not know from the box what kind they are,” Barton vouchsafed. “The boxes may name any of the most popular brands. Not always the same brand, now one sort and now another.”

“And what do the boxes hold?”

“They hold specially made cigarettes, which contain a modicum of hasheesh.”

“For Curtis’ private use?”

“Just that. Now, wait a minute. You are ready to condemn me unheard, I fear.”

“Don’t size up my mental attitude with no knowledge to work on.”

“Right you are. And don’t you do that, either. You see, it’s this way. Somehow or other Charlie contracted a taste for hasheesh cigarettes, and now he is utterly miserable if he can’t have one occasionally. So I

provide him with a few now and then, and it serves to make his burden of life a little easier.”

Barton paused for a moment.

Then he went on.

“Thank you, Mr. Stone, for not exclaiming, ‘A man in his condition!’ or something like that. Thank you for refraining from the implication that I am hastening Curtis’ death. No, I have had the advice of the best doctors and chemists I could find. I have asked drug experts in various fields, and one and all agree that the things cannot harm Charles Curtis in any way. His own doctor, Crosby, sanctions the plan, and so I take him a box now and then, an ordinary box, you know, but filled with the special cigarettes.”

“Where do you get them?”

“You can get them at lots of places. You can get them in their own boxes, of course, but I put them in the boxes of the plainer and cheaper kinds, so it will not be known.”

“Since all the physicians agree that these smokes do Curtis no harm, why the secrecy?”

“Because of his wife. Mrs. Curtis is a regular crank on the matter of drugs. If she thought her Charlie smoked one of these horrors she would bewail him as a drug addict, and would move heaven and earth to keep the awful menace from him. So, to give the chap a little pleasure, I carry the refilled boxes to him at intervals, and instead of handing them to him, I put them in the little cupboard. On one shelf he keeps various brands of cigarettes, and Mother Curtis keeps watch that no alien sorts appear. I mark the boxes, so he won’t get mixed up and for more than a year now, the plan has moved smoothly and without a hitch. Doctor Crosby keeps strict watch on all the details of Curtis’ condition, and as he assures me there can be no ill effects on his patient from the cigarettes I take to him, why shouldn’t I do it?”

“I felt sure, Mr. Barton, some such explanation would be forthcoming. I’m not awfully familiar with opiate drugs, but since the doctors are satisfied I am. It may well be that the drug is calming and restful to the

man's shattered nerves, and may be a real help in soothing his nervous spells. I wish he could forget his superstitious fears. Unless he does, I doubt his ability to help you in your enterprise."

"If he could only keep his mind clear," Barton said, with a troubled look. "Crosby tells me this anæmia does not affect the brain, but I think I see signs now and then of Curtis' lack of understanding, even in simple problems. Perhaps it would be better to give up the Fair plan. But I hate to do that. I feel it a sort of sacred trust left us by Mr. Allenby, and I do want to carry on—"

"Don't forget Miss Allenby," Stone reminded him. "She is a host in herself, isn't she?"

"Yes, I suppose so. But you can't do this kind of work with a girl."

There was a tap at the door and a page brought in a card. It was Davis' and the owner followed close behind.

"What are you fellers doing?" he said. "Come along with me, over to my diggings, and I'll show you the eighth wonder of the world. The Vermilion Pavilion! Just finished the model, and I'm screaming for somebody to come and admire it with me. Come along, Mr. Stone, come on, Pete."

Willingly enough the two went along with the exuberant Davis. They walked the few blocks to his hotel and soon were loud in their praises of the model Davis had built.

It was an odd-shaped structure of Oriental type, with soft yet gay coloring and catchy design.

"See?" cried the originator. "These are the exhibition booths, and behind them, each Sport has his or her dressing-room. It will be large—this is one-eighth size, for Mr. Allenby said I could count on all the room I wanted. Of course, you must imagine the furnishings and paraphernalia, but you get the general effect of the outside view, and a fair notion of the inside. What color is it?"

As the whole thing was lacquered a bright Chinese Vermilion, this question was a rhetorical one.

“It’s a beautiful piece of work,” Stone said, heartily. “I congratulate you, Mr. Davis, on a masterpiece.”

Munson Davis blushed with pleasure, for Fleming Stone was well known as an appreciator of art.

“I hope it will be put to its intended use,” he said, gravely. “But that’s a long look ahead. Well, how do you think our new acquisition, our so famous Pierre, will look in it?”

“He’s very good-looking,” Stone said; “I think he and your pavilion will complement one another.”

“He’s an artist at his work, too,” said Barton. “Same as Davis here. Your Pavilion is stunning, Munson. It’s overpowering. I begin to feel my inability to stand up to such gorgeousness.”

“Yes, it is gorgeous,” Davis took him literally, “but you must remember it will be out in the hot sunshine, and if of lesser import, would be lost among other buildings. As it is, it arrests by its unique form and color, and its grace of design. Don’t think me a bag of vanity, Mr. Stone, but I know my values, and I see merit in this composition.”

“You’re quite right, and I’m happy in knowing that the odd people for whom you are building it are worthy of so splendid a setting. It will be the most remarkable show ever staged, and I know you will continue to select only the best of the strange creatures you still expect to find.”

“I can scarcely wait for the time to come to build it,” Davis said, grinning like a boy. “I’m just marking time till I can put my plans in the outstretched hand of the master-builder.”

“You’re arranging for your exhibition?” Stone asked.

“Yes, I am. You see, I meant to ask Mr. Allenby to help me finance that, but I put it off too long. He was always kind about such matters. Two or three times he has lent me money enough to hold an exhibition, and I’ve pulled in enough to pay him back. So, as he left me a bit in his will, I’m using part of it to get a first rate gallery for my show-off, and I bet I’ll clear enough to furnish my model Pavilion.”

“When shall you hold your exhibition?”

“Right after Thanksgiving Day. Or early in December. So kind-hearted patrons can buy their Christmas presents there.”

“I say,” Barton suggested, “oughtn’t we to have a Christmas Tree for the Sports? Give them a treat, you know?”

“But I thought they were not to know one another,” Stone reminded him.

“That seems silly to me. I think they ought to be acquainted, and have meetings or little entertainments among themselves.”

“Now, Barton, you’re headed wrong,” Davis declared, and he spoke sharply. “You know that way trouble lies. You give those people free rein, and you know where they’ll land up. Affinities will ensue, if you see what I mean. The Skeleton will fall for fair, fat Bonnie, and as for our new friend, Pierre, he will play fast and loose with the smiling Albino, and—”

“Oh, hush,” Barton said. “But I’ll tell you one thing, Munson, now that Charlie Curtis can’t do any active work, and somebody has to chase those festive Sports to keep them in proper trim, you and I have our work cut out for us. You see, Mr. Stone, we have to do all that Mr. Allenby was doing, and I freely admit we can’t do it with his neatness and dispatch. But we have our own work also, and I know that we can’t keep watch and guard over Sports, old and new, in addition to our other duties. You know it, too, Davis, so why not speak up and say you agree with me that we must get an assistant curator, or whatever the position is, to help out in the schoolroom. Somebody not highbrow, but with a good high-school education and a lot of common sense and tact—maybe have to try out three or four before we’re suited, but fixed at last it would take a load off our responsibilities.”

“That’s just the thing to do,” Stone commented, “I hope you’ll carry out that idea. You try your three or four, and if you’re not suited then, I’ll recommend a man I know.”

“Oh, recommend your man first,” Barton begged, “then we won’t have to try out our sure-to-be failures.”

“My man is one Waldo Marsh. He’s a shrewd Yankee, but with enough mother-wit and common sense to manage your Sports, I’m sure. While not a *savant*, he’s well versed in ground and lofty literature, and has a bit of culture on the side. Moreover he’s of the quietly observant sort and can tell you who’s who among your curiosities.”

“Sounds good to me,” Davis said. “Send him to Barton, won’t you, for consideration. He’ll know if we want him, quicker’n I could judge. Mr. Allenby, now, would size him up in three minutes, and I’ll bet Bart will do the same. Can he get along with the untested Pierre?”

“That’s the man I had in mind. I don’t feel altogether sure of Monsieur Lamar’s integrity myself, but Marsh is a born character reader, and can take him apart and put him together again.”

“He’s the man for us. Send him to me as soon as you can, and I’ll make terms with him. Now that Charlie’s condition makes his help so uncertain, we must have someone to depend on. I say, Mr. Stone, without wanting to be curious, are you making headway with the search for the murderer?”

“Not exactly what can be called headway,” and Stone looked a bit rueful, “but I am holding my own. You know, Mr. Barton, some cases go very slowly for a time, and then take a sudden spurt and come to a head all at once. At present things are going very slowly, but that doesn’t spell discouragement.”

“No, I suppose not for you, but it would for me.”

“Detective work requires patience,” Stone said, and just then the telephone bell rang.

Davis went into the little booth to answer it. He had to have the booth, he often said, because his friends were all so fearfully curious and of such acute hearing.

When he came out he looked a little perplexed, but said frankly:

“From Grant. He tells me that Pierre, the mysterious contortionist, with the so great politeness of manner, is going to see Mr. Curtis this evening.”

“What for?” cried Barton, looking annoyed, “That’s a funny move.”

“Grant says he’s going at Mrs. Curtis’ invitation—”

“Is Grant going?”

“No, I mean Grant says Pierre is going because Mrs. Curtis asked him to—”

“Well, in the name of the seven sinners, what brings Mrs. Curtis to the fore?”

“I’m telling you. Mrs. Curtis has asked Pierre to come to her house this evening and do some of his stunts for Mr. Curtis’ entertainment. She thinks it will do her husband good to be diverted by Pierre’s fine contortionist work, and Mr. Curtis wants a talk with the Frenchman beside.”

“The plot thickens!” Barton growled. “I don’t get this. Of course, Curtis has a right to do just what he likes, without consulting us, but he might have mentioned it.”

“I think I can tell you why Mr. Curtis wants to see the clever Pierre,” Stone told them; “I chanced to overhear Pierre say to Mr. Curtis that he had been to the Tomb of Tutankhamen and had suffered its ill effects himself, and that a friend of his had died from the curse.”

“Curse that curse!” exclaimed Barton. “I vote we dismiss this Pierre person. He’s a trouble-maker. He’ll go there and talk to Charlie about a lot of friends of his who have died or been crippled by that dratted curse, and he’ll make the poor chap a heap worse than he already is.”

“Now, there, you see,” Stone said, “is where my man, Marsh, would be of greatest help. He could take hold of a little bother like that and put it right out of existence.”

“Sort of general Trouble Man,” and Barton nodded his head. “Sounds good to me. Can’t get him here too quick, I say.”

“I’ll send him whenever you like,” Stone offered.

“Tomorrow morning, then,” Barton rejoined. “Can’t do anything about tonight, now, and it’s too bad to cut Charlie out of any pleasure he can get.”

“I’ll send him,” Stone agreed. “You see, what makes him particularly adapted to your needs is his acquaintance with freaks. Oh, I know the difference between your Sports and the old-time freaks of the side-show, but they have some points in common. And Waldo Marsh’s father was with P. T. Barnum, and was the chief keeper of the Freaks, as they called them. So, as Waldo was with his father a lot at his work, he will have a general knowledge of the way and whims of such people.”

“Better and better!” Davis rejoiced. “It will save Barton and me a lot of time, and be a real help beside; for we’ve little experience with the queer ones.”

“I suppose we oughtn’t to butt in on Curtis’ party tonight,” Davis said, dubiously.

“Certainly not,” Barton told him. “As we’re not invited, we can’t go. And Curtis has a right to ask whom he chooses.”

“I doubt if he’s asking many,” Stone said. “As I see it, Mr. Curtis wants to talk of the supernatural with one who won’t scoff at him as he tells me most people do.”

“If they don’t, it’s out of kindly consideration for him,” and Barton shook his head. “Almost no one stands for it, and if Froggy Pierre does, he’ll find steady company in President Curtis.”

“You’ve been to ball-dances, Mr. Stone,” Davis said. “Have you ever heard or seen anything that you believed came from other than a natural source?”

“No, I am in no sense a spiritualist or supernaturalist. Nor have I ever seen or heard anything that seemed other than a natural effect, that could not be explained by chicanery or inattention. A man may hoodwink his fellows, and they may overlook the truth though it lies right under their eyes, but acts or sounds without natural causes I do not admit.”

“Don’t tell Curtis that,” said Barton, “no use stirring up trouble. I think sometimes that he believes more fully in spooks than in people.”

“Does his fancy run to spooks?”

“Not very much, but some. He is mostly interested in the influence supernatural powers have over ordinary humanity. Like his sufferings from the curse that threatened any disturber of the Egyptian’s tomb. He holds that the curse was really pronounced by the Powers of Darkness and that the sufferers from the curse, brought it on themselves. He thinks if he had never gone into that Tomb, he would be a well man today.”

“Well, he isn’t a well man today, that’s certain,” Davis spoke angrily. “And what is his illness? No one knows. What caused it? No one knows. I say, Mr. Stone, is there anything in it? For I went into that tomb, and of late I’m feeling some such effects as Curtis has.”

“Oh, come now, Davis,” Barton laughed, “I can’t stand two of you! Take that back, or I break up our partnership here and now! A committee of three, a modern architect, and two lunatics! Fine! Greatest show on earth! Can your Waldo Marsh straighten out Pete Barton, Mr. Stone?”

“Let’s drop the subject for the moment,” Stone said, “I must go now, and I want to know some things. How many sports have you engaged to date?”

“Four, positively, and three more on approval,” Barton said, promptly

“If Marsh comes to assist you, you want him to look after them all?”

“Why, yes, I think so,” Barton said, thoughtfully. “With Mr. Curtis ill and Munsie here gone off his nut, I’ll have all I can do without looking after any of the Sports, except perhaps occasionally.”

“True enough,” said Stone, sympathetically; “and, as I’m sure you’ll like Marsh, I’ll send him round in the morning, and you can take him on trial, at least.”

“And can’t we somehow find out,” Davis said, “what Mr. Curtis and Pierre talk about tonight? This isn’t idle curiosity, but I am keeping tab

on Charlie's movements, and I have reasons for wanting to know of his dealings with Pierre."

"Why Pierre?" asked Barton.

"Oh, because I mistrust that man, and I have a sort of fear that he spells trouble for Curtis."

"Now, Munson," Barton spoke crossly, "how can you know anything about what a man spells when you don't know anything about the man? Did you ever see Pierre before today?"

"No."

"Did you ever hear of him before we thought of taking him on?"

"No."

"Then how can you mistrust him in regard to Curtis?"

"Heavens, Pete, did you never have a hunch? Did you never feel a man was evil, even before you knew it for a fact?"

"And did you never find yourself dead wrong?" This from Stone, who smiled at Davis as at a pampered child.

"Well, Mr. Stone, I haven't always been wrong, no. And I bet you didn't feel a real drawing toward Pierre, because of his open, frank straightforward nature, did you now?"

"Not altogether that, no. But as to this conversation tonight, it doesn't spell trouble so far as I can see. I look on Mr. Curtis' supernatural notions as a hobby, nothing more, and I don't think his illness is caused by or affected by his belief in the unreal or by his fear of the so-called curse."

Chapter XII **The Great Waldo Marsh**

STONE went away, and Barton said to Davis, "What did he mean by that last speech?" and Davis said, "I don't know," and then Barton went

home, and Davis was left to gloat over his model of the Vermilion Pavilion.

It was beautiful, he told himself. Its delicate upright lines, slight in appearance but strong in reality, carried the lateral structure with ease and grace. The surfaces of red lacquer were of varied tones, the gold ornamentation, here a mass, there a mere tracery, was perfectly adjusted, and the ensemble was charming as well as gorgeous. It was designed to please the man in the street, as well as the connoisseur, and Davis was sure he had accomplished that.

He sat before it a long time, seeking flaws, noting points for improvement and also gloating over the real beauties of the thing.

Like most artists, Davis was a late riser.

But, interested in his creation of the pavilion, he nowadays rose early to work on his masterpiece.

So that the next morning, he was already in his workroom when a visitor was announced.

The page informed him it was Mr. Waldo Marsh, and the bearer of the name followed the small herald into the room.

As imaginative people will do, Davis had already visualized this expected helper, and he had pictured him as a raw-boned Yankee countryman, careless of dress and with customs shocking and manners none.

Stone had given him no real reason to look for a man of this type, but then neither had he hinted at the sort of man Marsh really was.

To sum up his appearance in a word, the word would have to be majestic.

Nothing less would do.

Waldo Marsh was six feet of masculinity, well proportioned, grandly formed, and with the free, swinging grace of a Walt Whitman.

In fact, he was not unlike that child of Nature, for he boasted a head of fluent white hair and a full set of white whiskers that would outshine either Whitman or Santa Claus.

“Are you Marsh?” and Davis stared at him. “Did Fleming Stone send you here?”

“Yes, to both,” and the voice was mellow and rounded, though not musical. “Won’t I do?”

“How do I know, first-off, like this? What are your qualifications?”

“Anything you want,” was the gently-spoken answer. “I gathered I was to look after a special brand of freaks, that you’ve been collecting. I’m more or less used to them—I was helper to my father at Barnum’s Biggest Show On Earth.”

“Then there should be no question of your ability to look after them. And I’m sure you could manage them if they became rambunctious. But they’re not a fiery sort. Mostly gentle, eat-out-of-your-hand variety. Where do you live?”

“Out in Jersey, just now. But I’d move to wherever you’d say. I’d expected to live with the lot, you see. Can’t really understand them unless you do.”

“Well, we hadn’t counted on that. I’ll tell you what to do. You run along now and see Mr. Barton, he’s really our general manager, and tell him you seem all right to me, and if he agrees and Mr. Curtis—he’s the President—agrees, I say take you for a time on trial.”

“How long a time?”

“Oh, fix that up with the others, and yourself. I’ll agree to anything they say. But I don’t see how you can live with the Sports. We are keeping them separate, housing them in different places.”

“Why?”

“It seemed to us better to segregate them. It will be a long time before we can exhibit them, you know, and we want to keep them unspotted from the world, as far as possible.”

“Oh, pshaw, give me a good big house, and the Sports, and I’ll guarantee satisfactory reports. I don’t see how I can get to know ‘em, and them living all over the country. Howsumever, just as you say; we won’t quail over a little thing like that. So you kinda like me, do you?”

“Yes, I like your looks and your manners. That’s as far as I can go. You may have a cantankerous disposition and a poor digestion, but so far as I know you, you have my subscription.”

“All right, sir, then I’ll scoot over to see Mr. Barton and follow him up with Mr. Curtis.”

“Mr. Curtis is very ill, you know?”

“Mr. Stone told me about him. He oughter have a feller to talk that heathen nonsense outen him.”

“You might have a try at it, now and then, if you stay with us.”

“Dunno how it would work out. Depends on Mr. Curtis’ temperament. Some can be easy moved by oughter-suggestion, and then, some can’t.”

“Go along, then, and tell Mr. Barton all you said to me and all I said to you.”

The big man gave a graceful nod of farewell, and went off, gently closing the door behind him.

“Well,” said Davis to himself, “he’s a gamble. I’ll bet he’ll be a Tower of Strength, or else he’ll vamoose with the spoons. Queer old boy, but one can’t help liking him.”

Still alone, Waldo Marsh went to Barton’s home. Pete Barton, also expecting him, had made no mental picture of him, but he, too, was surprised at the dignity and self-possession of the man who walked into his presence.

“Mr. Marsh?” Barton said, pleasantly, for he would have shown no amazement had Marsh been twice as tall.

“Yes, sir,” and the singularly gentle voice harmonized with rather than misfitted the man.

“And you came to see me at the word of Fleming Stone? Sit down—I am glad to see you.”

“I have seen Mr. Davis,” the recital began, “and he bade me tell you that he had taken a liking to me and is all for me, if you and Mr. Curtis agree.”

“That’s good hearing. Did you and Mr. Davis decide on any details?”

“No, we didn’t. It seems you all are planning to keep the Freaks—Sports, I mean, in different homes. It would be my plan to have one big house, where I could herd them and take care of them, all under one roof.”

“H’m. That question we must consider. You look capable of taking care of them in almost any emergency.”

“Not likely there’ll be emergencies. Freaks are the easiest folks in the world to handle, if you just study ‘em a little and treat ‘em according.”

“Of course, you can remember to say sports, not freaks. Just a slip of memory.”

Marsh understood this for a reprimand and did not forget again.

After some more conversation about duties and privileges, Barton said:

“Well, I’m for you. Now, we must put it up to Mr. Curtis, and we may as well go right over there so you can take up your duties at once. Of course, we can’t get the sports into one house at once, but you’ll start in with them as they are?”

“Oh, yes. And I’m sure you’ll soon see for yourself how much better my plan would be.”

“After all, that’s a mere detail. Come along, we’ll go to see Mr. Curtis. He’s a very ill man, but I can see you have tact and sympathy, and I needn’t tell you how to behave.”

They found several people at the Curtis apartment.

Mr. Curtis was in bed, and as Barton was allowed to see him, he took Marsh along with him.

“Hello, Charlie,” Barton said cheerily. “Here’s a man it will do you good just to look at! Greet Mr. Waldo Marsh.”

By an effort, Curtis turned his head and stared at the big, smiling visitor.

“A new Sport?” he asked, weakly.

“No, not quite that, but a Keeper of the Sports.”

“Oh, Stone’s man. He looks as if he could be a Keeper of ‘most anything. I can’t talk much, Pete, I feel pretty much all gone. But I had a fine time with Pierre last night. He’s our new contortionist,” he added, courteously, to Marsh.

“And he interested you?” was the response. “That’s good. Nothing like an interesting fellow-man, after all.”

“You interest me, too,” and Curtis looked steadily at Marsh. “Do you believe in curses?”

“No, not a bit. I believe in blessings. Much more easy to manage, and they knock the old curses galley-west.”

“How do you get them—blessings, I mean?”

“Oh, they just come to you. You want one?”

“Yes.” Curtis drew himself up on his elbow. “I want the blessing of good health.”

“Oh, no, you don’t. If you did, you could have it.”

“How?”

“Just by dropping your silly and ostentatious belief in this heathenish curse, and believing in something jollier.”

“Coué business?”

“Yes or no, as you like. You don’t need any help but your own will.”

“It all sounds good, Mr. Marsh, and we’ll talk about it tomorrow, if you’ll come to see me then. Now, I believe this is a business meeting. Sorry I can’t sit up at a table properly.”

“You can, if you want to. Here.”

And before anybody could stop him, Waldo Marsh had a table drawn across the room, an easy chair pulled up to it, and Charles Curtis gently aided out of bed, into a dressing gown and on to the chair.

“My God!” exclaimed Curtis, “I never expected to sit up again.”

“Tut, tut, what sort of talk is that! Drop it and attend strictly to business with Mr. Barton here, and if you prefer, I’ll leave the room.”

“Lord, no! Stay here, stay right near me, it’s a tonic just to look at you.”

Barton drew up a chair for himself on the other side of the table, and pulled some papers from his pocket.

“I didn’t hope to have a real business huddle, Charlie,” he said, smiling. “You’re amazing, Mr. Marsh.”

“Never mind that,” the other said. “Get to your business. I don’t promise to let Mr. Curtis sit up long.”

“The first business is to sign a few papers,” and while Barton showed them to his partner and explained their content, Mrs. Curtis drew Marsh aside and begged him to give up the idea of working for the Committee and be a nurse to her husband instead.

“Don’t know about that, Mrs. Curtis,” Marsh replied. “I’m pretty well engaged by Mr. Davis already. But, Lordy, I can boss the Sports, and give a helping hand to Mr. Curtis too. You see, there’s nothing the matter with him but notions. He’s sound enough, physically.”

“Oh, do you think so? Can you persuade him of that?”

“If he wants to be persuaded. Some folks are stubborn about their maladies.”

“I know. Yes, you may find Mr. Curtis a bit stubborn, but that’s what I want you to combat. You have a way with you, Mr. Marsh, and I somehow think you can wipe out my husband’s stubbornness with that knack of yours.”

“Well, no harm having a try at it. I can help him, I know, and I can cure him if I can go about it in my own way.”

“Of course you can have your own way! Who could dictate to me about my own husband?”

“All right, all right. Don’t get peevy, ma’am. I’ve got to do what I’m told tonight, but I’ll come round to see Mr. Curtis tomorrow morning and make a start on his case. Meantime, you kinda urge it onto him, not to be stubborn with me.”

“I’ll try. I wish you had come a day sooner. Mr. Curtis had a session with Pierre, our new contortionist, and the Frenchman put a lot of ideas into his head that are already influencing him in a way I don’t like.”

“The contortionist, after turning and twisting every way himself, proceeds to turn Mr. Curtis’ head, eh? Well, we’ll have to put a stop to that, pronto! And I see Mr. Curtis is drooping a bit. I’ll have to put the kibosh on that!”

Quietly, Marsh left his seat, crossed the room, and picked up the wearied man, with a “Time’s up, Mr. Curtis,” and carrying him like a child, the strapping big Marsh deposited Charles Curtis back in his bed and fairly shooed the two partners out of the room.

“You ought to have a nurse for your husband, Mrs. Curtis,” Marsh said, seriously. “Ask your doctor for a good strong man nurse, with common sense. Never mind about the trained part of it, though the more he knows, the better. Now, I’m going. Better call your doctor, soon. Mr. Curtis is all right, but perhaps the doctor will give him a nostrum of some kind.”

“Yes, the doctor will be here soon, without being called. He’ll give Mr. Curtis aspirin or pyramidon or some such thing. He’s a fine doctor, but my husband is a difficult patient.”

Marsh gave a sympathizing look at Curtis, who seemed to be asleep or exhausted, and went silently away.

That evening, Barton and Davis went to the Allenby home to talk things over with Rosella.

The girl was an uncertain proposition. Sometimes she was deeply interested in the Committee's plans, and again she would seem utterly indifferent to the whole enterprise. Once she even said that she washed her hands of the matter and if the two men wanted to carry on, very well, but for her part, she preferred to resign. She got over that notion, however, and now wanted to do all she could to bring about the fulfillment of her father's wishes.

She had not yet seen Waldo Marsh, but from the descriptions given her, concluded that he was just the right person to care for the mental and physical condition of the Sports. She fully approved of Davis' suggestion that they take him on trial, and she agreed to a generous salary for him.

She expressed her concern as to Mr. Curtis' condition, and feared he would never be well again.

"But the man Marsh has already cheered him up some," Davis told her. "He's going to see him tomorrow and Mrs. Curtis has great hopes of his good effects on her husband."

"Is he a healer?" Rosella asked.

"Not nominally that. But he's a big, powerful chap, with all sorts of vitality and vigor and poor old Curtis fairly hangs on his words."

"I surely hope he can help Mr. Curtis," Rosella said. "Tell me about the newest Sport. How do you like Pierre?"

"I don't like Pierre, but I like his work," Davis replied.

"Don't denounce the man, when you know nothing really to his discredit," Barton said reprovingly. "Pierre is a bit difficult, I'd say, but if that dynamo of a Marsh gets after him he'll fall into line. I begin to think

Marsh is right about gathering the Sports in one place, instead of scattered all over the landscape.”

“But how can you do that?” Rosella asked. “No hotel would take them—”

“They’d take them fast enough, but it would be too public. Marsh’s idea, and a good one, I think, is to get a big house in the country, not too far away, and put them all in it. I can see no objection to their being together, with that Viking to look after them. You see, it’s not only his great bulk and strength that are so dependable, but he has just about the best stock of plain common sense I’ve noticed lately. I questioned him a lot, and I assure you we’ve a wonderful stroke of luck in getting that man. He will take full charge of the Sports and still have time to do other jobs we may want of him. And it will leave Davis and me free to look after the business matters and the getting of new Sports and the building plans and the financial budget. In a word, it will make the whole undertaking a pleasure and not a burden. Which was Mr. Allenby’s intention from the first. Indeed, with all respect and reverence for Mr. Allenby’s memory, I feel that Waldo Marsh can take his place in the management of the Sports, better than any of the rest of us could do. And, too, that miracle man declares he’s going to get Curtis well again. He says it’s all megrims, whatever they are. Now, if he can help Curtis, even if he doesn’t entirely cure him, if he can make him well enough to attend meetings and advise with us, I see no reason why things shouldn’t go along smoothly, always providing that Waldo Marsh turns out to be and to remain all my fancy paints him. Also, it will give us a little more time to look into the question of who killed Mr. Allenby. Forgive me, Rosella, if I grieve you, but I know you are as anxious as we are to find your father’s murderer.”

“Oh, yes, never hesitate to speak of it before me. Mr. Stone is doing everything possible, and I have reasons, which I may not tell of, to think he will succeed. And if we, any of us, can get the glimmer of anything which may be of assistance to him, let us tell him at once.”

“Will he thank us for butting in?” Davis inquired.

“It won’t be butting in,” Rosella said indignantly. “You men of the committee and Fred and myself are all deeply anxious to get the

criminal and any bit of information, even a mistaken bit, must be reported at once.”

“That’s right, Rosella,” Barton nodded at her. “Stone is a most just man and not at all conceited or self-important. If I get anything definite out of Pierre, I shall tell Stone at once.”

“Why Pierre?” Rosella looked surprised. “Does he know anything?”

“I have a sort of feeling that he does. But I’m not enough acquainted with him yet to ask him all I want to. After a little, I think I can get his confidence and inquire into some matters of importance.”

“I think he likes to live in his French hotel. Would he go to a country farm?”

“I don’t mean an old farmhouse. I have in mind some large country place, for sale because of taxes or something like that. Even if we have to pay a round sum of money for it, it will be a good investment. I keep watch over our output, you know, and we’re well within our limit. As for the house, trust Waldo to find that. I bet he could nail one inside of twenty-four hours. Then, don’t you see how easy it would be to furnish it properly, and get a proper staff of servants and put the Sports in it, not in any way shut up or confined, free to go and come as they choose, and a good home always there for them?”

“It sounds good to me,” Rosella agreed. “And there are scores of houses to be picked up for a song, up Westchester way or on Long Island, or in New England, if that isn’t too far.”

“Well, we’ll see. Of course, Marsh will have to be tried out, before we can put really important decisions in his hands, but I have a firm faith in his capabilities. And if he brings up Curtis’ powers of activity and we get back our old Curt, things can begin to move. Don’t think for a minute, Rosella, but I know you won’t, that I am forgetting our great and irreparable loss of your father, but I feel that our best way to show our recognition of that loss is to do the best we can to continue the work he so loved and believed in.”

“I do understand, Mr. Barton, and I appreciate and admire the progress you have already made and the promising outlook of your further

doings. I fear I'm not of as much help as I want to be, but I'm an understanding audience and an applauding one."

"Nobody could help liking a girl like that," Barton said, as he and Davis left the house, and made their way to Fleming Stone's apartment. "And I'm rather glad she doesn't try to aid Stone in his work, as she threatened to do at first."

"Fred Stafford talked her out of that," Davis said. "Rosella wants to do everything she hears about, but things come along so fast she forgets them all in turn. We won't stay long here. Just report to Stone on his very acceptable man of all work he has provided for us."

Stone was glad to hear the good report of Waldo Marsh and hoped he would live up to their belief in him.

"I'm not sure he can cure Charles Curtis, though," the detective told them. "Curtis is a very ill man and a trouble of the sort he has does not yield readily to suggestion, which is, I fear, all Marsh has to offer."

"No harm to try," Davis assured him.

And then, after a little further talk of the plans for Marsh's work, the callers left and Fleming Stone sat down in his study for one of his serious sessions with himself.

He had introduced Waldo Marsh into the Fair Committee business for two reasons; one, because he was glad to save the sinking ship of the adventure planned by Robert Allenby, sure to go down if left alone, and the other, because he expected the indirect result of Marsh's advent to be of enormous assistance to him in his search for the man who murdered Allenby.

He reassembled his suspects, in his imagination, and looked them over.

He had neither added to nor subtracted from his first selected list.

They were: one of the three men on the committee or an outsider as yet unknown and undreamed of as to identity.

In the face of all improbability, all unlikelihood, all absurdity and all damfoolishness, he believed that not the Unknown Killer but one of the three partners used the knife that ended the life of Robert Allenby.

And, never forgetting the hypothetical villain, he addressed all his practical efforts to decide on which of the three other men he could fasten the crime.

And now he busily dissected his decisions in the light of the new word just brought him that Marsh was to undertake the cure, or at least the alleviation, of Curtis' real or hypochondriacal ailments and sufferings.

And that will settle it, Stone told himself. Curtis could have done the murder, when he went in the second time. Davis could have done it, as he went in last of the three. Barton could have done it, only if Davis was blind when he went in. But, anyway, Curtis was the rational one to pounce upon, he had motive and opportunity, he wanted the plan given up, he wanted to recover the money he had put in, and now—was his illness really a rare and dread form of pernicious anæmia, or was it—remorse, horror, fear of the consequences of his own crime? If Marsh cured him, by any means or lack of means, then it was a real illness. If not—then it was guilt—that could not be blotted out. A torment of soul that tore at his frail body, and would yet hound him to his death.

Next morning, when Fleming Stone awakened, he was told the news that Charles Curtis had been found dead in his bed.

Chapter XIII

Was It The Curse?

“DEAD in his bed.”

Fleming Stone heard the words that came over the telephone, and his alert mind leaped to various conclusions.

It was Rosella who told him. She had herself just been informed by the Curtis butler, and Mrs. Curtis hoped the girl would come to her at once.

“So I thought I'd tell you, Mr. Stone, for I am going there now, and I suppose you will be there as soon as you can.”

“You know no further details?”

“None. The man told me, and I asked no questions. I suppose the anæmia, or whatever it is, reached the climax.”

“Yes; I will be there as soon as I can make it.” Fleming Stone drank a cup of coffee slowly. His sense of relative values was too strong for him to think that to arrive at the Curtis house one minute sooner was worth the price of a scalded throat and its discomforts.

Curtis was dead. In Stone’s opinion the influence of Waldo Marsh’s vital personality or the force of his suggestions could not have averted the death that had overtaken the President of the Committee, and he wasted no regrets that he had not called in that capable helper sooner.

To be sure, Marsh’s physical strength and forceful mentality must have proved tonic to Curtis’ weakened condition, but at best it would have been only temporary relief.

Also, this sudden death seemed to prove that Curtis had, after all, suffered from a definite, if incurable disease, and not from that vague malady known as megrims.

His car awaited him, and very soon Stone found himself in the Curtis home, in that strange stillness which is the inseparable companion of death in the house.

Rosella, who had already arrived, greeted him, and brought him a message from Mrs. Curtis.

“She is prostrated,” the girl told him, “and really ill. I’ve sent for a nurse. Mrs. Curtis is so very alone. She hasn’t expressed a wish to see anyone but me, and of course I can’t stay all the time. I say, Mr. Stone, there won’t have to be—er, police and all that, will there?”

“I see no occasion to call the police, if Doctor Crosby gives a certificate. Is he here yet?”

“Yes, he’s in the bedroom. Why don’t you go there?”

Stone went at once to the room which he had left but a few hours before.

“That you, Stone?” said the genial physician. “Well, poor old Curtis gave way at last.”

“To the curse?”

“Curse be damned! To pernicious anæmia, in a virulent form. Not quite a recognizable form, and doubtless aggravated by the sad state of his nerves and his overweening fears of that confounded curse. But I have attended him all through his illness. I knew every phase of it, and I have no hesitancy in signing a certificate. I see no cause to call in the Medical Examiner.”

“No, I suppose not,” Stone agreed. “My Heavens! Look who’s here!”

For the opening door revealed the inquisitorial face of Commander Lovell.

“Gone, has he?” that officer remarked as he closed the door behind him.

“Yes.” Crosby spoke a little shortly. “You’re not going to kick up a bobbery, are you?”

“Certainly not.” Lovell regarded the physician scornfully. “Why should I? If you see fit to sign a certificate, there’s no question for me to answer.”

“Of course I shall sign—” Crosby began, but Stone concluded to nip this growing discussion in the bud.

“Better take a look around, Lovell,” he said firmly. “You know, queer things happen, Doctor Crosby, and we don’t yet know who had it in for Robert Allenby.”

A trifle disconcerted by the severe disapproval shown on Doctor Crosby’s face, and the urgency of Stone’s requirement, Lovell began a routine search.

He found nothing inexplicable or questionable. Even when he drifted into the bathroom, and scrutinized the contents of the medicine cabinet on the wall, he sung out his findings in most uninteresting detail.

“Pond’s Extract, Seidlitz Powders, Collyrium, Bicarbonate of Soda, Aspirin, Aromatic Spirits of Ammonia, Sirup of Squills, Pyramidon,

Rhinitis, White Lotion, Cold Cream, Mustard Plasters, and so on—nothing here but the stock supplies of Everyman’s Medicine chest.”

“If you’re implying, Mr. Stone, that Mr. Curtis died of poison, you’re on the wrong track,” Crosby growled.

“I’m not implying anything,” Stone said, looking surprised, “but surely it’s Lovell’s duty to give a glance around. How about it, Inspector?”

“Sure,” Lovell replied. “Never neglect an opportunity. But I’m stumped to find anything mysterious here.”

“So much the better,” the detective returned. “Now, if Doctor Crosby can’t find anything mysterious either, our skirts are all clear, and we have only an ordinary death to handle.”

“Which is the case,” the doctor said pompously.

Rosella appeared in the doorway.

“Please come to see Mrs. Curtis, will you, doctor?” she said. “I fear she is on the verge of hysterics. Perhaps you can give her something to soothe her nerves.”

Crosby went off with the girl, and Stone and Lovell looked at each other.

“You’ve no reason to suspect any sort of foul play, have you, Mr. Stone?”

“No, I haven’t. Except that a man in my profession automatically looks for incriminating circumstances.”

“Me, too, as far as that goes. But here it’s all clear sailing. I’ve known Crosby for years. Not a spectacular sort, but not an old fogy, either. If he had the least speck of dissatisfaction about any point or symptom of Mr. Curtis’ illness, he’d probe into it till it was clear to him. he’s a thorough one, is Doctor Crosby, though not up to the very latest wrinkles of modern medical science.”

“I don’t think he thoroughly understood Mr. Curtis’ case, all the same.”

Rosella came back into the room.

“The mortician’s men are here,” she said. “I suppose they will take charge now.”

“Yes,” Lovell said, “I’ve seen all I need to. Send them in.”

The officer and the detective went down the short staircase, and Rosella went too.

They went into the living-room, and found there Davis and Barton.

The two men listened to the few and slight details of the death of Charles Curtis.

“Who found him?” Barton asked.

“The butler,” Rosella told them. “Gregg, his name is. He took up his coffee at eight o’clock, as always. You see, Mr. Curtis is a man of whims and most of them of an Oriental bent. He has Turkish coffee, and nobody but Gregg can make it just right.”

“Will you call Gregg here,” Lovell said abruptly; “or shall I go to his pantry, or wherever he keeps himself?”

“He will come here,” and Rosella rang a bell.

The butler appeared, correct, respectful and properly sad.

“How was Mr. Curtis lying when you found him?” Lovell asked, his official manner falling round him as a garment.

“In a natural sort of position. On his side, with his arms thrown out as if he were weary and exhausted. Mr. Curtis was always weary of late.”

“Yes,” said Lovell, “the symptom of the last stage of his terrible disease. Did he express to you last evening any word of special weariness or fear of an attack of any sort?”

The man looked uncertain, as if puzzled how to reply.

“Speak right out, Gregg,” Fleming Stone said to him. “Tell the exact truth.”

“Well, then, sir, you know Mr. Curtis was under a curse—a dreadful heathen curse. He could tell sometimes when the effects of it was coming on, and sort of brace himself to it.”

“Brace himself! How?” Lovell became alert.

“I don’t mean he did anything, or—or took anything. But he was just extra quiet, and scared-looking.”

“Mr. Curtis wasn’t a timid man?”

“Oh, no, sir! But he was afraid of that curse—”

“Never mind the curse. Forget it. Then, when you saw Mr. Curtis, as you went in with the coffee, what did you think?”

“I thought he was asleep, sir. he looked that natural, and I never dreamed of anything else, so, of course, I just assumed he was asleep. I drew up the blinds and let in the morning sunlight. Then, as he didn’t open his eyes, I touched him on the hand, but he didn’t respond at all and his hand felt cold. I went for Cook, she’s a mighty sensible person, and she went back to the room with me.

“ ‘My Lord!’ she cried out. ‘He’s dead! You’ll have to tell Mrs. Curtis, I can’t.’

“ ‘I’ll get hold of Elsa,’ I said; ‘that’s Mrs. Curtis’ maid. She’ll tell her.’

“ ‘No,’ she snapped. ‘Don’t you do that! If you can’t a-bear to tell her, I’ll tell her myself. That I will.’ ”

“And did she?”

Gregg looked his scorn.

“No, sir. I did. I’m not for hiding behind the skirts of a woman. I told Mrs. Curtis. Poor lady, she just collapsed like, and I called Elsa to look after her, while I set about thinking what I must do first.”

“Are you Mr. Curtis’ man?”

“I’m the butler, sir, but I looked after Mr. Curtis all he wanted. He wouldn’t have a valet, said he hated to be coddled. But of late it was getting to be hard to look after him and do my regular work proper, too. I was going to ask for a helper with one job or the other. But now—”

Gregg broke off, not so much from emotion as because he thought he was overstepping his privileges.

“When did you see Mr. Curtis alive, Gregg?” Lovell asked. “Last night, when he went to bed?”

“Later than that, sir. He has a little bell that he rings if he wants me. He rang it round about two o’clock, and I went in there to see what he wanted. But he didn’t say anything. He was just awful weak, but not in any pain. I gave him a sip of water, that’s all he wanted, and then he dropped right off to sleep again. I didn’t have any fears for him. He’s always weak like that, in the middle of the night. I saw he was breathing comfortable, so I left the room softly, and closed the door without a sound. But I made up my mind I’d ask Mrs. Curtis today to get a nurse for Mr. Curtis, and if she refused, I was going to ask the doctor. If ever a man needed a regular trained nurse, he did.”

“Thank you, Gregg. You may go now. I’m sure you have duties to look after.”

Lovell nodded dismissal and the butler went away.

“I didn’t say anything,” Barton remarked, “for I found Lovell was handling the situation so well I learned all there was to know. I suppose now it’s up to the family to arrange household matters. Who is in the family? Only Mrs. Curtis?”

“There’s a married daughter who lives out West somewhere,” Davis said, “and maybe another, I don’t know. Funny how you know a chap as well as we knew Curtis, and yet know little of his immediate family.”

Rosella had left the room at a call from Elsa, some time since.

“I’m going now,” Stone said. “I shall want a confab with Miss Allenby soon, but I’ll try not to disturb her until after the funeral. Poor girl, she’s living in sad scenes. If I can do anything for you, Lovell, let me know.”

“Aye, aye, sir. We’re digging away at the Allenby case and thanks be we haven’t to add another murder case to our troubles.”

“Why harp on murders?” Davis asked rather petulantly. “There’s nothing whatever to suggest murder in Charlie’s death and I wish you’d all stop suggesting it. Well, Barton, are we to carry on, just the two of us?”

“Why not?” But Barton’s voice was disheartened and he showed little interest. “Besides,” he went on, “we can’t settle that for ourselves. Rosella has full voting power—”

“But she can’t say what we two shall do,” Davis was getting snappish. “We are the only ones to decide that question.”

“Well, we certainly can’t decide it here and now,” and though Barton showed no ill-temper, he sounded both weary and sorrowful.

“That’s right,” Stone said, hoping to divert them, “let’s go home now, and get a different viewpoint on things. We can leave some courteous messages for Mrs. Curtis, and hold ourselves at her disposal if we can be of help in any way.”

So the group broke up, and Fleming Stone went home, relieved that none of them elected to accompany him and come in for a time, as they so often did.

In his own study, he found Waldo Marsh awaiting him.

“The only man I want to see!” he cried. “How do you happen to be here?”

“Drifted round to see what sort of news you’d bring back from the Curtis session,” Marsh told him.

“Except for a few sidelights, I know just about as much as I did when I started. Charles Curtis is dead, after a long and wearing illness. If the curse carried him off it made a good job of it. Apparently, the man died peacefully in his bed, just faded away. No signs of any final paroxysms or spasms. So we have no reason to ascribe his death to other than natural causes, though, to be sure, it is a more severe and desperate form of pernicious anæmia than can be found on any record.”

“Have they raked up that information since the man died?”

“Oh, no. Crosby and other physicians have been noting Curtis’ progress all the way along. They knew the end must come soon, but they were helpless to stay its course.”

“M’m. Sort of queer. Lessen you take the curse into consideration.”

“Which I certainly do not. No, the case is not mysterious. Pernicious anemia is not common, but it occurs occasionally if not frequently. It is the intensity of this case that makes it remarkable. And I will say, if anyone wants to believe in a heathen curse, this gives him a grand chance.”

“Well, there’s plenty who want to, so let ‘em go to. Now, what difference is this dee-mise of our Mr. Curtis going to make in the fame and fortune of one young hopeful?”

“Meaning yourself?”

“Meaning me.”

“Of course that depends on whether the two remaining members of the committee go on with the plans, or whether they drop it all.”

“Why should they drop it all? Mr. Curtis was no real help to them. They won’t miss his help, ‘cause he didn’t help any. The money part is all safe and sound, Mr. Curtis’ share going to his wife and family, if any. But there’s oodles left to work with, and with Miss Allenby in on the game, they’ll never lack for lucre. I’ll own up when I first heard of the sideshow, I thought it was the dumb-silliest fool notion I’d ever heard of. But now I begin to understand it better and I see its good points. And I’ll say it’s one grand scheme. And the way Mr. Davis is going to rig up that Pavilion thing is a caution!”

“You like the Sports?”

“I just lap ‘em up. And you can bet they’re goin’ to like me. You think they’ll keep me on, don’t you?”

“If they keep on themselves, yes. But no one knows what will happen next.”

“I know. And you know, too, that Mr. Davis and Mr. Barton won’t drop that whole great plan, specially now they can run it all their own way.”

“You think Curtis was a curb on their activities?”

“A little, yes. I’ve heard a lot, you see.”

“You do seem to have. Where’d you get all this inside information?”

“Well, I’ve been round to see that Grant secretary person and likewise the lawyer chap, one Fenn. I got right down to it, I told ‘em I was General Manager of the Sports, and they came right across with anything I wanted to know. I just plain snooped, but I did it high-class and dignified like.”

“Get much?”

“All about the will.”

“Just what one might expect?”

“Yes. Proper doings for servants, office chaps, charities, old friends, and all that, and residuary to family. Not such an awful rich man, Curtis—nothing like Allenby, but a good slice all round. Of course, his holdings in the Committee’s funds are his own, and go to his wife. The old lady is well fixed. Grant, he thinks the two remaining members of the Committee will carry on, but Fenn, he thinks they won’t.”

“Why are these two men so mixed up with the Curtis estate?”

“Tain’t that exactly. But Fenn, he’s Curtis’ lawyer, same as he’s Allenby’s, and Grant, he’s been looking after the Curtis securities and such, while Mr. Curtis was bein’ cursed, and so Grant knows all about his affairs.”

“I see. Well, Marsh, if they keep on going, you’ve got a good job, and you’re the one for it. We probably won’t know until after the funeral and the readjustment of the partners. I don’t know how far Miss Allenby wants to go in the matter, but she seems interested.”

“Didn’t the two left-over bosses say anything about it this morning?”

“Nothing definite. Davis seemed peevish and inclined to be rather crosspatch, but Barton was logical and seemed unusually capable and resourceful. He declared nothing could be decided on until a serious consultation was held, and that might not be arranged for a day or two. That looks as if he included Miss Allenby in his thoughts, and I hope he has.”

“Why?”

“For one reason, because I am determined to use every effort to find the killer of Allenby, and if the Committee disbands entirely, I may lose track of those men who know so much about the occasion and the circumstances, even if they don’t know the criminal.”

“I see. Of course you’ll find your Allenby man, but it’ll take a spell yet.”

“That’s how it looks to me. Scoot along now, Marsh. Play your own game, you’ve plenty to do these few days that will be more or less devoted to the affairs of Mr. Curtis.”

Waldo Marsh was an old friend and helper of Fleming Stone. They had not met for some years, as Stone had had no case that called for Marsh’s peculiar talents. But as guardian of the Sports he was right in his element, and was sure to make good.

He had no sooner left than the Homicide Captain, Lovell, arrived.

“I met that Marsh chap as I came in,” Lovell said, as he sat down. “My, he’s a whale of a man! I never knew they grew so big. And his stride! Well, of course, he can’t do anything but stride. Imagine him pacing or trotting, or even stepping! I say, Mr. Stone, I want a few minutes’ talk with you.”

“At your service. Speak up.”

“You’ve no tiny glimmer of a spark of suspicion that there is anything—er—sinister about Charles Curtis’ death, have you?”

“How could there be, Lovell? He wasn’t murdered, was he?”

“How do I know? But he had a queer malady, and, too, I turned out his bathroom cabinet, and of all the conglomeration of remedies I ever saw

it was about the biggest—and the most worthless. I don't believe that cabinet had been turned out since they moved into that apartment eight years ago. Every old quack medicine you can remember! From Sirup of Squills to Jonas Whitcomb's Asthma Remedy. From Elliman's Embrocation to Pink Pills for Pale People! I never saw such a thing!"

"Well, then if he had all these at his hand for eight years and they never killed him, he must have found them harmless, or else he didn't take them."

"Well, then, also I found some dope cigarettes. Now, what have you to say to that?"

"What sort of dope?"

"Hasheesh. Oh, to be sure, they were in a Chesterstrike box, but you can't fool me. I've seen those sleepy-boy cigs too often."

"Get on with it. What are you trying to prove? That Curtis killed himself with the drug? It would take quite a lot, you know."

"Oh, no. I don't think the man was a suicide. He probably had the various nostrums to help his anæmia, or whatever it was he had."

"Curse, maybe."

"Don't be silly!"

"Silly, yourself. Now, Lovell, you know Mr. Curtis had a legitimate and recognized disease. It was treated by wise and experienced physicians. They admitted they were puzzled by the details of the case, but they did their best. They were unable to save their patient, but it was not for lack of skill or persistence."

"I don't mean all that. I know how ill he was. But all those bottles, some unlabelled, look curious to me. And the doped cigarettes in an innocent, ordinary box—well, I say it must be dug into."

Stone sighed. He didn't want to tell about Barton and the cigarettes, but it seemed he would have to in order to save a lot of mystification and misinformation.

So he told him the whole story, as Barton had told it to him.

Lovell listened attentively, and then said:

“Of course, I accept your statements, backed as they are by several doctors and chemists. I do not consider your communication confidential, for if necessary, I shall not hesitate to tell it.”

“That’s understood,” Stone agreed. “But I see it like this. If the general public knew that Barton gave him those cigarettes secretly, the matter will look suspicious, and unnecessary questions will be raised. I am thinking of Mrs. Curtis. She had such a horror of her husband’s using drugs in any form, other than the doctor’s prescriptions, that it would give her deep sorrow to learn the truth. No harm was done by the mild use of the hasheesh, Mr. Curtis was greatly comforted by the indulgence, and since Mrs. Curtis is still in blissful ignorance, it seems a pity to enlighten her.”

“You may be right,” Lovell said hesitantly. “I’ll think it over, and probably decide that I agree with you.”

“I’m sure you will. We owe it to Mrs. Curtis to do anything we can to lighten her troubles.”

Chapter XIV **Despair Assails The Detective**

THE days and the weeks went by.

This, in itself, was not remarkable, but it was remarkable that they should go by leaving Fleming Stone still uncertain as to two or three matters that he had expected to settle long before this.

And one was the identity of the Allenby murderer.

Time after time, he thought he had discovered this. Morning after morning he had awakened with the feeling that he was at last sure of his man.

And then, the day would bring forth some fact, some tiny bit of assurance that his suspect could not have been the murderer.

His suspect was always the same one, oh, yes, but what good did that do, if it was the wrong one?

Then there was the business of Charlie Curtis' death.

“Due to natural causes,” oh, yeah? The doctors agreed on that, and who was he, Fleming Stone, to gainsay their pronouncements?

He was a celebrated detective, ‘m h’m, but his job was not to detect doctors’ errors.

He had never before fallen down utterly on a case, but he began to think the first time was looming into view.

Of course his vanity was deeply hurt, his conceit quailed under a dreadful blow, but laying aside the subjective viewpoint, Stone was appalled at the thought of the killer of Robert Allenby walking the earth, a free man!

Stone was not the sort to exclaim to himself, or to anyone else, “something must be done! the search cannot stop here!”

Instead of that he did something, he did not let the search stop there; but everything he did was futile, every further search proved unproductive.

To be sure, the earth could continue to move in its orbit, even though the much sought for criminal was not found. The sun could grow cold and the stars become old, and even the great leaves of the judgment book might unfold, unimpeded by Fleming Stone's failure, but that knowledge was no comfort to the chagrined detective.

The calendar pushed up to Thanksgiving Day, and passed it.

Stone went out of town for the week-end, hoping a change of scene would help.

Then the persistent calendar rolled up its numbers toward the Christmas season.

Fleming Stone elected to stay in the city for that occasion, for he felt he was beginning to see light at the end of the tunnel, and even if it were an ignis fatuus, the hope cheered him.

Refusing all his friends' invitations for Christmas Eve, he accepted instead a bid to the opening of the Vermilion Pavilion.

It was to be a great party.

Davis and Barton had their hands full with the invitation list. Each of the Sports had the privilege of inviting one friend and no more. As most of them had dozens of sincere and devoted admirers, the clamor for wider hospitality was loud, and brought about serious difficulties.

The big country house for the Sports had been found and bought.

On a real farm, up Westchester way, Waldo Marsh had smoked out the very thing in the line of domiciles.

It was not an old farmhouse, with barns and chicken runs, but a fine country place, with a guest house and an annex, and all sorts of modern inventions and innovations for up-to-date farming and novel entertainment. The farming was kept trimmed, not allowed to run wild. There were markets not too far away, and the oversight of Waldo Marsh kept everything in tune.

There was nothing about it remindful of a Home or an Institution, it was more like a small, select hotel or club.

It was an ideal abode for anybody and each guest was made welcome so long as he kept to the very reasonable stipulations made by Marsh.

The Sports, there were eight of them now, all liked Marsh.

He understood them, and realized that everyone must be treated carefully and differently.

They respected him, and as they were all of intelligence rather above the average, they understood and appreciated his manner to them.

The matron of the house was Mrs. Foster, who was the guardian of the Albino girl, Lolita.

The woman had proved so trustworthy and capable that she was gladly given the more responsible position.

She kept strict watch over Lolita, whom she loved, and though the Frenchman, Pierre, had fallen for the pretty child, as Davis observed, there was no danger to a girl looked after by Marsh and Mother Foster.

And, too, Bonnie Russell, the Fat Lady, had taken a notion to Lolita, they were the best sort of chums.

Altogether, it was a Happy Family, and on Christmas Eve they would give a real exhibition, in honor of opening the new building, the Vermilion Pavilion.

Davis had managed to get it built, not in permanent form, but a temporary structure that would be a valuable experiment and would accustom the performers to the atmosphere of their future exhibitions.

After the death of Charles Curtis, the two remaining members of the Committee went into a very small huddle and pondered on what to do.

But, as both wanted to go on with the enterprise, the discussion was mostly as to ways and means.

The means were not far to seek. Though considerable money had been expended on Allenby Hall, as the big house had been named, yet it proved an economy in the end. It had been bought at a tremendous bargain, and was in a condition that called for little refashioning or renewing.

The living expenses of the Sports and the attendants together cost less than if they had been in separate homes.

And, too, the coffers of the committee were well filled, and as the accounts were kept strictly, to a penny, by the methodical Barton, they knew just where they stood, and they stood firm on their money basis.

And, as a rule, the guests, as Mrs. Foster liked to call them, were aware of the good fortune that was theirs, and showed appreciation if not gratitude.

Barton didn't go there often. He did what he felt to be his duty by them, but he had no call to frequent the place.

Davis, on the contrary, was there most of the time. He had to superintend personally every detail of the building of his masterpiece, and though made up of temporary material, it was carefully exact in order to be a true model for the permanent edifice.

"But what I don't get," Waldo Marsh said to Fleming Stone one day, "is the meaning of a certain wave of ill feeling that has sprung up against Mr. Davis. Not a wave, that's saying too much, but a breath, a zephyr, a tiny cloud, a mere nothing, and yet a something."

"When did it begin?" Stone asked, alert at once.

"It didn't begin. It just wasn't there—and then it was there. Not words, though I have heard a few, but more a nasty look or a scowl when Davis turns his back."

"Isn't Davis nice to them?"

"Oh, all that's necessary. Not much is required, you know. But Mr. Barton is more affable—you know his way—sort of chummy, yet always dignified. But pleasant, smiling. Mr. Davis isn't like that. Though he's merry enough with his reg'lar friends. And the Sports, they notice it. They're as good as anybody else, and they won't take it lyin' down, if anybody says they aren't."

"Oh, I'm sure Davis doesn't mean that. But I know you're not imagining it, Marsh. I know if you observe it, ever so little, it's there. Wait a bit, and make full sure, and then mention it to Mr. Barton. I've no say in the matter, but Mr. Barton must be told if that spirit is really there. I suppose Pierre is in it?"

"Well, no, I haven't caught Froggy looking askance. It's more the working men. I mean the India Rubber man and the Trapezist and such. You see, they have to work like fury every day to keep in practice. Well, Mr. Davis, he's everlastingly saying, 'Have you done your practice work today?' Now, I could say that to them and they wouldn't mind a bit, but they think Mr. Davis isn't their boss and hasn't a right to talk like that. And too, Mr. Stone, it's the way he has. Mr. Barton he could say a thing

like that and smile his pleasant way, and it would be all right. But Dr Davis rubs 'em the wrong way."

"It must be looked into, Marsh. Report about it again in a few days. And let me know your findings." Stone didn't take this tale of Davis' unpopularity very seriously. He knew Davis hadn't the genial way and cordial smile of Barton, but after all they had no responsibility for the attitude of their employees. They had weightier business to attend to, and now there were only two of them, they had all they could do to keep ahead of their work.

To be sure, Curtis had not been of much help, but he was a man of fine understanding and wise discretion, and a court of appeal like that was much needed by the personnel of the present committee.

With the great Allenby and the fine Curtis at the helm, they would never run on the rocks of ignorance or error, but alone, and now timid, now headstrong, they faced dangers indeed.

They knew this, yet neither Barton nor Davis could bear to think of giving up the plan, taking their legitimate moneys and walking away.

Once Davis suggested trying to find a new member for the committee, an older man, perhaps, who could steer well.

"I'm ready for that man," Barton agreed, "and when you find him, bring him to see me. It seems there must be other men in this world like Mr. Allenby and Charlie Curtis, but I just don't happen to know of anyone available right now."

And as Davis didn't either, the new member didn't materialize.

Beside, these two men were younger than the absent members, and though they assumed a modest and unworthy air, they had a pretty fair opinion of their own ability and of one another's.

And so far, they were going along all right. So why worry?

Stone asked them for details of the Christmas party, but was told that most of the preparations were being kept secret.

"Indeed, we know little about the affair ourselves," Davis said.

“You just get yourself up there,” Barton added, “and they’ll do the rest. Oh, and be sure to take a present, small or large, for everybody. The Sports, of course, and the managers, and all the staff down to the littlest page. Mr. Allenby was a stickler for omitting no one at Christmas time, and I want his ways remembered.”

“I’ll remember,” Stone promised. “Will Miss Allenby be at the festival?”

“She hasn’t quite decided. She wants to play Santa Claus in her father’s place, but she fears the occasion will sadden her beyond endurance.”

“Better for her to stay away, I think.”

“Wish I could stay away,” Davis said, frowning. “I hate a sociable of that kind. Like a tea-party at the Children’s Home.”

“I think, Davis,” Stone said, “you stand in your own light, when you take that attitude toward the Sports. I’m not talking ethics, but business. You needn’t curry favor with them, but even if you don’t like them, a little diplomacy goes a long way.”

“Not necessary,” Davis said, carelessly. “We pay them well, we house them comfortably, we treat them like—well, almost like visiting British authors. Now, it isn’t up to us to pet or coddle them, or even be chummy with them. Nor do we have to look after their morals, unless some flagrant offense affects our interests. We don’t run a house of correction, but we do try to improve the talents they show. That, however, is for our own benefit as well as theirs, but any way you look at it, they’re getting a whole lot besides their salaries. When we separate, as I suppose we shall sometime, they will have a fine lot of knowledge and experience and memories of a few happy, prosperous and improving years. If they are provident, they will have quite a nest-egg saved up, and if not, they have only themselves to blame. However, I see the fairness of your judgment. I can just as well be a bit more chummy with the guys. The ladies find no fault with me, I hope.” Davis gave his funny little smile, that was considered very charming by the said ladies.

“No,” Barton stated, “quite the contrary. Bonnie is really very much gone on you, but young Miss Lolita thinks you’re ‘drefful.’ ”

“Bah, I can’t be bothered with a kid like that. She’s pretty, in her startling color effects, but it bores me stiff to have to talk to her.”

“Better get over that feeling, Davis,” Stone said, seriously. “For instance, come Christmas Eve, you mustn’t go in there, take them lovely gifts, as I know you will, and then fail to respond to their timid advances.”

Davis laughed aloud.

“Timid advances, is it? I wish you could have seen that precious Albino kid wind herself around me yesterday, till I wanted to scream for a policeman.”

“That won’t do!” and Barton turned suddenly serious. “You know, Davis, that’s the sort of thing I want most to avoid.”

“Well, so do I! By gum, so do I! Don’t blame me! I didn’t cajole the infant, it was all her own sweet joy.”

“The Albino girl is no infant, Munson, and you know it. Her odd coloring gives her a babyish look, but she’s a nice, decent girl and Mrs. Foster is giving her good care.”

“Oh, don’t make such a fuss about nothing.” And Davis brushed away the subject with a smile. “Maybe I exaggerated my idea of her affection. I’m not much of a Lothario, anyhow. But our Pierre can do the graceful, all right. Do you know, Stone, the Frenchman is walking out with Suzette Gale!”

“Is that an item of interest?” and Stone looked indifferent to the news.

“Does it convey nothing to you?”

“A liaison between our Sports and the House of Allenby? Only the fact that we can have a grapevine telegraph if we like, and our *trés diplomatique* Pierre can bring us inside information of Rosella.”

Barton spoke up at that.

“Why do you want inside information of Miss Allenby?”

“I don’t. I only said we could get it if we did want it.”

“We have a little,” Davis said, casually. “She is going to announce her engagement on Christmas Day.”

“An Announcement Party?” Stone asked, a little astonished.

“No, just a small bunch of her dearest friends. She feels she wants it known, but she doesn’t want a gay party, while she’s in mourning.”

“Is Mrs. Curtis staying with her now?”

“Yes.” Barton answered this time. “Rosella has invited her to spend the winter, and it seems to me a good plan. Mrs. Curtis is sad and lonely and the society of young people will do her good. And Rosella will be less talked about if she has an older person in her home, by way of duenna. The girl is so independent that she cares nothing for the gossip of people, but it is wiser to have Mrs. Curtis there. She is a most pleasant woman, and very fond of Rosella, so I think it a fine plan all round.”

“She was given her husband’s share of the Committee funds, I suppose?”

Stone said this, not with any effect of curiosity, but as one whose connection with affairs gave him a right to know. He had been up in Vermont for a fortnight, and was ignorant of some details.

“Yes,” Barton said. “Of course, as I’m Treasurer, I had charge of that business. I took special pains to see that nothing was overlooked, that every cent coming to Charlie went to her. There were many small increments that a lawyer or trustee wouldn’t know about, so I made it a thorough job. She is pretty well fixed, I can tell you.”

“And you two standbys are going to run the ship alone?”

“We are that,” and Barton looked serious. “We may run on the rocks, we may go to the bottom, but we’re going to deliver the goods, as ordered, if it is humanly possible. If necessary we’ll call in skilled aid, but it will be carefully chosen.”

“Oh, you’ll get along all right, and may I say I’ll not be surprised if you have easier going without Mr. Curtis than with him.”

“You see that, do you?” Davis said, looking up quickly. “You realized that Curtis, while sound of judgment and possessing real diplomacy, was a bit—er—what the youngsters call ‘dated.’ ”

“What we all call dated,” Stone agreed. “I dislike the word, and it’s pretty poor English to use it in that way, but it expresses what we mean.”

“Just that,” Barton nodded. “Now, Mr. Allenby was a little older than Mr. Curtis, but his notions were never dated. He was as modern and up-to-date as his own daughter.”

“Cause and effect,” Davis suggested. “Rosella kept him young. Now, she may bring back Mrs. Curtis’ lost youth.”

And then, Davis declared he must go, but Stone elected to stay for a time. They had spent an hour in Barton’s office, which had come to be the usual meeting place. Waldo Marsh came there to make his reports, Pierre or others of the Sports came sometimes, and Mrs. Foster, now head housekeeper, came to tell how things were going.

“Davis growing a little crochetty?” Stone asked, with a smile.

“Oh, no. He’s like that sometimes. He doesn’t like Pierre getting intimate with Rosella’s secretary, Miss Gale. Of course, we have no jurisdiction over the social proclivities of the Sports, and no reason to question their goings and comings. But Davis, and I too, would rather not have Pierre over at the Allenby house so much. It may do no harm at all, but with the girl and Mrs. Curtis talking unguardedly, it makes Pierre’s position too intimate.”

“Where does Miss Gale receive him?”

“I asked him that and he said in her office. I don’t know whether that adjoins Rosella’s rooms or not, and I don’t want to ask. Perhaps you can find out?”

“Likely I can. Is it that you don’t trust Pierre?”

“I don’t quite say I don’t trust him, but I don’t understand him, I don’t get him.”

“I’ll cultivate him a bit. Perhaps he’ll unfold to me. I hear you have one or two new Sports. What are they?”

“Oh, yes, we have. One is the loveliest clown you ever saw.”

“A clown! Do you have to have him in hand so far ahead? Are you teaching him?”

“No, not exactly. But we’re trying him out. If we don’t engage him now, he’s going to England. Then we have a Bareback Rider who is a wizard with a horse. We’re holding him and his horse, for a time. After Christmas we’ll decide on these new ones.”

“That reminds me. Help me out with these Christmas presents, won’t you? I’m more than willing to give goodly gifts to them all, but it’s a pity to give something they don’t want, and how can I tell that?”

“I’ll fix that. Mrs. Foster and Marsh will make out a list for you and you can choose from their suggestions.”

“Fine. Then tell me now what to get for Davis and yourself and I’ll be for bothering you no more.”

“It’s a pleasure, and I can tell you what Davis wants, easily. A wrist-watch. He’s busted his, and it wasn’t much good anyhow. Don’t get it too grand, but a good goer.”

“All right. I can size up Mrs. Foster myself. How about you?”

“Don’t ask me to tell you. The only delight to me in a gift is the surprise. Anything, so long as I don’t know of it beforehand.”

“Funny notion, just like a kid. All right, boy, it shall be so. I say Barton, nobody ever said anything to you about those doped cigarettes, did they?”

“No, they didn’t. But it was no secret, except from Mrs. Curtis. You know some women don’t like to have their husbands smoke at all. Mrs. Curtis didn’t mind that, but she was like a maniac about drugs. It seems Curt had a leaning to drugs, as a habit, and she was afraid it would grow on him. So she watched carefully that no grain or speck of the terrible thing should enter the house. But Curtis was a bit smarter than she is, and he

begged me to slip them to him, without her knowledge. He told me the doctor approved and all that. But I wasn't hiding them from anyone but Mrs. Curtis. Though of course if the maids had caught on, it might have spelled trouble. But I was willing to chance it for the pleasure it gave old Curt. Now, he's gone, I feel glad that I did it. It eased a little the discomfort of his last dreadful days, and did no one any harm. Why did you ask about it?"

"Only because I thought you were running a risk to do it, and I'm glad to know nobody checked up on you."

"Who could have done so? If anyone knows of that and puts a wrong construction on it, I want to know who he is, and deal with him myself. Tell me his name, and let me go to him and have it out, frankly and honestly."

"Don't jump ahead so. I haven't anybody particular in mind. And you've told me all I want to know. I just wanted to be sure no one had pried into the matter."

"Of course no one has pried into the matter, except yourself!"

Stone stared at him.

"Gracious sakes!" he said, "don't get so het up! For the love o' goodness, don't say things like that!"

Barton cooled down and smiled again.

"Forgive me, old man," he said, "I didn't mean anything, but to tell you the truth those cigarettes have always bothered me."

"Why should they, Barton, when you were bringing them with the full knowledge and permission of Mr. Curtis' own personal doctor? Crosby knew all about them, he could examine them, test them and judge for himself just how many Curtis ought to have, what strength they could be, and all about them. Why have they bothered you?"

"I suppose I was foolish. But I've wondered, both before and since his death, whether they could have had anything to do with it."

“You certainly are foolish, for you are implying that you know more than an experienced and well known doctor how to treat a very difficult and unusual case. Forget it, boy. Brace up and get busy with your work. Don’t be influenced by Curtis’ odd and unreasonable ways. First thing we know, you’ll begin to believe you are under a heathen curse.”

“Nix! Whatever I am, I’m not superstitious. Curtis was, and that was the root of all his troubles. Come on, let’s go over to the Club for cocktails. Or we might do a bit of our Christmas shopping.”

“Both,” said Stone.

Chapter XV

The Sports’ Christmas Party

The Christmas Eve Party at Allenby Hall was going along at high speed.

Both Barton and Davis had been worked to death getting ready for it and Mrs. Foster had been obliged to get in extra help in her culinary department.

Lolita was not allowed to assist in any way, for it had been decided that the Sports must do no work at all, except their own specialties, for which they were paid.

It was hard to get temporary helpers, for though scores of workers were willing and eager to come, they had to be carefully recommended and tested before being taken on.

The enterprise as a whole was not a secret, but the details of the preparations were not told to outsiders.

In fact, if Waldo Marsh had not been there, the wheels would have stopped entirely and there would have been no Christmas party at all.

Marsh hunted for and found an enormous tree, which was set up in the great hall, and hung with gifts and ornaments till it could bear no more.

The exchanging of gifts and the program of entertainment was left to the Sports and, with the oversight of Marsh, things took on a promising air.

Mrs. Russell and the Fat Boy, Willie Woo, never went out in the streets, as the general public failed to recognize the dignity of their characters and saw in them only the usual Circus Freaks.

It was not intended to keep both the two weighty ones, but they were on approval, and eventually one would be selected for the permanent position.

Fleming Stone went to the party early, as he had a later engagement, and he drove Barton up with him.

It was a crisp fine winter evening, and the starry heavens seemed to proclaim it Christmas Eve.

“Davis is coming?” asked Stone.

“Yes,” Barton rejoined. “He’s not keen about it, but he’s coming. I hope he’ll be in good humor. He’s been so short and even snippy to the Sports of late and they don’t like it.”

“Queer for him to do that. Any cause for it?”

“Only a foolish one. He thinks he’s under the curse. Thinks he caught the bug from Curtis, or however those things spread themselves.”

“But this is absurd. We can’t let him go along the Curtis road!”

“What to do? And the so delightful Pierre is egging him on in those beliefs—”

“Pierre! Why this is getting serious.”

“I’ll say it’s serious. I was going to talk to you about it, but I decided to wait until after the holidays were over.”

“What does Pierre do?”

“Nothing very definite. But he inquires solicitously as to Munson’s health whenever he sees him, and as he sees him rather seldom, he’s everlastingly asking the other Sports how is the constitution of that so important gentleman, Mr. Daveese? They, in turn, stare at Davis, to see

if he's visibly cursed, and they tell him of Pierre's anxiety, and poor old Munsie gets all fussed."

"Not so good," and Stone shook his head. "Pierre is a bad hat, I'm thinking. Can you see your way clear to get rid of him?"

Barton looked troubled.

"Well, you see, Mr. Stone, he's one of the finest contortionists known to the circus world. I hate to give him up unless we have to. And there's no definite fault in asking as to Davis' well-being. But that's one reason I wanted you to come to the party, I want you to find out, if you can, if there's anything really wrong about Pierre, and if he is any sort of menace. One or two others likewise. I won't say which ones, but you give them all the once-over and see if you see any rocks ahead. If I had known the various difficulties that crop up to balk good intentions, I'm not sure I would have stuck to the ship."

"Oh, yes, you would. But there are usually difficulties in harmonizing a mixed lot of human beings with few if any similar tastes, hobbies or pursuits. Without such avenues of sympathy, their baser instincts come to the surface, and jealousy, envy and some other of the Deadly Sins come to the front."

"They sure do! And I've not the heavenly patience or the divine charity needed to cope with such elements. Why, if your man Marsh hadn't been here, there would have been ructions before this."

"Now, now, don't take a dark view of the situation. You have Marsh. He's delighted with his place. And he's not the sort whose capabilities lessen with service. He'll keep things moving smoothly. He likes Davis, doesn't he?"

"Yes, but he sometimes says he does wish Mr. Davis wouldn't be so almighty haughty."

"That doesn't sound like Marsh. He must have been stirred to wrath by something special."

"Maybe. Don't mention it to Davis. Criticism always makes him worse."

“I shan’t. But let up on yourself. Take things more lightly. Don’t cross your bridges before you come to them. Pierre doesn’t live in the house, does he?”

“No, he was so anxious to remain at his little French hotel, we let him stay there. It’s better all round, for he’s a disturbing element among the men and women both.”

“Only the Fat Lady and the little Albino miss, aren’t there?”

“We have one more. Davis discovered a singer, a young girl with a lovely bird-voice, and no means to have it cultivated. She is so glad and thankful to come with us, and we’re so glad to have her. But she’s young and innocent, and that Pierre devil has already begun to make eyes at her.”

“ ‘Fraid you’ll have to let the brute go.’ ”

“But we don’t want to do that. If I could forbid him to come to the house, since he won’t live in it, I’d do it. But that’s a dubious move.”

“Would you want him in the house?”

“Well, yes—in the hope that with Marsh’s eye on him he couldn’t go far. And with Mrs. Foster taking care of the two girls, they’d be pretty safe.”

“And Mrs. Russell to help look after them.”

“Bonnie? Nay, nay. She has her own notions. Did you never know that the older they grow and the fatter they grow, the more they incline to Love’s Young Dream?”

“You don’t mean it! And who is the vivacious Bonnie setting her dainty cap at?”

“Pierre first, and as second choice, Beverly, the new trick rider.”

“You have my sympathies, old man. I knew your job was no sinecure, but I didn’t realize the peculiar and nerve-wracking anxieties it brings.”

“Oh, well, I have good helpers. Davis thinks we will pull through all right.”

“He sees all these pitfalls you tell of?”

“Yes, and realizes them. But not to the extent that I do. You see, Davis is such a good fellow he thinks everybody else is also a good fellow. Mighty seldom he thinks ill of anyone until he has to.”

“And he doesn’t think he has to, regarding Pierre?”

“He says not.”

“Well, I’ll give Pierre the glad hand tonight and see what I can make out of him. It’s going to be a real kettledrum, isn’t it? Will Miss Allenby attend?”

“Hope so. She said she’d look in for a while. Here we are.”

They drove in at the great gates of the place, and found the house blazing with lights and the beautiful Pavilion shining with a less brilliant illumination.

“Davis means to have the Pavilion more lighted when it is in real use,” Barton said, looking proudly at the scene, “but we try our best not to have it conspicuous now. There’s enough curiosity shown, do the best we may, but if it gets described in the papers, all the bloom, will be rubbed off before time to exhibit it. Glorious, isn’t it?”

“Yes, and more. It’s up only temporarily?”

“Yes. It’s detachable and can be packed away in a storehouse. Our idea is to let the Sports have a practice week now and then, and lay it away in between times.”

They went into the house, and found it beautifully done up with evergreens and holly. Trailing ropes of ground pine, huge poinsettias, lighted candles and golden stars all make a background for the tall and stately Christmas tree.

But Stone’s attention soon wandered from these decorations to the even more picturesque figures that made up the pageant of the Sports and their friends.

Little Lolita was a veritable Christmas Fairy, in sparkling white and tinsel, and she ran to greet them with gay smiles and a jabbering of very poor English and voluble Russian that was as charming as it was unintelligible.

The fair, fat Bonnie sat in a large easy chair, also arrayed in gorgeous trappings and smiled fatuously as she ate consecutively the rows of French bon-bons from a box at her side.

Stone bided his time, and at last Pierre came toward him and sat down beside him.

“Merry Christmas,” said Stone cordially, and the man responded gracefully. He was wearing a new Harlequin suit, most becoming to his lithe, gracile figure, and his handsome face was smiling happily.

“Wonderful party, yes?” he said, and his glowing eyes and expressive hands echoed his words.

“You’re enjoying it?” Stone said, a trifle absent-mindedly, for he was studying the women in the room, all of whom were staring at the Frenchman.

“No. Enjoy it, bah! How can I?”

“Why not?” Stone’s attention was engaged.

“Why, that I am beset by the watchers, the scanners, the snoopers—I know not the word I want!”

“The managers?” and Stone smiled at him.

“I think so. They will not let me dance with this one, they will not let me talk to that one—”

“And they will not let you flirt with the other one. That it?”

“Something very like that,” and Pierre looked disgruntled.

“Who is the lovely girl in rose color?”

“Ah—who? who, indeed? The angel! the bright, particular star—and they will not let me even meet her!”

“How come?”

“Oh, but I am not a member of the house. The house! Is the house a palace? a castle? a moated grange? And I am unworthy because I live in a home of my own choosing, a home where I find my compatriots, my fellows! It is an outrage!”

“Why don’t you speak to Mr. Davis about it?”

“Mr. Davis!” Pierre almost shrieked the name. “He it is who brings it about. He forbids that I meet the houri, the nymph!”

“What’s her name?” Stone broke in upon the transports.

“Ah, that I know not. Lurline, Lorelei, Lalage, ah—where is the name fair enough for her?”

“She sings?”

“Like a skylark, a nightingale, a bulbul bird! There is no bird can sing as sweet as she does. Intercede for me, Mr. Stone, you are a kind man. Persuade those so detestable managers to allow me to meet the lady.”

“No, Pierre, I will not interfere in your social affairs. Manage those yourself. If you behave as the reputed product of your country, an honorable French gentleman, you will have no trouble in getting yourself presented to Miss Norris. But you must watch your step, or you may not remain in your present position.”

“Ah, that Daveese! he has again been maligning me! Yes? I must correct him.”

“You try to correct Mr. Davis and you’ll have a large regret coming to you.”

“So?”

Davis came toward them and, speaking directly to Stone, said, “Come with me, will you? I want you to meet Miss Norris.”

“Also me?” Pierre eagerly asked.

“No, not this time,” Davis said courteously, and went off with Stone.

“A word to the wise,” Stone said, as they crossed the room. “Don’t antagonize Pierre. Dismiss him if you want to, but don’t keep him on in his present attitude toward you.”

“Me? I haven’t done anything to him!”

“That’s it. You neglect him and he resents it.”

“But, good lord, man, I can’t chum around with all the Sports.”

“Don’t be silly. You know you don’t treat Pierre as you do the others, and he is not a good man to have as an enemy. Be rational and don’t pretend you don’t know what I mean.”

“Yes, I know, and you’re right. But I detest the chap.”

“Don’t show it so plainly, then.”

Stone liked Louise Norris, and asked about her music.

“I just sing,” she said; “nothing extraordinary, but I am said to have an unusual quality in my voice, and I hope I have, for I want to be a singer.”

“Mr. Barton discovered you?”

“Oh, no. I am acquainted with Miss Allenby. She has had me sing at her musicales twice. About a year ago, that was, and now I’ve had some lessons, and Miss Allenby thinks my voice worth cultivating.”

“So you’re engaged here?”

“For a time, yes, and if I do well, it may be permanent.”

“You like the people here?”

“Not all of them, though I try to be friendly. Mrs. Foster is very good to me, and I’m allowed to keep by myself if I choose.”

The girl was very lovely, and Stone felt an inclination to warn her against the dangerous Pierre, but decided it was not his duty. He would put Marsh wise and leave it to him.

“You know Mr. Marsh?” he asked.

“Yes, slightly. I’ve not talked with him much.”

“Depend upon him, if you are in any quandary. He is a fine man, and of good judgment. And Mrs. Foster also. Trust those two to any extent. And of course, the managers. But be non-committal with the other Sports. They may be sincere or they may not, but though courteous, do not be confidential with them.”

“I’m glad you told me,” and the girl’s lovely eyes gave him a grateful glance. “And, too, Miss Allenby is most kind to me.”

“She’s a good friend for you to have. Here comes our friend, the Clown. You know him?”

“Oh, yes. A dear boy. Sit down here, Bob, and talk to Mr. Stone.”

Instead of the usual loose and ungainly garment usually worn by a circus clown, this fellow wore the elegant costume of a Court Jester. Copied from an old print, the doublet and hose of fine silk were bedecked with pointed flaps, each tipped with a silver bell. The stripes were pale green and white, and the elaborate cap of complicated shape was belled at every peak.

“You look as if you had just stepped out of a Shakespeare play,” Stone told him.

“‘As You Like It,’” responded the quick-witted lad. “Touchstone is my name, see?” and he tapped Stone on the arm with his Fool’s sceptre.

Then he pranced away to jest with someone else. “Charming fellow!” Stone said, with enthusiasm. “Is he always so bright? That Touchstone was too quick to be prearranged.”

“Yes, he’s very witty. Bob Berry they call him here. I doubt that’s his real name.”

“Probably given him because he kicks up a bobbery. But here comes your friend,” and he smiled at Louise, as Rosella came in with Fred Stafford.

“Oh, I’m glad!” and as the two girls began to chatter together, Fred turned to the detective, and said, “I’ve a message for you from the Lab.”

“Good. What is it?”

“Doc Fisher wants to see you, when you can get around to it.”

“I’ll get around to it tomorrow, and thank you for telling me. Are you staying here long?”

“I think not. Rosella said we’d just stop in for a few minutes, but you never can tell.”

He glanced at Rosella, who was jollyng the clown, and a group of people gathered about them to hear the repartee.

Louise Norris stood on the outside edge of the group, when, suddenly appearing, it seemed from nowhere, Pierre threw his arms round her and gave her a hearty kiss.

Almost simultaneously Munson Davis materialized right there, and gave Pierre a resounding slap on his face.

Like the tentacles of an octopus the writhing limbs of the contortionist wound themselves round Davis’ body, and that angry personage, gaining strength from his anger, struck back, and began the fight of his life, if not for it, when the massive frame of Waldo Marsh intervened and separated the two, as one accustomed to the trick might break an apple in halves.

“All over,” Marsh said, cheerfully, as the two men glowered at one another.

Barton came toward them, slowly.

“What happened, Munson?” he said, quietly, and his wrathful partner made reply, “That French poodle of yours made himself too familiar with Miss Norris.”

“And your version, Pierre?” Barton went on.

“Not at all, m’sieur. I have been to many Christmas parties, in many countries, and always it is permissible to kiss the fair lady who stands herself beneath the mistletoe.”

All looked up, and sure enough Louise Norris was standing under a huge bunch of the white berries that hung suspended from the ceiling by a ribbon.

Most of the party laughed, as at a good joke. But Barton did not laugh.

He said, “How about that, Davis?” in a noncommittal tone.

Davis blustered:

“That might have made it excusable, if he had given Miss Norris the casual, conventional kiss that the occasion allowed. But he didn’t.”

“Mr. Daveese is the close observer,” the Frenchman said, scoffingly. “However, M’sieur Barton, it does not please me to continue this little wrangle here and now. M’sieur Daveese and I, myself, will arrange it all between ourselves at our convenience.”

“That’s right,” and Davis looked relieved. “Forgive us, people, for our intrusion on the program, and forget it.”

Pierre was smiling, too, and so was Louise Norris, and Bob the Clown began to cut his funniest capers, so the episode was forgotten—by most of them.

The Christmas Tree came next, and the tall Living Skeleton, the agile India Rubber Man, the muscular Trick Rider and the Contortionist took the gifts from the Tree, not aided by the antics of Bob, the Clown.

Waldo Marsh and some helpers came to their assistance, and Stone soon realized that the feast which would follow next, and the program after that, would give him no further opportunity to talk to anyone individually. Also, he had found out what he came to find out, and he concluded to slip away unobserved.

Barton saw him edging away, and followed.

“Tell me,” the manager said, “how shall I treat that row business? I don’t want to side against Davis, but I can’t help seeing an argument in favor of Pierre. It is tradition, you know, and universally accepted. If Frenchy made his salute too enthusiastic, that didn’t justify Davis’ quick action.”

“We must remember Davis didn’t know the mistletoe was there,” Stone offered.

“Granting that, the blow was too heavy for a ballroom performance.”

“But, as you say, you have to stand up for Davis, as your partner. If you should lose him—”

“God forbid!” Barton exclaimed. “Yes, I must back up Davis, of course. And, after all, I think I ought to get rid of Pierre, anyway. He’s a troublemaker.”

“Yes, I think you can’t keep him after tonight’s performance. I saw him kiss the lady, and it was quite outside the Queensberry rules.”

“Well, I shan’t do anything tonight. I hope the party will go off well and fulfill its intent, which was merely to promote good-will and peace on earth among the Sports. But the outlook begins to be less rosy. I fear the future if fist-fights are to enter the game.”

“Oh, that’s a mere incident. Leave it to Marsh, he’ll settle it out of court.”

“There’s something in that,” and Barton looked relieved. “Are you going places?”

“Yes, nothing very gay, but I have to go. I’ll see you some day soon. Your newest acquisition is a beauty!”

“Miss Norris? Yes, isn’t she? A friend of Miss Allenby’s. In fact, Mr. Allenby had her in mind from the beginning. He knew her family.”

“She’s lovely. I’d like to stay to hear her sing, but that must wait for another time.”

Fleming Stone went down to the city at high speed, but he had nearly reached New York before he could divert his mind to any subject but that fight that was started between Davis and Pierre Lamar.

Started—that was the trouble. Would it ever be resumed? And if so, was it not certain that disaster would result?

It was a revelation to learn that Davis was so hot-headed. Stone had always thought of him as easygoing, and slow to take offense. But the late unpleasantness had shown Pierre sly and Davis vindictive.

The fight, Stone opined, might be ignored and forgotten, but to keep Pierre on was like harboring a firebrand.

The main issues of the matter were not in Stone's jurisdiction, yet he had a presentiment that they might affect the main business he was just now concerned in.

If Davis were as quick on the uptake as that, might he have wielded the jackknife that killed Robert Allenby? Davis was in the room last, before Curtis went in and raised the alarm.

Chapter XVI **Doctor Fisher's Information**

WHEN Stone told Fred Stafford that he would go to see Doctor Fisher the next day, he forgot it would be Christmas Day.

So he put off that matter over the holiday and spent his Christmas with some old friends of his, who were not interested in detective work.

He thought a respite from his intense sleuthing might do him good, but instead of that he found himself bored by the chatter of trivial matters and longed to get back to his work again.

He well knew that what he called intense sleuthing might not seem so important to people who did not understand.

But, in truth, ever since he had taken up the Allenby case, he had devoted his entire energies to it. It seemed to him there was little to work upon, but that condition had obtained many times before, and then suddenly light had come, and due to his own efforts, even if indirectly.

And he had been hoping for some such illumination regarding the Allenby murder. But try as he would, no gleam or glimmer of light had yet come to him.

He had suspected each of Allenby's three partners in turn, but not only could he prove nothing, he could think of nothing that he might try to prove. He began to think the murderer was some unknown, who was an enemy and a fiend, but clever enough to make no mistake that might have trapped him.

He had passing suspicions of that strange man, Pierre, but he was not sure that the Frenchman had known Robert Allenby in life sufficiently well to bring about such desperate enmity.

Christmas, with its gayety and glee passed, and the day after, Stone went over to the great laboratory where Doctor Fisher was among the high officials.

"Hello, Stone," he said, as the detective came into his office. "How you getting on with the Allenby case?"

"Not at all. It's as stubborn an old proposition as I've ever run up against. I can't get a lead. Whoever slid into that room and stabbed him is a miracle-monger."

"But you did have your eye on the partners. Have you gone back to a masked intruder?"

"I never said he was masked."

"But as long as he is unknown he's the same as masked."

"Everything's masked. I can't find anything to look into."

"How about Charlie Curtis' death? Was that all aboveboard?"

"So far as I can see. I tried to read a homicide into it, but failed."

"Or a suicide, maybe. Was Curtis that sort?"

"Nothing like it!"

“Unconsciously, maybe. Killed himself without meaning to.”

“That wouldn’t be suicide, then. But, I say, Fisher, have you anything to tell me? You didn’t send me word to come over here just to look at me, did you?”

“Not quite that. But, I’m going to tell you, confidentially, a bit of news. You see, we doctors have made a discovery.”

“That sounds interesting, anyhow.”

“And it is. You see, knocking round a lab, we do get notions and sometimes they turn out worthless and sometimes not. This one is not.”

“Not what?”

“Not worthless. And developed, it may prove great stuff.”

“I’ll bite; what is it?”

“Just this. We’ve found that there is a relationship of cause and effect between the whole general family of amido-pyrenes and agranulocytic angina.”

“Just what is the low-down English for that last bit of nomenclature?”

“Why that’s what Charlie Curtis died of.”

“Nonsense, he died of pernicious anæmia.”

“Yes, that’s all true, but there’s more to it. You know there are some several kinds of pernicious anæmia. His was agran—”

“Don’t say it again, I don’t need it. And that’s pernicious anæmia?”

“That name is not a specific one. There can be several kinds of vicious or, if you will, pernicious anæmia. The one that Curtis died of was called agranulocytic anæmia. And that isn’t new, but the fact that it may be induced by apyrenodene is the discovery. Now, where did Curtis get that comparatively new dose? How, why and from whose hand did he take sufficient quantities of that—”

“I suppose Doctor Crosby gave it to him as a cure. Curtis wasn't murdered!”

“No, I know he wasn't. But old foggy Crosby didn't know about this new drug, I'll bet, though he knew Curtis had one of the primary anæmias.”

“Just what is a primary anæmia?”

“One of the anæmias of which we don't know the cause.”

“Oh, and it's brought about by one of the amidopyrenes?”

“Not always. But there is a special type of pernicious anæmia which may be caused by the amidopyrene group.”

“You mean you take an amido for a headache powder, say, and it acts as an anæmia starter?”

“Something like that. Now, I say Charles Curtis died of agranulocytic angina. And to prove it, I'll tell you his symptoms, though I've heard no detailed account of those. Wasn't he very weak and wobbly as to his legs?”

“Yes, but any nervous disease has those symptoms.”

“Didn't his skin grow yellowish?”

“Yes, very much so.”

“Didn't his blood get thin and didn't his doctors try to feed him up a lot? Didn't he continue to grow weaker and weaker and tired continually? Didn't he have a bad sore throat, with ulcers on it which the doctors couldn't cure? Didn't they come to forcible feeding and blood transfusions and all the last resort methods? Wasn't his heart action weak and irregular, and didn't he breathe heavily and in jumps? You needn't answer, I see by your face I made a true diagnosis. Then, didn't he fade suddenly at the last? Didn't he die suddenly, at the very last? Of course he did. And slipped away, alone, in his sleep. Now, that we've discovered that all these symptoms may follow doses of apyrenodene, why don't we suspect that Curtis took them either willingly or ignorantly?”

“It will certainly bear looking into,” and Stone began to think back. “And it would fit in with a theory I’ve often thought of. You know, Curtis attributed all his illness, all his weakness and suffering to the curse laid upon him by the old Egyptian gods.”

“No, I didn’t know that. Why did they have it in for him? What had he done?”

“Funny you don’t know that part of the story. Why, he was there at the opening of the tomb of King Tutankhamen, and all who were there at that time, or who visited the tomb subsequently, were automatically cursed by the gods who look after the sacred dead. Of course, all Mr. Curtis’ family and friends took no stock in this curse, but when he began to fade away under their very eyes they had to admit there was something wrong. Crosby had several expert specialists to consult with him, but they found no direct cause and I think in their hearts they blamed the old curse, but they daren’t say so lest they be laughed at.”

“I suppose they just told me the physical details, thinking I’d not be interested in the spooky side of the story. And I shouldn’t. But, if Curtis was sensitive to those supernatural suggestions, he would respond to what seemed to be the fulfilling of the curse. Did he believe his illness was due to the heathen influences?”

“Oh, he did. He was nutty on the subject. And it’s quite possible, isn’t it, that his deep-rooted, terrifying fears aggravated his condition and made him grow worse?”

“Yes, undoubtedly. But here’s my point. Now that we know all his ailments, all his tortures, *could* have been produced by a drug, ought we not to endeavor to find out if that did happen?”

Stone saw Fisher’s ‘point’ and quite understood it. As well as if the doctor had said it in so many words, the detective was aware that the next proposition would be the exhumation of Curtis’ body and thereby an experiment that must help answer the numerous questions now facing the laboratory workers.

Yet it would answer some important questions for Stone, too.

So he himself suggested that the remains of the late Charles Curtis be taken up and examined, with a view of adding to the amount of scientific knowledge now in the possession of humanity.

Fisher assured him that at his request the suggestion would be made and carried out, and Stone went away to await further reports later.

But, he thought to himself, where does it get me? What more do I know about my case because I find that agranulocytic angina is what Curtis died of, and that it can just as well come from a dose of amiparallelopipedon as to be the gift of a musty old spirit of evil that squats, fuming, in a King's tomb?

And then, with satisfaction, he remembered that Curtis didn't have any of that drug in his small cabinet. Most methodical was Curtis, and all his drugs, lotions, sedatives, stimulants, aspirin and Witch Hazel were carefully labelled and set in neat rows on the shelves.

Stone concluded to go to the Allenby house and have a confab with Rosella and with Mrs. Curtis, in which he might glean some further knowledge of Curtis' death, and he might not.

He had never yet been able to persuade himself that Charles Curtis had met with foul play; indeed, he could see no way such a thing could have happened. It was really easier for him, he thought, to believe in the curse of the heathen gods.

He remembered the old story, one of The Ingoldsby Legends, where the curse fell on a poor little jackdaw, and how the wretched bird wasted away and grew thinner and thinner till he was a mere shadow—'with his eye so dim, so wasted each limb, and pinions drooping'—and all in all, a poor ragged apology for the spruce and gay jackdaw that he had been.

Curtis was just like that jackdaw. He had sunk, slowly but surely, from a well man, though frail, to a sick, miserable, dragging ghost of his old self.

But, pshaw! the reason for it all was not an evil curse, nor was it the wicked deed of some enemy. Curtis had no enemies of sufficiently high standing in the medical profession to know about these sudden discoveries of high-powered drugs and their action on high-strung dispositions.

The death of Charles Curtis, in Stone's opinion, and his opinions were always well founded, occurred after a long and wearing fight against pernicious anæmia, than which there is no fiercer foe.

He walked rapidly through the clear, cold winter air, and reaching the house found Rosella and Mrs. Curtis both at home and glad to see him. The girl was in the library, surrounded by myriad Christmas gifts, which she was sorting, some to be acknowledged by herself, others turned over to Suzette Gale, to be answered by her understanding little notes.

"Come into the office," Rosella cried, taking Stone's arm and leading him away from the piled-up gifts.

Rosella always liked to conduct conferences in her father's office, where the Committee was gathered the day of Mr. Allenby's death.

Mrs. Curtis joined them, and the three sat round the table.

"Any new developments?" Rosella asked.

"Hardly that," Stone answered, "but perhaps hints of a new way to look. Mrs. Curtis, will it unnerve you, if I ask you some questions about your husband's illness?"

"No," and Mary Curtis spoke calmly. "I will tell you anything I can, and glad to do it if it will help you in your work."

"It may, and yet, perhaps not. But do you ever think, have you ever felt that the death of Mr. Curtis might have been brought about, or, at least, hastened by some human hand?"

"That Charles was killed! As Mr. Allenby was killed?"

"Not in the same way, of course, but can you think of anyone who could wish Mr. Curtis out of the world?"

"Positively not!" the good lady looked her astonishment. "My husband was not at all like Mr Allenby! Was he, Rosella? Why, Charles was a quiet homebody, he liked just to stay in his home and read or play some game or listen to the radio—he was not at all an active man. Now, Rob Allenby was always flying here and there. Out of town for a business trip or a country week-end. Off in his motor for New England, in an

aeroplane across the United States—that's Robert all over! Isn't it, Rosella?"

"Yes, of course. My father was always on the go. Mr. Curtis was content to sit at home and let the world go by. He did take an interest in father's Fair plans, but of course he wasn't expected to do anything like physical work. Not even going to see people. Dad said Mr. Curtis was invaluable in consultation, and didn't need to exert himself in any other way."

"Mr. Curtis have any enemies? Definite ones, I mean. With revengeful instincts and evil hearts?"

"Oh, no!" Mary Curtis cried. "You didn't know Charlie, Mr. Stone, when he was in full health, or you would never ask that! he was the gentlest, most lovable man—wasn't he, Rosella?"

"Yes, indeed! He couldn't have had a real enemy. I say, Mr. Stone, you're not looking for a murderer among the members of the committee, are you?"

"There are few of those left," Stone said, looking at her blankly.

"Yes, I know. Only Mr. Davis and Mr. Barton. We can't think of either of those men. I think whoever killed Daddy wanted to stop the Fair Exhibit he was planning."

"Then it couldn't have been either of those committee men," Mary Curtis said, thoughtfully. "They're working overtime to keep the thing going. But, Mr. Stone, if you had to choose, which of the two, Barton or Davis, could be more logically suspected?"

Stone looked at her in surprise.

"I can't answer that, Mrs. Curtis. I have studied both men and they are both deeply interested in carrying on the Exhibit. The only possible theory for their guilt, would be on the supposition that they wanted to be rid of the older men, and take the enterprise into their own hands. This sounds absurd, but we can find so few suggestions of a motive that we grasp at any straw. Now, I must tell you that discoveries have been made at the laboratory that seem to show a way Mr. Curtis could have been killed, whether he was or not. It is known that a certain form of a certain

drug, administered in a certain way, will bring about all the symptoms Mr. Curtis had.”

“But he had no drugs. My husband was not a drug-taker, by any means. Doctor Crosby gave him certain medicines, but they were to cure those symptoms you mention, not to induce them.”

“Did Doctor Crosby always bring the medicines to Mr. Curtis, himself?”

“Usually. And when he didn’t, he sent them by Mr. Davis.”

“Mr. Munson Davis?”

“Yes, he lives in the same apartment house as Doctor Crosby. And as he often came here to see Charlie, sometimes the doctor sent the medicines by him.”

“Odd thing to do. Hasn’t Crosby a delivery boy?”

“Oh, yes. But sometimes it was more convenient. And when Mr. Davis was coming here, he’d stick his head in the doctor’s office, and ask if he wanted to send any message.”

“Do they live on the same floor?”

“No. The doctor is higher up.”

“Then Davis had to go up in the elevator and down again, on the chance of doing an errand that it is the doctor’s business to have done himself!” Mrs. Curtis laughed a little.

“Why does it seem so extraordinary to you, Mr. Stone? To me it seems a most casual, friendly act.”

“Yes, if he had been passing the doctor’s door. But to go upstairs and ask if he might do an errand for a prominent doctor like Crosby, is, I think, a little queer.”

“I know what you mean, Mr. Stone,” and Rosella frowned at him. “You think Mr. Davis tampered with the medicines he brought from the doctor, before he gave them to Mr. Curtis.”

“Oh, Rosella, what an awful suggestion!” and Mary Curtis stared at the girl.

“And I think, Mary, that you have already thought of this, and that in your secret heart, you are afraid Munson Davis did do that, and that he is the murderer of your husband.”

“Be careful, Miss Allenby,” Stone said, “you must not make such assertions unless you are prepared to back them up. Do you know of any time that Mr. Davis brought the medicine to Mr. Curtis, and that he grew worse afterward? Do you know that Mr. Davis had any desire to lose Mr. Curtis’ backing—his influence and his good will? Those things were among the principal assets of the Committee, and why, under the heavens, would Davis want to lose one more of their dwindling committee?”

“You are talking, Mr. Stone, to draw me out.” Rosella looked indignant. “You know there is reason in what I say, whether I am right or wrong in my theory. And this is what I believe. I really think that Mr. Davis and Mr. Barton are in cahoots, that they both wanted to have father and Mr. Curtis out of the way, and run the Committee themselves. They are comparatively young, and have their own notions. Dad and Mr. Curtis acted as a barrier to the full play of their plans and so—”

“And so they killed the pair of them, in order to act as they chose! Miss Allenby, what has come over you? You don’t really believe such a fiendish thing as that! And such a foolish thing, too! Why, those two young men can’t put that Sport Show across! Were it not for Waldo Marsh, they’d be on the rocks now.”

“They have money enough,” and Rosella’s eyes were stormy.

“But it takes more than money to manage a gigantic gesture of that sort. Just the keeping peace among a lot of hasty tempers and hectic temperaments is a task in itself! They’ve had one fist-fight over there already.”

“No!” cried Mrs. Curtis. “And I thought everything was running so smoothly!”

“Let us hope it will come to that. But as to what I came here for, today. It is to ask you, Mrs. Curtis, if you are willing the authorities should exhume the body of your late husband and make further investigation as to the reason for his death?”

“Certainly I am willing. I am not one of those women who are squeamish about such things. If it is of help to science in general, or if it may help you and the police in your work, by all means consider you have my consent. Just what will occur?”

“At the exhumation? It will be secretly conducted, of course. The casket will be opened, the necessary operations performed, and everything returned to its former order. It will take but a short time and it may be of incalculable benefit to us all. I am glad you look at the matter so sanely.”

“Why was it not done directly after Mr. Curtis’ death? Nothing was said to me about it then.”

“It was mentioned,” Rosella told her, gently; “but Doctor Crosby said an autopsy was unnecessary, and he gave the burial certificate without it.”

“They didn’t know then,” Stone explained further, “that certain conditions, if found, would lead to certain conclusions. Let us not think any more about it, until the investigation of the matter has taken place, then we will know better where we stand. I will go now, and report to the laboratory. I hope, Miss Allenby, this will be of help in finding the murderer of your father, and I think it will.”

“Do you think, Mr. Stone, that if you learn that Mr. Curtis’ death was the result of foul play—do you think that the man responsible for that will be the same man who killed my father?”

“I’ve given that much thought, but I can’t come to a justified conclusion until I know the results of the coming investigation. But I do think, if the exhumation tells us what I think it will, I do think the whole mystery will be made clear.”

Stone went away, and then Rosella insisted that Mrs. Curtis should go for a rest, and sent her to her room.

Then Rosella called up Fred Stafford, and told him all about it.

Stafford was deeply interested and told the girl that he knew a little about this drug Stone was talking about. "It isn't exactly a new drug," he said, "but a discovery of certain powers to be found in a well-known drug, if sought for. I can't explain it to you in full, because you don't know quite enough chemistry. Forget it now, dear, and come for a drive with me. There's a glorious, crisp tang in the air, and we can have a long spin."

Fleming Stone went back to the laboratory, found Doctor Fisher, and told him that the widow of Charles Curtis raised no objection to their plans and that the exhumation and consequent autopsy could be effected whenever they chose.

Then he went to one of his favorite clubs for his lunch.

It was late, and after he finished luncheon he went into the lounge for a smoke. Friends and acquaintances drifted past him, but to none did he address an invitation to sit down for a chat.

He was called to the telephone and answered promptly, to find it was Lovell, who expressed a great desire to see him.

"Come here," Stone made reply. "We can talk by ourselves, and my people will know where I am if I'm wanted."

Stone secured a small private room, and Lovell soon came.

They had a long and serious conversation, and it was something after six when the detective was again summoned to the telephone.

There was an extension in the little room, and as Stone took up the instrument, he heard Waldo Marsh's big, bluff voice already started.

"Mr. Stone? Yes, all right. I say, Mr. Stone, you'd better come right up here, will you?"

"Where and what for?"

"Don't make talk, sir. Get to Allenby Hall just as soon as you can make it. There's big trouble on."

"Lovell is with me. Better bring him?"

“Yes, *sure!* But hurry, for the Lord’s sake! Can’t you get a police car to come in? Anyhow, hustle like you never did before!”

Chapter XVII

The Tragedy Of Munson Davis

A POLICE car was achieved and it rushed them up to Allenby Hall in such good time that they were there a bit before seven.

Waldo Marsh greeted them at the door, and though his usual imperturbable calm stood by him, he was quite evidently stirred deeply about something.

“Come this way,” he said, and led them into a small room, evidently a coat room, and closed the door.

“Take off your hats and overcoats,” he said; “there’s bad news. I didn’t want to tell it over the telephone, but—Mr. Davis is dead.”

“Murdered?” asked Lovell, at once.

“S’pose so. Looks like it, anyhow. Stabbed. Dead in the bathtub. But Mr. Barton had better tell you about it. Thought I’d just take the edge off. Mr. Barton is all in—never saw anybody so collapsed. Seems like he can’t bear it.”

“Poor chap,” said Stone. “May we see him?”

“Oh, yes, he’s waiting for you. He told me to get you, if I had to go myself. Come along.”

Marsh led the way to a pleasant little reception-room where Davis or Barton received their callers, tapped at the door and went away.

Barton opened the door, let them in, and then closed and locked it.

“We mustn’t be interrupted,” he said, and his voice was sorrowful. He offered chairs and, as they all sat down, he turned a bewildered face to Stone and said, “What can we do?”

The utter despair in his tone touched both his hearers as no words could do. He looked crushed and broken, as if now he had reached the very limit of his endurance.

And then, with quick apology, he said, “Don’t think I’m acting childishly but I’ve been through a lot lately, and it does seem as if this last blow is unbearable. But never mind my feelings now, we must get busy—whatever there is to be done. Did Marsh tell you the details?”

“No,” said Lovell, “will you—or will you call Marsh back?”

“Oh, no, I’ll tell you. I can face a situation, when I have to. Well, here are the facts. We’re having a little musicale this evening, and Davis agreed to come, to hear Miss Norris sing. He came early in order to have a little skating on the lake with the crowd.”

“Had he made up with the Contortionist chap with whom he fought Christmas Eve?”

“I don’t think they entirely made up, but they were preserving some sort of truce, an armed truce I’d call it.”

“And Pierre broke through and killed his opponent?” asked Lovell, trying to speed up the story.

“Better hear me through before you draw conclusions,” and Barton frowned at the Homicide man.

“Go ahead,” put in Stone, placidly.

“So Davis came, reached here about three this afternoon, and they all went to the lake and skated for a good while, and then came back to the house, and sat round the fire, telling stories, as amiable as you please. Well, then it was time to dress for dinner, and Davis, who had fetched his evening duds in a suitcase, went up to Marsh’s room to change. He always uses that room, when he stays over. There’s a big bathroom, and an extra clothespress, where Munson keeps a few shorts and shirts and things.

“He went up rather early, so as to get dressed and give Marsh his chance, and while he was in the bathroom, somebody telephoned to him, and

Marsh went up to tell him. At first, he couldn't find Davis, and then he concluded he must be in his bath. So Marsh tapped on the bathroom door, then he rapped, then he banged, but he got no answer at all. He called to Davis, but still no reply. Marsh began to think the man had had a stroke or something, and he went outside on the balcony, and looked in at the bathroom window. The window is high, but Marsh is very tall, and he could just see over the sill, and he thought he saw Davis in the bathtub, and the water was all red."

"Could he get in the window?" Lovell asked.

"No. It's one of those long, narrow ovals, I guess no normal human being could get through it, except a baby. Marsh came right down to me, and my first thought was for Fleming Stone. I told him to call up and find you, wherever you were, By good luck, he found you both. And I'm most awful glad to see you."

"And we're glad to be on the spot so soon," Lovell said. "What have you done? Did anyone get in? Through the window—or, how?"

"I had the door broken down," Barton said; "I'm not sure I did right, but I had to get in. Suppose he had only fainted, in the water, he might have drowned! Oh, I had to go to him. So I ordered the door broken down. Marsh, with one or two helpers he collected, went through those panels with an axe, and soon had a hole big enough to put in his hand and turn the bolt back."

"And you found him—?" asked Stone.

"Dead in the bathtub, which was nearly full of water. Red water!" Barton shuddered.

"You left him there?"

"Yes, at first; I thought I'd move him to a bedroom, but it could have done him no good—he was positively past all help. Marsh, too, declared him dead, and we concluded to leave him there. Want to go up, Mr. Lovell? Go on by yourself, or find Marsh."

A glance from Barton to Stone made the detective remain where he was and Lovell started on his quest.

“Isn’t it pitiful, Stone?” the stricken man began, “Davis was so enthusiastic and so pleased with the way things were going. Of course, that little row with Pierre was unfortunate, but I doubt we can keep Pierre anyway.”

“Let me get it straight,” Stone asked. “Davis was dressing in Marsh’s room?”

“Yes, and using his bathroom. Davis is quick, you know, and he often did that, and was usually dressed and downstairs before Marsh was ready to go up.”

“And he was stabbed?”

“Yes, with a small fancy dagger.”

“Ever see the weapon before?”

“Often. It lives in a little corner cupboard of knick-knacks in the hall. Not valuables, but some odd and rather interesting curios. I’ve never known anyone to open the door of the cabinet, but I’ve often seen the thing through the glass. He was stabbed right through the heart, much as Mr. Allenby was.”

“The thing is,” said Stone, “who could get in through that narrow window? I can’t seem to suspect any of the Sports. They liked Davis, didn’t they?”

“They did not. Davis was a bit haughty with them. I don’t think the chap meant to hurt their feelings, but he treated them with a sort of hauteur that they resented very much. And, too, while I don’t want to suggest anything, they could get through that narrow window, when the average human being couldn’t.”

“Not all of them.”

“No, I can’t see Mrs. Russell or Willie Woo pushing in, but some of the others could.”

“Just how large is the window?” asked Stone. “Do you know?”

“Yes, I had Marsh measure it. It’s exactly ten by fourteen. That lets Marsh out,” and Barton smiled at thought of the man’s enormous frame. “Me, too, for though I’m shortish, I’ve broad shoulders, eighteen inches by exact measurement. But, oh, Stone, the Sports! They could slide through—the contortionist like a squirming snake, the rubber man squeezing and collapsing, the Living Skeleton just like a thread through a needle, the little Clown—any of those. And, too—even Lolita and Miss Norris could probably make it. I just dread to have the police begin on them! They’re so eager to get a suspect, and here are half a dozen ready made!”

“Come on, Barton, we’d better go outside. I think it would look better all round. Of course, you know, you’ll be up against a perfect avalanche of questions. Are you prepared for them?”

“Certainly, as I’ve nothing to tell but the truth. All the way through the trying scenes of the Fair Committee I’ve stood up against the driving inquisition of the police, and I’ll not break down now. I was pretty near it at first, but now I’ve seen you, I’m helped a lot. And Lovell is a good sort. Logical, I mean, and rational. Now, I want to engage you to take the case, if you will. I owe it to Davis to get the murderer. You’ll be paid from the coffers of the Fair Committee, which is as it should be. Rosella engaged you for her father, but I bespeak your services, for the murder of Davis in the name of the Committee, now, alas, represented by myself only. Come along, you’ll want to see the bathroom.”

They went out of the little room, and up two flights of stairs to the large room, with bath, that had been assigned to Waldo Marsh.

A pleasant room, warm and sunny, and quite large enough for Marsh to have his bedroom furniture at one end and a sort of living-room at the other. A door from the room opened directly into the bathroom, and Fleming Stone went in. The bathroom was good-sized and well-furnished, though in no way elaborate. White tiling and shining silvery plumbing were bright and clean, and save for the dreadful sight in the bathtub, the room was invitingly attractive.

There were a chair and a low stool, and on these as Stone and Barton arrived, sat Commander Lovell and Waldo Marsh, in eager conversation, which, however, stopped as the others entered.

“Don’t stop talking,” Stone said, “go on. We want to hear your conclusions.”

“Too soon for conclusions,” Lovell returned.

“What do you think of the situation?”

“I think this, for a starter,” Stone answered. “That whoever the murderer was, he—or she—was not one of the Sports.”

“Quick work,” Marsh said, “but I’m rather agreeing to that.”

“Why?” Lovell asked him. “Because Mr. Stone says so?”

“No,” and Marsh looked a little miffed, “I do my own thinking. But seems to me the Sports would be a pack of fools to cut up a trick like that. They’d be sure to get caught.”

“They certainly would,” and Lovell nodded his head. “I rather hope it will prove to be one of them, so easy to catch.”

“I may be mistaken,” Stone said, “but I doubt this criminal will be easy to catch. Remember we haven’t caught the killer of Mr. Allenby yet, though we’ve been working mighty hard. And this case may be the work of an enemy unknown to us and under no glimmer of suspicion. Poor chap!” He looked compassionately at Davis. “He looks peaceful enough now. Seems as if he must have known the one who stabbed him.”

“I’ve heard that’s an exploded theory,” Barton objected.

“What is?”

“That one can tell by the expression on a dead man’s face anything of what he was thinking or feeling in his last moments.”

“I don’t suppose you’ve seen many corpses, Mr. Barton,” Lovell put in. “Lots of ‘em are far from as placid and serene as this here Mr. Davis is. They may not tell all they know in their faces, but they give a bit of information sometimes.”

“Where is the dagger?” asked Stone, looking at Marsh.

“I pulled it out,” Barton answered him. “I wanted to see if it was the one from the hall cabinet. If so, it might prove a clue.”

“Where is it?” Lovell demanded.

“Right here,” and Barton opened a small closet, and took the weapon from a shelf.

Lovell held it out toward Stone, and they examined it.

Of no great value, it was gracefully fashioned and Stone pronounced it of Italian manufacture. The blade was long and sharp, and the handle was of a fine quality of mother-of-pearl.

“Kept in a cupboard, in the hall?” the detective inquired.

“Yes, a glass-doored corner cabinet.”

“All right, put it away. You’ve called a doctor, Lovell?”

“Yes, I telephoned New York headquarters. They’ll be flocking here soon.”

Lovell was measuring the oval window. It was of the type that is all in one piece, and which is opened and closed by means of a heavy cord fastened to the bottom of the frame. This cord, running straight up the window to a pulley at the top, and thence to a cleat on the wall at the side, served to open the window and hold it open. The whole window, thus raised and fastened, left the opening clear for the entrance of anyone who could get through it.

“Yes,” the Commander agreed, “ten across by fourteen high, and scant that. Try to go through it, Stone.”

“I don’t think I could pull it off. But somebody must have climbed through. No secret entrance to this bathroom, is there, Mr. Barton?”

“Oh, no.”

“Why any doubt?” Lovell said. “Isn’t it clear as daylight that the intruder must have been one of the freaks? The polite Pierre, for choice.”

“Aren’t we going ahead a little too fast?” Stone suggested. “Why not do a little questioning and weed out any that are undoubtedly innocent?”

A hubbub below announced the arrival of the police.

They came tramping up the stairs, with little black bags and other and more bulky paraphernalia. Finger print men, camera men, plain clothes men, a doctor, a detective—more varieties of police than even Fleming Stone could name.

But everyone knew his business and settled to it, and shortly, Lovell said, “We’re not needed here now, Stone, let’s go down stairs and see if we can find out anything.”

“Wait a minute,” Stone returned. “What time do you think Mr. Davis died, Doctor?”

“Not long since. Have you any way of knowing, Mr. Barton?”

“I never know the time of anything. But there was a telephone call for him—can’t you check up on that?”

“And somebody came to call him—”

“Yes, Marsh came, one of my helpers. I thought he was here. Well, anyway, I know he was looking for Mr. Davis, and he found this door locked, and he pounded on it, but got no answer, and so he went round on the balcony and looked in the window.”

“Was the window open?”

“I’m not sure, but I think it must have been; for Marsh saw Mr. Davis in the tub, and saw that the water was red, and he couldn’t have seen anything if the window had been closed. It’s stained glass, you see.”

“Yes. We can doubtless get the hour from the telephone people. Go along, Lovell, if you want to. I’m going to have the body moved. Shall I have him laid on the bed there, Mr. Barton?”

“Yes, but can’t he be taken away soon? You see, I am responsible for the behavior of the somewhat odd people under my roof, and I don’t know

how they're going to take this tragedy. They're a nervous lot, some hysterical, and all probably very much excited already."

"Go and calm them down, Mr. Barton. They must be carefully handled, you know."

"I guess I know!" and Barton showed a rueful countenance. "I'm hoping Mr. Stone will help me out in the handling. I've not very much tact—you see. Mr. Davis looked after such things. I'm the business manager. Well, it's got to be tended to. Come on, Stone."

Lovell had already started, and the three went down to the big living-room. Marsh was there, and Mrs. Foster, and also a few of the Sports. It was nearing dinner time, and Mrs. Russell and Willie Woo, owing to their slowness of gait, usually were down early.

Pierre, too, was there, having come early in hope of seeing Miss Norris alone for a few minutes.

But that lady had not yet appeared, and Lovell, unable to prevent a slight smile at sight of Bonnie Russell and Willie Woo, dismissed them at once from all suspicion of having climbed in the window, and turned his attention to Pierre.

"The very one!" he thought. "That chap could easily slide through the narrow window. Guess I'll quiz him."

But Fleming Stone was ahead of him.

"Your work, Pierre?" the detective said, watching the Frenchman's face.

"No, indeed! I am not so much the fool."

"But you are an enemy of Mr. Davis?"

"No, not to say enemy. We do not like him, Davis, but we would not kill him! Mon Dieu, non!"

"Yet somebody killed him, and that somebody was slim, like you, and could get in at the bathroom window, like you, and—didn't like him, like you. Why not confess?"

“Because I am not the guilty one. You must find him.”

“We’ll find him, all right,” Lovell said, nodding his head. “Marsh, collect all the Sports and get them down here? I suppose they are in their rooms dressing for dinner.”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Foster. “Go after the men, Marsh. I’ll get the girls.”

They went away, and just then the Clown came in. The handsome young chap wore a jester’s costume, all white satin and gold lace.

Bob Berry, Marsh introduced him, and Lovell noted that his slender form could slip through the narrow window with ease.

Anyone who could do that, was of interest to the Homicide man, and he immediately began to question Bob.

“Where have you been for the past hour?” came first.

“I went to my room at five o’clock, and only just now left it to come down here.”

“You are the Clown?”

“Yes, but I do not feel like clowning now. Mr. Marsh told me what has happened.”

“Did he tell you we suspect you of having used the dagger on Mr. Davis?”

“He did not, because he does not believe that of me.”

“And why shouldn’t he? You are slender enough to go through the window, you had ample time, and you do not like Mr. Davis.”

“None of us liked Mr. Davis. He did not like us. But not one of us would kill him! It is unthinkable. Besides, I could not get through that bathroom window. It is too narrow. I am of slight build, yes, but my bones are hard and my muscles are strong. I am not as flexible as I seem to be.”

“You will be put to the test, however. I fancy you can push through.”

The others came into the room.

Soon, the whole collection of Sports had assembled. The police doctor and a detective came too.

Barton was there, and tacitly accepted the position of head of the house. Lolita sat beside him, in a little frock of yellow chiffon decked with pale pink roses and she looked angrily at the policemen as they questioned one after another rapidly.

At last it was her turn.

“Where were you this last hour?” came the usual question.

“In my room,” she answered, for she had picked up a good bit of English.

“All the time? What were you doing?”

Lovell couldn't shake off the idea that he was talking to a child. With great dignity the Albino responded.

“I was dressing myself only. I likes my clothes proper arranged and donned correckly. See?”

“You did not like Mr. Davis? No?”

“As much as most.” She shook her little shoulders carelessly. “But I did not—make him dead!”

Apparently such words as kill and murder had not yet entered her vocabulary.

“You could slip through that window!”

Lolita stared at him, burst into a flood of tears and hid her face in Mrs. Foster's bosom, as that good lady held out her arms to the frightened girl.

At this Barton spoke up sternly.

“I think, Lovell,” he said, “you needn't harp on that narrow window so continually. In the nature of things, our Sports here, are of appropriate figure to get through a small aperture. But that does not prove them murderers. Indeed, the fact that so many of our friends here are slender

goes to prove that other points must be taken into account. Also, slenderness of itself is not enough to condemn. Some of them are too short for the feat you have in mind, some are too large of frame. Why not work on motive, for instance?”

Just then the Living Skeleton came in.

He was not a favorite with the lot. Something, perhaps lack of hearty food, had made him rather morose, and he was often teased by the others.

The witty clown had dubbed him the ‘needless Alexandrine,’ and the name had stuck; he was always called Alexandrine or Alex.

But he seemed to Lovell the perfect suspect. Unpleasant of demeanor, quite obviously nasty-tempered, he was thin enough to go through the window, and also, tall enough to reach it easily.

The window was unusually high from the floor, but this man’s arms were long and supple, like a gorilla’s, and his long gangling legs could climb any surface.

Lovell began his quiz, but Alex was so disagreeable and resented the implication that he was a murderer so strongly that Lovell could make little headway. Moreover the other Sports kept teasing the suspect, and baiting him on his marvelous aptness for the role of killer, so that Lovell concluded to question the Sports singly and alone.

Whereupon Stone went to the Commander, and said:

“Look here, Lovell, I have to go away for a day or two.”

“Not now! Not right now!”

“Yes, tonight—at once. You have the situation well in hand. Until I get back, you just mark time questioning the Sports. Make them think you suspect this one and that one in turn. I’ll be back as soon as possible, and I’ll bring you the name and address of the person or persons who killed Munson Davis. I’m starting now, and don’t tell anyone I’ve gone until you have to and then say I went off on a sudden clue, and I’ll soon be back. Understand?”

“Your words, yes. Your intent, no. But go ahead, I have implicit trust in you, and in your plans, whatever they are.”

Chapter XVIII

Fleming Stone Finds The Criminal

FLEMING STONE went ahead.

He went ahead so steadily and so rapidly that in an incredibly short time he was in a chartered aeroplane, en route for Vermont.

He reached the Green Mountain State in the small dark hours, and finally arrived at his destination, which was a smallish town called New Canterbury, and which boasted one of the largest factories in Vermont.

Stone was not an entire stranger to the town. He had visited it only a few weeks previously, and had returned to verify some statistics.

Disregarding the time, he went directly to Police Headquarters and insisted on an interview with the Chief.

Due to his stubborn persistence Chief Taylor was called by telephone and responded that he would see Mr. Stone at his home as soon as the detective could get there.

The interview was friendly and rather lengthy, and involved the calling up of a member of the company who owned the big factory.

An appointment was made: Chief Taylor and Fleming Stone went to the home of Mr. Foss, and the three went into a huddle that lasted until the sun was bright in the heavens.

The discussion was highly satisfactory. A goodly breakfast followed, and Fleming Stone made all haste back to his waiting aeroplane and made a quick return trip to New York.

He had a few errands to attend to, and then he went up to Allenby Hall, where he found Marsh waiting his arrival.

“Come in,” said the soft-toned giant. “Any luck?”

“Good enough,” Stone told him. “Where’s Lovell?”

“He’s putting the Sports through the window.”

“Can he get them through?”

“Some of ‘em. Little Lollie went through like a homing pigeon, but the Skeleton stuck half-seas over. That Lovell, he’s mighty conscientious in everything he does, and he’s persistent just now in shoving those dumb bunnies through. As if any one of ‘em had wit enough to kill anybody.”

“Oh, they’ve wit enough, Marsh, but they’re shy on motive. Just to dislike a man for his manners isn’t a reason for killing him. And such a troublesome killing. Whoever did it had his work cut out for him. I’m going up there.”

Stone went up the two flights of stairs and stepped out on the balcony before going into any room.

A small crowd stood near the oval bathroom window, and Lovell was busily engaged in trying to urge the India Rubber man through the aperture.

The man himself was helping all he could, for his present position was decidedly uncomfortable. But he couldn’t get through, he was soft and pliable enough, but there was too much of him. He was rather fleshy, and when he pushed one portion of himself through, another part rose in rebellion and refused to follow.

“Go on!” shouted Lovell, “push yourself more! The slicker you go through the less you’ll be suspected. It’s the criminal who holds back!”

This was specious reasoning, but some well-placed prods helped along and the squirmer finally squirmed through.

Had the occasion been less serious, it would have been very funny, but Stone felt no inclination to laugh.

“Let up on that performance for a little while,” he said to Lovell. “Send the Sports downstairs for a rest. Marsh will look after them. Where’s Mr. Barton?”

“In his room,” Lovell said. “Want him?”

“We’ll go to him. Come along.”

Marsh and one of the policemen herded the Sports downstairs, and Stone and the Homicide Captain went to Barton’s room on the second floor.

Barton didn’t live there, but he had a good room kept for his use, and a small room adjoining which he used as an office.

He looked up as Stone came in, and gave a grunt, as if in pain.

“Where’ve you been?” he said, looking disinterested.

“Just on an errand. I say, Barton, isn’t all this poking people through that window sort of foolish?”

“What do you mean foolish?” Lovell demanded. “I s’pose we’ve got to find out somehow which of those loonies did it.”

“How do you know any of them did it? What’s the matter, Barton, you’re all fussed up. If it’s the very natural result of Davis’ death, I understand and I deeply sympathize with you. But you seem irritated—worried, besides.”

“Tell him what it is, Mr. Barton,” Lovell urged.

“It’s nothing—” Barton began, but Lovell interrupted.

“It is so something. You see, Mr. Stone, Mr. Barton has a notion that he’s going the way Mr. Curtis did.”

“Oh, shut up, Lovell,” Barton said petulantly. “I don’t think anything of the sort!”

“Yes, you do,” Lovell insisted. “He’s gone superstitious, Mr. Stone, and he thinks Mr. Curtis’ curse has settled on him.”

“Maybe it has,” and Stone spoke absent-mindedly, as if thinking of something else, which indeed he was.

Barton glared at him, but Stone unnoticing, went on.

“Any message for me from the Laboratory? Call Marsh, will you, Barton, and inquire?”

Barton pushed the bell, and shortly Marsh came, with a long envelope.

“This what you want, Mr. Stone?”

“Clairvoyant!” Stone commented. “Yes, that’s just what I want.”

Without apology, he slit the envelope, took out its contents, and was for two minutes absorbed in reading them.

He returned the paper to the envelope, put the document in his pocket, and then turned to Barton.

“I’m sorry for you, old man,” he said, with real grief in his dark eyes. “Have you come to any decision yet as to your plans? As I see it, you’re the last leaf on the tree, the last of the committee that planned this Fair enterprise and pushed it along to where it now stands—pretty fine work for the short time you’ve spent on it. And now, Barton, left alone, what do you propose to do?”

“I’m not quite ready, Stone, to answer that question yet. This blow is so unexpected, so bewildering, I must think things over. Only two ideas are clear in my mind. One is, that, even alone, I want to continue this project we have worked so hard on; the other is, how can I get along alone?”

“It’s a hard question,” Stone replied, “and of course you can’t decide anything without thought. Now I have a report to make, in fact, two reports.”

“Won’t they keep till tomorrow, Stone?” Barton asked sadly. “I am really overcome with all my troubles, and I don’t think I can pay proper attention to anything more.”

“What’s the matter, Barton? Are you really ill physically, or is your heart so grieved for Davis that you can’t control your mind?”

“I should think you’d understand, Stone.” Barton looked pathetic. “But I guess if you’d worked as hard as I have—as we all have—to put this Fair matter on a proper working basis, and then see my partners, one by one fade away, I guess you’d be pretty well knocked out, too. I don’t say I

won't get over it, rise above it, conquer my distress, but you must give me a little time! Gosh! I'm all in. I believe I'll go away for a little trip. I can't face another funeral, and all that."

"Who are Davis' people?" asked Lovell. "Where are they?"

"I'm not sure," Barton said, "but there are papers in Davis' desk that will tell everything we want to know. But can't we leave that till tomorrow?"

"No," Lovell said, decidedly, "we can't. Munson Davis is murdered, we must notify his nearest relatives as soon as we can find out where they are. You don't have to do anything difficult, Mr. Barton. Just send word to—has Mr. Davis a lawyer?"

"Yes, I think so, but I've no idea who he is. But Davis will have a notebook, of course, and we can find out such things. He has no relatives in this city and no very intimate friends. He was an exclusive sort, and went out very little and entertained even less. I know I must look after his financial account with the committee, but I can't do it tonight. And I do believe, and it wipes out all thought of anything else, I do believe I am affected by that curse that carried off Charlie Curtis, and which will wipe me out some day."

"Well, Barton, I can free you from such fears, at least," and Stone took the long envelope from his pocket again. "I have here the report of Doctor Fisher, who has been looking into the cause of Curtis' death."

"The cause!" exclaimed Barton. "Why, Crosby told me himself it was beyond all doubt pernicious anæmia."

"And Crosby was right as far as he knew," Stone informed him, "but Crosby didn't know all. He's a good doctor, is Crosby, but far from being up to date. Now the latest discoveries show a new drug or combination of drugs or, rather an exaggerated dose of a known drug, that is a positive and inescapable poison."

"What drug is that?" Barton inquired.

"Apyrenodene," Stone said slowly, "that drug is not new by itself—the discovery is—that a heavy overdose of it is a virulent poison."

“Is that what they make headache powders of?” Lovell asked.

“Oh, no! not pyramidon. That is for headache relief but is not toxic. This I speak of belongs to the amidopyrene group, but not at all dangerous unless taken too freely.”

“Well, go on,” Barton urged. “How did Charlie Curtis get that stuff—if he did get it!”

“Look here, Lovell,” and Stone suddenly started up, “you had a time putting the Sports through the bathroom window, now I’m going to have a try at it. Come on, Marsh, come on, Barton, we’ll do a little experiment of our own.”

Stone started, and more or less hypnotized into obedience, the others followed him.

Out on the balcony, he led them, and toward the bathroom window.

“Now,” Stone said, “we’re all going through that window, one by one. You go first, Barton.”

“But I can’t get through, my shoulders are too wide—”

“Yes, I know all that, but make the attempt. Can you reach up to it?”

“No, not tall enough.”

“All right, get something to stand on.”

Still looking as if he were obeying orders unconsciously, Barton drew over a porch chair from the other side on the balcony and pushed it beneath the window.

“I can climb up on that,” he said, “but I can’t get through that narrow opening.”

“Try it,” Stone said calmly, and Barton stepped up on the chair.

Stone went closer to him.

“You’re going through there, Barton, so you might as well go about it the right way.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” and Barton turned to look at him.

Stone’s face seemed to frighten him, and he began to try to go through the window.

“Can’t!” he declared again.

“Go on,” Stone commanded, and as he spoke he pulled off Barton’s low shoe, and touched the sole of his stockinged foot with a cigar lighter, which he pulled from his pocket and ignited.

“Ooh!” yelled Barton and as Stone did the same thing to the other foot, the desperate man writhed and twisted, until with a final shove he was through the window and picking himself up from the bathroom floor.

“That’s all,” and Stone snapped his lighter shut, and put it in his pocket again.

“Take him along,” he said, and Marsh and one of the burly policemen present led the limping Barton back to his office. Stone followed, and keeping the escort and the Commander of the Homicide Bureau of the New York Police with him, Stone calmly seated himself, bade the others sit down, and began his arraignment.

“I hereby accuse Peter Barton of being the murderer of Robert Allenby, Charles Curtis and Munson Davis, in the order named. His motive for these three deeds is the same. Barton became a member of the Fair Committee, formed by Mr. Allenby, with the full intent of disposing of the other members and thus securing for himself all the money of the committee. Notwithstanding the very heavy expenses already incurred, there is still about seventy thousand dollars in the treasury, and this automatically reverts to Mr. Barton, when he is the last legatee.”

Barton looked at Fleming Stone with a puzzled expression.

“I suppose there is some meaning in your words, Stone,” he said, wearily drawing his hand across his brow, “but I don’t get it for the moment. Perhaps you are trying, by your senseless and shocking accusation, to draw a confession from someone else—Marsh, maybe—but can’t you let it rest over till tomorrow? I am all in, and this farrago of nonsense you are saying makes me feel utterly at sea. I can’t help thinking that, as the

one most deeply affected by Davis' death, a little consideration should be shown me. Instead of which, I am accused of his death! I can say no more, I am overcome."

Barton slumped back in his chair, and his face became contorted, his eyes closed and he looked the picture of absolute exhaustion.

But a stern voice began, and Lovell said sharply: "Better sit up and take notice, Mr. Barton. You're not as ill as you make out. I can see your eyelids quivering with fear. Now, are you going to confess, which would be your best course, or are you going to try to deny Mr. Stone's statements? Which would be a foolish move on your part."

"I cannot confess to a series of crimes of which I am entirely innocent. Nor can I enter any formal denial today. I am a very ill man, and while I will take up this terrible aspersion tomorrow, I can't discuss it now."

"Then we will discuss it for you," Lovell declared, untouched by Barton's pleas.

Opening the door, he called in a stenographer and one or two other helpers.

Marsh left the room to see about matters in the house, and said he would return soon, after giving Mrs. Foster some directions.

Barton seemed to grow weaker and more irresponsible, but Lovell reiterated that he was shamming and his illness was really fright.

Stone took up the tale.

"From the first," he began, "it seemed to me that the killer of Mr. Allenby was one of the members of his Committee, who were in huddle in his office. This was objected to on the grounds that no one of them could have managed the deed."

"Nor could they!" Barton burst out.

No attention was paid to him and Stone went on.

"This is what happened. Mr. Allenby went to his bedroom to get some papers from his private safe there. When he delayed returning, Mr.

Barton went in, ostensibly to tell him of a friend's death. This was when he killed Mr. Allenby. Don't say that isn't possible—it is what happened. If you look at Mr. Barton now, you can believe it.”

“Gosh!” said one of Lovell's lieutenants, “I'll say so!”

For Barton looked like a man in torture. His face was drawn, his eyes were staring and he trembled as with a palsy.

Fleming Stone went on.

“After Barton returned to the office, Curtis went in to speak to Allenby. This is the part you will find hard to believe. Mr. Curtis saw his friend dead, yet he came back to the room, sat at the table and told no word of what he had seen.”

“How do you explain that?” asked Lovell, who was listening intently.

Waldo Marsh came back into the room then, and he too listened eagerly for Stone's reply.

“I have two explanations,” the detective said slowly, “either or both of which may be correct. One is that Mr. Curtis, who was even then badly shaken by his illness and nervous troubles, may have been so overcome by his discovery that he simply couldn't speak for a time and then found it impossible to describe what he had seen. The other, and I think the true one, is that Mr. Curtis at once assumed the murder to be the work of Barton, and he withheld his knowledge at the moment, planning to use it at some future time as a means of blackmail. I gathered this when I talked alone with Mr. Curtis. He didn't tell me in so many words, but during some highly confidential moments, I gathered that such a plan might be in his mind. How about it, Barton?”

“He tried it on,” was the muttered reply.

“And that's why you had to kill him!” Stone said quickly.

“How you talk! Curtis died in his bed—of natural causes.”

“In his bed, yes; of natural causes, no! You poisoned him with apyrenodene.”

“What in the world is that?” Barton asked, looking blank.

“Well you know!” Stone returned. “It is one of the amidopyrene group about which a discovery has recently been made.”

“Do you mean pyramidon?”

“I do not! And you know I don’t. That is a harmless remedy, this stuff you used is poison if taken in large quantities. You brought it to Mr. Curtis and placed it in his medicine chest, where he would take it, instead of the simple remedy which it replaced. You found ample opportunity to do this under cover of the fact that you were secretly leaving him some mild hasheesh cigarettes. This was known and sanctioned by his doctor, so your skirts were clear.”

“Can anybody get those cigarettes?” Lovell asked.

“Oh, yes—through the underworld trade. They never harmed Mr. Curtis. But it gave Barton a splendid chance to carry out his dreadful murder plan. You know how that man faded away, and it was due, not to the heathen curse, not to a pernicious anæmia, but to the deadly drug fed him in huge doses by Peter Barton. He knew Curtis planned to blackmail him for the Allenby murder, indeed, had already begun, and he took desperate means to stop it.”

“You’ve left out Davis, Mr. Stone,” Lovell reminded him. “At the time of that first meeting, I mean. Granting Davis came out of the bedroom, and said nothing about seeing Mr. Allenby dead in there. What was his reason?”

“He told me that, himself,” Stone said. “When I questioned him one day, alone, he admitted that he saw Allenby there, dead, and he supposed that an intruder from outside had done it, after Curtis came out. He didn’t dare tell of it, lest he be himself suspected. So he awaited developments, and then when Curtis went back to the bedroom, and called out, he still thought it had happened after Curtis’ first visit there, and he never suspected any of the partners. Of late, though, he had learned about apyrenodene, and he had been questioning here and there, regarding its properties and uses. So Barton prepared to put over his last crime, and watching his chance, found it yesterday, and will,

soon I hope, pay the penalty. I have no pity for him. Such a fiend deserves all he may get in the way of punishment.”

“I’ll see to that!” and Lovell gave the criminal a scathing glance. “Have you anything to say, Mr. Barton?”

“Why, no, I don’t think I have. Of course, Lovell, you’ll check up on Mr. Stone’s bombastic assertions and I fancy you’ll find them mostly hot air.”

“I fancy you won’t, Mr. Lovell,” and Waldo Marsh shook his white head. “I’ve known a little of these goings-on, myself, and I’m not surprised at the result. Now, who’s to tell Mrs. Curtis and Miss Allenby about it?”

“It is my place to report to Miss Allenby,” Stone said, “as she engaged me on the case. By the way, Barton, you engaged me to find the killer of Mr. Davis. I have done so.”

“Well, yes, I suppose you have. You’re too smart, Stone. I don’t see how you ferreted it all out. You’ll be paid, as I told you, from the treasury of the Fair Committee. There’s plenty of cash there. And, as it’s now my property entirely, I want to make a will. I mean to leave all my property to the person or persons who will carry on the plan of Mr. Allenby. Perhaps not so elaborate as he meant to have it, but in a good, practical way. And I think Mr. Waldo Marsh and Mrs. Foster will be the ideal ones for the purpose. If they like the idea, fix it up so they can make it go. If not, return the money to Miss Allenby, who is an honorary member of the Committee, and let her do what she chooses with it. I don’t mind telling you I did plan to remove the other members, so that the business would be all in my own hands including the treasury part of it. Had not Fleming Stone upset my apple-cart, I should have succeeded in my nefarious plans—good word, nefarious—and I intended to disband the Sports, sell this house and go away with the money, legally mine, and enjoy life in my own way. But, unless you can prove Mr. Stone is all wrong in his theories and practices, I daresay I am done for. Just one question more, if I may. Do tell us, Mr. Stone, how in the world you knew I could get through that narrow bathroom window?”

“That was my final proof,” Stone replied. “That was why I flew to Vermont last night.”

“Oh, you flew to Vermont last night?” and Barton roused up again. “Why Vermont?”

“That I fancy you know,” Stone said gravely. “But for the benefit of those who don’t, I’ll tell. I happened to know that Mr. Barton lived many years of his life in New Canterbury, a small town in Vermont, where there is a very large manufacturing plant. I reached there some time after midnight, and went straight to Police Headquarters, and was taken to the Chief’s home, where he got up from his bed to receive me. He called the Manager of the big factory, who also was kind enough to leave his home comforts and come over to the Chief’s house to talk to me. I asked him concerning the possibilities of a largish man going through a small orifice, because I have known of such cases in boiler factories where the engineers perform what seem to be wonders in that way. I learned, or rather corroborated, for I knew it before the fact that large men can get through surprisingly small openings, if they know how. That is the point. It is an art, almost a science, by which they learn how to manipulate certain muscles and follow other routine procedures. The trick is acquired by some pupils more easily and perfectly than by others, as some have more natural aptitude.

“I asked him if he remembered a Peter Barton, who was for a time among his factory employees. He remembered him very well, saying he was marvelously adept in this matter we are speaking of. He told me that in a factory, the regular man-hole is oval and measures about nine by fifteen inches, but there are even smaller ones that are used by bulky workmen. He told me of very large men who could go easily through a hole that a much smaller man could not negotiate because he did not know how. It’s all, he said, in the knowledge and practice. Barton was an expert engineer in Mr. Foss’ employ for several years, and knew well how to get through a window, ten by fourteen. So there was no use trying experiments with the slim Sports, as not one of them could really be a suspect in the case of Mr. Davis.”

Barton looked at the detective in undisguised admiration.

“You’re a wonder, Fleming Stone!” he said enthusiastically. “Few criminals are clever enough to stand up against your wits.”

“It’s a pity,” came the answer, “that you didn’t apply your own clever wits to better causes than you have chosen.”

There was a silence and then Lovell rose and said:

“Guess we’ll move on. Get up, Barton.”

Two strong men in blue uniforms stepped forward and accelerated Barton’s getting up.

As the murderer left the room, he bowed elaborately and admiringly to Stone and paused, as he passed Marsh, to say, “Be good to the little Albino.”

When the criminal and the police had gone, Marsh said, “What put you on Barton’s track, Mr. Stone?”

“In the beginning? Well, I never took much stock in the unknown murderer calling on Robert Allenby in his bedroom while a conference was being held. Such visitors usually know what’s going on. So I felt sure it was one of that precious committee. If so, one of them must be a first class liar. I watched them closely in their daily walks and avocations, and I finally came to the conclusion that Barton outclassed the others in that respect. After I recognized that fact, it was easy sledding.”

“I’ll bet the other two could lie, on occasion.”

“Most likely. But Barton lived a lie. He called himself an architect, but he had been an expert chemist for many years. And in Vermont, where I gathered in his history last night, I found he was an expert engineer for several other years. When he went in for wholesale murdering, the chemistry and the factory-training were of great help to him. You see, he gave his murder business time and study. He planned every detail, long before time to follow out the plans.

“As to the Allenby killing, Barton carried his old, untraceable jackknife in his pocket until the ripe opportunity came to use it. His wide and up-to-date knowledge of chemistry brought him the idea of using the lethal drug on Mr. Curtis, and he knew about the drug discovery long before laymen did. Then, this death of Davis was impromptu but not unplanned. Barton meant to put the last remaining hindrance to his

freedom out of the way in some fashion that would make it seem the work of one of the Sports. But a crisis was impending, and being pushed by circumstances, he cleverly managed the bathtub murder, and it certainly did suggest one of the Sports as criminal.

“I learned that Davis had heard of the drug that killed Curtis, and had hinted to Barton that he suspected him. Therefore, Munson Davis had to be removed.

“And he was.”

THE END

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