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Where's Emily? A Fleming Stone Story

By
Carolyn Wells

Chapter I Personality

“Where's Emily?”

“Dunno, Aunt Judy. Shall I go a-hunting?”

“No, no, Rod. Betty—Nell—doesn't anybody know where Emily is?”

“Did anybody ever know!”

“You see,” Aunt Judy whispered discreetly, “the minister's here.”

“Oh, *that!* Well, tell him Emily's gone walking with the Swami. That'll give him one crowded hour of glorious life—”

“Leave all to me; I'll take care of the cloth. What's a best man for?”

Burton Lamb stepped to Aunt Judy's side, and murmuring “lead me to him” left the room with her.

In a small reception room they found the Reverend Mr. Garner seated in a truly ecclesiastical attitude on the edge of a chair.

He was of an austere and ascetic type, and his fundamental beliefs were written plainly in his square, set jaw, and his snapping black eyes.

Aunt Judy had snapping black eyes, too, but of quite a different snap.

Lamb went through his part of the introduction with his usual nonchalant grace, and sat down sideways on a chair to see what he could do about it.

“Yes, Emily is not here for the moment,” he said, “and I’m wondering if I won’t do, instead. If it’s anything about the plans, you know—the arrangements—of course, as best man, I have it all at my finger ends—I mean at my wit’s end. You’ll be at the rehearsal this evening?”

“Yes—at six or so, is it not? But it is the service I have in mind, not the—er—social side of it. Emily is of the—the ultramodern set who have little care for the dignity or gravity of the sacrament.”

“Oh, I know what he’s getting at,” Aunt Judy exclaimed. “You are bothered because she means to omit the word ‘obey.’ I know—it worried me ’most to death at first, too. But she explained it to me—”

“Pardon me, it admits of no explanation, Mrs. Bell.”

“Yes, I thought so too, at first. But I’ve come round to Emily’s way of thinking and—”

“But her way of thinking cannot change the prayer book—”

“Now, look here, Mr. Garner,” Lamb began, in his pleasantly decisive way, “isn’t it a bit late for a discussion of this matter? The wedding is on Saturday, and to-day is Thursday. No amount of argument or debate on your part would change Emily’s mind in the least degree. Therefore, you will have to submit to her decision or refuse to perform the ceremony. In that case—pardon my plain speaking, but you see I am the best man, and it is my duty to attend to everything I possibly can that will save the bride and groom from any bit of worry or bother. So, again pardon my straightforwardness: if you do not wish to fall in with the ideas of Emily and Mr. Sayre, then I must be about the business of finding somebody who does.”

“I am told, too,” the irate dominie went on, “that Emily does not intend to take the name of Sayre, but will continue to be known as Emily Duane.”

“That is a matter entirely outside your jurisdiction, sir.” Even mild-mannered Burton Lamb was beginning to lose his patience. “That is the legal side of this affair, not the religious part of it.”

“Now, Mr. Garner,” Aunt Judy put in, and her black eyes snapped into his own, “I am older than you are, I was brought up as strait-laced and hide-bound as you were, but owing to the trend of the times and the ways of the world, and the dominance of the younger generation, I see clearly that the only thing to do is to let them have their way, which they will do, anyhow.”

The white, bobbed hair shook its pretty soft curls at him, the nearly double chin set itself in soft ridges, and Aunt Judy smoothed down her short skirt over her not invisible silk-clad knees, with an obvious submission to the trend of the times and the ways of the world.

The Reverend Garner looked at her.

“You naturally side with your niece,” he said coldly, “but I am told that Mr. Rodney Sayre is not at all in accordance with his bride’s views, and that he would much prefer the orthodox and time-honored ways.”

“That, too,” and Lamb spoke now with real asperity, “is outside your province, Mr. Garner. At a wedding, it is the bride who gives orders, who has her own way in every particular. I am glad Emily is not here to listen to you, for it would only rouse her anger and lead to unpleasantness. As I am, then, practically master of ceremonies, I ask you to decide now, at once, whether or not you will meet Miss Duane’s wishes in every particular. If not, there is no real reason why you should attend the rehearsal this evening. I daresay the—that is, Mr. Lal Singh—”

“Oh, hush!” exclaimed Aunt Judy, scandalized herself, now, “he is a Hindu!”

“Oh, I know, I know,” put in Mr. Garner. “He’s that Swami, or whatever he calls himself, who is attracting a lot of foolish fashionable women to his lectures, and who—”

“We really haven’t time now to discuss theosophy,” Lamb gently insisted. “Do you or do you not want to officiate at the wedding, Mr. Garner?”

“I wish I might see Miss Duane herself for a moment—”

“Well, you can’t, and it wouldn’t do you a bit of good,” declared Aunt Judy. “Oh, pshaw, Mr. Garner, don’t stir up trouble at this late date. Just do as our darling bride wants you to, or else say you won’t, and we can easily get another minister—and not a heathen, either.”

The Reverend Garner, being after all—or, perhaps, before all—human concluded he didn’t care to lose the pleasant fee which this same efficient best man would probably hand him, so he made the best of the situation, and took his leave, agreeing to do as Mrs. Bell had advised.

“Where’s Emily?” asked Aunt Judy, as she and Lamb returned to the lounge. “What’s the girl doing?”

“She was here,” Nell Harding informed, “but she flew off again. Went to take another look at her necklace, she said. We’re talking about personality. I say Emily has more of it than any one I ever knew.”

“Silly word,” put in Pete Gibby. “Doesn’t mean a thing. Everybody has personality of one sort or another—”

“It doesn’t mean that, dearie,” Betty Bailey kindly educated him. “It means, why, it means—”

“Go on—what does it mean?”

“Oh, just that you stand out, you know. You’re like a solitaire diamond and the others are like a cluster.”

“Not bad, Betty,” Sayre agreed. “Yes, Emily is like that—she—”

“Never mind, Signor Benedick, we have a dim idea of your opinion of Emily.”

“Have I personality?” asked Nell Harding, who was to be one of the bridesmaids.

“You bet you have!” said Lamb, who was madly in love with her.

“Have *I*?” cried Betty Bailey.

“Not a bit,” Pete Gibby told her. “You’re strictly impersonal. Aunt Judy here has more than all the rest of us put together.”

Mrs. Bell smiled absently, accustomed to their foolishness.

Though nominally in charge of the house and of her niece, she actually had no hand in managing either.

When Emily’s parents had both been killed in a motor accident, Mrs. Bell, as the only available relative, had come to Knollwood as a matter of course.

And as a matter of course, she was still there, but the direction of the establishment was entirely at the will or whim of imperious, efficient Emily, personification of personality and able exponent of the younger generation.

Not that Emily was a flapper. She was twenty-two, well educated, well mannered and a thorough-bred.

But impulsive and high-tempered, she needed a restraining hand now and then and there was none to stretch out to her.

She was sole heir to her father’s enormous fortune, which was judiciously attended to for her by able trustees.

She did whatever she chose and she had whatever she wanted.

In fact she lacked nothing but parental love and guidance, and this, some said, was lucky for the parents.

Not that Emily was wild or eccentric.

But she had little sense of moderation and once bent on a thing would achieve it at any cost.

And she had the elusive charm ambiguously termed personality.

With it, she could make almost any one bend to her will or grant her request.

It made her a favorite and a belle. She had hosts of friends and no enemies, unless some envious or jealous young people were to be counted.

Her home, the great and beautiful house her father had built up among the Ramapo Hills, was filled with everything that conduced to comfort or happiness, and Emily and Aunt Judy lived in the utmost peace and harmony.

School, travel, friends, social success, had all come to the girl in turn, and now she was about to marry Rodney Sayre and a house party was gathered for the wedding festivities.

Although at the time of her arrival in Emily's home, Aunt Judy had been an old-fashioned, even provincial sort, her niece had changed all that.

She had ordained that Mrs. Bell should do at all times and in all things exactly as Emily dictated and not otherwise, that strict adherence to this plan of campaign would make for happiness and contentment, while any dereliction from such a path would lead straight to chaos and misery.

So clearly was this set forth and so emphatic was the insistence upon it that Mrs. Bell saw at once she must acquiesce or depart.

In her wisdom she chose the former course, continued in that course, and all went very well indeed.

For Emily was not a bit difficult to get along with if she had her Own way. And her way, though sometimes amazing and even incomprehensible, was never in line of any wrongdoing.

Her flapperhood was hoydenish but not reprehensible. Her love affairs were hectic and frequent, but short-lived. Her fads and hobbies, though often expensive, were harmless.

And if she was criticized by some of her neighbors, she was beloved by many more.

Neighbors were numerous, though not very near.

Hilldale Park was a gesture that followed the building of the Duane house, and the exclusive reservation contained now many beautiful estates that spread out from Emily's home in all directions.

The whole region was more or less wild, and strictly kept so. Main motor roads there were, and some paved sidewalks, but there were also many places whose walks were footpaths through the woods or winding ways skirting ravines of picturesque beauty.

The dwellers were largely artists or lovers of the arts, most of them wealthy and most of them young or trying to keep so.

Fads were taken up, tried out and dropped in rapid succession. Philanthropies likewise, also charities.

A new hospital, but recently opened, was the pride of the community, and a new Hindu teacher, Swami Lal Singh, was the current excitement.

With her usual impulsiveness, Emily had thrown herself into this metaphysical movement, had raved over the strong, silent Hindu, and had even added a codicil to her will for the bestowal of a sizable gift on his cause, when with characteristic suddenness she had decided to be married at once.

She had known and loved Rodney Sayre more than a year, but had refused to give up her freedom until this season, when she quite took his breath away by proposing an immediate wedding.

Sayre, a worth-while chap, had a slight tinge of reserve and decorum left over from some old New England ancestor, and he was really the very one for Emily to marry, for he truly loved her and he had great tact and discretion in managing her.

Meekly, Emily had asked him to help her and teach her in the ways of calmness and dignity, for she knew, she said, that she was too volatile and effervescent to be a real companion to him otherwise.

And in moments of meekness or humility Emily was so bewitching that Sayre vowed he must learn of her, rather than the other way.

Emily was too restless to be beautiful, too excitable to be handsome.

She was pretty, of course—what girl isn't nowadays?—but as her friends averred, her charm lay in her personality.

Poor overworked word that means so much, yet is always constrained to mean more.

In Emily's case, it meant quick, vivid interest in persons and things, expressed by the most adorable little motions, unstudied, unselfconscious, but readily translated, quick, musical little exclamations, sudden, unexpected smiles, flashes of understanding eyes, queer little curves to her mouth—a thousand fascinating ways that meant Emily, and nobody else.

She adored Sayre, but she teased him unmercifully, for, as she told him, his own good.

Rodney, understanding, never resented it, but smiled at her in his big-hearted way.

But, innately, he rather scorned the meretricious and tawdry side of the gay crowd they went with, and hoped after he and Emily were married they would be also, what is, or used to be, known as “settled down.”

Not that he was a prig or a prude. He had no quarrel with the wildest escapades planned and carried out by his friends, but they sometimes failed to interest him. Yet he was so broad-minded and so really tolerant by nature that he never showed, or even felt, any annoyance at their pranks.

Burton Lamb, his chum, was the most irrepressible spirit of the crowd, so, as he and Sayre reacted on one another, it helped both of them.

Sayre was of the Viking type. Tall, fair and of magnificent physique, he bore himself with a swinging, easy grace that was one of the first things about him that attracted Emily.

“Most too big to stand in front of a fireplace,” she had said, looking at him critically, “but just grand to hand you down the steps and into the car.”

And at that speech Sayre had secretly determined to hand her into her car for the rest of his life.

And now the wedding was only about forty-eight hours away.

He was a bit disappointed at Emily's insistence that she would keep her maiden surname in accordance with the views of her modern coterie, but he thought too, that she might be saying that only to tease him, and in any case she should have her own way.

So truly did he understand and respect the character of his *fiancée* that he was more than willing to let her do exactly as she chose in minor matters, or what seemed to her minor matters.

And so, when the gay group in the lounge, as Emily preferred to call the great living room, were talking about the personality of his bride, Sayre smiled a little to himself to think how perfectly he understood that darling person, and how easily he could persuade her to fall in more completely with his ideas, should he choose to do so.

The house party included only the out-of-town members of the wedding procession. There would be other bridesmaids and ushers from Hilldale Park, also a matron of honor, whose home, The Ravines, was near by.

Pete Gibby, a most adaptable and chummy sort, was asked because he was engaged to Betty Bailey, the maid of honor.

Gibby fitted in with the crowd, as he could fit in anywhere, by reason of his suavity and gay impudence.

Aunt Judy took to him at once, as she did to most of Emily's friends, and it pleased Pete to pretend that Aunt Judy had ousted Betty completely from his affections.

"Yes, Mrs. Bell," he said, sighing, "your personality is so marvelous, so perfect that I can't help wishing—"

He broke off abruptly, as one overcome by deep feeling, and just then Emily came into the room.

"Talking about personality!" she cried; "you must indeed be hard up for a subject of conversation! I'm glad I came in—"

“Meaning you think we’ll talk about you?” asked Pete. “We do that when you’re not in the room.”

“Go right on,” Emily said, “I don’t mind a bit. I shan’t be listening. Oh, girls, the bridesmaids’ gifts have just come! Want yours now?”

“Straight off!” and Betty and Nell took the long slender white boxes Emily held out.

They contained cigarette-holders of an astonishing length and beauty. Of exquisite white enamel, with monogram in raised goldwork, they brought forth storms of approval and gratitude.

“One for you, too, Aunt Judy,” for Emily never forgot the old lady she had rejuvenated and given a new interest in life.

“And I’m going to have another thrill out of my own present,” Emily went on, as she perched herself on the arm of Rod’s chair, and leaned against his shoulder.

Slowly she opened the jewel case that held the bridegroom’s gift to her.

A long chain of diamonds, not large, but of faultless purity.

She let the necklace run through her fingers, like a small cascade of rippling light.

“Isn’t it beautiful!” she sighed, in an ecstasy of satisfaction at the lovely thing.

She flung it round her neck, and let it hang down over her dress, a sports frock of dark blue crêpe.

“I put on this dark thing, so it would show up better,” she explained, frankly looking about for admiration. “Isn’t it exquisite? Oh, Rod, it is just *too* darling!”

She clasped Sayre to her, and gave him a most satisfactory demonstration of love and gratitude.

Then she flew across the room to a mirror, and peacocked and pirouetted about, as she viewed her precious necklace from all angles and in all lights.

“How do you like it?” she smiled, leaning over the back of a chair, and letting the chain of stones run over the velvet cushions.

“Perfect!” declared Betty, and Sayre looked at the smiling eyes that held his.

Very dark, Emily’s eyes were, almost black, and their white lids, often falling over them, gave her at times the look of a siren.

Her face had a natural pallor, and though she carefully tinted it now and then from her compact, yet, her rouge did not hold like the other girls’ and much of the time Emily was positively pale.

“Red up, Emily, do,” cried Nell. “You look like your own ghost!”

“Lal Singh won’t think you’re pretty if you’re so white!” Pete declared. “Is he coming to rehearsal?”

“The Swami?” Emily tried to speak calmly, and did, too, but a quiver of her eyelids showed her slight embarrassment.

“Yes,” said Lamb, seeing a chance to tease; “I was going to tell his Reverence, the Garner, that you had left your fortune to Lally, but I was ’fraid you mightn’t want me to—”

“Hush your nonsense, Burt!” Sayre shot at him. “Do you s’pose I’m going to let you rag my wife—”

“Your wife!”

“Same as. Anyway, if you say a word she doesn’t want you to, I’ll—”

“There, there, Roddy, boy,” said Emily, standing behind him put a hand over his mouth.

Then she tweaked his thick, wavy hair, of a golden, almost yellow gloss, and announced:

“Gentlemen prefer to be blonds!”

Whereupon, Rodney jumped up and went for her.

Very dear she looked, caught in Sayre’s arms, her lovely head drooping on his shoulder, and her necklace dangling like a flashing thread of light.

Her dark bobbed hair was long enough to shake its soft curly sides and close-clipped at the back.

Leaning back against her big, strong lover, she stood, unconcernedly smiling at the others.

“And now,” she said, “we must get ready for the rehearsal. Spinks will be here about six, and I have to get into my—”

“Oh, Emily, you’re not going to wear your wedding gown at rehearsal!” and Aunt Judy looked really aghast.

“No, no, ducky; I’ve a sort of dummy frock, a make-believe wedding dress, with a long train and veil and all that. I’m going to rehearse in that.”

“Going to rehearse in the church?” asked Gibby.

“No, too much trouble. We’ll just go through the paces here. You see Spinks—”

“Who is Spinks?” asked Pete.

“Why he’s the Funeral Director. You needn’t laugh, because he is that, too. He takes full charge of the wedding parade, and you must all do exactly as he says. And obey him, or he’ll get awfully mad—”

“That reminds me, Emily,” Lamb put in, “Friend Garner is terribly alarmed for fear you won’t say ‘obey’ in the service—”

“Is he?” said Emily, indifferently, “then to tease him, I think I’ll say ‘Oh, boy!’ I heard of somebody who did—”

“Will the Penningtons be here?” asked Aunt Judy, to turn the subject.

“Oh, yes, Pauline is matron of honor. They’re coming over for tea, too. Be here any minute.”

“Is the Swami coming?” This from Lamb.

“I hope so,” and Emily faced him. “Oh, please *do* like my Swami-wammi! Don’t paste him all the time. Remember he communes with unseen worlds; he contemplates the Over-Soul—”

“Hush, Emily! What *are* you saying? Are you talking of Lal Singh?”

This speech, in irate and excited tones, came from the red, very red lips of a young woman just entering.

She was obviously angry, and as evidently the cause of her ire was the overhearing of Emily’s words.

“Oh, Polly, dear!” and Emily flew to greet the newcomer and kissed her with effusion.

Followed Jim Pennington, the husband of the angry Pauline, and in a moment, all the disturbance had blown over, tea was brought in, and everybody grew gay.

“Are you really the Mr. Pennington who writes those—those plays that I’m not allowed to go to?” Betty asked of the man who sat beside her.

“I hope so,” he returned, with a grave smile. “I mean I hope you’re not allowed to go to my plays.”

Chapter II

A Kiss For Luck

“Why not?” and Betty’s round, chubby face registered fine indignation. “Girls nowadays can go to anything evil, see anything evil, hear anything evil—”

“You sound like the Japanese monkeys,” Pennington laughed at her. “And don’t say ‘nowadays’ to me! I’m not your uncle.”

Jim Pennington was a man of thirty, but to flapper Betty he seemed a generation removed. He was an erratic playwright, some of his work

achieving marked success and some falling flat. One of his plays had been suppressed and others ought to have been, but they were not quite popular enough to make it worth while.

He was not distinguished-looking in any way, but his bored, languid air and his soft, drawling voice had an attraction for some women.

He made slight appeal to Betty, however, who liked her men louder and funnier.

“How’d you come to marry your wife?” she said, feeling she ought to startle a playwright.

“She made me,” returned Pennington, straightforwardly.

“Why, what a churlish speech!”

He stared at her, and comprehended.

“Oh,” he laughed, “I didn’t mean it that way! I mean she was the making of me—of my career. Her sympathy and help—”

“I see—your dearest friend and severest critic—or whatever it is. She’s very beautiful, too.”

“Yes; if she weren’t quite so pretty, she’d be the most beautiful woman in the world.”

“Does that mean anything?” asked Betty idly. She was bored with the man, and didn’t want to waste any sparkle on him.

“Not to you, I daresay. Are you to be maid of honor?”

“Yes, and Mrs. Pennington is matron of honor, I know. We’ll do well together.”

“Watch your step, then. Polly is a marvel when she’s in regalia.”

“So’m I,” returned Betty; “what’s she going to wear?”

“Lord, I don’t know. Let me see—she should wear—oh, well, nothing short of a complete Carmen costume brings out her best points.”

“Yes, I can see that. She’s a perfect Carmen. That wonderful black hair, those eyes—even the very way her cigarette droops from her lips. Do you care for any other woman, Mr. Pennington?”

“Woman? No. Women? Yes. I adore many of them. May I adore you?”

“Fraid I haven’t time. There are so many enticing strangers here. Look at that man who just came in! Is he the one they’re all crazy about?”

“Yes, he’s the Swami. His name is Lal Singh. I think he’s a faker.”

“Fakir with an *i* or an *e*?”

“All the same. Want to meet him?”

Betty did and the two went across to where the Swami and Emily were talking together, a little apart from the rest.

“Do we intrude?” said Pennington lightly. “Miss Bailey wants to meet a real live celebrity.”

Lal Singh bowed, gravely accepting the compliment.

Whereupon Betty monopolized him, and Emily turned to Pennington.

“Where’s Polly?” he asked.

“In the present room. Oh, Penn, look at my necklace! Isn’t it perfect?”

“Let me see it,” and Pauline Pennington came toward them. “Yes, Emily, it’s awfully good. Might have been a bit heavier—”

“Not at all. I wouldn’t have it of larger stones. Just because Penn gave you a Kohinoor—”

Polly held up her chin, as if to show off better the diamond pendant that had been her wedding gift six years ago.

“Funny for you to have the Rehearser, Emily. What’s the idea?”

“Oh, everybody does now. Of course, six years ago, such a thing was unheard of, but it’s a great discovery, really.”

“But Spinks is the undertaker.”

“What of it? Can’t he undertake a wedding as well as a funeral?”

“Oh, you give me the creeps—”

“Don’t come to rehearsal if you feel nervous about it, Polly dear.”

Emily was not of a catty disposition, but Polly Pennington, though one of her dearest friends, often rubbed her the wrong way.

Moreover they were rivals for social queendom.

Emily, as a belle and heiress was easily first with the younger men, but Polly, who was really a married flirt, had a long list of admirers.

The two girls were opposites as to character, Emily being daring, unafraid and impulsive.

Pauline, nearly seven years older, had learned to be diplomatic, discreet and careful. She had the mentality of a Machiavelli and the suave countenance of a Mother Superior.

Not that she looked nun-like. Her suavity was a mask and she meant it to be known as a mask. Beneath it were fires of many sorts, to be kindled or extinguished at her pleasure.

Emily’s personality was frank, free, and open. Pauline’s was deep, mysterious, hidden.

Yet the two were friends, after a fashion, and Emily never fought Pauline with her own weapons of sarcasm and pettish faultfinding, unless goaded to it.

And during the preparations for the wedding Pauline had been especially irritating. Both jealous and envious by nature, she resented Emily’s triumphs and sought to belittle the elaborate plans.

“Oh, yes, I’ll come,” she answered Emily’s suggestion. “I want to see what the undertaker person does. I never should have had such a thing at my wedding.”

“Of course not—seven years ago.”

“Six.”

“Well, six, then. You see, modes were very different then. How would I look having the sort of wedding you had?”

“What do you know about it? You weren’t there!”

“No, I was in the nursery. But, now, the Rehearser is a regulation thing; one has to have him. You’ll see.”

“And that Spinks is a general-utility man. Why, he manages bridge games and costume parties.”

“Of course he does. He attends to everything except christenings—”

Emily stopped suddenly, and quickly changed the subject. There had been one great tragedy in Pauline’s life, the loss of her baby.

She worshipped the child, really idolized it, and when the little thing died of croup the night before the christening day, Polly Pennington almost went mad.

Highly strung and nervous of temperament, she was a long time regaining her poise and her health.

Her friends even now were careful not to mention children or christenings in her presence, and Emily’s slip was a real catastrophe.

She turned quickly toward the pair at her side, Betty and the Swami.

The Hindu would, she knew, distract Pauline’s attention at once.

“Come with me, Betty,” she said, peremptorily. “There’s some one I want you to meet.”

Betty was enjoying herself and didn’t want to leave, but the look on Emily’s face compelled her, and she obeyed.

“Wassamatter?” she said, curiously. “You and Polly had a spat?”

“No. Keep still, do.”

She shepherded Betty across the room toward a man who had just come in.

A man much older than the rest, a man who gave the effect of an elderly beau, which, indeed, is just what he was.

Abel Collins, sixty or thereabouts, was the friend of all the world.

He had been a friend of Emily's parents and had known and loved the girl all her life.

His bright, blue eyes gleamed from beneath shaggy gray eyebrows, and his gray hair, a bit long, curled at the ends.

He was good-looking in the sense that he looked good and his attire was immaculate, if not quite of the latest styles.

He put an arm round Emily without speaking to her and held out a hand to Betty as Emily introduced them.

"My godfather," Emily said, "and my guide, philosopher and friend. My overseer and general superintendent. My mentor and tormentor—"

"There, there," Abel Collins interrupted, "I'm sure Miss Bailey knows enough about me now to last the rest of her life. Let's talk of something else."

"Talk about me," said Betty promptly. "I'm maid of honor, and I'm next to the bride in importance now, and as soon as she goes off with Rod, I'll be top of the heap! I guess you'll be glad then that you know me, Mr. Collins!"

"Oh, I hope so," he returned. "My dear young lady, I truly hope so! And if you'll only behave yourself—"

"Now, now," said Betty, taking to him at once, "don't set me too hard a task—"

Seeing the two fairly launched on a gay conversation, Emily slipped away from Abel Collins' clasp and went to Sayre's side.

She slipped naturally into Rodney's circling arm and joined in a spirited discussion he was having with Burton Lamb.

"You're crazy, Burt," Sayre was saying; "what do I care what Emily does?"

"Why, why!" Emily said, smiling up at him as she felt his arm tighten round her. "What's the wild Lambkin saying to make my sweetie talk like that?"

Her perfect faith and trust left no room in her heart to imagine that Sayre's words cast any aspersion upon herself, as indeed they did not.

"He's a goof," Rodney informed her. "And he's also an interfering old cuss and a general rotter. Want to know any more?"

"I do," said Emily, "I want to know it all. First, the subject of the debate."

"No debate about it," Lamb said, with some heat. "I merely told this lunatic that you're planning to marry that you had been bamboozled into giving a lot of money to the present pet of Hilledale, the dear little Swammikins—"

"Oh, that!" and Emily laughed. "Well, go on, my Lamb, go on; I'm a member of the What-Of-It? Club."

"Oh, nothing much," said Lamb, airily, "only I thought any good citizen who dared ought to remonstrate with you."

"And I interrupted friend Sayre here as he was saying he doesn't care what Emily does with her money, didn't I?"

"Exactly that," agreed Rodney, glad that Emily had sensed his meaning.

"Exactly that," agreed Lamb. "So, as best man, I think it my duty to do a little in the remonstrating line myself."

"Why?" and Emily was suddenly serious.

"Because, Emily dear, I'm sure that man is a fraud. He's not a real Hindu, to begin with, and if he is, he isn't the holy man he pretends to be."

“Burton, darling, you’re a brick. It’s nice of you to put me on my guard. And to tell you the truth, I more than half believe you’re right. But you see I didn’t pay him any money; I only added a codicil to my will that he shall receive a bequest for his charitable work when I no longer have any use for such things. I don’t intend to die for a long time yet, but if I should, I won’t begrudge the legacy. Whether he’s the real thing or not, he has entertained us all and has wormed himself into the good graces of the Hilldale people.”

“But, Emily, if you knew anything about theosophy, anything about Hinduism—”

“Never mind the isms; he can spout the lore of Farther India, or whatever it is, farther than any Orientalist I ever knew before. And his talk when he’s alone with you, would charm the birds off the trees!”

Sayre bent down and kissed the top of her head, to show that he was not jealously roused by this revelation.

“And another thing,” Emily went on, “since you feel so deeply about the matter, I’ll tell you there’s nothing in it.”

“About fifty thousand dollars, I’ve been told,” Lamb put in.

“Yes, on paper.”

“But aren’t wills usually on paper?”

“Yes, O wise one. But, hearken. Said will, on said paper, becomes null and void when Miss Emily Duane, Spinster, becomes Mrs. Rodney Sayre, Matron.”

“Of course it does!” and Lamb’s face broke into smiles. “I knew that, but I forgot it. Oh, Emily, you’re all right!”

“Then,” Sayre said bewilderedly, “when you go off with me on our wedding trip, you leave no will behind you?”

“That’s right, my best beloved,” Emily returned. “Should battle, murder and sudden death o’ertake me, you are my sole heir—”

“Hush, Emily, you shan’t say things like that!”

“Well, my Heavens! Rod, you’re my only heir anyway, so what need for a will?”

“There’s Aunt Judy—”

“Yes, dear, but I trust her to you. And, anyway, I’m to have a little talk with Mr. Craven about all this to-night or to-morrow. And there’s his massive dome now!”

Burton Lamb turned to look at the mentioned lawyer, but his glance paused halfway, for he caught sight of Lal Singh staring at Emily.

His face was distorted with passion, and it was impossible not to realize that he had heard Emily’s remarks about her bequest to the Hindu and was greatly upset in consequence.

Lamb chuckled, for he had no faith in the Oriental’s sincerity and hoped he would never receive a cent of Emily’s money.

To be sure it was a legacy, but he was apprehensive lest the wily mystic might persuade Emily to make a cash payment in advance.

After her pronouncement, however, he felt at ease about the matter, and in a moment, Everett Craven, Emily’s lawyer, joined their group.

Lamb then faded away, for he felt the business confab was only for the principals, and even a best man was not needed there.

Everett Craven had long been a suitor of Emily’s. Though several years older, he was a man of persistency and determination, and her repeated rejections seemed only to intensify his resolves to win her.

Of course, since her engagement to Sayre had been announced, Craven had given up hope, and though still attending to her legal affairs, he was a changed man.

A good lawyer, though of no brilliance, a good citizen, in a non-committal way, Craven had few friends and no enemies. He was uninteresting and rather self-centred.

As a matter of fact, Emily had thought little about him. She rejected his proposals as fast as he made them, and then, as he showed no special resentment, she continued to retain his legal services.

Craven continued because she was his best-paying client and he had none too many.

So now, taking the opportunity, Emily spoke to him, in Sayre's presence, about her will, and about the advisability of making a new one to be signed after she was married, and before starting on her wedding trip.

"But there isn't time now to discuss this thing at length," she said, glancing at her watch. "Will you come to-morrow morning, at ten, and we can go into it? You see, we're having the rehearsal soon now, and I have to get rid of these people."

She danced away and Rodney's watching eyes saw her go into the telephone booth. This was just outside one of the doors into the lounge, and Emily found her maid, Pearl, hovering in the hall.

Pearl was a negro, as black as jet, and devoted, soul and body, to her Miss Em'ly.

Not much older than her mistress, Pearl did everything for her, and was so capable as a personal maid, a needlewoman, and to a degree, a social secretary, that Emily was tempted to take the maid with her on her wedding trip. But the desire to be alone with Rodney for their honeymoon was too strong, and Emily had decided to leave Pearl at home, and send for her if she needed her too greatly.

She smiled at the grinning negress as she entered the booth.

There was great understanding between the two, and Black Pearl, as she was of course called, stood sentinel at the door of the booth.

As Emily became excited and her voice rose in exclamation, Pearl, too, rolled her eyes in delight, and clapped her hands softly.

For she had overheard Emily's part of this conversation:

"Is this the hospital?"

“Yes, madam.”

“May I speak to Nurse Graham?”

“I’ll see. Wait a moment.”

“This you, Nurse Graham?”

“Yes, Miss Duane.”

“Has Mrs. Laurence’s baby arrived?”

“Yes, Miss Duane.”

“Oh, lovely! What is it?”

“A little girl.”

“Fine! How is Mrs. Laurence?”

“Doing beautifully. I must go now—”

“Wait a minute, Nurse. Listen. If I come over, right away, now, can I see her?”

“Mrs. Laurence!”

“Oh, no, no! The baby, the little girl—”

“Oh yes, you can see the baby. I’ll show her to you myself.”

“All right, be there in ten minutes. Good-by.”

Emily hung up the receiver, left the booth, flung her arms round Black Pearl and danced her down the hall, then ran back to the lounge.

People were leaving, and though Emily gave farewells to a few, she whispered to Aunt Judy to attend to that for her, and told Betty Bailey to help Mrs. Bell.

Then she turned toward Sayre, who was where she had left him, and as she passed the Penningtons, she saw they were just going.

“By-by, Polly,” she said, “come over for rehearsal soon after six—unless you’re afraid of the undertaker!”

“Oh, I’ll be here, Emily. If I’m late, don’t wait for me; you can get along—”

“Sure. Don’t come unless you want to.”

Emily didn’t like Pauline’s attitude, but she was so full of another matter she gave it no thought.

“Roddy-doddy,” she said, and he knew she was about to wheedle.

“Well?” he said, snatching a little kiss from the back of her neck, “what’s up?”

“Kitty Laurence’s baby is here!”

“No!”

Sayre’s pretended interest was so ludicrous Emily pinched him.

“Keep still! I don’t want anybody to know it, or the girls would all rush over. Now, I’m going to run over to the hospital, just a minute, to kiss it.”

“Kiss the hospital?”

“No, silly, to kiss the baby. It’s a girl—a darling, sweet little girl. And you know there’s no such sure-fire good luck as to kiss a new-born baby. And I *do* want our wedding to be a success.”

“Good Lord, Emily, what a kid you are! Am I to go along?”

“I should say not! You stay here and fend off inquiries. If any one says ‘Where’s Emily?’ you just say, ‘Why, she was here a minute ago,’ or something silly like that.”

“Don’t be gone long—”

“Indeed I shan’t. Why, they won’t let me stay more’n a minute. I know the nurse, you see, and she’ll let me have a peek at the kiddy when she

wouldn't let any one else. You hold the fort here—don't budge from this sofa, will you?"

"Do bab, I wod't," and Rod looked the picture of half-witted obedience.

"Oh, Roddy, you *are* so sweet!" and Emily kissed him heartily, not caring whether they had spectators or not.

"Listen, dear. I've got a much better good-luck stunt for you than that. I've a gold piece to put in your shoe. They say—"

"Oh, I know all about that. I'll have that, too. Save it for the wedding. Now, Rod, don't fuss. I'll just scoot over to the hospital, cross-lots. It isn't a step, I won't be a minute, and after say, ten minutes, you can tell them where I am if you like, for I'll be home by that time. But don't tell them at first, for Nell and Betty would come flying over, too."

"And I'm to sit here until Your Royal Highness returns?"

"Yes, right here on this very sofa. Don't budge."

Seeing Sayre alone, Abel Collins went toward him, and Rod beckoned him to a seat by his side.

The older man sat down, lighted the cigarette proffered him, and then said:

"I envy you, feller."

"Yes, you may," returned Sayre, who liked the old chap, though he knew him but slightly.

"You see, I've known the Duanes, root and branch, all my life, and there's no finer stock anywhere."

"I can believe that," and Rod smiled at him.

"But there's one thing—"

"Ah, I thought there was a catch somewhere!"

Abel Collins grinned.

“Yes, and it’s this. There’s a streak of stubbornness in the whole family. It’s always there. Dormant, maybe, or prominent. But *there*. I’m giving you this tip for what it’s worth.”

“It’s worth a lot, Mr. Collins. Don’t think I undervalue it. But I admit it would be worth more if I didn’t already know it. Do you think I could know Emily as I do, and not be aware of her—well, we’ll call it firmness of character?”

“Call it all the pretty names you like, it’s stubbornness, obstinacy and pig-headedness, that’s what it is.”

“There aren’t three men in Boston I’d allow to talk like that. But I know your affection for my girl, so you may say what you choose. And after all, even pig-headedness isn’t a crime.”

“No sir, it isn’t. At least, not in Emily. In her father, it came mighty near being. Oh, well, it’s her only flaw, and knowing it you can make allowances.”

“Yes,” said Rodney Sayre, “I can make allowances.”

Chapter III The Rehearsal

“Where’s Emily?” demanded Betty, coming to Sayre a few moments later.

“Why, she was here a minute or two ago,” returned Rodney, mindful of his instructions.

“Well, where is she now?” and Betty grew impatient.

“Isn’t she in the present room?”

“No, I can’t find her anywhere. And everybody has gone home, except the wedding party, and the Rehearser will be here pretty quick. Oh, it’s awful to be maid of honor to a bride like Emily! Do help me, Rod. Don’t sit there grinning like a Chinese god of happiness! Get up, and find Emily.”

“Not so. You get Black Pearl; she’ll smoke Emily out. Or ask Aunt Judy. I can’t run around looking for the bride.”

Betty went off, and then half a dozen young people from near-by houses came trooping in. They were the rest of the bridesmaids and ushers and with the house party made up the wedding procession that was to be rehearsed.

The minister arrived and for a moment cast a damper on the gayety going on.

But the irrepressible spirits of the younger generation soon rose above such an influence, and gay speeches from the men and shrieks of laughter from the girls made the house ring with merriment.

Aunt Judy sat, looking on placidly. It seemed to her a strange performance, this rehearsal business, but it was Emily’s wish, and that was that.

“Where’s Emily?” was asked again and again, but as no one knew except Sayre, and he didn’t tell, the question remained unanswered.

Then Spinks, the Rehearser, came.

Emily being still absent, Betty took charge of affairs.

“Hello, Mr. Spinks,” she greeted him. “Gracious, what’s all this you’ve brought?”

For the Rehearser had his arms full of gauzy white draperies, artificial flowers and other paraphernalia, while an assistant following bore tall wooden standards, painted white.

“Can’t get along without these traps, miss. Where’ll I put ’em? Where’s Miss Duane?”

“She’ll be here in a minute. Somebody will help you take your stuff to the drawing-room; we’ll rehearse in there.”

Mr. Spinks was a dapper little man who jumped about like a grasshopper. His sandy hair stuck out horizontally from either side of

his pinky, small-featured face. He screwed up his eyes when he talked, and was far from prepossessing in appearance.

But he was undoubtedly capable and efficient.

With a glance he swept the room, and seemed to itemize everything in it. He classified the people present, intuitively knowing which were the ushers and which the best man, though Burton Lamb had not spoken to him.

“You the groom?” he said to Sayre, so suddenly that Rodney almost jumped.

“I have that honor,” he returned smiling.

“All right. You’re the maid of honor, of course,” and he nodded at Betty. “And you’re the Knot-Tier.” He grinned waggishly at the Reverend Mr. Garner, who looked grimly disapproving.

“And I’m the chief bridesmaid,” Nell Harding announced, moving toward him.

Spinks gave her a withering look.

“No chief bridesmaids, miss—that is unless Miss Duane so orders. Otherwise, you’re graded by height. You, being so almighty tall, will come last.”

Nell wanted to protest, but the Rehearser had turned away to size up the others.

Asking their names as if he were a census-taker, he jotted them down in a notebook, put the ushers through the same procedure, and in five minutes had the positions arranged in his mind.

“You in the procesh, madam?” he inquired politely of Aunt Judy.

“Yes, and you know it,” she snapped at him. She had met the Rehearser before. “And do get busy and get the thing over, for we want to have dinner some time to-night!”

“Yes, ma’am, yes, ma’am, all in good time,” returned Spinks who was really progressing at a remarkably fast rate.

He scribbled a lot of cards and gave one to each, designating the position to be taken in the rehearsal.

“Got any music?” he asked, abruptly.

“There’s a piano in the drawing-room,” Aunt Judy told him.

“All right, my chap here can play it. Now, in the name of goodness, where’s the bride?”

“Where’s Emily?” rose like a chorus, and everybody looked at everybody else.

Sayre thought it time to speak, for Emily had told him he might after ten minutes, and now more than that had passed.

“She went out on an errand,” he said quietly, still sitting on his sofa.

“Errand! What errand? Where? Why?” and similar questions were flung at him.

“Oh, she’ll be back in a minute,” he parried.

“But where did she go?” Aunt Judy said, and Rod couldn’t ignore her.

“She—well, she went out to kiss somebody.”

“Oh, she did!” exclaimed Nell. “And you let her?”

“Why not?”

“Don’t be silly, Rodney,” Aunt Judy commanded him. “Where has she gone?”

“Well, she went to kiss Kitty Laurence’s baby.”

“What!” came the chorus, and Aunt Judy said:

“Nonsense! Kitty Laurence hasn’t any baby.”

“Yes, she has—that is, she has one now—” Rod grew a little red.

“Where is she?” demanded Betty.

“Who? Mrs. Laurence or the baby? Why, they’re both over at the hospital, and Emily picked the news off of the telephone and ran over to kiss the child for luck.”

“Well, of all fool performances!” Aunt Judy looked disgusted. “Did she go alone?”

“Yes, she insisted upon it, and you know, when Emily insists—”

“I know; it’s worse than when England expects. Well, she’ll be back in a few minutes, then. They won’t let her stay long.”

“That’s what she said. Yes, she’ll be here right away. Go ahead with your rehearsing, Mr. Spinks—”

“But, really, I can’t go any further without the principal figure—”

“Yes, you can,” Sayre was doing the dictating now. “Take the bunch into the drawing-room, and get them stood up in their places. I’ll bring Miss Duane in as soon as she arrives.”

Spinks was clearly annoyed. He stood for a moment looking at his watch and rising on his toes and falling back, as was his habit when perturbed.

“I’ve a notion to call it off—”

“Indeed you shan’t,” Betty declared. “You come right along. Miss Duane will be here in a few minutes—”

“But I’ve a funeral on at eight—a top-hat funeral, lights and everything, you know—”

“Oh, hush,” cried Betty. “Don’t talk about it now, of all things!”

Gathering up his armful of white tarlatan and crumpled flowers, Spinks followed Betty to the drawing-room.

It was an enormous room, for Mr. and Mrs. Duane had been lavish entertainers. The great crystal chandeliers and paneled mural

decorations were of two decades back, but it was all in good taste and harmony, and now, cleared of its furniture, it was ready for the wedding celebration.

A beautiful flower-decked altar had been erected at one end, and as the wedding day drew nearer other palms and flowers would be placed.

Spinks gave a swift all-embracing glance around, made a few motions to his assistant, and in a twinkling, it seemed, the white stanchions were in place, the white ribbons slung between them, and bunches of artificial flowers tied to each upright.

“Can’t tell anything about it, lessen the scenery is in place,” the Rehearser stated. “Here, Bob, don’t get them bunches too high. You see,” he addressed the company at large, “if every teeny weeny detail is perfect, the whole bloomin’ show will be perfect. And if it ain’t, it won’t.”

But though the available properties were perfect, the somewhat important detail of the bridal couple was lacking.

Again, the anxious Mr. Spinks rose on his toes, teetered and sank back again, his spirits seeming to sink in unison with his descending physique.

Again he consulted his watch, frowned darkly, quivered through his whole small but energetic frame, and turned to Aunt Judy.

“Now, Mrs. Bell,” he said crisply, “we got to put up or shut up. Miss Duane may come in a minute, and, too, she mayn’t. I know that young lady, and she’s not what you might call a real dependable sort.”

Aunt Judy’s eyes snapped at him, but he was so deeply in earnest, and the statement he made was so undeniably true, that she said nothing.

“And, you see, I got to get round to that funeral. A wedding will keep, but a corpse won’t. They’re expecting me there in about fifteen minutes. Now, I can put this thing through here in that time, if somebody will just stand up in the bride’s place. You do that, ma’am, and then when the young lady comes home you can tell her just how to do it all.”

“Oh, yes,” cried Betty, “let’s do that. Rod will come in, and—oh, my gracious, where’s Mrs. Pennington? I forgot all about her!”

“I remembered her,” said Nell Harding, “but you seemed to be running things, Betty, and of course I wouldn’t interfere.”

Nell was intensely jealous of Betty’s prominence, and as she had hoped to be maid of honor herself, she was both sulky and spiteful.

Also, she had been and was still in love with Rodney Sayre. It was she who had introduced him to Emily, and thereby, as she told herself, lost him.

The whole wedding celebration was like a nightmare to her, but she felt she must come, and, she thought, it might be that seeing her again Rodney might return to his first love.

A brief time had shown her the folly of this notion, but she never let up on her steady efforts to attract his attention or win his admiration.

Emily saw through this and merely smiled at the silly thing.

Sayre saw through it, and was annoyed, but didn’t show it.

Betty didn’t know of Nell’s *penchant* for Rod, but she did know that the bridesmaid had wanted to be maid of honor, and she secretly exulted over the situation.

She was about to propose that they telephone for Mrs. Pennington when Pearl came to her and said:

“Miss Betty, ma’am, some while ago, Mr. Pennington, he telephomed to know was his wife here. And I tole him she wasn’t.”

“How long ago, Pearl?”

“Lak ’bout half an hour, maybe, maybe not so long, maybe a quarter-hour.”

“That’s funny. The Penningtons went home together, didn’t they, Aunt Judy?”

“Yes, Betty. I said good-by to the two, as they left the house.”

“Well, then,” and Burton Lamb sized up the situation, “Emily took Mrs. Pennington with her over to the hospital to see the new baby, and they’ve no idea how the time has gone by!”

“That’s Emily all over!” declared Nell Harding. “Of course, Burt, you’re right. How can anybody be so thoughtless and so careless of other people’s convenience?”

“Well,” Mr. Spinks said decidedly, “either we put this thing over or we don’t. I suggest we go right straight bang through with it, and we’ll just have time if we begin at once, and then you folks can coach Miss Duane and Mrs. Pennington in their parts afterward. Like’s not they’ll come in while we’re at it. Hey, Mr. Sayre, come along here. Mr. Garner, you get up there in the bower, will you?”

Burton Lamb went back to the lounge to tell Rodney of the decision, and to his surprise the obdurate bridegroom refused to budge.

“You see, Lambkin,” Rod said, and Lamb always knew that when the diminutive was used there was about to be a tussle, “the truth is, I promised Emily I wouldn’t budge from this sofa until she came back.”

“Gosh, old man, she didn’t mean that literally! What ails you?”

“Well, I’m taking it literally, see? Now, you go on and hold your confounded rehearsal. I refuse to be in it without Emily—”

“But Rod, you must. And, too, Emily and Mrs. Pennington will know their stunts without rehearsing. But you won’t. You don’t want to come a cropper at the big show, and you sure will, if you don’t get onto the quirks right here and now.”

“Emily will tell me just what to do, and I’m not such a stupid that I can’t catch on. And if I make a terrible break, they’ll forgive a clumsy bridegroom.”

Rod settled back in the corner of the sofa and lit another cigarette.

Burton Lamb knew Sayre well. He knew that if he bullied him long enough he would give in, but it might be a protracted and wearing process. And the Rehearser couldn't wait.

"You're a brute," he told Rodney. "I haven't time to argue with you, but as I'm your best man, I've got to get you through somehow, I suppose. All right, I'll do your act myself, and then I can coach you. For Heaven's sake, when Emily comes, shoot over to the drawing-room as fast as you can. You may be in time."

Lamb returned and made up the most plausible yarn he could think of, and advised Spinks to whizz things through.

The Reverend Mr. Garner was clearly disturbed at the merry mess that was being made of a solemn ceremony, but little attention was paid to him, in the whirlwind of the Rehearser's movements.

"You," Spinks said to Aunt Judy, "please stand up here and personate the matron of honor. That's right, a little more to the left. There. Now, Miss Maid of Honor, you stand here. Bridesmaid Number One—yes that's right—here take your bunches of flowers," he gave each one of his artificial horrors. "Now, stand on your left foot, ready to advance to the music—hold on, Bob, I haven't stood up the men yet."

The men were duly stood up, Lamb insisting on being bridegroom and saying he could understudy that and be best man also.

Spinks grew angry and excited, but frequent glances at his watch showed him he had no time for quarrelling, so he ran his fingers through his bristling hair, and went ahead with his work, so familiar to him that the hackneyed direction flowed readily from his lips.

But he suddenly found he had no bride!

Betty was determined to get letter-perfect in her own part and Nell exulted in any *contretemps* that threatened the perfect performance of Emily's wedding pageant.

Wildly, Spinks looked around. No servants could be seen—their peeping had been strictly forbidden—with the exception of Pearl, always a privileged character.

Catching sight of a human being, the Rehearser grabbed at her as the only possible last straw, and pushed her into place at Aunt Judy's side.

"Never mind the matron of honor," he shouted, dancing about in an agony of haste and excitement. "You've got to give the bride away, ain't you? And you've got to have a bride to give away! Well, this is it!"

With the deftness of a lightning-change actor, he threw the long veil of white tarlatan over Black Pearl's kinky head, and as her startled eyes rolled heavenward, he thrust into her arm a long shower bouquet that had done duty at many rehearsals.

"Best thing, too," he exulted. "Now, you Blacky, you pay strict attention to everything I say, and then you can tell your mistress exactly what she is to do. See?"

Being nobody's fool, Pearl saw, and realized that this was no joke, but that she was to be of real help to her beloved Miss Em'ly, and she put her whole mind on the task.

She slipped her hand through the arm of Aunt Judy, as instructed, and stood waiting, every sense alert to obtain all possible information to pass along to the real bride later.

Aunt Judy, too, caught the spirit of the thing, and if some of the bridesmaids giggled at the ill-assorted assembly, the principals did not.

Burton Lamb, doubling as bridegroom and best man, stood back of a tall palm, awaiting the signal to show himself.

But when the opening strains of Mendelssohn were jerked out of the grand piano by the mechanical talent of Spinks' assistant, it was too much, and excepting, perhaps, the minister, the whole party went off in peals of laughter.

Even this did not bring Rodney Sayre to the scene.

He was thinking deeply. He well knew Emily's wilful ways, her sudden yielding to a whim, but he didn't think she would forget or ignore the rehearsal of their wedding.

He was not at all angry at her, or even annoyed, but he couldn't quite understand.

Well, at any rate, he could obey orders. She had said, "Don't budge from that sofa until I come back," and nothing short of an irresistible force would make him budge.

Nor was this merely a dogged or slavish obedience to orders.

It was only that Rod loved his Emily so truly and so deeply that he wanted to do as she asked him, now and always.

She was whimsical, wilful, yes, even stubborn; or, as that queer man had put it, "pig-headed," but with it all she was open to conviction and quick to acknowledge her mistakes.

So Rodney sat and mused, and when the music began and the party broke into laughter, he heard it unheeding.

What to him was a wedding rehearsal without Emily? Had he taken his part, probably Nell Harding would have slipped into the bride's place, and that would have been more than he could stand.

Well, all he could do was to wait. When she came, she would tell him all about it, though he thought he knew already, and smiled a little as he fancied Emily bending over the adorable little bundle of humanity, and making those crooning sounds that all women use to address a baby.

A step on the veranda was followed by the entrance of Jim Pennington.

He looked at Sayre in astonishment.

"What are you doing, flocking in here alone? Is the rehearsal over? I called in to take Polly home."

Lighting a cigarette, he dropped into an easy chair near Rodney, who sat up straight in astonishment.

"Polly? Your wife? Did you think she was here?"

"Yes, sure. To do her part in the rehearsal, you know. What seems to be the matter with you?"

He looked at Rod with a puzzled expression.

“Polly hasn’t been here,” Sayre said, “since she went away with you, after tea. Emily isn’t here, either?”

“Where are they?” Pennington demanded, as if the other had them concealed somewhere.

“I don’t know, Pennington, I’m sure. And I wouldn’t say it to the others, but—well, I’m a little anxious.”

“Anxious about what? I don’t get it. But, what is to be done, anyhow? Surely that’s the wedding! Why are you in here? And where’s Emily?”

“I’ll tell you all I know. And of course, everything is all right. You see some friend of Emily’s is over at the hospital, having a baby.”

“Yes, I know, Kitty Laurence.”

“That’s the one. Well, the child arrived, and nothing would do but Emily must fly over to kiss the youngster for luck.”

“Oh, that’s it,” and Pennington drew a sigh of relief. “That’s where Polly is, then. They’re lost to the world, cuddling that baby—”

Pennington stopped suddenly, remembering how Pauline was affected by children.

“You see, old man,” he went on, in a lower tone, “our own kiddy died—soon after its birth, and Polly never got over it. If she sees or touches a little child, she’s nervously upset for days afterward. Yet she can’t keep away from them, and if she and Emily are over there, with Kitty Laurence’s new baby—well, I’d better go over and take Polly home, that’s all.”

Sayre looked at the nervously working face, and deemed it better to offer no word of sympathy or consolation. He knew vaguely of this tragedy in the Penningtons’ life, but he didn’t feel sufficiently acquainted with the man to talk of it, nor was this the opportunity, for the laughing crowd might come in at any minute.

“If you do go over there, Penn,” he said, using for the first time the abbreviation usual with their crowd, “for Heaven’s sake send Emily home. I’d go myself, only I promised her I’d hold the fort here till she got back. But we’re not sure they’re there.”

“Bound to be, Sayre. Guess I’ll go along over.”

“Just telephone first, will you? I’d do it myself, only I don’t want to get up.”

Pennington looked at the other quizzically.

“Do you mean to say you take her orders as literally as that?”

“Why not? It’s only a trifle, anyway, and as she went out she said, ‘Don’t budge from this sofa till I come back,’ so, I’m not budging.”

“And they’re rehearsing without bride or groom!”

“Also, without the matron of honor!”

“Pshaw, it isn’t a rehearsal at all, then.”

“Oh, yes, it is, Black Pearl represents the bride—”

“No!” and Pennington shook with laughter. “I say, I must see *that!*”

He rose and started for the hall, the other side of which was the drawing-room.

“Telephone first, Penn, there’s a good chap.”

“All right, I will.”

Pausing at the telephone booth in the hall, Pennington called up the hospital.

It took some time to get the connection, and longer yet to obtain speech with Nurse Graham, who was in charge of Mrs. Laurence.

But at last Pennington’s questions were answered.

Instead of going to the drawing-room to see the spectacle of Black Pearl as a bride, Pennington retraced his steps to the lounge where Sayre still sat on the sofa.

“Neither Emily nor Polly has been at the hospital at all,” he said, with a bewildered look on his face as he sat down beside Sayre.

“What!”

“The nurse told me. She said that Emily telephoned and said she would be right over, but she never appeared. Of Polly she has heard nothing.”

“Where’s Emily?” said Rodney Sayre, a look of awful fear coming into his eyes.

Chapter IV

Where’s Emily?

Pennington smiled at Rodney Sayre’s alarmed expression.

“Don’t worry,” he advised. “I don’t know Emily as you do, but I do know her in some ways that perhaps you don’t. You see, she and my wife are very intimate friends—oh, they have their little scraps, but they’re real chums. And the crazy schemes those two girls can cook up would knock you silly. Why, last year, they went down to Atlantic City for a week, and Emily pretended she was married, and Polly pretended she wasn’t. They just changed names. And the tangle it made!”

“Did Emily really do that?”

“Yes, but don’t take it too seriously. She’ll tell you all about it.”

“Of course she will. She’s wild and wilful, but she’s honest and truthful at heart.”

“You bet she is. So’s Polly, but somehow the two of them seem possessed to cut up when they’re together.”

Sayre, who lived in New York, had known Emily less than a year, and during that time he had been abroad on business for several months. Their courtship had been a whirlwind affair, but they were both sure of

themselves and their love and confidence in one another was unbounded.

Sayre had been a guest at Knollwood, more or less, through the summer, but another business trip abroad was impending and he had urged Emily to be married in September and go over with him.

She had willingly agreed, and plans were made rapidly for the wedding.

Seeming obstacles were overcome, and Emily's efficiency completed all arrangements, and now the house party had gathered for the wedding two days later.

Emily had frankly warned Sayre of her impulsive nature and her erratic proclivities, but he had only laughed and said he, too, had flaws in his character, but they would both take chances.

Congenial in most respects, of similar tastes and sympathetic in their views, they feared no disillusion, nor any disappointment that could not be overcome.

And they were very deeply in love.

Sayre, quiet and forceful by nature, adored the effervescent and excitable girl, and Emily, with innate common sense, rejoiced in the guardianship of a man who could tame her, if necessary.

Aunt Judy, though not consulted in the matter, was greatly pleased with Emily's choice, and would stay on and take charge at Knollwood, while the young couple looked the world over and decided where to make their home.

For Emily had vague but elaborate visions of a villa on the Riviera or a country house on the Thames, and her ample fortune, with Sayre's most satisfactory prospects, gave them free rein.

But all those plans were for the future. Just now the idea was to have the wedding a beautiful and memorable occasion, and Emily and her aids left no stone unturned to make it so.

Occasionally some detail was not quite as Rodney would have chosen it, but he deferred always to Emily's taste and judgment, and made slight, if any, protest.

His parents, who were coming from Boston for the wedding, would doubtless have their conventional susceptibilities a little jarred by the lavish and elaborate *alfresco fête* that would follow the ceremony, but after all, Emily couldn't be expected to consult a mother-in-law whom she had never yet seen.

And Emily's crowd, a little more ultramodern than Sayre liked, demanded everything that was new and *chic* and exaggerated.

So the bridegroom wisely refrained from criticism or advice, and not even Burton Lamb, Sayre's best man and best friend, knew that Rod was not heart and soul in sympathy with the gay doings.

Perhaps Jim Pennington, with his deeper understanding of character, appreciated more truly Sayre's attitude than did the light-hearted Lamb.

The playwright was a conscientious student of human nature, and if his plays were not such as the Reverend Garner approved, at least, only one had, as yet, been censored off the stage.

He was not specially interested in Emily Duane, but as she was his wife's crony, he saw more or less of the girl.

He had sized her up as a typical young woman of the day, though with rather more brains than most and with much more firmness of character.

But his conclusions were drawn largely from the tales his wife told him, and to her he gave the *pronunciamento* that the Duane girl was a "damned stubborn little piece."

Polly had agreed, indifferently; but the consensus of social opinion was all in favor of Emily's wilfulness and obstinacy.

Few, however, voiced this opinion to Rodney Sayre, and had they done so, he would have hesitated to believe it.

For to him, Emily was the very spirit of gentleness and submission. She deferred to his judgment, asked and followed his advice, and had never shown to him any of the pig-headedness which Abel Collins had ascribed to her.

Nor was this dissimulation on the girl's part.

She had found in Sayre her lord and master, her idol, her paragon, and she was ready and willing to submit to him in all matters on which he chose to dictate.

Whether this idyllic state of things would last or not was a moot question among Emily's friends, but it bothered her not a whit.

Nor did it trouble Sayre. He was satisfied with his lady and with her love, and the future was on the knees of the gods.

However, he was disturbed at Emily's prolonged absence on this particular occasion.

Granting that she and Polly Pennington did love to cut up, this was no time for the cutting-up process to take place.

And it was unlike Emily to say she was going to the hospital and not go there. She had intended to go, he was certain, for her eager, happy smile as she told him about the Laurence baby was too real to be a blind.

"Where are they?" he demanded of Pennington.

"I haven't the least idea, but they'll turn up all right. Don't worry."

And then the crowd from the drawing-room came back to the lounge.

The latter room was the one liked best of the whole house. In the middle of the great house, it ran from front to back, with doors and windows at either end.

Like most of the homes in Hilldale Park, Knollwood was built on the side of a slope. From the front, one could see the scattered houses among the trees, and at the back rose the picturesque Ramapo Hills.

Near the house were formal gardens and carefully kept walks and drives. But outside those the place was allowed to run more wild and the woods, with their undergrowth, made a pleasing background.

Most of the places were even more wild than Emily's, for her parents had not felt the urge of back-to-nature as strongly as it had affected the later settlers in the Park.

But they had built a large, commodious and comfortable home, and the lounge, with its French windows and verandas, its big fireplace and its cozy alcoves, its occasional tables and bookracks, made the ideal congregating place for parties.

"Where's Emily?" said most of the voices as the two men were seen there alone.

"I don't know," Sayre returned, but his smile was a little forced.

"You don't know, sir!" The Rehearser stepped up to him with a decided scowl on his face. "Allow me to inform you, mister, that though I have conducted many wedding rehearsals, never have I been so insulted as at this one! Called to take charge of a large and fashionable wedding and finding no bride and no bridegroom at hand! What sort of game is this? Why are the principals absent? I think there will be no wedding! But I have done my part, and I shall expect my pay. I will not come again; no, not though you beg me to, I will not step foot in the place. But I expect my pay—"

"Good Lord, man, you'll get your pay," exclaimed Lamb. "Now, run along home, for mercy's sake. I give you my word your bill shall be paid. Clear out."

Lamb paused to light a cigarette and then turned to Rodney.

"Where's Emily?" he said.

"I don't know, Burt," and now Sayre spoke very soberly. "She told me she was going to the hospital—"

"To kiss the new baby," broke in Betty Bailey. "Then she's there yet. I'll go and call her."

“No, Betty,” Sayre deterred her, “we’ve called—Mr. Pennington called, and they haven’t been there—”

“Who’s they?” demanded Lamb. “Who’s with her?”

“We don’t know for certain,” Pennington volunteered, “but my wife isn’t at home, or wasn’t when I left, and we think the two may be together.”

“They haven’t been to the hospital!” exclaimed Betty, her eyes opening wide. “Then something has happened to them—”

“Don’t make a scene, Betty,” Nell Harding said scornfully. “They’re all right, of course. Emily went over to Mrs. Pennington’s house, and is waiting there for her to dress—”

“That may be,” Pennington said. “Polly wasn’t there when I left, but she may have come in since. I’ll telephone over and see.”

He went out to the booth, and Pete Gibby went and sat down by Rodney, who was still on the sofa.

“Emily said she was going to the hospital?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Sayre.

“And the hospital people say she didn’t come there?”

“That’s what they say.”

“Then we must go out and look for her. Good Heavens, man, we must do something! Suppose she fell and sprained her ankle—the roads round here are steep and stony enough. How can you sit still, not knowing where she is?”

“She told me to stay here till she came back,” Sayre said, and even as he spoke, he realized how silly he sounded! To be sure, Emily’s word was law to him, but to the crowd he must appear like a drivelling idiot to sit there, saying “She told me not to budge!”

Just then, Pennington returned.

“Polly isn’t at home,” he said, and now he looked concerned. “Rosa, that’s the maid, says she hasn’t been home at all.”

“Then,” said Betty, who was a quick thinker, “she met Emily, and Emily told her about the baby, and they went to the hospital together—”

“But they haven’t been to the hospital.”

“I mean, they started for there, and then—”

“And then?” Lamb prompted her.

“And then, either Emily had one of her wild, impulsive schemes to go somewhere else, or else—something has happened.”

“What could happen?” asked Nell, scornfully. “Emily is too used to these steep and stony roads to turn her ankle. She’s been racing over them all her life.”

“It might happen,” said Gibby.

“Oh, of course, it *might*,” Nell agreed. “And a bear might come out of the woods and eat her up! But I don’t believe either of those things. And, too, if Polly Pennington was with her, and Emily met with any accident, Polly would come and tell us. I can’t think they both sprained their ankles!”

“Speculation won’t get us anywhere,” said Lamb. “As I’m attending to all the wedding arrangements, it’s up to me to find the missing bride. So, I’ll set about it. Want to go along, Rod?”

“No,” said Sayre, after a moment’s pause. “I’ll stay here. Not only because Emily told me to stay here till she came back, but because Pete will go with you, and if there has been an accident, which I don’t for a minute believe, you two can bring her home.”

“I’m going along,” cried Betty, and flinging a cape round her she stood by Pete Gibby.

Pennington rose to go, as a matter of course, and Betty’s quick sympathy sensed that he was as anxious about his wife as Rod was about Emily.

“They’re all right, you know, Mr. Pennington,” she smiled at him. “They’re together, I’m sure, and that makes it safe for both. I suppose Emily took a notion to run down to New York—”

“Betty! How absurd!” cried Aunt Judy. “Why should the child go to New York at seven o’clock at night?”

But the three men and Betty had already started on their quest.

Mr. Garner, seeing an opportunity, took his cue.

“My dear Mrs. Bell,” he said with his most funereal intonation, “keep up your courage—”

“It hasn’t gone down yet,” she snapped back at him. “Anybody would think Emily was in danger of wild beasts or bandits or something! Did you ever hear of marauders of any sort at Hilledale Park?”

“No, I never did,” and the Reverend Garner seemed to begrudge his acquiescence.

Nell Harding had ensconced herself on the sofa beside Sayre, and proceeded to comfort him.

This was about as acceptable to Rodney as the minister’s sympathy had been to Aunt Judy, but he couldn’t retort as he would have liked.

“Oh, Emily’s all right, Nell, of course,” he said pleasantly. “I just don’t understand it, that’s all.”

“You don’t understand Emily,” Nell cooed, with a gentle smile.

“Well, she understands me, and that must do for the pair of us,” he returned, a little shortly.

Nell said nothing, but sat a little closer to him, and offered him a cigarette and then lighted it for him, until Rod said to himself if she didn’t let up on her coddling he’d pitch her head-first out of the window.

However, Nell couldn’t read his thoughts and she saw nothing of them in his face, so she kept on coddling.

“My dear sir,” the minister began on him next, and then Rod had to turn his attention to the prevention of laying hands on the sacred person of Mr. Garner.

“Excuse me, please,” he said, frowning; not rudely, but as one in deep absorption of thought. “Come in here, will you, Pearl.”

He had seen the black maid hovering about in the hall, and he wanted to talk to some one who understood Emily.

“Tell me all you know of Miss Emily’s talk on the telephone.”

“Oh, Mistah Sayre, suh, she was dat glad to hear about Miss Kitty’s li’l baby! She jes’ said, ‘Can I see dat chile?’ and dey said yes, and she jumped up from de tellyfome quicker’s scat, and presoomed to run right erlong. She jes’ stopped to hug me—she alwus does that when she’s tickled to deff—and then she flied in here to tell you, suh, dat she was agwine and den she went.”

“You saw her go? Think now, Pearl, did you?”

“Well,” the girl hesitated and her big eyes rolled about till the whites were prominently exposed, “now, I cyan’t jes’ say’s I did see her go. But you did, didn’t yo’ Mistah Sayre, suh?”

Pearl was a sympathetic listener, and she caught a note in Rodney’s voice that told her he was thinking deeply over the matter, though he was not saying much.

“Why, no, Pearl, I didn’t see her go. I saw her leave this room, but she disappeared round the palms in the hall. I thought you might have seen her go out of the door.”

“No, suh, I didn’t. I went back to de kitchen fer a minute, and when I come in again she was gone.”

“Why, Rodney, you don’t think she didn’t leave the house, do you?” and Nell grasped his hand in her earnestness.

“I don’t think anything, Nell,” he quietly drew his hand away, “but the fact remains we don’t know *where* Emily is. If she is safe and sound,

anywhere, up to any mischief or foolishness, that's all right. But if there's anything wrong—"

"That's what I want to say, dear Mr. Sayre," Garner put in, "if there is anything wrong, any tragedy in our midst, count on me to help and comfort you."

Rod wanted to say that he would gladly count him out on those two counts, but he couldn't be rude to a clergyman, so he merely bowed his appreciation of the offer, and hoped the man would go.

Aunt Judy threw herself into the breach.

"All right, Mr. Garner," she said, briskly. "We'll most certainly send for you if you can be of help or service. Now you run along home, for your dinner will be waiting. Goodness knows when we'll get ours!"

She struck the right note, for the man had not realized how late it was getting, and there was certainly no hope of dinner at Knollwood very soon.

With elaborate protestations of condolence and promises of future encouragement, he at last went away.

"Isn't he awful!" whispered Nell, as his footsteps grew fainter in the distance. "If he hadn't gone when he did, I'd have ushered him out myself. I could see how he annoyed you, Roddy, dear."

"Oh, no, he didn't. He meant well enough. Now, Nell, let me alone a minute, I want to think."

"Yes, indeedy. I'll do just that, and I'll sit right near by, and I won't let anybody speak to you—"

She fussed about, putting another pillow behind him and setting a fresh ash tray on the taboret at his side.

Aunt Judy's black eyes winked at Rod over Nell's solicitous head, and he gave the old lady an answering smile.

The three were there alone, save for Pearl, who sat in the hall waiting the return of her young mistress.

“Emily’s all right,” Aunt Judy said complacently. “If you’d been through this, Rod, as often as I have, you wouldn’t get stirred up.”

“She frequently disappears, then,” and Sayre tried to speak lightly.

“Oh, yes. And she has stayed away for days at a time, but always turned up safe and sound.”

“But this time it is a little different,” Nell suggested.

Rodney wanted to shake her, but she had voiced the thought in his own mind.

“Yes,” he had to agree, “this time it is different. Other times, she’d have gone off with some friends, I suppose.”

“Yes,” Aunt Judy said. “Why one night she went out at ten o’clock, and I didn’t see her for a week!”

“Where was she?”

“Oh, she met some people she knew, in a car, and they picked her up and took her along with them to Tuxedo. She sent back the next day for clothes and things and she had a beautiful visit.”

“How’d she come to go out alone as late as ten o’clock?” asked Nell.

“Oh, she only went for a little walk around the place. She happened to be alone that evening, so she was mooning about, and the crowd in the car picked her up. She loves a crazy performance like that. Oh, she was dressed well enough—had on a little flowered chiffon that—”

“What’s she got on to-night?” said Nell, suddenly. “Oh, a dark blue crêpe, I remember. She expected to dress for dinner, after the rehearsal.”

“Didn’t she have on her diamond necklace?” Aunt Judy said.

“Why, yes, I think so,” and Nell’s eyes opened wide. “Didn’t she, Roddy?”

“Yes,” he said, wishing she wouldn’t call him that.

“Well, then, I’m worried,” Nell declared. “If Emily went over to the hospital alone, with that glittering necklace on, anything might have happened!”

“Do hush, Nell!” said Sayre, goaded beyond endurance. “Don’t frighten Aunt Judy. Nothing ever happens up here.”

“Oh, doesn’t it?” and Nell grew excited. “I suppose Mrs. Grant didn’t have her car held up and her jewels taken, not so long ago! And I suppose there weren’t burglars in the Caldwell house last week! Rodney, did you see her start off alone with that diamond necklace on and never say a word?”

“I wanted her to let me go with her, but she wouldn’t,” groaned the wretched man, who hadn’t before thought of robbery or, indeed, of anything but some whimsical prank of Emily’s.

“How would she go to the hospital?” said Nell, who was thinking seriously now.

“She said she was going cross-lots,” Rodney informed her. “I don’t know just where the hospital is—”

“Well, I do,” and Nell shook her head. “And to go to it cross-lots is to go along the loneliest and darkest road in all Hilldale Park.”

“But it wasn’t dark, then,” Rodney said. “It was only just beginning to grow dusk.”

“Well, it’s dark enough now. And anyway, Rod, no matter what she said, you ought not to have let her go alone.”

“Now, look here,” and Sayre sat up straighter, “cut out that sort of talk. You know as well as I do that Emily is the apple of my eye, the core of my heart. When she said she was going to run over to the hospital, and for me to sit here until she came back, do you suppose I would have obeyed her if I’d had an inkling of any danger? She was bubbling over with joy about the new baby, she said she’d be back in ten minutes, and the whole matter seemed of no more importance than any other thing she has done since I’ve been here. If harm has come to her, I shall eternally regret that I let her go alone, but at the time and in the

circumstances there was no reason for my doing anything else. Nor would she have let me go with her. But, pshaw, Nell, there's no tragedy on, as you seem anxious to prove, and I'd go out this minute to search for her, if I thought she was anything but safe and sound. What way is cross-lots?"

"You go down to our back entrance," Aunt Judy told him, "and then you go along across the bridge over the big ravine, by the Miller house, then over the little ravine near the Pennington house, and then, it's just a short cut through the wood to the hospital."

"Through the wood?" Rod echoed, the phrase bringing up dark and gloomy pictures.

"Yes, but just a little wood," Aunt Judy averred. "It isn't dark there, not in the daytime—I've never been there at night."

"I wonder if the search party will go to that wood," said Nell, going over to sit by Rod's side again.

"Of course," he returned, but he shuddered as one who was having a bad dream.

Chapter V

As To The Hindu

The situation seemed to grow more tense.

Rodney sat motionless on the sofa, declining further cigarettes that Nell offered.

Aunt Judy also relapsed into silence, and though Nell tried to keep up a run of gay chatter, it sounded hollow and inane when nobody answered or even heeded it.

And then, about eight o'clock, the search party returned.

"The girls here?" asked Jim Pennington, trying to speak lightly.

"No," Nell told him, while Sayre just sat and brooded.

“Then I won’t come in,” Pennington said, “I’d better be over home. Maybe they’re there by now.”

“Telephone over and see,” Aunt Judy suggested, but Jim shook his head.

“She isn’t there,” he said gravely. “We passed the house on our way here, and there’s no light in the living room. That’s why I came on here. But I’ll go back, and be there when Polly shows up. If she comes here, with Emily, of course you’ll let me know at once.”

He tried to speak quietly, but his voice shook and his face was white and drawn.

Always of nervous temperament, it was easily seen that he was now on the verge of collapse.

“Stay here awhile, Penn,” said Aunt Judy, looking at him anxiously. “You’ll go to pieces if you’re over home alone. I’ll send Pearl over to tell Rosa you’re waiting here for Polly.”

“No,” he said hesitatingly, “I’d better get along. But, I say, people, we must do something. We can’t go to bed with those two girls missing. I think I’ll go home and mull over it, and if they don’t turn up by midnight, I’m going to notify the police.”

“The police!” cried Aunt Judy with all a woman’s horror of such publicity.

“Yes,” Jim returned, “something must have happened to them. But I’ll wait a bit, and then, if we hear nothing from them, I’m sure we ought to take steps to find them. Anyway, I shall hunt for Polly. I can’t go to bed not knowing where she is.”

He went away, and the others sat blankly staring at nothing in particular.

“I feel ashamed of myself,” Lamb admitted, “but my anxiety for Mrs. Pennington is all lost in my fears for Emily. I’m sorry for Penn, of course, but our chief end and aim now is to find our own girl.”

“But to find one means to find the other,” put in Pete Gibby. “Of course they’re together—”

“I don’t know,” Lamb demurred. “We have no real reason to assume that.”

“And it makes no difference,” Rodney Sayre declared, speaking for the first time. “Like Burt, I’m terribly sorry for Jim Pennington, but his trouble is a side issue to us who want to find Emily.”

Rod’s earnest, despairing face seemed to excuse his lack of sympathy for a fellow sufferer, and anyway, they all felt the same about it.

The disappearance of Polly Pennington would have been a great question had they not been so absorbed in their own problem.

Where was Emily? Where could she be?

“Pennington’s right on one thing,” Gibby remarked. “Unless we learn something soon, we ought to tell the police. I know how you all hate the idea, but what else can we do?”

“But it’s only some crazy escapade of the child’s,” Aunt Judy insisted, the tears rolling down her plump cheeks. “I don’t want to act as if it were some tragedy—”

“But it may be—it must be,” Gibby said, his big blue eyes blinking behind his dark-rimmed glasses. “I have a bit of detective instinct, and I’m convinced that Emily and Mrs. Pennington are not away all this time by their own wish. Why, what could keep Emily like this? Say she went to some neighbor’s house, she wouldn’t stay to dinner and spend the evening without letting us know.”

“Speaking of dinner, we must eat,” Aunt Judy said, heavily. “Betty ring for Prall and tell him to serve dinner.”

The butler appeared and Betty did as she had been told. Then Aunt Judy stopped him as he was leaving the room.

“Prall,” she said, “did you see Miss Emily go out, about—what time was it, Rod?”

“About five o’clock, Aunt Judy, or a little later.”

“Yes, Mrs. Bell, I did see Miss Emily go out about that time,” the butler said. “I was in the pantry and through the window I saw Miss Emily run out the side door and down the path toward the ravine.”

“Is that the short cut to the hospital?” Lamb asked, and Aunt Judy nodded her head.

“She had no hat on, Prall?”

“No, madam, nor any wrap, but a fur neckpiece. I noticed her because it seemed queer for her to be going out the back way.”

“Miss Emily often does queer things, Prall.”

“Yes, Mrs. Bell, that is so.”

The butler departed, and again that strange hush fell on the party.

It seemed impossible to talk, everything one would say sounded inane or out of place.

“I can’t stand it!” and Sayre jumped up and began pacing the room. “I think I shall go out and search around myself.”

“Have dinner first, Rod,” Aunt Judy said, sensibly. “If that blessed child is all right, it won’t make any difference. And if anything has happened, we must be fortified to meet it. It’s late and we are all hungry, whether we know it or not.”

Dinner was announced, and Rod went out with the rest.

With a rather fine sensitiveness Prall had taken away the place laid for Emily, and they sat down, with Aunt Judy at the head of the table, and Sayre at the other end.

The dinner was delicious, and in spite of their anxiety, the healthy young people found they had appetites after all. Even Sayre ate what was put before him, though with no real consciousness of the viands.

Now and then, one or another tried to change the subject, but after all, the talk was mostly of Emily and her inexplicable absence.

“It’s all very well,” Rod said, as they rose from the table, “to say she is wilful and erratic and thoughtless and all that. No amount of whimsey would explain her being away all this time. I am going out for a look around. Want to go, Burt?”

“Of course,” and the two started off at once.

Gibby wanted to go, too, but he had not been asked, and he hesitated to intrude his services, although he did rather fancy his detective powers, and he felt sure he could have helped.

The Swami came to call a little later.

Aunt Judy detested the man, but Nell Harding made up for that by the warm enthusiasm of her welcome.

“Dear Mr. Singh,” she exclaimed, “you’re the very one we want and need. Can’t your occult lore find our darling Emily for us?”

“My occult lore, Miss Harding, deals not with clairvoyance or divination. I am only an humble disciple of theosophy. I study mysticism, not magic.”

“But I thought they were connected, or related in some way,” Nell urged him on. “Surely your powers can help us.”

“I fear not. Gladly would I hold out a hope, but I know it would be groundless. Let us assume that Miss Duane will return shortly, of her own accord.”

“How did you know she was missing?” asked Pete Gibby, his detective mind catching at this.

“I stopped in at the Pennington home,” Lal Singh returned equably. “I called to see Mrs. Pennington, but I found her husband alone, and half frantic at his wife’s absence.”

“Does he fear something has happened?” Gibby went on interestedly.

“He’s tossed between two opinions,” Singh told him. “Either, he thinks, that is the case, or, that Miss Duane, always eccentric, has taken Mrs. Pennington off on some wild-goose chase—as he expressed it.”

“Wild-geese chase, nothing!” exclaimed Aunt Judy. “Emily never would drag Mrs. Penn into an escapade to-night of all nights.”

“Then,” Lal Singh said suavely, “is there any other theory than that of disaster?”

“There are plenty of them,” Aunt Judy sniffed scornfully.

“Such as?”

But Lal Singh got nothing out of the black-eyed and white-haired lady.

Her eyes snapped with impatience and her short white curls bobbed about as she shook her head, but she gave no answer to the Swami’s question.

Indeed, she had no answer. She kept up a pretense of hopefulness, but in her heart was black despair.

Where was Emily? Where was her darling girl? She couldn’t believe that the wilful spoiled child had deliberately absented herself from the rehearsal of her wedding, and yet that belief was far preferable to the vague, unknown dangers that they all expressed by the stock phrase, “something happened.”

What could happen? Bandits and marauders were not known in Hilddale Park. One or two stories of them were not more than half believed by the residents.

An accident was possible, of course. A fall and a sprained ankle, or even a broken leg, would keep her from home, but in that case Polly would have come for assistance.

It was impossible to dissociate the two, for it could scarcely be that they had both mysteriously disappeared, independently of each other.

No, Aunt Judy was sure that whatever explained the absence of one must explain the absence of the other.

The Swami was speaking again.

“I know Miss Duane in some ways that even her nearest and dearest friends do not understand,” he said.

“As how?” asked Pete Gibby, bluntly.

He did not like this smooth-tongued man, and he wanted to trip him up if he could.

“I know her by her spiritual moods, her psychic manifestations. I can say what she would do with more accurate knowledge than can those who know her in her daily walks and avocations.”

“Then say it!” exploded Gibby. He didn’t want to encourage this foolishness, but he felt he must get every possible angle of the situation.

“Ah, that cannot be done impromptu. It would require time. Only through the mystic ecstasy may we achieve a veritable glimpse into eternity, may we become an ethereal floating part of the All, at one with the great Over-Soul of the universe. Earthbound, we can do nothing, but once tasting Nirvana—”

“Cut it out, Swami,” begged Gibby, not rudely, but as one who can stand no more. “I just wanted a little sample, just to get the drift, you know. I’ve got it, so don’t waste any more on me.”

Lal Singh looked at him with a face of mild reproach, but Pete descried a baleful gleam in his eye, and he couldn’t help wondering if the Hindu had anything to do with Emily’s disappearance.

But the idea was too fantastic, and he put it aside in favor of more practical theories.

“I haven’t had enough, Mr. Singh,” Nell Harding told him. “I wish you’d instruct me further in your fascinating philosophy. Come out on the veranda with me and give me a little lesson.”

The two went off, and Gibby said to Aunt Judy:

“What do you know of that Scum?”

“Oh, my!” said Aunt Judy, shocked at the speech, “I don’t know much, to be sure, but you mustn’t speak like that! He’s a holy man!”

“Holy caterpillar!” Pete snorted. “He’s a first-class fake. I don’t say there aren’t true and sincere theosophists, but I never happened to meet any. And, take it from me, this Lal person isn’t one of them. Who is he?”

“Why, I don’t know,” Aunt Judy spoke helplessly. “He’s a friend of the Penns—”

“Mrs. Penn, or both?”

“Mostly Polly’s friend, I guess. But Jim likes him, too.”

“And Emily likes him?”

“Oh, they’re all crazy about him. He has made a hit in the place, and he’s invited everywhere and all the best people go to his meetings and lectures.”

“Of course they do! Well, he’s no Swami, to begin with, and I doubt if he’s a Hindu at all.”

“What of it?” asked Betty. “Who cares anything about him? He didn’t kidnap Emily, did he?”

“Maybe he did,” said Gibby, thoughtfully. “You know he’s bound, bent, and determined to get money from her—a lot of money— isn’t he, Aunt Judy?”

“Yes,” came the somewhat reluctant reply. “But she has made a bequest—”

“Bequest nothing! He wants it now. What price his abducting her for ransom?”

“I can’t think that, Pete,” Aunt Judy smiled. “But, be careful, he may overhear your flattering opinion of him.”

“No,” said Gibby, “he and Nell have gone down to the arbor to sit. I saw them pass the window when they first went outside. I suppose she’s drinking in his mystic babble and pretending to understand it.”

“Well, it won’t hurt her,” and Aunt Judy returned to the subject nearest her heart. “Why do you suppose Rod doesn’t come back?”

“Because he has no report to make,” said Pete sadly, and then they all sat silent for a time.

Nell returned shortly, saying the Swami had gone home, and had left his adieux for them all.

“I think he didn’t come in again, because you were so rude to him, Pete,” she said, with a reproachful glance.

“Was I?” he said cheerfully. “Hope I’ll have a chance to be again. See, here, Nell, you’re not to fall for him, you know.”

“Mustn’t I? All right.” She smiled acquiescently, but her mental reservation was that she would do as she pleased.

She was good friends with Pete, he admired her greatly, but he hadn’t acquired the right to dictate to her about her likes or dislikes of people.

Restlessly Gibby wandered about the room, then he went to the booth in the hall and telephoned.

Returning, he said:

“I called Craven over. I think I’d like a talk with him. Stay or go, the rest of you, as you like.”

Aunt Judy went off to see about some housekeeping matters, but the two girls stayed, for lack of anything better to do.

Craven, who lived near, came along soon, and asked, “Where’s Emily?”

“We don’t know,” Pete replied, and then he recounted the situation. Craven was amazed and decidedly perturbed.

“You don’t mean—you can’t mean,” he said, “that she’s lost!”

“She’s unexplainably missing,” Gibby said. “You can call it lost or whatever you choose. The fact is that she isn’t here, and we don’t know where she is. A few of us went out to look for her, without success, and now a few others have gone to look, with, so far, no success, either.”

“But it’s incredible—impossible—”

“Well, it’s so, all the same. Now, what I want you to tell us, and I’m sure you can make no objections, is about this money Emily bequeathed to this Swami person.”

“But that’s in her will,” Craven said, “and so it couldn’t be paid while she is alive. Moreover, she’s to be married on Saturday, and that automatically annuls her will. Perhaps when she makes a new one, which she intends to do to-morrow, she’ll cut the Hindu out.”

“How can a will made to-morrow be any more efficacious after her marriage than her present will?”

“Because she means not to sign it until after the ceremony; then she will sign her married name, and of course it will stand.”

“Then, Craven, granting there is anything wrong about Emily’s disappearance, doesn’t it look as if the wily heathen had something to do with it?”

Everett Craven stared at him.

“Abducted her and killed her, so he’d get his money under her present will?” he asked bluntly, and Betty gave a little shriek.

Nell flared up instantly, and said, “Pete Gibby, how dare you suggest such a thing. It’s bad enough to have Emily gone, but to attempt to fasten a crime on that godly man, that holy priest of Vishnu—”

“Hold on, Nell, you don’t mean Vishnu—I don’t believe you know one heathen god from another!”

“Do you?”

“Well, I know Ra, the sun god, from the cross-word puzzles, and the quiz books have taught me a few more. But I’ll bet I know as much about that lingo as your old faker does. Look at it, Craven. Who else could have any possible motive for wanting to do away with Emily?”

“Pete, you stop!” Betty put her hands over her ears. “Don’t dare mention such unspeakable things!”

“But, Betty, this has to be faced. If we can’t find Emily, what can we think but that she has been carried off by some one—somewhere—”

“No, no, I won’t hear of it! Pete, she’s at some of the neighbors’, some one we haven’t even thought of. They got into a game of bridge or something like that and she didn’t realize how time flew. I’m going to call up a few people on the telephone.”

“Go on, Betty. It can’t do any harm. Be a little guarded, no use sounding an alarm quite yet.”

Betty went off to telephone, and Everett Craven put his mind on the problem.

“I can’t see it, Gibby,” he said. “It could be done, of course, in a movie or in a melodramatic thriller, but here in broad daylight, in a civilized community—”

“It wasn’t broad daylight,” Pete told him. “It was dusk. And many a civilized community has had crimes on its fair lands. And, I tell you, that Indian is a bad Indian! He would knife a victim as quick as wink—”

A low moan from Nell proved that her belligerent attitude had changed to fear and terror.

But Pete went inexorably on.

“What do you know of the man?” he demanded.

“Practically nothing.”

“Exactly what everybody else knows about him. Now give me some other theory—any other that will fit the case.”

“But I don’t admit there is a case,” said Craven, rather lamely. “Why get up such wild theories until you see at least a necessity for an explanation?”

“There is a necessity. Emily is gone. We can’t find her. If those chaps out looking for her had had any success, we would have known it before this.”

“Well, then, Mr. Gibby, if you think there has been foul play, if Mrs. Bell or Mr. Sayre believe there has been or may have been foul play, then, as you yourself know, the thing to do is to call in the police.”

“I quite agree to that, and I think it should have been done sooner. However, Mrs. Bell is distinctly opposed to it, and so we’ll have to wait for Rodney Sayre’s return. He was opposed, also, but I think his common sense will make him agree to it. He doesn’t particularly like the Swami, but he doesn’t dislike him as much as I do. Can’t we get a line on that bird at once, without waiting for Rod?”

“I don’t see how. He was here this evening, wasn’t he?”

“Yes, talking twaddle about mysticism and things.”

“Emily didn’t care for him, really. I wonder she put that codicil to her will.”

“He probably hypnotized her into it. Who in Hilldale knows him best?”

“Oh, the Stevensons, I guess. They introduced him here. Want to call them up?”

“No, I think I’ll go over there. Are they easy people to talk to?”

“Delightful. But, I’d keep the matter quiet a little longer, don’t you think? The search party may bring some news.”

“Can’t wait, I’ve got to move. If Rod comes home, call me at the Stevensons.”

Feeling the imperative need of action, Gibby went to the Stevenson house.

He went cross-lots, and though the road was a new one to him, he had a fine sense of direction and went straight to his goal.

He thought as he plodded along that this must be the very road Emily had traversed when she started for the hospital.

At least, it was the road she meant to take, whether she had ever done so or not.

She had certainly not reached the hospital, and who could know just where she had changed her course?

Involuntarily, Pete looked for footprints.

But none were possible on the hard, stony road, covered, too, with falling autumn leaves.

The road—there was no footpath—led along a rather steep embankment, then across a bridge that spanned a wide and deep ravine, on to another bridge that crossed a smaller ravine, and then off to more level lands and a street which led to the Stevenson house.

Here Gibby was admitted, and soon greeted by a large, stalwart man of genial address and pleasant manner.

His errand made known, Alec Stevenson looked earnestly at him, and then asked him to go with him into his den.

There, with the door shut, his host told Pete that he had no use for the foreigner in question, but that Mrs. Stevenson was really daffy about him, and therefore he could say nothing to his disparagement.

“But what do you know of his standing, his history?” urged Pete.

“Nothing, simply nothing,” said Stevenson, with such an air of finality that it seemed useless to prod him further.

“And, I suppose, Mrs. Stevenson knows no more than you do?” he said.

“No. Not of his past or his sponsors. The women of the place here took him up, and in true feminine fashion they wanted no guarantee or references. Sorry not to be more helpful, but that’s how it is.”

But as Pete Gibby walked back through the starless, murky night, he remarked to himself that Friend Stevenson was one large and elegant liar.

Chapter VI

Tragedy

Pete Gibby walked slowly back to Knollwood, thinking about Mr. Stevenson. He knew nothing of the man but what he had just seen for himself, but he was puzzled at his attitude.

On the face of things, it was all right for Stevenson to distrust the Swami, but to hesitate about saying so, since the Oriental was his wife's friend.

But Gibby sensed more than that. There was something furtive about Stevenson's manner that implied a deeper feeling about the whole matter than merely wife's opinions.

"Oh, Lord," groaned Gibby to himself, "I'm a fine detective, I am! Running off with all sorts of fool ideas that have no basis whatever. If I'm going to look into this case, and I certainly am, I must be at least methodical and logical about it. Emily is missing, mysteriously missing, and so is Polly Pennington. Now, first of all, are they together, wherever they are, or separated? If the same influence is responsible for both disappearances, they are probably together. And I feel it must be the same influence. It's too extraordinary for a bride and her matron of honor to be wiped off the earth at the same time, unless by the same agent. But, granting that, where does it get me? Nowhere."

Gibby trudged along, his mind a blank as far as theories or deductions were concerned. Indeed, his detective instinct was decidedly embryo, being merely a love of detective stories, and a quick mind for solving their fictional problems.

A real question of mystery had never before come his way, and having one now plumped down before him, he was a little bewildered by his sudden opportunity.

He had crossed the bridge over the little ravine and was nearing the big ravine. These two bits of natural scenery were the pride of Hildale.

The whole town was picturesque, the whole topography was hills and dales, but the two ravines were deep, jagged canyons whose rocks had been tossed up from the clefts in the earth by some prehistoric convulsion of nature.

The bridges across these were of a rustic sort, and over their railings vines had been trained by the Town Improvement Society, who took intense pride in fostering the fairness of their fair city.

Not really a city, Hilldale was a good-sized town and growing apace.

The shops and business section were some distance away from the residential Park, and the great estates of the landowners were jealously guarded from invasion of any modern improvements that might mar their natural beauties.

A fine motor road had been put through, but otherwise the roads and paths were almost primitive.

The houses, usually on a hill or rise of ground, were approached by walks of irregularly shaped flagstones or bits of marble. It was in no sense an old-time place, it was all modern, but it aimed for simplicity and good taste.

Sometimes adventurous climbers would go down into the ravines, but it was a wearisome, even dangerous trip, and few dared it.

Gibby had paused on the bridge as he crossed the little ravine and leaning against the stout railing, looked down into the dark abyss.

The thought struck him that Emily might have fallen over the rail, but he saw at once it was too high for that. Moreover, she had used the bridges all her life and would not dream of leaning over the side too far.

Yet he looked down into the black darkness, and determined that when it was again daylight, the ravines must be looked into.

A half-moon hung in the sky, but though it somewhat illumined the surrounding scene, its rays did not penetrate the black chasm.

He concluded to say nothing of this, however, for it was too remote a possibility and it would probably send the girls into hysterics.

So Pete Gibby went on, staring about him at the wooded hills and the scattered houses. Most of the houses showed bright lights, and from some he could hear sounds of music, or even laughing voices.

He knew few of them, however; only the young people who had been over to Knollwood for the rehearsal had he even met.

He glanced up at the Pennington house as he went on. Surrounded by trees it was on the side of a hill that ran down to the little ravine.

Only a few lights showed from its windows, and Gibby felt a wave of compassion for the man who sat there, as uncertain as to his wife's fate as they were about Emily's.

Pete was a bit intuitive, and he had sensed a slight hint of resentment in Pennington's attitude. It was almost as if Penn blamed Emily for Polly's disappearance. Almost as if he thought that Emily had urged his wife to go to the hospital to see the new baby.

And Pete had gathered that the sight of any baby was liable to send Polly off in one of her nervous spells, and that in such case she was more or less irresponsible.

So he gave a thought of real sympathy to the waiting husband and then his thoughts returned to their own tragedy.

For he had begun to look on it as a tragedy. Most certainly something had happened. What sort of happening it could be, he didn't know, couldn't even imagine. But it spelled trouble, and it was nearing a crisis.

Before he reached the house at Knollwood, he knew there was no good news there. If Emily had returned, the house would have been lighted up from top to bottom, whereas, there were only lights in the lounge and a few other rooms.

He went in and found Everett Craven was still there, but Rodney and Lamb had not yet returned.

"I don't like your old Stevenson," Gibby said to the lawyer, as he lighted a cigarette.

"Why not?" asked Craven, not greatly interested.

"I don't know. Sort of Doctor Fell, I guess. But he doesn't ring true. He says he can't abide His Oriental Nibs, but as he's a friend of Mrs. Stevenson's he has to swallow him."

“Well, that’s about the size of it. And he’s not alone in that. Some several husbands put up with the obnoxious Lal Singh because he’s a fad with the women.”

“Nothing criminal about him, I suppose?”

“Not that I know of,” Craven said. “I’ve looked him over pretty well, and he seems to me just out for the cash.”

“Does he charge by the hour?”

“Oh, yes. That is, he gives an afternoon or an evening here and there, and expects and gets a goodly honorarium. It’s all right if people choose to fall for it. He got around Emily in the matter of her will, but he didn’t get any immediate money from her. Except of course, his own fee, when she engaged him for an afternoon.”

“I suppose, Pete,” Nell put in, “you’re trying to fasten Emily’s absence on Mr. Singh. If you only knew how ridiculous it makes you appear! Oh, I know you fancy yourself as a detective, but—”

“Hush up, Nell,” said Betty, who was crying now, “I won’t have you speak as if Emily had been kidnapped or something—”

“Well, where is she then?” Pete spoke abruptly.

But before any one could respond to his question, Rodney and Lamb came in.

Their dejected air made inquiry unnecessary, and it was in silence that they let Prall take their hats and sticks and provide them with highballs and cigarettes.

“Something’s got to be done,” said Sayre, heavily.

He spoke as one in a dream or trance.

“You see,” he went on, “something must have happened. Emily isn’t at any house; we called at all the neighbors’. She never got to the hospital, we’ve been there. We could find nobody that saw her or heard of her after she left this place. Prall saw her go out the back door, and that’s all we know. Now, as the person most deeply interested, I feel I should take

the helm. I'm not forgetting you, Aunt Judy," he said, with a pathetic look at her, "but as Emily's future husband I feel I have a right to dictate."

"Of course you have, Rodney," Aunt Judy said, tremulously. "Whatever you think best to do, that you must do."

"I think so, and I propose to call the police at once and let them take up the matter. That is, to my mind, the only thing to do. The only argument against it is the unpleasant publicity of it. But I think the time has come to discount that. If Emily is all right, she will forgive us for getting so alarmed at her absence, and if she isn't all right, surely we want the help of the police."

"It's outrageous," exclaimed Nell. "It's a perfectly dreadful thing to do! Emily will be angry when she comes home and finds—"

"I'll take care of Emily's anger, Nell," said Rodney, so sternly that the girl ceased to remonstrate.

"But let's call up Jim Pennington first," suggested Aunt Judy. "He may know something about—"

"He won't know anything about the matter," Craven declared, "for if he did he would have telephoned us before this. But, I do think, Sayre, it's only right to tell him what you've decided to do. For, I can't see us giving the police the facts without telling them that Mrs. Pennington is also missing, and before we do that Jim ought to be consulted, or, at least, notified."

"That's right," Lamb said, "shall I get him?"

Sayre nodded and Lamb started for the telephone.

The rest sat in utter silence until his return.

"Jim agrees it's the thing to do," Burton told them. "He's been thinking the same thing himself. And he says he'll come over here, and we'll confer with the police together. He says the maid will call him if Mrs. Penn comes in."

And so the strong arm of the law, as represented by the Hilldale force, came to Knollwood and Jim Pennington came also, and Emily's disappearance became a case.

Aunt Judy couldn't stand it, and Pearl led her sobbing from the room.

Betty and Nell stayed in, of course, and the men of the house party.

Everett Craven remained and he and Pennington were really spokesmen, Sayre answering only when asked a question.

The chief, a man named Jennings, was well-mannered, but straightforwardly inquisitorial, and seemed to think that all present were trying to hide something from him.

"Speak out, now," he said; "anything you try to conceal will not only hinder our efforts but react against your own interests."

Jim Pennington stared at him. All this was distasteful to the artistic temperament, and though trying to bear it bravely, Pennington was growing nervously irritable.

"Great Scott, man," he said, "we're not keeping anything back! We haven't anything to keep back. I only wish we had. But we know nothing beyond what we've just told you. Miss Duane and Mrs. Pennington are strangely absent. It may be that everything is all right, and it may be all wrong. That's what we want you to find out."

"You have all the facts," Craven assured them, "but if you want to ask questions, go ahead. You may bring out some facts or deductions that we haven't thought of."

A sergeant was present, and also a plain-clothes man, who was Lawlor, a detective.

Lawlor was alert and quick-witted, and his eyes darted from one to another as he listened.

"I think," he began, and the chief sat back in silence. It was plain to be seen that he was quite content to leave the inquiries to another.

“I think,” Lawlor said, “that we want to begin at the beginning. Who was the last one to see Miss Duane as she left the house?”

“I don’t know about seeing her,” said Sayre slowly, “but I daresay I was the last one to speak to her. She had been telephoning the hospital, and she ran in here to me to say she was going over to the hospital to see a new baby there. She told me not to tell anybody, as she would be back in ten minutes. So I obeyed her, and just waited for her return.”

“Did any one else here see Miss Duane go?” asked Lawlor, but they all looked blankly at one another.

“Prall, the butler, saw her,” said Betty, suddenly. “He saw her go out the back door.”

“Call him in,” said the detective shortly, and Prall was summoned.

“Yes, sir,” he informed, “I saw Miss Emily go out the back door—”

“The kitchen door?” he was asked.

“No, sir, it’s a door that opens into a back hall, an entry.”

“I see. Go on.”

“That’s all, sir. I just chanced to see Miss Emily run out that door like she was in a hurry.”

“Didn’t you think it strange she should use that door?”

“Well, no, sir, I didn’t think anything about it. I was busy with my work, and too, Miss Emily, she’s always doing things other people don’t do. I’ve seen her go out of a window when there was a door open and handy.”

Lawlor looked at the others for confirmation of this, and Jim Pennington said, “That’s right. Miss Duane was, well, whimsical, and often did unexpected things. It was nothing remarkable for her to go out the back door if she wished to escape observation.”

“I see. And which way did she go, Prall?”

“I don’t know, sir. I didn’t look after her at all. I just saw her go out.”

“Have on a hat and coat?”

“Neither, sir, just a fur skin round her neck. I noticed that without exactly thinking about it, but I can see her in my mind.”

“Yes, a mental picture, a photographic recollection. Think well, now, Prall. Did she seem perturbed? Bothered? Anxious? Worried?”

“Not a bit of it, sir. She was gay as a lark, humming a little tune, like she often does when she’s happy.”

“Then, so far as I can see, that’s all we can learn at first hand of her procedure. Now, Mr. Pennington, what of your wife? When did you see her last?”

“We went away from here together,” Jim said; “we said good-by to Mrs. Bell and to Miss Duane and we spoke to a few others as we left the room. Then, we walked along together, toward home, and my wife said she wished I’d step over to Wallace’s and get her some cigarettes. She expected some from New York but they hadn’t arrived. She said for me to run over and get them, and she’d saunter along until I caught up with her again.”

“And did you?”

“No. I was delayed a few moments getting the cigarettes and when I again reached the point where I had left her, I didn’t see her. But I thought nothing of that and went on toward home, hurrying a little that I might overtake her. But I didn’t see her at all, so I concluded she had reached the house before me. I went in the house and to my surprise she wasn’t there at all. I called Rosa, the maid, and she said Mrs. Pennington had not come in.

“Even then, I didn’t think much about it, assuming that some one she knew had come along, and she had gone off on some trivial errand. I even thought that perhaps Emily Duane had run after her for some purpose. I didn’t know then anything about the hospital baby or that Emily had gone over there. So, I just waited around a while. I called up this house and one or two others where my wife might have gone, but I

could get no word of her, so I just waited. I worried a little but not much, for, with the wedding preparations going on, all the girls have been on the jump and you never know where they'll be next."

"The maid could tell you nothing?"

"Nothing at all. How could she? Mrs. Pennington went out with me when we came over here in the afternoon, and when I reached home, she hadn't appeared at all."

"But, I mean, the maid said nothing about Mrs. Pennington's having some other engagement or—"

"No. She, Rosa, isn't my wife's personal maid. My wife has none. Rosa is waitress and parlor maid. Indeed, she's the only maid at present, for the cook left yesterday, and a new one is expected on Monday."

"You poor man!" exclaimed Betty. "How do you get along? You come over here for meals until the new cook comes."

Pennington smiled at her ready hospitality.

"Thank you," he said, "but we'll manage. Polly is efficient, you know, and the chauffeur's wife is cooking for us. They live over the garage and she's a good cook—but my domestic arrangements cannot interest you," he said to Lawlor.

"Then as far as I can see," the detective seemed to come out of a brown study, "those two women disappeared within a few moments of one another. It isn't logical to suppose their absences are entirely disconnected."

"And yet," Chief Jennings interposed, "if they had been together when it happened, I mean whatever did happen, accident or anything—one of them could have brought back the news."

"You're predicating something along the lines of a sprained ankle or broken leg," Pete Gibby, declared. "Now, that isn't a probable explanation at all!"

"Indeed," said Lawlor icily. "Just what is your notion of a probable explanation?"

“That the two of them were abducted or kidnapped by men of evil intent—”

“Abductions of grown people are not often heard of,” Lawlor began.

“Disappearances of well-to-do young women are not, either,” Pete told him. “But there is a system of abductions—”

“Oh, Pete, shut up!” Rodney cried out, as one in agony. “Do shut up, I can’t stand everything!”

“Go on,” urged Pennington. “What do you mean? If there’s a theory, however awful, let us have it.”

“Were these ladies wearing conspicuous jewelry?” Lawlor asked, suddenly.

“No,” Pennington began, but Gibby interrupted:

“Yes, Miss Duane was. She had on a diamond necklace that Mr. Sayre gave her for a wedding present.”

“Aha,” and Lawlor looked like a man who has discovered all. “That’s it, then.”

“What’s it?” demanded Sayre. “Suppose robbers did take that necklace, where are the two girls? You can’t assume that they killed them and disposed of their bodies in this short time.”

“Why not?” said Lawlor, calmly. “You have hunted and searched for two live women, but no search has been made for dead ones.”

“Look here, Mr. Lawlor,” said Burton Lamb, “I understand your interest and your desire for action, but need you be quite so bluntly definite? Have you no consideration for the feelings of those near and dear to the missing ladies? Have you not even the common decency to speak a little less crudely?”

“I thought you wanted police work done,” Lawlor said, sulkily. “I’m not in the habit of mincing words.”

“Let him alone, Burt,” Sayre said. “Neither Pennington nor myself cares how he expresses his fears. We’re all apprehensive that a severe accident or sudden death has wrought this tragedy, and the sooner we begin real investigations the better. I propose that searching parties be organized at once, police, neighbors, volunteers, anybody who can look for the girls, dead or alive. We dare not wait till morning. It’s all very well to say that if one had been hurt or maimed the other could come to tell us. They may both be hurt, dying, even, and here we sit, palavering over the matter!”

“But what can we do in the dark, Mr. Sayre?” asked Lawlor, a little petulantly. “I think we must wait for daylight.”

“You may, but I shan’t,” said Rodney, with determination. “Do you suppose I could go to bed? Or Mr. Pennington, either? No, we will go on another search. Anything is better than inaction. If you as officials want to organize and conduct a hunt, all right. If not, it must be amateur.”

“Good for you, Mr. Sayre,” said Everett Craven heartily. “I’m with you, for one.”

Pennington, Lamb and Pete Gibby merely nodded their heads in the foregone conclusion of acquiescence, and they began to rise.

“Now, now,” said Jennings, “don’t act like a passel of hot-headed youngsters! Of course, the police will conduct this search. Of course, we’ll have posses and we’ll do whatever we can and call in outside help beside. We’re not lukewarm in this matter, as you seem to think, but it does require a certain amount of system and method, which seems not to occur to you.”

“You’re right,” and Pennington looked at him with anxious eyes. “I, too, want to rush right out and scour the land over, but perhaps a little organization would make for greater success.”

“That’s the talk!” and Jennings nodded approval.

And then there were some more questions asked and answered and soon the policemen went away, promising to conduct the search with propriety and despatch.

“That’s all right,” Pennington said, after they had left, “but all the same you’ve got me stirred up with your awful suggestions, and I’ve got to go out and hunt, myself. You see, the idea of Emily’s necklace puts a new face on it all. It was dusk, you know, and if those two girls did start over toward the hospital, which is the only thing I can picture them doing, why a passing motor might have been full of bandits, who—”

“Needn’t have been so many,” said Gibby. “One bandit in a Ford car would have been enough to overpower Emily, grab the diamond chain—”

“Then Polly would have given the alarm,” said Pennington. “Grant two bandits, Gibby.”

“All right, two bandits, then. But some such thing happened.”

“Go on,” said Rodney, wearily. “What did the bandits do next?”

“Beat the girls up or left them unconscious, and made off with the loot.”

“Oh, Pete, you’re worse than the policemen!” cried Betty.

“Forgive me, I didn’t mean to be. But that’s how I see it.”

Just then Prall came in and whispered to Rodney, who rose and left the room with the butler.

“Mr. Jennings wants to see you, sir,” Prall said, still softly.

Sayre followed the butler to the dining room and then to the back hall.

Here Mr. Jennings stood, looking alarmed and excited.

“I thought I’d better tell you first, sir,” he said. “We were going back to the station to get the search party into shape, when, as we crossed the bridge over the ravine, Sergeant Murdock noticed the rail was broken away.”

“Which ravine?”

“The little one, sir. And he had a powerful flashlight and he turned it down over the rail, and far below, we could see what looked like a

huddled-up body. So Murdock—he can climb like a monkey—he climbed down and—well, sir, he found it was Mrs. Pennington—dead.”

Chapter VII

The Sable Fur

“Are you sure?” said Sayre, for lack of anything else to say.

He looked blank and dazed, as one does on hearing a piece of news that nearly stuns him.

“Yes, sir,” Jennings said, “I know her well. Will you tell Mr. Pennington? Is he here yet?”

“Yes, he’s here. He was just about to go home. Call Mr. Lamb out here, Prall.”

Burton Lamb came, and saw with surprise the returned policeman.

“What have you found?” he said, and Jennings told him.

“Will you tell Jim Pennington?” Sayre said.

“Good Lord, I can’t! But, yes, I will. And we must tell him at once. Who’s left there—on the scene, Jennings?”

“Murdock and Lawlor are standing by, but I must get back. There’s a deal to be done. And no doctor or anybody could get down there, you see. You know how steep and craggy it is, and more’n fifty feet deep. We’ve got to get the lady up, and that’s a problem of itself.”

“Well, Jennings, you get along then.” Lamb was alert enough now when he had something to do. “I’ll tell Mr. Pennington—of course, he can be of no help—so we’d best keep him here for a while. You—you saw nothing of Miss Duane?”

Rodney Sayre turned to Jennings with his haggard face still dazed at the news he had heard.

“No, sir, nothing at all. But I must see Mr. Pennington before I go. You see, it’s his wife—”

“Yes, I see,” Lamb returned quickly. “He must be consulted, though of course he’ll not be able to do anything—”

“That he won’t. It was all Murdock could do to get down, I dunno how he’ll get up again, or get the lady up.”

“Is there water in the ravine?”

“No, sir, it’s dry just now. It’s never very wet, anyway. Can we see Mr. Pennington now?”

The three returned to the lounge, and as Rodney sank down in silence on the sofa, Lamb went to Jim Pennington and laid a hand on his shoulder.

“Bad news for you, Jim,” he said, slowly, with a compassionate look.

“For me? What is it?”

“They’ve found Mrs. Pennington, and she’s hurt—badly hurt.”

“Hurt? How? Let me go to her. What’s Jenkins doing here again? Has he seen Emily?”

“No, but he has seen your wife, and she—she fell over the bridge into the ravine.”

Pennington looked simply incredulous.

“Fell over the bridge into the ravine? Why, she couldn’t. The railing is too high.”

“Well, she did,” Lamb’s nerves were giving way, “and she’s lying at the bottom of the ravine, badly hurt—”

Pennington rose and his face went white.

“What are you trying to tell me? If she’s at the bottom of the ravine, she’s not hurt—she’s dead—”

“Yes,” Lamb assented, glad to have the dread ordeal come to its climax at last.

“Pauline—dead—it can’t be—”

All of Jim Pennington’s careless, debonair, semi-bored manner fell from him like a garment. He seemed suddenly old, suddenly helpless.

Everybody in the room was intensely sorry for him, but what could be done?

It was hard to say any words of comfort or condolence to a man of Pennington’s type. He was so cynical, so impatient of spoken sympathy, that any speech seemed banal.

And then Rodney said, seemingly not so much by way of condoling, but with a cry wrung from the depths of his tortured heart:

“Jim, I’d rather know where Emily is, even if she’s dead, than to suffer this unbearable suspense.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” Pennington returned, with his quick insight. “You may think you mean that, but it isn’t true. Come, Mr. Jennings, take me to—to the place. Will somebody go with me?”

He looked round the room with a pathetic air of appeal that they never had seen in his eyes before.

“I’ll go,” said Pete Gibby, “I’m the best one to go. Rod, you and Lamb stay here. If there’s any news of Emily, I’ll come straight back and let you know.”

The three men started, Gibby racking his brain to think of something to say to the man beside him.

“Don’t try to help, Gibby,” the other said, with understanding. “There’s nothing to be said, you know. Which ravine is it?”

“The little one, sir,” answered Jennings, turning his head. “Just past the Miller place.”

Leaving Emily’s home, the path was picturesque, being purposely left rough and stony and lined on either side with flowing wild shrubs.

The Duane house being on a hill, this path led slightly downward, but crossed the big ravine by means of a rustic bridge.

Soon after came the Miller place, a big house, also on a sidehill. This place was between the two ravines, but what with trees and rocky spots, it was scarcely visible at night.

The stony, winding path went on, and after crossing the little ravine, passed the Penningtons' home.

But, of course, our two men stopped at the bridge of the little ravine, where a group of people were already gathered.

The scene was weird, for the Hilledale lights were not numerous, though ordinarily sufficient.

The flashlights of the police were here and there, and there seemed to be more people coming.

The first words Gibby heard were from the lips of some untutored helper who was saying:

"Yep, I know; but how'll we git her up? Nothin' to hitch a derrick to—"

"Come away, Jim," Gibby said, "let's go on to your house."

"See here," said Pennington, "I'm not a weakling, though I know I acted so when you first told me. I nearly went under. But the situation has to be faced and I'm going to face it. Isn't that Doctor Eaton?"

"Yes, let's speak to him," Gibby was greatly relieved at the way Pennington was recognizing the inevitable. Time enough for collapsing and grieving after this awful situation was closed. Of course they would get Pauline up somehow and away somewhere, but Gibby couldn't fathom how or where.

Doctor Eaton recognized Pennington and held out his hand.

Quietly he said, "I'm glad you're here. We want your advice."

"I doubt whether I can give any. What do you think of doing?"

“I’ve sent for an ambulance from the hospital—”

“Is there hope?” and Pennington’s face lighted up for a moment.

“No—but I think it the best thing to do.”

“Can’t we take her home?”

“I’m afraid not to-night. There may be much to do too difficult for an ordinary funeral director—”

Gibby felt the shudder that ran through Pennington’s body, and he broke into the conversation:

“Don’t let us keep you, Doctor, I’m sure you are needed at the scene of operations.”

“No, the ambulance and fixtures haven’t come yet. You see, to let down a bed or pallet is out of the question—I mean the getting of it up would be too much of a problem.”

“Cut out the details, Doctor,” said Gibby, irritable at last. How could even a calloused doctor be stupid enough to talk like this before the husband of that poor broken victim!

But Pennington said:

“He’s doing that for my sake. But he doesn’t quite understand. I want to know details. It is my right. It is no kindness to me to guard me from the horrors of it all. My grief I must bear alone, but the things you propose to do, you must tell me. It is your duty.”

Though Pennington spoke with utter calmness, his lip quivered, and after a keen glance at him, Doctor Eaton said:

“I think it is, and I think you will be better for knowing. We can conceive of no way of carrying the body up the side of the ravine. It is a most difficult climb for an unhampered man; with a burden it would be impossible.”

“And so?” Pennington queried.

“And so, we have decided to let down a hammock, which can be safely drawn up by two strong men.”

Pennington drew a quick breath of relief, which was echoed in Gibby’s mind, for both men had vague fears of horrible things like hooks or grappling irons.

“Have you strong men to raise it?”

“Yes, have no fear. I will look out for that. The trouble is to find another who can climb down to help Murdock out. It needs a man of agility and skill, but I’m sure Jennings can get some one.”

And so some of the gruesomeness was removed, but the weirdness remained, and it even changed to a solemn rite as Pauline Pennington’s body was carefully hoisted up into view.

Gibby had once seen a burial at sea, and he never forgot the sight of the swathed dead body going over the side of the ship.

But here was a dead body coming up from depths beneath.

The hammock was folded over so that nothing could be seen, and though Pennington made a quick move toward it, Pete Gibby held him back with an iron grip.

There were some things in which he was determined to have his own way.

Carefully the hammock was lifted into the ambulance, and driven to the hospital.

With a quickly controlled sigh, Pennington said:

“Now, see here, Gibby, you’ve been a real brick. You’ve stood by and you’ve done all one man could do for another. Now, you go on home—my God! in my own tragedy I forgot all about the other one! Where’s Emily?”

“Maybe at the bottom of the other ravine,” said Pete somberly.

“Oh, no. Well, you go on home, and I’m going over to the hospital. Even if they don’t let me see her, I can be under the same roof; and if there’s any word of Emily, let me know.”

Gibby agreed, for he knew Pennington would be in safe hands if, as he feared, there was any sort of nervous collapse.

Stolid and material-minded himself, Pete Gibby had a sneaking contempt for the artistic temperament; but he admitted that Jim had behaved very well.

Alone, he turned back to the strange scene. Murdock was just coming up, having preferred the perilous climb to trusting to being hauled up by his fellow men.

“Don’t want two bodies in the ravine in one night!” he said, as they remonstrated with him when he appeared.

Gibby shuddered, for his mind kept picturing another body, that of Emily, in the ravine that night.

But he could do nothing in the matter, he couldn’t make search where better and wiser searchers were covering the ground.

He concluded to go home; it was only right the tale should be passed on to the others, so he gave one last glance at the busy squad of police and their helpers, civilian and official, who were making notes and talking in low tones.

A tall skinny lad came up to him and said abruptly:

“Ain’t you a friend of them Pennington folks?”

“Yes,” returned Gibby, “who are you?”

“I’m the guy Murdock got to climb down there and help him. I can climb!”

Gibby glanced at his lithe slimness and his muscular legs and arms and said he didn’t doubt it.

“Well, I can; so the p’lice they hired me to go down and help Murdock, so I did. Murdock can climb, too.”

This last rather grudgingly.

“Well, what about it?” asked Gibby, pretty sure the boy wanted an honorarium.

“Why this. After we put the lady in the hammock and the fellers up above hauled her up, I looked around to see what I could see, and I found this. So I brought it here to give it to Mr. Pennington, but he’s gone, they say. So, can I give it to you?”

He held out a sable neckpiece, of considerable value.

Gibby was a bit surprised that he hadn’t stolen it, but realized that a superstitious person couldn’t do that.

“Yes; I’ll take charge of it. I’m staying at Miss Duane’s house, and I’ll give it to the ladies there and they’ll see that it reaches Mr. Pennington.”

He reached in his pocket, but the boy said quickly:

“No, mister, I don’t want no pay.” And looked so frightened that Gibby more than ever marveled at the extent of the fear of the dead.

“All right, Bub. What’s your name?”

“Billy McGuire. I can climb.”

“Yes, that’s just it. Now, Billy, suppose you do some more climbing. You know Miss Duane is lost. She may be in the other ravine, or even in this same one.”

“No, sir, she ain’t.”

“How do you know?”

“I been a-lookin’. First thing I heard that young lady was missin’ I clumb down into the ravine by the horspital—that’s where they said she was headed for—and she wasn’t there.”

“Did you hunt any more?”

“Well, no. It got dark, and soon after Murdock sent for me to help him.”

“Then you haven’t hunted at all. Now you get up with the sun to-morrow morning, and hunt good and plenty. I hope to Heaven you don’t find her, but you can see for yourself there is a chance. You’ll be well paid for your time.”

“I’ll do it; Lordy, I couldn’t keep away from them ravines. But most of the rails is higher than the one Mrs. Pennington fell over.”

“All right, Billy, you do what you can in the way of climbing down to see. And I’m much obliged to you for returning this fur tippet. Good-night.”

“Good-night, sir.”

Gibby walked away toward the Duane house. He passed the Miller house, right across the road from which ran a small street, really a lane, where Wallace’s was. Wallace’s was an institution. The only shop on that side of town where one could buy candy, cigarettes, cosmetics and such matters as might be needed in a hurry.

Gibby looked back to the little ravine, and pictured Pauline standing there while Jim went to Wallace’s on the trifling errand. Pictured her looking over the rail, realized the strange lure high places or precipices have for some natures and pictured her throwing herself over. For he didn’t much believe it was an accident. The bridge rails were pretty sturdy across those ravines, and he had noticed the nervous, restless state of Mrs. Pennington. They had told him she had never ceased to mourn the death of her baby. Perhaps she had somehow heard of the birth of the Laurence child, and knowing she could never have another herself, had yielded to impulse and decided to give up her weary, useless life.

But Gibby was given to fancies and as he went along, over the big ravine and in at the Knollwood entrance, his thoughts came back to Emily, and Pauline Pennington’s awful fate was eclipsed.

The group in the lounge was only slightly decreased since he had left it.

And no word was asked or offered to denote that anything had been heard of Emily.

Craven had gone home and Aunt Judy had been persuaded to go to bed.

So, with Pennington absent, there remained just the wedding house party.

“Tell us about it,” Nell said, peremptorily, “don’t wait to be quizzed.”

“And don’t keep anything back,” added Rodney. “We can stand anything now.”

So Gibby told them in a straightforward and accurate way the events of the rescue of Mrs. Pennington’s body and the taking of it to the hospital.

“It seems so queer,” Betty observed, “Polly was one of the chief ones in getting that hospital built and now she’s there herself.”

“Had she melancholia at all?” asked Gibby.

“Not exactly that, but she had queer spells—”

“Queer, how?”

“Oh, I don’t know—it wasn’t quite epilepsy, but a sort of hysteria.”

“Then I bet she threw herself over—”

“Oh, no, no,” cried Betty, “she never would do that.”

“You can’t tell what she’d do. But the thing is, what are we going to do? If you don’t want to go to bed, Rod, we men will sit up with you. There’s positively nothing to be done, but—what do you say?”

Sayre looked quietly indignant.

“I couldn’t go to bed, Pete. I’m sure nobody could in these circumstances. Anyway, I can’t. But I don’t want you people sitting up with me. Go along and get some rest, and Lord knows you need it. Betty and Nell go to your rooms and relax. Put on kimonos, so you can come down, if necessary, but lie down on your beds and try to sleep. I shall just stay here in this room, or wander out on the lawn.”

“We’ll all stay up awhile longer,” Betty said, kindly. “Maybe she’ll come home.”

Rod threw her a grateful glance for this speech, and Nell wished she had thought to make it.

“Oh, here’s Mrs. Polly’s fur neckpiece,” Pete said, suddenly remembering it.

“Why, that’s Emily’s!” cried Nell, and Rodney sprang up.

“No, it isn’t,” Betty told them. “Emily and Polly had them just alike. They bought them at the same time, and though they’re a little out of date now, they both cling to them.”

“A beautiful two-skin sable like that can never go out of date,” Nell said, fondling the lovely soft fur.

“Where’d it come from?” asked Rod, his spirits sinking back to apathy.

“It was found where Mrs. Pennington’s body was found,” Gibby told them. “But it wasn’t discovered until after she had been brought up. Then the chap who found it brought it to give to Jim, and as Jim had gone this boy asked me to take care of it.”

“Who is he?”

“I don’t think he is connected with the police, but they hired him to-night to climb down the ravine to assist Murdock. He’s a great climber.”

“He is?” and Rod’s mind worked along the lines Pete’s had. “Then why don’t we—”

“Get him to climb down and look for Emily? We’re going to, old man. I asked him to rise at dawn to-morrow and go to it.”

“Good for you, Pete,” and Sayre’s glance said far more than his words.

“What are you thinking about, Nell? You look as if you’d seen a ghost.” For Nell’s expression was puzzled and there was a look of fear in her eyes.

“One of her psychic moods coming on,” said Betty, with her ever-present good-natured desire to lighten the conversation whenever possible.

She was horribly afraid of the reminiscent “Just think, only this afternoon, Emily was here, so gay and glad!” type of conversation.

“No,” Nell said, looking more and more bewildered, “but Polly wasn’t wearing her fur this afternoon.”

“Must have been,” Pete said, disinterestedly, “they found it right where she lay.”

“But I tell you she didn’t,” persisted Nell. “I guess I know more than a man about clothes.”

“She didn’t have any fur on when I saw her,” Betty agreed. “But she may have left it in the dressing room and taken it when she went out.”

“Well, she didn’t, for I saw her go out with her husband, and she had no fur on. I remember particularly noticing how modish the back neckline of her frock was.”

“Well, what’s the difference, anyway—”

“This difference,” Nell said, and now her face was frankly frightened and her voice shook, “this difference. That isn’t Polly’s fur at all, it’s Emily’s.”

Betty opened her eyes wide; Lamb merely smiled, thinking Nell was trying to create a diversion and draw attention to herself.

Rodney didn’t spring up this time. He wasn’t to be caught twice in the same trap.

“Oh, don’t act like stupids!” exclaimed Nell, breaking into angry tears. “Betty, where did Emily buy her fur?”

“I don’t know. Wherever Polly did, I suppose. They are just alike. Isn’t there a maker’s tag in that?”

“Yes, and it says, ‘Made by Masters and Graham, New York.’”

“Well, they’re a fine firm.”

“Oh! just you wait a minute.”

Nell ran out of the room, and in less than five minutes she was back, more excited than ever.

“I went to Pearl’s room and woke her up. Poor girl, she thought Emily had come back. Well, I asked her if Mrs. Pennington bought her fur at the same place Emily did, and she said, ‘No ma’am. Mis’ Pen’nton, she bought hers in ‘Lantic City. She allus buys ‘em there.’ Then, I hated to scare her, but I said, ‘Is this Miss Emily’s fur?’ But she wasn’t scared, she just looked at it closely and said, ‘Yas’m, it is. She didn’t wear it after all, then.’ So, I told her to go back to sleep and I’d wake her if Miss Emily came home to-night.”

“But, Nell,” Betty looked puzzled, “those Atlantic City places, they’re auction rooms, you know, great big fine ones; they may sell New York made furs.”

“No, I asked Pearl how she was so certain this is Emily’s, and she showed me a little place where she had sewed the button-loop on, and the silk didn’t quite match. Now, if this was found with Polly’s body, what does it mean?”

“Are you sure Emily did wear her fur to-day?” asked Gibby, and Nell reminded him that Prall saw it on her as she went out at the back entry door.

“Then,” said Pete, “how did it get into Polly’s possession, and where’s Emily?”

Chapter VIII

What The Police Thought

Rodney rose, walked over to Nell, and took possession of the fur neckpiece. It was soft and pliable, a fine quality of Russian sable, and he examined minutely the place where the brown cord loop had been sewn.

“You’re sure this is Emily’s, Nell? What do you think, Betty?”

“It must be, Rod,” Betty returned, “as Pearl sewed it.”

“Then how did it get down there, under Polly’s body?”

“That’s our starting point,” said Pete. “And we must follow it up.”

“Yes,” Rodney said, “it’s time some detective work was done. I don’t mean to disparage your efforts, Gibby, but you’re amateur. The police detective is far from being really clever. To-morrow, I shall get the best detective in the world, whoever he is, and set him on the trail. You all think I sit here like a bump on a log—and I do,” he added, with a grim smile, “but there was no use moving until I could see some way to turn. As to this searching—”

“There isn’t enough of it!” exclaimed Nell. “Why, when that woman in England disappeared, the whole county turned out and searched night and day—”

“The cases are very different, Nell,” Sayre said. “She was lost on a dark and dreary moor, or so they supposed, and they had to work that way. Here, Emily is either in Hilldale, where she must easily be found, or she has been carried away by force, abducted, and held for ransom. At least, I can see no other theories. Had she been attacked because of her necklace, the thief would have secured that and fled. If I am right, we will soon get letters demanding money, and in the meantime they will not harm her. That’s cold comfort, but it’s better than a good many other thoughts. However, it’s all assumption or theory, there’s no proof of any of it. But this fur business puts another face on it. It makes it mysterious, and mystery calls for a skilled detective. You, Pete, have a real detective instinct, as it is called, but that’s not good enough for me. I shall get the best talent, and at once.”

“You’re right, old man. I fancy myself as a sleuth, but I know nothing about it, really. Who’s your choice?”

“I don’t know. To-morrow morning I shall telephone a chap I know in New York who knows all the game, and he’ll advise me who is top of the heap.”

“As to that fur—” and Pete gazed meditatively at the sables, “I can’t see—”

“Of course you can’t,” Rod told him. “Not one of us can have a glimmer of an idea how Emily’s neckpiece came to be down there under Polly’s body. So there’s not the least use speculating about it.”

“No harm talking it over,” said Lamb, as he watched Sayre holding fast to the bit of fur and unconsciously caressing it as if it were Emily herself.

Like Rodney, Burton Lamb said little when he had no real opinions to advance. He was always ready with light chatter or jests, but serious matters affected him weightily and left him silent. He had been thinking deeply for the last few moments about this fur piece, and he desired to talk about it.

“It may be easily explained,” he began. “Say, Emily left the house with it on, which we know she did. Say, she met Polly, and asked Polly to go to the hospital with her. Say, Polly wouldn’t—and we all know Polly was as likely to turn one way as the other in that matter, about going to see a baby, I mean.”

“Yes,” Betty agreed, “sometimes she loves to see any passing child in a pram, and stops to talk to it, and then again the sight of one seems to repel her and she goes off in a nervous fit.”

“Exactly. That’s what I mean. Well, say she refused to go with Emily, and Emily went on alone. Then, for some reason, Emily left her fur with Polly. Polly was chilly, or Emily was too warm, or—why, you must agree that’s all possible.”

“Good for you, Burton,” Gibby said. “You’ve built up a most plausible case. And, to continue, say that the whole matter of the baby threw Polly into one of her fits of melancholy, and as she stood, looking over the bridge rail, she yielded to a sudden impulse to end her life.”

“That’s just what I told you,” and Sayre smiled a little. “You two have made that all up, without the least scrap of evidence to build on. That isn’t deduction, it isn’t even theorizing, it’s just fairy tales. And, too, it doesn’t throw any light on Emily’s proceedings. Even if it were true, it would only predicate that whatever happened to Emily, happened after she left Polly on the bridge of the little ravine. And before she reached the hospital—since she never reached there. There are no more ravines in that distance, its mostly woods, and estates. But all that section has been searched and scoured for trace of her. No, we can understand Polly’s death, at least we can see how it might have happened, but Emily’s absence is as utterly inexplicable now as it was when we first began to feel alarmed. So, I can think of nothing better to do than to get

a big detective and let him take care of the whole matter, we doing what we can to help, or, more likely, hinder him.”

“I don’t look at it as you do, at all, Rod,” Nell began. “I don’t think Polly killed herself—”

“Oh, Heavens, Nell, I don’t care *what* you think!”

It was unlike Sayre’s equanimity to speak like this, but Nell had tried him all the evening, and his nerves were at the breaking point. He could be quiet and calm if let alone, but these futile discussions jarred him.

“Forgive me,” he said, quickly repentant, “but I’m about all in. I wish you folks would go off to bed, or if you don’t want to do that, go in some other room to chatter.”

“Let’s do that,” said Lamb, with a quick glance at Rod’s quivering fingers, still clutched in the sable fur.

“Oh, nonsense, I didn’t mean it.” Sayre’s reactions were always immediate. “Stay here, but don’t talk to me.”

“Talk to *me*,” said Pete. “I love it.”

They retired to the other end of the long room, and talked among themselves. It was easier without Sayre, for though they all loved Emily, it was not the vital thing to them that it was to Rodney, and they began to feel the excitement of it all rising above the grief.

And, too, there was always hope. Whatever had happened, Emily might yet return safe and sound.

Sayre’s voice interrupted them.

“People,” he said, “come back here.”

From his seat on the sofa, he spoke like a magnate from his throne.

They trailed back, wondering.

“This,” said Rod, holding up the fur, “must be reported to the police. I wonder you haven’t seen that before. I wonder I didn’t see it sooner. It’s

most important evidence. We have no right to hold it back a moment. It's our duty to tell them—and, if they ask it, to turn it over to them."

"You're right, old man," Gibby said, realizing, after being told, the truth of the matter.

"Do you mean to-night?" asked Lamb.

"I think so, it's only a little after midnight, and those police chaps are not early birds. Want to telephone, Lammie?"

"Yes, what shall I say."

"I think I'd say that we have a bit of what may be evidence and shall we telephone about it, or will they toddle round?"

Lamb inwardly rejoiced that Sayre was at least coming out of his apathy enough to speak a little more lightly, and went to the booth.

He returned to say Lawlor would be right over.

The detective came and listened to the story.

He was greatly impressed, he seemed astounded, and his expression was deeply regretful.

He accepted their declarations that the fur was positively Emily's and that she had positively worn it when she left the house. Also their statement that Mrs. Pennington had not worn her fur, which was exactly like it.

"You think it important?" asked Gibby, trying to gauge the detective mind.

"Vitality. At what time did McGuire give you this?"

"Just after they had taken Mrs. Pennington to the hospital. I said I would restore it to Mr. Pennington, as of course we assumed it to be hers."

“Of course. Well, I’ll have to take it along.” Lawlor sighed deeply. “Look here,” he said, suddenly, “which left this house first, Mrs. Pennington or Miss Duane?”

“Why, I don’t know,” Betty said, taking it on herself to answer. “You see, Emily, just flung a word to Mrs. Bell and myself to say proper good-bys to departing guests, as she would be away for a few minutes.”

“You thought nothing of that?”

“Mercy, no, why should I?”

“What time was that?”

“I don’t know. About five, I guess.”

“Well, did Mrs. Pennington go then?”

“Let me see, she—”

“I know this much,” Sayre put in, “Emily said good-by to the Penningtons, for I saw and heard her. Then she came to me and told me she was going over to the hospital, and she went immediately. I should say they left about the same time, within five minutes or so.”

“Mrs. Pennington must have gone first,” said Lawlor decidedly.

“How do you get that?” asked Gibby, concluding the police detective was better than he had thought.

“Why, if Miss Duane had gone first, she would have gone on to the hospital and Mrs. Pennington couldn’t have met her on the bridge.”

“How do you know they did meet on the bridge?”

“How, otherwise, could Mrs. Pennington become possessed of Miss Duane’s fur?”

“Perhaps Miss Duane dropped her fur piece as she was on her way to the hospital and Mrs. Pennington retrieved it.” This from Lamb, who was thinking deeply.

“Perhaps, but that necessitates Miss Duane’s having gone first.”

“I can’t see,” put in Nell petulantly, “what earthly difference it makes which one went first.”

“That’s the difference. If Miss Duane went first, she was surely over the ravine bridge and on her way before Mrs. Pennington appeared.”

“Proving,” said Burton Lamb, “that Miss Duane didn’t tell Mrs. Pennington about the Laurence baby, and so threw her into a melancholy fit, which caused her to end her life. That it?”

“Something like that,” said Lawlor.

“Do you think her fall was not an accident?” asked Rodney, his face suddenly changing.

“I’m almost certain it was not. The bridge rails are not worn or broken in any way.”

“Somebody said they were.”

“It may have looked so because the vines were broken and torn. They are so carefully kept that any imperfection shows at once. And at the place where Mrs. Pennington’s fall occurred, they are greatly mangled.”

“And you think she threw herself over?” Betty spoke sobbingly.

“I can’t express any opinions about it, ma’am. It is all very mysterious, and this fur business makes the mystery deeper. In fact, it means that there must now be an inquest.”

“An inquest? Whatever for?” cried Nell.

“It’s always done in case of a death unattended by any physician, or—well, I don’t know, I’m sure, but I’m almost certain there’ll be one. A mere matter of form, they’ll call it. But the case has its queer points.”

He seemed to forget his audience, and sat staring at the fur.

Then suddenly, “Well, I’ll be going. You’ve told me all you know?”

His keen gaze rested on one after another, and he felt sure no one was keeping anything back.

“Just one more thing, Mr. Lawlor,” sounded Sayre’s clear voice. “Oh, no, not about this matter—we’ve all told every word we know. But I know how busy you must be with it, especially if there’s going to be an inquest and all that; and also because I want to do everything I can, I propose to call in a celebrated detective to take up the matter of Miss Duane’s disappearance. He will have no connection of course with the Pennington matter, and will in no way interfere with the police work, but I feel I must do this and I thought you ought to know.”

“Thank you, Mr. Sayre, for your thoughtfulness. And I may say I think you’re doing a wise thing.”

“What a nice man,” said Betty as the detective went away.

“Quicker-witted than I thought the police ones were,” said Gibby, with a grudging admiration. His opinion of himself as a Sherlock Holmes was rapidly dwindling, for he realized he had done absolutely nothing as yet.

“An inquest! Think of it,” exclaimed Nell. “Do you suppose we can all go?”

“Sure,” returned Pete. “They’ll want us.”

“My Heavens! To testify, or whatever you call it?”

“Maybe. An inquest in Hilldale is bound to be properly conducted. How’d you like to be in the witness box?”

“I’d love it,” responded Nell truthfully. “It’ll give me a thrill. I liked Pauline all right, but of course, I knew her only slightly, and Mr. Pennington I scarcely know at all. I’m terribly sorry for him, but truly, all my sorrow and sympathy is for Roddy and our own crowd here of Emily’s friends. Oh, where’s Emily? I can’t see through this fur business at all. To me it looks sort of—”

“Shut up, Nell,” Gibby growled at her, for everybody was beginning to feel nervous and upset.

They talked awhile longer, and then the girls agreed to go to bed.

But just then a step was heard on the porch, and Jim Pennington came in through the open French window.

“Forgive me,” he said, throwing himself into a chair, “but I can’t sleep, and I’m prowling about, and I saw by the lights you were still up, so I came.”

“Glad you did,” said Rodney, who by common consent had fallen into the position of host. “Come over whenever you like. We’re always right here.”

“Going to stay on?” Pennington asked, with perfunctory interest.

“Surely!” cried Betty, “Emily may turn up any minute, and we may go on with the wedding.”

“Oh—of course,” and they all realized that Pennington’s own tragedy had made him forget or ignore the wedding.

Kind-hearted Betty tried to talk of other things and then Pennington said abruptly, “You know, there’s to be an inquest.”

“How did you know it?” cried Nell, glad to hear more about it.

“Lawlor has just been to see me, and he says that what he learned here, about the fur, you know, makes it advisable. He wanted to see Polly’s fur, and I showed it to him. They’re almost exactly alike. Well, I hope you folks don’t mind. For my part, I’m rather glad to have an inquest; it may help toward finding Emily.”

“How?” said Rodney.

“I don’t know, but isn’t there a chance of bringing out some evidence, or report of any strangers in town, or something like that?”

“You on the motor-bandit theory?”

“I wasn’t. I was sure that poor Polly took her own life, for I know there were times when that notion appealed to her. But after the fur story I have vague ideas of bandits or hold-up men who were attracted by Emily’s necklace, and when they tried to grab it, Polly tried to help Emily with the result that they pitched Polly over the rail and took Emily off.”

“But why abduct her if they had the loot?”

“I don’t know. Gibby, my mind goes round in circles. I can’t theorize the thing at all. That’s why I sort of hoped an inquest might bring out some clue, some otherwise unavailable bit of evidence that might help toward finding Emily.”

“It might,” Rod said. “At any rate it can do no harm. Shall you go?”

“Oh, I’ll have to. And I don’t mind. You see the Hilldale people are all like one big family. And, let me tell you, it’ll be some inquest. Whatever our people do, they dress up for it, and they’ll make it more like a field day than a police proceeding. They’re sorry enough for me, and all that, but they can’t help making a Roman holiday. It’s their way; they mean no harm.”

“Why shouldn’t they?” said Nell, secretly intrigued with the prospect. “It can’t harm poor Polly and as you say, it may be a help toward finding Emily.”

“I hope so. I’m having the funeral on Saturday, and on Sunday I’m going off for a while. I can’t stand the lonely house, it drives me crazy. So I’m going to fire the few servants we have, shut up the place and go away somewhere for a time. Probably write a play; that’s the only thing that would divert my interest.”

“Where you going?”

“Haven’t a notion. I’ll take my car, I think, go down to New York, and then see what I want to do. Perhaps go abroad, though I hardly think so. I’ll let you know where I am—if you care.” He looked about him almost piteously. “Why, you are all out-of-towners! Well, I’ll let Mrs. Bell know. I’ll see her before I go.”

“Oh, yes,” said Betty, who delighted in playing the rôle of hostess whenever she got the chance. “And, do, Mr. Pennington, come over here for your meals until you go away. I know how forlorn you must be, eating alone.”

“The place is so desolate and empty. I see Polly everywhere!” He shivered, and even Gibby, who had about as much temperament as a snow man, felt sorry for him.

“But I’ll get along,” Pennington said. “Rosa is a good sort, and the chauffeur’s wife is a fine cook. I shall give them advance wages in lieu of notice. Rosa is sure she can get a place in Tuxedo, the Mecca of all good Hilldale servants. And my chauffeur is pure gold. He’ll get a place before I’m round the bend.”

“I say, Jim,” Sayre said to him, “I’m going to get the best detective in the world to bring Emily back to me.”

“Good work!” Then with a queer little crooked smile he added, “I wish the best detective in the world could bring back my Polly.”

“I wish so, too,” said Rodney solemnly. “Do you know any superior detective? I mean one who brings in the goods, not necessarily a superhuman magician.”

“The best one I ever heard of—I don’t really *know* any—is Fleming Stone. They say he’s the greatest.”

“I’ve heard of him as top of the heap, too,” said Gibby. “But he’s almost impossible to get and very expensive.”

“I don’t mind any expense,” Sayre assured him, “and I’ve some influential friends who could get him for me, I think. I’ve heard his name, but, like you, Jim, I’ve never had any dealings with live detectives.”

Pennington went off home, and after a short further talk the girls went off to bed. Soon Lamb and Gibby went to their rooms too, but Rodney Sayre camped on the sofa for the few hours left of the night.

“Let ’em laugh,” he said to himself. “Emily told me to stay here, and here I stay. Dear little girl,” he picked up her photograph from the table. “Where are you now? Oh, Emily, darling, if you’re only alive! Jim thinks,” he went on soliloquizing, “that his affliction is worse than mine—saying that a detective couldn’t bring Polly back. Well, maybe it is, but in some ways suspense is almost harder to bear than any certainty. No, it isn’t! For with suspense there is always hope.”

He tumbled onto his sofa, leaving the door ajar and the light burning, and exhausted by the terrible strain, he fell into a sound sleep.

Next morning, the others having also caught a few hours' sleep felt refreshed for whatever the new day might bring forth. They were not light-hearted, the situation was too serious for that, but they were normally healthy and sound young people, to whom the delicious breakfast set before them was particularly welcome.

Aunt Judy appeared, sad and tearful-eyed, but bravely trying to keep up as well as the rest. They realized that, after Rodney, she was the one Emily loved best of them all, and they were especially kind and gentle with her.

But kindness and gentleness, nice as they are, cut little ice with Aunt Judy.

"Now, look here," she said to them, "I suppose everybody in Hilldale will come here to-day, with sympathy or a chocolate roll or something to cheer us up. I'll see some of them, but if it's people I don't like, I shall refuse. Nell, I suppose you'll take care of that wooden Indian. Lambie, darling, you made such a success with the Reverend Garner yesterday, I daresay you'll be glad to relieve me of him, and he'll be about the first one here. The neighbors I'll see myself and Pearl will let me know who's approaching in the distance."

The announcement of the inquest startled her.

"What for?" she cried, and they told her about the fur.

Aunt Judy grew very thoughtful. Her black eyes ceased to snap and her white, bobbed hair ceased to shake its curls.

She looked about at the young people, just finishing breakfast.

"Which of you lads has the most sense?" she demanded.

"I have," answered Sayre; "you know it."

"You won't do." She stared hard at Gibby and Lamb and decided on the former.

"Come with me," she beckoned to him, and took him to a small sitting room of her own.

“Pete,” she began, after she had closed the door, “it’s very bad. Do you see how things are going?”

“In what respect?” he asked, a little bewildered, and also disturbed at her serious air.

“You all told me everything there was to tell about the fur, didn’t you?”

“Yes, everything. You know all we know.”

“I know more than you know. At least, I see through it as you do not. You are all too young, I suppose, to realize it, but that Lawlor man means very bad business, very bad, indeed.”

“Come, Aunt Judy,” Pete was permitted the name, “tell me just what you mean.”

“This. They were to have no inquest. They were to bury Pauline as having died accidentally. Along comes that fur piece, and turns out to be Emily’s. As soon as they learn about it, they call an inquest. Now do you see?”

“Go on,” said Pete unsteadily.

“I will go on. They can’t explain Emily’s presence on the bridge, nor her absence afterward. And they think—they think that Emily pushed Polly over, and her fur fell over, and then Emily ran away.”

“Aunt Judy, you’re crazy.”

“I hope to goodness I am!”

Chapter IX

The Inquest

The two said no more, for as Aunt Judy had prognosticated, callers came in streams.

The Hilldale people were neighborly, and they also had their due share of human curiosity.

The minister was taken charge of by Lamb, who carried the interview through successfully, although with difficulty repressing a strong impulse to pitch the visitor out of the window.

For the clergyman, without saying it in so many words, implied, or seemed to imply, that a young woman who proposed to edit the marriage ceremony ought reasonably to expect battle, murder, and sudden death to pursue her course.

Burton Lamb tactfully refrained from any reply or comment on these innuendoes, and tried to keep the conversation on the Pennington tragedy rather than their own.

But Mr. Garner kept at it.

“You know,” he said, through tightly drawn lips, “Mr. Sayre did not at all approve of Miss Emily’s strange notions. He wanted everything right and proper, as it should be. May it not be that the two young people quarrelled over these matters, and that in her pettish way, Miss Duane flung herself out of the house and ran off to the home of some friend, where she is in hiding?”

“It may well be so, Mr. Garner,” and Lamb nodded his head affably. “Doubtless your assumption is correct. We must inquire among her friends.”

Mr. Garner looked closely at the young man, but could see no gleam of sarcasm in his courteous expression, and after a few more banalities of sympathy and unctuous proffers of help, the reverend gentleman went his way.

Also came the Swami.

Nell appropriated him, Betty making no objection, and Pete Gibby joined the pair, for he had a distinct distrust of His Hinduship, and much desired to watch him.

“Give us your ideas and advice, won’t you, Lal Singh?” Pete said, pleasantly. “What do you think became of Miss Duane?”

“I think it is a freakish prank to annoy and tease her lover, the good Mr. Sayre.”

“Oh, you do. Going pretty far in a prankish line to disappear just before her wedding day?”

“Yes, yes, but Miss Duane went far, always. She was the far-going sort.”

“Don’t say *was*, it annoys me. Yes, she is of the far-going sort. You know her fairly well, Lal Singh?”

“I know her not so well, but I know much of her.”

“What sort of knowledge have you, sir?”

Nell was distinctly upset at Pete’s questions, and indeed, at his being there at all, as she wanted the Hindu to herself.

“Let us alone, Pete,” she said, crossly. “The Swami wants to talk to me.”

“How do you know he does? I haven’t heard him say so. Well, I’ll clear out as soon as he answers my question.”

Now, the Swami didn’t at all like this gay young man whose off-hand manner and smiling eyes seemed ever mocking him.

So, he decided to give him a “jolt,” though he didn’t know that expression at all.

“You perhaps know little of the young lady’s gay ways?”

“I know all about her gay ways, and consider them delightful.” Pete was getting very angry, but concluded to keep calm.

“I think not, sir,” purred the soft Oriental voice, and the great dark eyes looked straight at him. “You know, then, of the escapades at Atlantic City?”

“Certainly,” declared Pete, who hadn’t the slightest idea of them.

“Ah—then I say no more.”

And it was not necessary, for with a slight gesture of his long brown hands, and a mingled expression of scorn, pity and mirth on his swarthy countenance, the Hindu shrugged his speaking shoulders and gave the impression that Emily was just about the worst ever.

But Pete Gibby's temper was under his own control. This was no time to pick a quarrel with this slimy son of the East. He must be put in his place, Pete saw that, but just now it was nearing the time for the inquest, and they must soon be starting.

So Pete walked away leaving Nell to her coveted *tête-à-tête*.

He ran into Abel Collins, who paused to talk to him.

"Bad business," said the older man, his mild blue eyes full of pain. "Emily is my godchild, my darling. I am as fond of her as if she were my own kin. Where is she, young Gibby?"

"I wish I knew, Mr. Collins. Do you think her disappearance and Mrs. Pennington's death are in any way connected?"

"I hope not," said Abel Collins gravely.

"Why?"

"I don't know—I don't know. Let's not discuss it until after this infernal inquest. Why an inquest at all, I can't see!"

"A mere formality, they tell me."

"Mere fiddlestick!"

And then the people came from the house, ready for their walk to the inquest.

"I'm not going," Rodney had declared. "I shall stay here in case Emily returns. If they want to ask me any questions, let them do it over the telephone. Of course, if I'm cited or subpoenaed or whatever they call it, I'll go over, but in that case Aunt Judy, you must not come along. One of us must be here all the time."

“I don’t think they’ll want you, Rod,” Lamb told him. “I think I can explain your absence; but if you must go over I’ll bring Aunt Judy back here first.”

Hilldale prided itself on its public buildings. The hospital was the newest, but the church, the library and the town hall were all fine and modern and were really gems of architecture, unornate and in good taste.

The inquest was to be in the town hall, and thither a large portion of the Hilldale population set out.

They were smart, astute, and clannish. Well bred, well fed and well read, they represented a community rather above the average. The men were keen, wise and well balanced. The women, for the most part, home-makers of efficiency and knowledge.

To-day’s affair was a novelty and so promised a new thrill.

But this idea was not expressed. Only murmurs of conventional sorrow and sympathy were heard as the audience filed to their seats. All were dressed appropriately in tailored street gowns or modified sports clothes. No bright colors, yet no undue somberness. Oh, the Hilldale people knew a thing or two.

Perhaps none noticed this so much as Gibby. But to him, it seemed a pageant, impromptu but successful, and the solemn Swami and the ascetic clergyman added the last touch to the picture.

The coroner was a man of dignity and poise. He would be, of course.

The jury was a joy to look upon. A handful of Hilldale’s best citizens, all calm and at ease, awaited whatever might be the outcome of this new duty thrust upon them.

Indeed, *savoir faire* was Hilldale’s middle name, and there was no danger of any untoward occurrence.

Nell was enchanted. She looked about as if at an opera or play, but soon saw that an extra shade of decorum was the thing.

Betty was entirely oblivious to the scene and thought only of the matter in hand.

The coroner, whose name was Winston, went through his preliminaries with gravity and despatch.

He admitted the strange peculiarities of his inquest, and confessed that he had no witnesses, weapon, clues, evidence, criminal suspect, or even certainty of a crime.

But, he averred, there was an unexplained death, and inquiry into it must be made.

So, Hildale being a law unto itself, inquiry was made.

Sergeant Murdock, who had discovered the body, told his story first.

“You thought the bridge rail was broken, did you?” asked Winston, fixing his calm gray eyes on the witness.

“I did sir, at first. But I found afterward, that ’twas only the vines as was broken and tangled.”

“Badly broken and tangled?”

“Very bad, sir.”

“More pushed about than would be likely if one person had gone over that rail?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then, would you say there had been another person present at the breaking and tangling of those vines?”

Now Murdock was far from shrewd, but he began to see the drift of these questions, and like King Agag, he walked delicately.

“No, sir, I wouldn’t go so far as to say that. It might easy a been done by one person thrashin’ around like.”

“I see.”

After Murdock came McGuire, with his statement of finding the fur scarf at the place where the body had lain, and of bringing it up when he climbed the steep side of the ravine.

“It was just at the place where you found the lady?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Would you say it had been under the body?”

“That I can’t say, sir. It mighta been or it mighta fell off her when we took her up.”

“I see.” The terrible finality of Winston’s declaration of his powers of vision, or some other influence, seemed to disturb greatly the climber, McGuire, for he trembled and bit his lips and clenched his hands, and looked generally upset.

“What’s the matter, man?” said the coroner, not unkindly. Then, with a flash of divination, he said:

“Did you find anything else?”

“N—no, sir.”

“You did,” returned Winston calmly. “What was it?”

“I d—didn’t—”

“Don’t lie, my boy, or you’ll be in deep trouble. What else did you find?”

Whoever expected or wanted a thrill from the morning’s proceedings, received it now.

“This, sir.” The trembling fingers of Billy McGuire slipped into his pocket and he draw forth a glittering object which he handed over to his interlocutor.

Winston at once held it up in full view of the audience.

It was a short chain of six diamonds, not very large, but pure, flawless stones.

Now to Robert Winston this was a surprise, a startling occurrence and of great interest, but it told him nothing further.

To those who knew Emily Duane and knew of Rodney's gift to her, it was a thunderbolt.

Nell put her hands across her mouth to keep from screaming. Betty gripped the sides of her chair to keep from fainting. And Aunt Judy Bell sat immovable as a statue, showing no emotion save for the fact that all the lustre had suddenly left her great black eyes.

Pete Gibby felt as if some one had slipped a chunk of ice down his back and Lamb was so full of devout thankfulness that Rod was not present that he had room in his soul for nothing else.

Jim Pennington sat gazing at the thing with a numb, dumb horror.

He had braced himself to stand the trying ordeal he was going through and was quite ready, when the time came, to tell of his wife's doings the day before.

But the sight of those diamonds sent a fresh shock through his shattered nerves, and through his weary brain there raced one theory after another as to what it might all come to mean.

He knew more than the rest of Emily's squabbles with Polly, squabbles that sometimes developed into real quarrels.

With Polly's ultra-emotional nature and Emily's spitfire ways, there was often friction. Why the girls remained friends at all, he could never quite see. But between fights, they were amiable, chummy and often affectionate.

Pennington knew all—or nearly all—about the Atlantic City escapades, and had long ago forgiven his wife for those.

But these diamonds, now. How would they be interpreted?

He never had admired Emily greatly, she was too animated, too coltish. To him, she was merely one of Polly's friends. But these diamonds! He wondered.

Winston was speaking.

“Where did you find these, McGuire?”

His calm tones steadied the lad, and he replied, in a low tone:

“Just where I found the fur piece, sir.”

“They were together?”

“Maybe a coupla feet apart.”

“Why didn’t you turn them in before this?”

“I—I wanted to keep ’em, sir.”

“Steal them?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I see.”

To the listeners it seemed that Winston’s calm quiet hypnotized the witness into simple statements of truth.

“And why didn’t you stick to your denial just now, and keep your booty?”

“Because,” the voice sank to a whisper, “because the Devil gets them as robs the dead.”

“As a matter of fact,” said Winston, coolly, “I made you shell out. You would have kept them fast enough, Devil and all, if I hadn’t forced your hand.”

“No, sir,” said McGuire, earnestly, “no, sir. I dremp last night, and after that I—I couldn’t keep ’em, sir.”

“Well, never mind your dream. Now have you any more treasure-trove?”

“What, sir?”

“Did you find anything else in the ravine?”

“No, sir!” and the words rang out with a finality equal to Winston’s own.

“Did these diamonds belong to your wife, Mr. Pennington?”

“No,” was the answer.

“Do you know to whom they do belong?”

“I am not sure that I do.”

“Can any one present identify these jewels?”

There was a pause, and then, deeming it his duty, Burton Lamb said:

“I can. They are a part of a necklace belonging to Miss Emily Duane. I mean, they look like that. I cannot say for certain, of course.”

“Miss Duane possesses a necklace of similar gems?”

“Yes.” Lamb almost wished he had kept silent.

“Is Miss Duane’s necklace still intact?”

“That I do not know,” returned the perturbed Lamb.

“Does any one here present know?”

Apparently nobody did, for there was no response.

Winston began to feel that a coroner’s lot is not a happy one.

Then his common sense came to his aid, and he bethought himself of a way out.

“This inquiry is not in regard to or in investigation of Miss Duane’s disappearance,” he said. “We are merely eliciting such facts as may be obtainable in the case of Mrs. Pennington’s death. Mr. Pennington, will you detail the proceedings of your wife and yourself yesterday afternoon? Please tell the story in your own words.”

So, Jim Pennington told again the tale of their going to Emily’s tea, which was given for the purpose of letting her intimate friends see her wedding gifts before the day of the ceremony.

He told of their departure, after saying good-by to Emily, who made to them no mention of her intent to go out on any errand.

“Therefore,” said Winston, “which left the house first, Miss Duane or you and your wife?”

“I’ve no idea; after we said good-by, Miss Duane turned away, and after a word or two with Mrs. Bell, we came away.”

“What time was this?”

“It is always hard to say precisely. I should judge it was almost exactly five, but nearer than that, I don’t know. I left Mrs. Pennington for a few minutes to go over to Wallace’s for some cigarettes, and she said she would wait for me on the bridge. She often does that, as she hates going in crowded shops.

“When I came back, she was not in sight, so I went on home, thinking to find her already there. But she wasn’t. That’s all I know.”

“Mr. Pennington,” and whether suggestively or not, the coroner dangled the diamonds from his fingers, “have you any theory as to how your wife came by her death?”

“It isn’t a question of theory, but it is my belief, founded on certain knowledge, that she purposely and knowingly committed suicide.”

“What is your certain knowledge?”

“Her continued declarations that she would do so, and the fact that she had made some unsuccessful attempts.”

“What were these attempts?”

“One was only a few months ago. Mrs. Pennington chanced to read a long and elaborate news story of women who chose to end their lives by going to the garage, getting into a motor, starting the engine, and calmly sitting there until overcome by the fumes of carbon monoxide. It was a terrible story and had a great effect on her. She left her room softly one night, crept out of the house and down to the garage, and getting into the car, started the motor. Had not the chauffeur chanced to hear the

motor running, she must have been killed very soon. As it was, a pulmotor saved her life.”

The speaker looked at Doctor Eaton, who gravely nodded his head, well remembering the occasion.

“I trust it will not be necessary for me to detail any further attempts at suicide made by Mrs. Pennington, but there have been such. She was not entirely responsible, for a great grief in her life left her in a nervous state that resulted in occasional attacks of nervous excitement that amounted to hysteria and at times almost dementia. I am telling you this to explain why I feel certain that Mrs. Pennington threw herself over the ravine bridge of her own accord, though perhaps she was not quite rational at the moment.”

Winston knew a little about the Penningtons’ history, but not so much as this, and he was profoundly shocked.

He excused the witness, and sat for a few moments without speaking.

Pete Gibby, meaning no irreverence, thought to himself that the scene reminded him of a passage in the Apocalypse, a favorite book of his:

“And when he had opened the seventh seal, there was silence in Heaven about the space of half an hour.”

But he couldn’t tell this to anybody, for so few knew the Scriptures, save, perhaps, the Reverend Garner, and he didn’t care to speak to him about it.

Of course the coroner’s pause was not so long as the celestial one, and Winston returned to the fray, if fray it could be called, by saying:

“At this point it seems necessary to inquire of her family and friends at what hour Miss Duane left her home yesterday afternoon.”

Again Lamb was spokesman. As Rodney Sayre’s best man, it was his part to do anything and everything in his power to save old Rod any trouble or bother. And it was too bad to expect Aunt Judy or the girls to answer. Though, he felt sure, Nell was dying to get into the conversation.

But Nell, like the rest, was pretty well subdued by the terror of the ideas hinted at by the finding of Emily's diamonds and fur with the dead body of Pauline Pennington.

It could all be duly explained, of course, but it hadn't been as yet.

"We've gone over that question pretty thoroughly, Mr. Winston," Lamb told him, "and none of us can place the hour nearer than about five. You know yourself at a pleasant party one doesn't watch the clock in case of being called as a witness. Mr. Sayre was the last one to speak to her in the house, so far as we know. But the butler saw her leave by a side entrance and he said it was about five. He's more likely to know than the guests."

"Yes, of course." Winston nodded. "Where did she go?"

"She started for the hospital, but we are told she never arrived there. We fear foul play, perhaps abduction for ransom, or robbery of her jewels. That piece you have is but a small portion of a long rope of diamonds given her by her *fiancé* as a wedding present."

"And she was wearing it when she left the house?"

"We think so."

"Don't you know so?"

"How can we? She might have chosen to leave it behind at the last minute. It might have been stolen by a sneak thief—oh, I'm not in the witness box, am I?"

Lamb's enthusiasm had run away with him, and he ceased speaking, a little abruptly.

"No, Mr. Lamb, and the two cases must be kept separate, unless they impinge on one another."

There was more testimony from the doctor, and the hospital authorities, and then Winston put the case in the hands of the jury.

Solemnly they filed out of the room, and bizarre inquest though it might be, hearts were beating with very real and deep anxiety as to the verdict.

The Knollwood group sat properly quiet and conventionally calm, but Betty felt limp and weak and Nell wanted to scream.

Aunt Judy had on her best drum-major air, and that was a very fine one indeed.

The men came back, as fine in all respects as they had gone forth, though Pete looked at them for battle scars.

Their verdict was:

“Death by misadventure. Whether alone at the time, or in the company of another person, there is not sufficient evidence or data to determine.”

And the citizens of Hilldale filed out in an orderly manner and went sedately home to talk over their first inquest.

Chapter X

All The Cards On The Table

“Who’s going to tell Rod about the piece of the diamond chain?” asked Pete Gibby, as the Knollwood group walked slowly homeward.

Lamb quailed inwardly, but was about to say he would of course do that, when Aunt Judy spoke up.

“I shall. As things stand now, there is a shadow or the danger of a shadow on our Emily, and her natural protectors are myself and Rodney. I put myself first, for she is mine until I give her over to him. But of course, he and I share the responsibilities of any decisions. You will all stand by, I know, but we must take the helm. I feel helpless, I can take no initiative, for I know of none to take. I can only be ready to face any situation that may arise.”

Aunt Judy stopped talking and they were all silent.

Never had they seen this side of her before. Always placidly content, and carelessly gay, she had looked after household matters in her efficient way but no one knew how she could be depended upon for generalship.

Yet, as she had said, there was no initiative to be taken, only to await developments.

Lamb was escorting her, Nell and Betty were walking behind with Pete.

“Good for you, Aunt Judy,” Lamb said; “I know you’ll be a tower of strength for old Rodney, and, too, he’ll be your right-hand man. Call on me for anything in the world I can do, and indeed, on all of us. Shall we stay over the week-end?”

“Surely. You know, Emily may appear at any minute, and then the wedding will pick up and go on. Yes, irrespective of poor Polly’s death. She was a dear friend, but not a relative, so we will go right on.”

Aunt Judy spoke as though Emily might come home, laughing, at any time now, and whether this attitude was real or assumed, none could say.

But when they reached Knollwood and Aunt Judy summoned Rod to her in her own little sitting room, she told him the truth.

“Rodney,” she said, “we are up against it, you and I. I don’t want to talk this way before the others, but Emily is ours, and we must be the responsible ones. First of all, Rod, what do you really think has happened?”

“I’ve two theories,” he said, promptly. “One, that she was abducted and is being held for ransom. That’s the most plausible. You know they do abduct rich girls as well as children.”

“Not often. Well, what else?”

“That she is teasing me. I know it seems incredible, but Emily is a wilful piece, and it may be that she wants to give me a final test as to my patience in putting up with her teasing. I should not be surprised to see her walk in this minute and throw her arms around me.”

And then, very gently and straightforwardly, Aunt Judy told him of what had been brought out at the inquest.

Sayre listened, his face growing white and set, and his eyes filled with an amazement beyond all words.

When a faithful recital of the morning’s session had been concluded, he sat silent a moment, and then said:

“You’re right, Aunt Judy, we are up against it.”

“You see where the police are trending?”

“Of course I do. They’ll say Emily pushed Polly over the rail, that Polly caught at Emily’s fur and necklace as she went over, and that after the deed, Emily ran away.”

“That’s exactly what they will say.”

“But Emily didn’t do that?”

“Of course not.” Aunt Judy’s voice was firm and even, but her eyelids fluttered a mite, sure sign with her of uncertainty.

Sayre caught it, and said, quietly, “Tell me what you think.”

“I will. This is no time for concealment of any sort. I know Emily had no really evil thought in her heart, but I know, too, how she can fly off the handle and do the most outrageous things in a moment of angry passion.”

“Push Pauline over?”

“Not intentionally, but she could have given her a push in anger. Emily wouldn’t strike her, of course, but all her life, from a child, when angry, she would push out blindly at any one who had roused her wrath. She had honestly tried to overcome this habit, but it may have overtaken her. Then, if Pauline was standing insecurely, or too near the rail, she might have gone over from the impact, grabbing at Emily as she went. Hush—hear me out. If something like this did happen, Emily would go away and never return. I know her character and temperament better than you do, Rod, and I know, if she had done this thing, she would crawl away to die alone, rather than face us all.”

“Dear Aunt Judy, I’m willing to grant this as a possibility, though I can’t believe it at all.”

“But what other theory, however vague, however far-fetched, can you suggest?”

“I’ve told you what I think—”

“Yes, but that was before you knew about the diamonds. Emily isn’t going to run away to tease you, and then come back to the bridge for an interview with Pauline.”

“Well, you’re all wrong, anyway. Then, it comes back to the bandit who attacked the two girls, flung Pauline over, or she fell over, and he made off with Emily, diamonds and all. Of course, the diamonds you tell of—six, was it?—are but a small portion of the whole. There are sixty-seven stones in the necklace.”

“It is very valuable, Rodney?”

“The best I could get. I didn’t want great big stones of inferior degree, so I chose smaller ones that were perfect. Though none is less than a carat.”

“The child shouldn’t have worn it out in the dusk, alone.”

“Of course, she shouldn’t. But, she was Emily.”

“Yes, she was Emily.”

Aunt Judy sighed, as if they had agreed on some new discovery of prime importance.

“Well, never mind all that,” Sayre said, after a pause. “We must get busy now, deciding on our stand.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not sure, myself, but I think I mean what they call a line of defense. You see, if the police feel about this as you think they do, they will soon be here, and want to search Emily’s room and all that.”

“Good gracious! What for?”

“Oh, they always do. Is there anything you want to put away beforehand?”

“Mercy, yes, crowds of things!”

“Such as what?”

“Oh, all her little personal matters. Souvenirs, letters, pictures, love-
notes, her diary, her locked boxes—oh, heaps of things.”

“Heavens, Aunt Judy, you talk as if she were a movie queen!”

“Well, she has had lots of admirers, you know, Rod, and you know what
young people are nowadays.”

“I’m one, myself, madam.”

“Of course, you are, and so you know all about this sort of thing. You’ve
been through it all, but probably you destroyed more as you went along.
Emily has saved everything, from the days she first went to school. Says
she means to write her confessions sometime.”

“She can tell her confessions to me.”

“Oh, she will. There isn’t a breath of wrongdoing or wrong thinking in
our Emily. She isn’t the necking sort and she abhors petting parties.”

“You know a lot, Aunt Judy,” and Rodney laughed.

“I do know a lot. I learned it so I might be in Emily’s confidence and take
care of her properly. Well, never mind all that—only I want you to
understand that though you may be a Bostonian, though you may be the
whole public library, you’ve nothing on Emily for purity and sweetness
of soul—”

“Now, Aunt Judy, don’t you think I know all that? Now, let’s get down to
brass tacks. What shall I do about my revered parents? After this
morning, this whole business will be in the papers, of course. Lord
knows what the reporters will make of it! But we have to do the best we
can. And I don’t fancy my family on the spot. I’ve a Pilgrim father and a
Plymouth Rock mother, and something tells me that for them there’s no
place like home.”

“I think so too, Rod. Telegraph or telephone them not to come here until
further notice. I’m going to hold everything in readiness until after the
hour set for the wedding. Then—if Emily isn’t here—we can make
further plans. No guests will come, unless they know Emily is here, and
they’ll know it if she is. And if some should come, it will do no especial

harm. I think the presents should be sent to the bank, at least the more valuable ones, but I don't care. There's a competent protection agency in charge."

Sayre looked at her in real admiration, for he knew her heart was breaking with agony of suspense, yet these details of household management must be attended to, and Aunt Judy was right on the job.

"You're a brick!" he declared, "a real gold brick. Now, come along to lunch; and look here, Aunt Judy, if you and I are the forefront of this campaign or whatever it turns out to be, let's do our best to keep up the morale of the whole kit and boodle of 'em."

"Rod, you're a darling," and Aunt Judy threw her arms around his neck and kissed him soundly.

Luncheon, as it often was at Knollwood, was a continuous performance. Family and guests dropped in as and when they chose and Prall's efficiency and general oversight was never found wanting.

Aunt Judy sat in Emily's place at the head of the table, and Rod at the other end.

Abel Collins was there, and he and Gibby were in deep discussion.

The Swami had drifted in, as he acquired most of his meals in such fashion, and the Knollwood menus pleased him.

But afterward he and Nell had gone for a stroll, and Lamb and Betty were off somewhere.

"It seems to me," said Collins, "that about the emptiest phrase that falls from human lips is the one so frequently spoken to folks in trouble when really well-meaning friends say, 'Now, if there's anything in the world I can do, let me know, won't you?' It always makes me mad."

"It needn't," commented Aunt Judy. "That line is all right, Abel. It's because they are willing enough, but they don't know what to do."

"Then they're fools. They ought to know what to do. Now, as a friend of this house, I'm making a few suggestions. Let's divide the business that most surely lies ahead of us. As a starter, suppose I take care of the

police when they come. They're bound to come, or, if they don't—then I get off easy. You, young Gibby, look after the reporters. They're a foxy lot, but you're foxier, and you have a cheerio manner about you that can swing that job, I'm sure. I think the two young ladies can see the callers who come, except those Mrs. Bell wants to see herself. And with her housekeeping cares, that's all Mrs. Bell need look after."

The kindly blue eyes beamed about, seeming to seek approval, which was readily granted.

"And me?" said Rodney.

"You're the general who sits on his horse in a gold-lace cap—"

"I'd love to see a horse in a gold-lace cap!" exclaimed Betty, coming in with Lamb just then.

They slipped into their chairs, and cast furtive glances at Sayre to see how he was getting on.

"I'm planning plans," Collins resumed, including the newcomers in his glance. "You see, the search for Emily is being put through properly and thoroughly. It is in the hands of skilful organizers and helpers, and they will explore every foot of country for miles around for our girl."

The blue eyes looked troubled, but Abel Collins went on.

"Emily is my godchild, and I shall spare no effort to find her. I have no theories as to her going away. I have nothing to base theories on. So, I can only wait and hope. But there are minor matters that should occupy our attention. Here is one. The funeral services of Mrs. Pennington will be held to-morrow afternoon in Hilldale church. Already a lot of young friends of the Penningtons are arranging palms and flowers under the management of the Funeral Director—"

Betty stared, then suddenly choked with stifled laughter, and cried:

"You don't mean Spinks!"

"Certainly I do, why not?"

But though the redoubtable Spinks was so familiar to Hilldale people as to seem standardized, to Betty he was still the cause for wildest hilarity.

But she restrained her mirth, and went on with her luncheon and Abel resumed his talk.

“What I’m getting at is this,” he said. “I don’t believe one of you has realized that flowers should be sent from this house, as they will be from nearly every home in Hilldale.”

“My sakes!” cried Aunt Judy, “I should say so! You angel Abel, to think of it! Why, Emily would never forgive me if I neglected a thing like that!”

Human habit is so strong with most of us that Aunt Judy noted no incongruity in her words, if indeed there was any.

“And I appoint you, Betty Bailey, and Lamb Burton, or whatever his name is, to go and select proper flowers and have them duly sent to the church at the proper time.”

“Yes, sir,” said Betty, dutifully, not overjoyed at the prospect, but willing to do whatever she was asked.

And then the bomb fell.

Prall announced that Detective Lawlor had arrived and wished to see some representative of the family.

“I’ll see him,” and Abel Collins rose and quietly left the room.

The whole atmosphere changed.

Emily’s absence was hard enough to bear; the dreadful suspense, the blank wonder, the fearful imaginings.

But this was worse. This was a living horror, a black, fearsome serpent coiled, waiting to strike.

Sayre moved restlessly and laid down his fork. The others made pretense of eating, but soon gave it up.

With one impulse they rose from the table and went out on the terrace, where Prall brought coffee to them.

Abel Collins took Lawlor into Aunt Judy's little sitting room, which was secluded and safe from interruption.

"Now," said Abel, when the two men were seated, "all the cards on the table, please. Miss Duane is my godchild, and though her fortune is in the hands of trustees, I am the one most responsible for her personal welfare. What is your exact errand here?"

"All the cards on the table it is," agreed Lawlor. "I am here to make inquiries. You must not take it amiss, for it is in the line of police duty, and we have no choice in the matter. We must investigate."

"Yes, of course." Collins spoke heavily; he did not hanker after this investigation. Who could tell whither an investigation of the case of Emily Duane might lead? Emily!

"Yes, of course. Well, now, Mr. Collins, as man to man, if you found a dead woman, and lying beside her a fur tippet and a few diamonds that belonged to another woman, wouldn't you make inquiries? As man to man now, wouldn't you?"

"Lawlor," and Abel's blue eyes gazed at him, "I can't carry on this talk as man to man. You're the investigator, you're the inquisitor, but I'm only anxious to protect my little girl from this base, this outrageous calumny. Oh, I know you're honest enough in your suspicions and doubts, but Emily Duane couldn't have done this thing you imply—for I suppose you are implying—all cards on the table?"

"On the table it is. Well, then, sir, the chief thinks—and I think, that it might be that Miss Duane and Mrs. Pennington had a sort of tiff, and of course, they didn't fight, as men would, but there might have been a pull-about, push-about sort of time, and Mrs. Pennington went over, grabbing Miss Duane's neck chain and tippet as she went. Then, you see, Miss Duane being frightened, ran away."

"Like Little Miss Muffet," said Abel without a smile, for his mind was merely working subconsciously and his speech was automatic.

“Now, look here, Lawlor,” he said, after a moment, “why not just as well say that there was a tiff—or was not, either way—but that Mrs. Pennington herself stepped a little too near the edge of the bridge, and Miss Duane tried to grab her back as she went over. Miss Duane, not being strong enough, Mrs. Pennington fell, grabbing, as you say, at the fur and the necklace of her would-be rescuer?”

“Very good,” said Lawlor, looking compassionately at Abel’s earnest face, “very good, but in that case, why didn’t Miss Duane scream for help, or run home and tell the tale?”

“We here, don’t think Miss Duane disappeared voluntarily,” and Abel drew himself up with dignity.

“Uh-huh? Well, we do. Now, Mr. Collins, I’m right-down sorry for you, and sorry for all the folks in this house, but gotta do my duty. First off, I’m ordered to ask certain questions of Mrs. Bell, or of the servants here. Then, I’ve orders to search Miss Duane’s rooms.”

“But her rooms are the whole house—she owns it all.”

“Shucks! You know what I mean. Her room, boodore or whatever, where she keeps her mash notes and sweetie pictures. Her diary, if she has one, and all that sort of thing.”

“Oh, pshaw, Lawlor, you’re ’way off. Miss Duane is not that sort of girl.”

“All girls are the same sort. I didn’t say there was any harm in these letters and things, did I? But, a man of your age must know that when we set out to do this business we’ve got to do it.”

Abel Collins did know it. He also knew that he could stave it off no longer, and the matter must come to a crisis.

“Very well,” he said, and rang the bell.

Prall came.

“Prall,” said Abel Collins, “take Mr. Lawlor to Miss Emily’s rooms. Let him make such search as he wishes, and then bring him back to me.”

The astute Abel had had a fair notion that Mrs. Juliana Bell would already have performed such sins of omission and sins of commission as she saw fit in Emily's rooms, and he concluded not to trouble her further in the matter.

So Prall solemnly conducted the police detective to the rooms of Emily Duane.

Though not an uncouth or unkempt man, Lawlor looked about as much out of place as Christopher Sly in the bedchamber of the nameless lord.

He glanced round Emily's boudoir, which was done up that year in palest draperies of yellow and pink and mauve, with gilded furniture.

He stepped gingerly on the fair, soft rugs, but duty is duty, and setting his teeth, Lawlor went to work.

Even more than by the dainty trappings was the detective hampered by the terrifying Prall, who stood at attention with the yielding softness of a stone image. Only the eyes of the butler moved, but they followed the intruder's every gesture, until even the stolid Lawlor was so nervous he nearly screamed.

Learning the situation, Betty stole upstairs, and the sudden appearance of this goldy-haired, sprite-like person completed the discomfort of the man who was only doing as he was told.

The prickles came to the back of his neck, perspiration bathed his brow, and his thick fingers seemed clumsier than ever as he tried to extract from ormolu pigeonholes in a Louis Quatorze desk what might be incriminating evidence in the Duane case.

"You poor man! You're all tired up!" cooed Betty's soft, cool voice. "Let me help you. Have you finished this lot?"

Deftly she slipped a pile of papers into a drawer and pushed it shut.

"Now, over here—or have you already done this side?"

"No, miss, I ain't. But I don't need no help."

Ordinarily, Lawlor's English was fair, but under stress of embarrassment it went by the board. He was a well-meaning sort and a most kind-hearted man. He had daughters of his own, and he wished no harm to Emily Duane, but he most fervently wished this Lorelei-like young woman and that staring wooden soldier of a butler at the top of the North Pole or the bottom of the North Sea, he didn't care which.

Nor was he set more at ease when he caught sight in a mirror of a slight wink on Betty's part, and the merest fractional part of a nod from Prall.

They were baiting him, and he was mad, but what could he do? He could arrest the boldest bandit, if he could catch him, he could tackle the biggest bully in the gang, but against these two irritators he was powerless.

But this only gave a new zip to his bulldog grip.

Succeed he would, and he pulled out a pile of large and legal-looking documents, hoping they would be divorce proceedings at least.

"Oh, my heavens, don't spill 'em about so!" and Betty smilingly stooped to the floor to retrieve the lot, which, incidentally, she had herself jarred from his uncertain hand.

"Here, I'll show 'em to you. These, you see, are Miss Duane's wills."

"Her wills?"

There were at least two dozen.

"Yes; she's of a vacillating disposition, and she makes a new will every few weeks, you see. But she keeps the old ones; then, if she prefers a back number, all she has to do is to burn up the later ones, and there you are!"

"Yes, miss, I see. Now, which is the latest one?"

"Oh, the one leaving the money to the Swami! I *thought* he sent you here!"

It was a chance shot of Betty's, and she was utterly amazed to see the flood of red that surged over the countenance of the miserable man.

“There, there,” she said, “don’t take it so hard. No harm done. Be yourself.”

But Lawlor had had enough.

This triangle he was part of was too many for him, and he rose and tramped downstairs without a word.

On the veranda, he stepped up to Abel Collins, and said, his own man again now, “I have to report to the chief. I’ll be over again later.”

And then he turned to Swami Lal Singh, who lounged gracefully in a swing with Nell, and said quite clearly:

“I didn’t find any papers at all relating to Atlantic City.”

Chapter XI

The Funeral

Lawlor departed, swinging his broad shoulders with a general air of indifference, and Betty turned to Lal Singh and said, sweetly:

“Why did he tell you that he didn’t find the Atlantic City matter?”

Lal Singh vouchsafed no verbal reply, but spread his long, brown hands in a gesture of unmistakable denial of any knowledge of the subject.

“Oh, yes, Lally, you do know!” and Betty shook a pinky forefinger at him.

She was the only one who dared trifle with the dignity of the Hindu; and though he writhed under it, he could find no good way to show his resentment.

“It’s all poppycock,” declared Abel Collins, “this searching rooms and making insinuations about Emily. Let them find her first—that’s what we asked the police to do. Then, having found her, it’s quite time enough to bring accusations or insinuations or implications of her wrongdoing. Even if Emily was with Mrs. Pennington at the time of her death no assumptions are possible until we can hear some account of it from Emily herself or from some reliable witness.”

“Good for you, Abel,” said Aunt Judy. “That’s the way to talk. Can’t you tell the police people that, and head them off from messing around in Emily’s rooms? Though I saw to it that there was little there to interest them.”

Aunt Judy spoke casually, as she always did, of her own defiance of law and order, but Pete Gibby noticed the Oriental’s eyebrows draw together slightly and his nostrils quiver, as was his habit when deeply interested.

“The hoky-poky guy is in this, somehow,” Pete concluded, and let it go at that.

“Yes,” Collins returned, “I shall go around now and see Jennings, and tell him his first duty is to find a missing person, and after that is time enough to call her to account.”

“I won’t have my Emily called a person,” said Betty.

“Everybody who is missing is a person,” Pete informed her. “They have no Bureau of Missing Ladies and Gentlemen, nor even a Bureau of Missing People. They become persons as soon as they are missing.”

“I don’t see the use of any such bureau, whatever its name,” Betty declared. “It never finds anybody. It just keeps on letting them be missing.”

“A missing person by the river’s brim a missing person is to them, and it is nothing more,” Pete agreed with her.

“Let’s try to trace her,” Lamb said after one of his long silences. “I mean, try to reconstruct, and each suggest something.”

“Go ahead, Lambkin,” Rodney said.

He felt little interest in the suggestion, but he liked to keep the talk on the subject that engrossed his every thought and impulse.

“Well, we all know that Emily started for the hospital.”

“Yes,” Pete said, “that must be granted, for she told Rod she was going and Prall saw her start.”

“Yes; then, to get to the hospital she had to cross the big ravine and the little ravine on their bridges, before she could strike off cross-lots.”

“Yes.”

“Now we have two ways to look. Either she met Pauline on the bridge as she went, or, she went and came back and met Polly on the return trip.”

“But she never reached the hospital.”

“That can be explained by the assumption that she changed her mind about going. It was darker than she had thought, or she realized her diamonds were a bit conspicuous, or the whim seized her to go back home. There’s no accounting for Emily’s sudden changes of intention.”

“True enough.” Rod said this, he was becoming greatly interested. “Now, Burt, Emily and Polly met on the bridge. I’m not sure it matters whether Emily was going or returning. They must have met there. Moreover, it seems to me it must have been just at the time Jim was over at the Wallace shop, buying his cigarettes. Otherwise, he would have seen them.”

“That’s all right,” Lamb conceded. “Then, I hold that Emily asked Pauline to go to the hospital with her. This, of course, presupposes they met as Emily was going, and that’s most plausible, anyway. Then, I hold that Pauline unexpectedly flew into one of her tantrums at Emily’s suggestion of her going to see a baby, and either flew at Emily’s throat or turned to throw herself over the rail.”

“Well, that’s concisely put,” Rodney said, slowly, “and it may be the truth. But, then, where’s Emily?”

“Now, we’ve got to bring in the bandits. It seems a coincidence that they should be right there on the spot, but they may have been skulking about for days, waiting for a chance to kidnap Emily. A wealthy, petted girl, and a bride-to-be at that, is fair game for any kidnapper. The necklace was incidental. Of course, if Pauline jerked off that bit, she did it in a frenzied clutch as she went over. The scarf went at the same time. But what the abductors wanted was the girl. If she was wearing diamonds, so much the better.”

“These are hard theories to swallow,” Rodney said; “but as an alternative I can’t think of Emily’s seeing Pauline go over, and then herself running away to escape suspicion of having pushed her over!”

“You’re all wrong,” Aunt Judy said. “This is more like it. If your kidnappers really were hanging about, they simply took that opportunity to nab Emily. Polly, of course, was in the way, so they pitched her overboard.”

“Why didn’t they wait until Polly had gone on and Emily was alone? Or until Emily had gone on alone?”

“They didn’t know Emily’s plans, they didn’t know but she’d turn back with Polly or Polly would go on with her. And, beside, I’m not entirely in their confidence.”

Aunt Judy smiled. In accordance with Pete’s admonition she was trying to keep up the morale of the crowd, and, too, she was by nature hopeful, and was by no means ready to concede that they had lost Emily forever.

Sayre was hopeful and despondent by turns. Lamb bent all his energies to doing what he could to cheer or divert Rodney, and he was in a measure successful.

The afternoon wore on. Callers came and went. Tea was served on the terrace and kindly neighbors spoke words of cheer as they consumed buttered muffins.

The Swami, having consumed rather more than his full share of these, asked Nell to go for a walk, which she did.

They went round the rose garden and came to anchor in an arbor. “What nonsense they talk about the disappearance of Miss Duane,” was the Hindu’s comment.

“Do they?” said Nell. “What do you think, Lal Singh?”

“It is plain on the face of it. Miss Duane is a creature of whimsies, of ephemeral likes and dislikes. She is tired of the not too amusing Rodney, and has merely stepped out of it all.”

“Will she step back again?”

“Assuredly. After the day fixed for the wedding is passed.”

“Oh, Swami, I am so glad to hear this. Where has she gone?”

Nell's earnest eyes precluded all thought of insincerity, and the other replied:

“To the home of some friend who will care for her until after the wedding day.”

“It's a mean trick,” said Nell, thoughtfully.

“Aye, but Miss Duane is not thoughtful of the feelings or wishes of others.”

“Be careful,” said Nell, suddenly loyal, “she's my friend.”

“Of course. She is also my friend. She is also friend of the good Mr. Sayre, but she does not want to marry him. She does not want to marry anybody. The *grande passion* has not yet come to her.”

“Oh, my Lord! Do you think that? I thought she was crazy over Rod.”

“No, that is your rôle.”

Nell turned an angry face to his. The long almond-shaped eyes were gazing at her with an amused gleam. He was only teasing her, and as a matter of fact she was not displeased about it.

“Do I then, wear my heart on my sleeve?”

“To me, many people wear their hearts on their sleeves. And if your friend Emily never returns, you will proceed to—set your cap, I believe is the phrase—for the grandiloquent Sayre.”

The impudence of the man was unbelievable, yet he made his speeches with no twinkle of the eye, with no suggestion of a smile on his lips, with no light inflection in his soft, deep voice.

“You're perfectly horrid! I shall never speak to you again!” she cried, goaded at last to anger.

“No? I think, yes. You are fascinated by me. Not in love with me—we are of different races—but you love to be with me, to hear me talk, to watch my countenance. Deny it—Nell.”

He was only playing with her emotions as he might idly finger a lute. His attitude was calm and distant, his face rather benign, but his dark eyes blazed with a half hidden fire that was meant to make its own appeal.

And Nell Harding, only nineteen, had never before had an experience like this, and she lapped it up as a cat laps cream.

Nor was she caught napping. Most of her years had been spent in the last two decades, and they have been of educational interest to young people.

“Yes—oh, yes, my Swami, you are right. I do love to hear your voice, to watch the play of your expression—tell me more, but not about Emily. Tell me about myself—myself and you.”

Nell’s voice dropped to a soft whisper, and she moved a trifle nearer to the white-robed figure.

The Hindu began to feel a bit uncomfortable. The Hildale ladies had hung on his words, they had worshipped at his shrine, but they hadn’t struck just this note of intimacy.

He read Nell well enough to know she meant nothing, but he couldn’t tell just how far her meaningless nothings might go.

Anyway, he concluded he’d better snap out of it, and he rose, saying it was time for him to keep an appointment.

“I’ll go with you,” Nell said, jumping up. “Let me go with you, and sit by you on the platform. I’ll be your—what do you call it! Your control? Your aura?”

“Don’t talk nonsense,” he said, almost sharply, and she stopped.

He went away without rejoining the group on the terrace to say good-by. In the conventions he was a law unto himself.

“I handed him one,” said Nell, as she fell into a lounging chair. “He bullied me and I scared him. Now, we’re even. But, look here. He says Emily jes’ natchelly los her tas’e for Rodney, and she’s gone into retirement until after the wedding day, and then she’ll emerge.”

Sayre was not present, or even careless Nell wouldn’t have said this.

“Well, that’s rubbish,” Lamb declared.

He had been greatly taken with Nell when they first came, but every day had lessened his regard for her.

“I can’t help that, it’s what he said.”

“Then the fact that he said it bars it from further consideration.”

Everybody was getting a little irritable. The strain of worry and fear was growing on them. The excitement of the tragedy, thrilling at first, was settling down to a depressing state of enforced idleness.

The theories had all been discussed, the possibilities all talked over, the conditions deplored, until now, everything that was said had been said before.

All waited and hoped for some new development.

Aunt Judy saw this and flung herself into the breach.

“Look here, Nell and Betty,” she said, “Emily is away, but we’ve no real reason to think harm has come to her. We hope she’s safe and sound wherever she may be. And she may blow in any minute. Now, you do something to amuse yourselves. Get up a little dance for this evening. There’s no impropriety in that. Poor Polly’s death doesn’t touch us so very closely, she wasn’t related, you know. I don’t want you youngsters moping about, and nobody would think of inviting you, lest we feel hurt.”

“Good for you, Aunt Judy,” Pete said. “You’ve the best notions of keeping up the morale of a crowd I ever heard of. Come on, girls, I’ll help you with the list. Let’s keep it small.”

They all saw the common sense of the thing. Of course, left to themselves, Aunt Judy and Rod would never have thought of such a thing, but these young guests ought to be entertained, and Aunt Judy saw it clearly.

So it was left in their hands and they invited a handful of people for the evening.

“And if Emily comes home, it will be like a celebration,” said Betty, by way of salving her conscience, which pinched her a little.

The party was a pleasant one, and as Aunt Judy saw the young people enjoying themselves she was glad she had arranged it.

Rodney sat on his sofa, which had now come to be looked upon as his special piece of property, and for the most part conversed with Abel Collins or Aunt Judy. He danced a few times, but his heart wasn't in it, and concluding he was a gloomy partner, he gave it up.

And so the evening went by, and still no trace of Emily Duane.

Rod had telephoned his people that the wedding would perhaps have to be postponed, and had then written a letter, telling of Emily's disappearance.

He gave few details; indeed, there were few to give. He just told how she had started for the hospital and had never reached there, and said that was all they really knew. He said nothing of Pauline Pennington's death, for they didn't know Pauline and could not be greatly interested.

He told them further that if Emily returned in time for the ceremony, which was set for noon on Saturday, or, indeed if she came Saturday afternoon, the wedding would take place. If she didn't, they must await developments.

Getting this off, Rod felt his work was finished. He went back to his sofa and sat there.

Always energetic, always ingenious in thinking up plans, the situation now completely baffled him. He saw no use in rushing madly round the country on a search which was continually being conducted by better

men for the purpose than he. He sat and thought and thought what he could do to further the hunt, but he could think of nothing.

He had advertised extensively, Emily's picture was in many papers, but though large rewards were offered, Rod hadn't much faith in it all.

He had telephoned his friend about Fleming Stone and the friend had promised to do his best to secure the great detective's services. But Stone was out of town and couldn't be reached before Sunday at earliest.

However, Rodney's judgment prompted him to wait, rather than engage a lesser expert.

Then Friday became a thing of the past and it was Saturday.

The wedding day! The day looked forward to so eagerly by the principals, by the attendants and by half of Hilldale, who would be the wedding guests.

The florists and caterers had been told to proceed with their work as if nothing had happened, and they began to arrive early with their cars and trucks and workmen.

Aunt Judy was up and dressed early, too, and she gave, with wisdom and clarity, orders which were promptly carried out.

She was here, there and everywhere, and her white curls were like the plume of King Henry of Navarre.

The young people, coming down later, found the gala effect really breath-taking, and, too, in a way, it was ghastly.

The marriage bell, large, white and beautiful had been hung, and it seemed as if it might well be used to toll a requiem.

The flowers gave forth delicious fragrance, and a peep into the pantries showed marvelous confections of all sorts, yet, a strange air hung over it all, not quite so much of gloom as of mystery, yet partaking of both.

Rodney, his hands clasped behind him, stood looking out the French window, across the lawns.

“Poor little Roddy,” said Nell, coming along and slipping her hand into his, and Rod felt that if he had had one shred less of self-control, Lawlor would have a real murder to investigate at once.

“All right Nell,” he said cheerfully. “Maybe Emily will come back to-day.”

“Maybe,” said Nell, smiling at him. “Come to brekker, Rodsy.”

“One more nickname, my lady, and it’s the ravine for yours!” he said to himself, feeling he might be permitted that luxury of speech.

However, he went to the table with a pleasant countenance, and did his best to help carry on.

“You see,” Aunt Judy was saying, “when Emily comes in, we want to be all ready to say, ‘Lafayette, we are here,’ and so of course, we must all be here. What are you doing to-day, children?” she asked of her brood, for it was being borne in upon her that for Emily’s sake, she must be a delightful and efficient hostess. “Better go for a round of golf before it gets too warm.”

“Yes, dear, we will,” said Betty, always ready to help. “I suppose there’s nothing we can do around here; we’d only be in the way—”

“You have second sight, haven’t you, Betty?” smiled Aunt Judy. “Now here’s orders. I think we’ll have everything in readiness in case Emily appears, except our clothes. You see, she’ll have to dress, and that will give us all time to dress. So, when you girls come back from golfing, put on a nice little frock, but not your bridesmaids’ togger, see?”

“Yes,” said Betty, quickly understanding.

To her mind there was not one chance in a million of Emily’s return in time for a noon wedding, but, then, there was no counting on Emily.

“Why, the Pennington funeral is to-day,” said Nell, suddenly.

“I know,” Aunt Judy replied, “but I didn’t think you young people would care to attend. Do you ever go to funerals?”

“Well, no,” and Nell flushed a little, “but, to tell the truth, I wanted to see how that funny Spinks would look running a funeral!”

“You wouldn’t be greatly edified, my dear.” Aunt Judy spoke a little severely. “Mr. Spinks is a most efficient man and his capabilities as a funeral director are quite as good as when he officiates at any light function.”

“Don’t go, Nell,” Betty begged. “Let the men go, if they think it’s necessary, but let us stay at home.”

“I’m not going,” Aunt Judy said. “I must be here for many reasons. And Jim Pennington won’t mind. I don’t believe he’ll know who’s there and who isn’t.”

“What’s become of him?” asked Betty. “I invited him over to meals, he has such a forlorn household.”

“I asked him,” Aunt Judy told her, “but he’s busy packing to go away, and, too he doesn’t care to be social just now. Said he’d look in to say good-by.” So the matter was settled and Rodney Sayre and Lamb, with Pete Gibby went to the funeral in the Hilldale church.

Like all Hilldale institutions, the church was beautiful.

Modern and substantial, it was in accordance with the best canons of architecture and good taste, and its restrained use of the finest of stained glass was a joy to connoisseurs.

The congregation was arriving, and a decorum marked their manner, which was quite different from the dignity shown by them at the inquest.

Also, they dressed the part, as they always did. The women wore modish black frocks, with bunches of violets and perhaps a string of black beads.

Our young men met or saw many young people whom they knew, but were vouchsafed the merest nod of recognition.

Gibby thought whimsically that he’d seen nearly everything here but a christening, and he wondered what that would be like.

Then he realized, he hadn’t seen a wedding—yet.

Nor did he expect to see one. He had not the least hope that Emily would return that day, nor any other day. This was not pessimism, but a

conviction that she was either dead, or for some other reason, lost to them forever.

The strains of music as they entered, sounded like heaven. It would, in Hildale.

The congregation took the pews with no rustle or sound, and the services began.

They were very short, simple, and beautiful.

Handkerchiefs were lifted decorously, there was of course, no sob or snuffle.

Rodney could just see Jim Pennington's profile as he sat near the front.

Poor old Jim. Rod couldn't quite make up his mind whose lot was worse. He would think it easier for Jim, for he knew where Pauline was. Then, he would realize that hard as his own case was, not for a moment would he admit that he would rather know Emily dead.

No! While there was life there was hope, and, if he couldn't quite say that, at least, while there was ignorance, there was hope.

So, he listened to the solemn services, rejoicing that they were for some one else than his darling, wherever she might be. Time might bring back Emily; it could never bring back Pauline.

As Aunt Judy had said, Mr. Spinks was just as much at home at a funeral as at a wedding. His manner was perfect; he went round with just the proper shade of professional woe on his face, and his darting eyes saw to it that "every teeny weeny detail was perfect, so's the whole bloomin' show would be perfect," and it was.

Then again that wonderful music, which might not have sounded quite so heavenly had it not been for the accessories, but which, with the shaded lights, the softly breathing people, the fragrance of the flowers and the odor of sanctity, was like strains from the celestial harps themselves.

And then, under the competent management of Spinks, the flower-laden casket was reverently borne out and placed in the beautiful new, dull-

black motor-hearse, and all that was mortal of Pauline Pennington was laid to rest in the Hilldale God's Acre, and the Hilldale people were perhaps justified in their feeling that really, God must be rather proud of that particular acre of His.

The three men walked home in silence, until Gibby said:

"Did you see the Swami?"

"Yes," said Lamb "and I'm free to confess I thoroughly detest that blackbird."

"So do I," agreed Pete, who was craning his neck to look through the trees.

"Don't twist your neck, Pete," Rodney said to him, "she isn't home."

Chapter XII

A Wedding Party

"How do you know?" asked Pete.

"I told Aunt Judy to have the big flag run up if she came home, and we could see that from here."

"Yes, of course."

The church was on an eminence the other side of town from Knollwood, and from where they stood, the men could clearly see the great house that Emily's father had built.

"Stand still a minute," said Pete, "let me look the landscape o'er. There's Knollwood, clear enough. Then the road is hidden but you can just see the bridge over the big ravine. Whose house is that next one?"

"That's the Miller house," answered Sayre. "It's closed; they're in Europe."

"Yes; and then comes the little ravine; you can see that bridge clearly. And that's the Pennington house next? The one high on the hill?"

“Yes, it’s high, but it’s an easy path up to it. It’s a charming house inside, though not very large. That is, not in comparison with Knollwood. They called it The Ravines, because it’s over in that section. I suppose he’ll sell the place, now.”

“Then as the road goes on,” continued Pete, surveying the scene, “it finally reaches the hospital, by rather a roundabout route.”

“Yes,” Rodney agreed. “That’s why nearly everybody goes cross-lots, as they call it, though really, they mean through the woods.”

They traced the various roads and lanes for a few moments longer, and then walked on home.

Burton Lamb felt it incumbent on him to be at his best during the crucial period of what would have been the noontide wedding—he hadn’t the slightest hope that Emily would appear—so, having concluded that a moderately light tone was the best to adopt, he said, casually:

“No use blinking facts, Rod. We’ll just sit tight and wait. Also, as Aunt Judy told the girls, we won’t doll up until Emily comes; there’ll be time enough then.”

“Yes,” said Sayre, looking gravely at his two friends. “There’s nothing to be done. Some things a fellow has to take standing, with his back to the wall.”

“Yep,” agreed Lamb. “What’s your theory now, as things are?”

Lamb put the question advisedly. He was sure Sayre would rather talk about it than to have the matter avoided, and he proposed to keep the subject open.

And he was right. Sayre didn’t care to talk to the multitude about it, but he was glad to unburden his heart to these friends.

“I did think she was teasing me,” he said, “or, perhaps testing me. But I don’t think that any more. I think now she was kidnapped. I don’t know anything about the question of the fur and diamonds. That’s beyond my surmising. But I know Emily is not absent of her own volition. That I am sure of. So, I can think of no explanation except abduction. I think we’ll

soon get a letter asking ransom. If so, I shall pay it, without help or interference from the police. The principle may be all wrong, but I don't care. If any amount of money that I can command will get Emily back, I shall have her as soon as the stipulations can be carried out. So, that's that."

"All right, I'm glad to know where we stand," Burton said. "Now, we'll go home and keep a stiff upper lip—"

"Of course we will," said Sayre. "Whining or sulking won't help any. And Aunt Judy is such a brick, we must stand by her. Supposing Emily doesn't show up by noon, and I admit I don't really expect her, we must go right ahead and let the affair be a party if not a wedding. The preparations are all made, and the guests have not been notified not to come, so they have a right to expect due and proper entertainment."

"You'll be around?" asked Pete.

"Yes. It would be childish for me to absent myself. If my heart is breaking there's no use announcing the fact by moping in solitude. I'll be around, and I'll talk to anybody who wants to talk to me. There's nothing to conceal. Everybody knows as much about the whole affair as we know ourselves. It seems to me the only rational and common-sense way to act is the way I've just mapped out."

"Right you are," agreed Gibby. "I'll do my part to help the people have a good time. There'll be music and dancing and all that, just the same, I suppose."

"Of course," Rod assented. "The Hilldale young people are bidden to a party and a party they must have. And remember, there's no tragedy, as yet. With Emily, I mean. Poor Pauline's death is tragic enough, but that's outside our plans for the moment. I've thought this thing out thoroughly, and I know I'm right. I will not allow a foregone conclusion that anything serious has happened to Emily. If it has, time enough to take it up when we discover it. Meantime, we are uncertain but not unhopeful."

The two men, listening, knew that this was by way of an ultimatum. They understood that they were to fashion their behavior in the lines laid down by Sayre. They knew that he had not said all this unthinkingly,

or without long and serious consideration of the attitude he should assume before the public.

And they realized that he had chosen the best rôle, albeit it must be for him a hard one. A less courageous man would have gone off by himself while the guests were present, and only reappeared after the last one had departed.

But Sayre had a fine sense of the courtesy due a party invited to Knollwood, and he proposed that so far as it lay in his power he would keep up the dignity of the place and its traditions of hospitality.

Aunt Judy was not enough to offer to the guests, they must have any responsible member of the family available.

And a sort of *noblesse oblige* made Rodney feel that he must stand as representative of the family and the house with which he expected to be affiliated.

So he had steeled himself to this ordeal, and proposed to carry it through at any cost to his own feeling or nerves.

It would be idle to say that Hildale was not stirred to its foundations by the tragic occurrences. They might go calmly to the church, politely to call at Knollwood, sedately leave cards at The Ravines, silently attend the inquest, but at home, behind closed doors, human nature forced itself to the front and speculation was rife, while theories were plentiful as blackberries.

Opinions ran the whole gamut of possibilities, from the martyrdom of Emily to her blackest guilt. From a pitched battle between the two high-tempered friends to the onslaught of a carload of bandits terrible as any army with banners.

But these conversations came not to the ears of the Knollwood people, for Hildale was discreet before all else, and its attitude was entirely that of sympathy and condolence, with a due admixture of hope.

And so, the wedding party took place.

Determination on the part of all the household made it seem a mere reception or *fête*, without bridal significance.

At noon, as Emily had not returned, Aunt Judy took her place as receiving hostess and greeted the inrush of guests with a smile.

No explanations were needed, they all understood. Hildale was quick to take a cue, and their murmured greetings were befitting and pleasant.

Spinks was in his element. Often he had engineered a wedding, but never one like this, which, lacking bridal party entirely, was left to him to save from ignominious disaster.

And he did his part. He ordered the feast served at the psychological moment. He ordained the music of the right sort and at the right time. He planned the dancing, having removed the white stanchions with their great sheaves of lilies, which, incidentally he ordered sent to the hospital, in accordance with Hildale traditions.

He himself conducted dowagers to the present room, and elderly gentlemen to Aunt Judy's sitting room, which had been converted into a refreshing sort of place.

And so, as Spinks, with his staff, looked after all this, Aunt Judy and Rod were free to entertain the guests and they did themselves proud.

Rodney was grave, but politely smiling, and of such courtesy and charm that the hearts of the women went out to him and one and all sought to offer comfort.

This Sayre accepted in the most friendly way, and even the most critical of the guests finally concluded that the Knollwood people had done the best thing after all.

Aunt Judy was pathetic, yet in such a gracious, dignified way that few dared pity her.

Her attitude, like Rod's, was that Emily was mysteriously absent, and they were sorry, but nothing could be done about it at the moment.

And, after all, that was the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

And so the afternoon wore on. The elder people went home, but the younger crowd, having good music and good food, stayed on and on, and Aunt Judy was glad they did.

Reaction would come soon enough and she wanted Emily's friends to have a good time.

Abel Collins came to talk to her.

"You're a wonderful woman," he said. "Few could have accomplished this."

"I had to," she returned, simply. "I did it for Emily. Tell, me, Abel, where do you think the child is?"

Abel Collins looked at her sharply. He feared this meant the end of enforced control of herself, and possibly a collapse.

"No," she said, reading his glance, "I'm not going to give way. Why should I? All I can possibly do to help Emily is to—keep the home fires burning. If she comes home, she must find everything in perfect order, and, if she doesn't, there's no harm done."

"You're right, you're right," Abel Collins assured her. "Now, as to where our girl is, I don't know. But I do think, Judy, that she will yet be rescued."

"You're not saying that just to comfort me?"

"Partly," he smiled. "And partly because I believe it myself. If Emily were dead, her body would have been found by this time. If she has been kidnapped, we will hear from the villains, and probably soon. Dear friend, there is nothing to do but to wait—the hardest thing, I know, but the only thing."

To Rodney Sayre, Collins said practically the same thing. It was no news to either, but there was something about Abel Collins' way of saying things that brought a hint of hope and a breath of cheer to the two sorrowing hearts.

Then Abel and Rodney took a walk about the place, passing beyond the lawns and on toward the footpath that led to the big ravine.

They talked for the most part on desultory topics, not avoiding the subject close to both their hearts, but feeling there was little to be said about it.

They passed the Miller house, and spoke of its beauty and grandeur.

“Pennington’s will be shut up, too, for a time,” said Abel, looking-at the Millers’ boarded-up windows. “I say, Sayre, let’s drop in on Jim for a minute. He must be pretty blue this afternoon.”

“All right,” Rodney agreed, and they went on over the little ravine and up the hill to the house.

Although a steep hill, curves and windings made the ascent easy as well as picturesque, and before they were halfway up, the treetops were below them and their view of the road was cut off.

The house, as they neared it, looked as usual, except that one or two trunks and a large suitcase were on the front veranda.

Hearing voices, Jim Pennington himself came to the open front door. He was in his shirt sleeves, but made no apologies.

“How are you?” he said, to Rodney, holding out his hand, and afterward greeting Collins. “I’m downright glad to see you. Sit down, I’ll get you a bracer. I need one myself. Not that I’ve been working hard, my packing was easy, but—” he shrugged his shoulders and it was not hard to understand that the nerve strain of leaving his home was what had wearied him.

They sat in his pleasant living room, every detail of which told of a woman’s taste and fancies.

“I thought at first,” he said, “I’d take with me everything connected with Polly, her pictures, books, music—but, Lord, it would take a van. Then, I concluded to take nothing remindful of her, thought it might be better for me—but of course, that wouldn’t work, either. So, I’m doing what anybody would do, in the circumstances, taking some things and leaving some.”

“You’re coming back?” said Sayre.

“Oh, yes—excuse me, just a moment,” he stepped to a table, opened the drawer and disappeared from the room for a moment, then returned.

“Something I forgot to tell Rosa,” he said. “Yes, I shall return, and probably soon. I thought at first, I’d go away for good, but Hilldale seems like home to me, and I’m sure now I’ll come back here. In fact, I don’t know what I’ll do until I get away and think it out. You don’t know what it means to a chap who has had a home so long, to suddenly find himself homeless. And I can’t stay on here. These two days have nearly finished me. Everything reminds me of Polly. The very chairs and tables shriek her name at me, and I can’t stand it. I’m nervous, I know, but I can’t help that. So I shall go away, probably to Europe, or, maybe California, but far away for a time, a few months, and then I’ll come back here and sell the house or live in it, I don’t know which. But I can’t rent it now or anything like that, for I would have to put away all Polly’s things, and I can’t.”

“I think you’re doing just right, Jim,” Sayre told him. “Go off, as you propose, and later, you’ll get a better perspective, and you’ll be ready to take up your life again. Me, I don’t know where I’m at.”

“Of course, you don’t,” and Pennington spoke with utmost sympathy. “I don’t see what you are going to do, Sayre. Did you get the detective you had in mind?”

“Stone? I hope to get him, I don’t know for certain yet. I think now it’s a case of kidnapping and I’m expecting the ransom letter any hour.”

“It may be,” and Pennington looked thoughtful. “I hope the police won’t harp any more on the fact of the fur and the diamonds being found beside Polly.”

“They will, though.” Abel Collins put in. “And since that has been touched on, how do you explain it, Mr. Pennington?”

“I’d rather not pursue the subject, Mr. Collins.”

“Why not?” asked Rodney. “Look here, Pennington, if you know anything, out with it. You’re going away—”

“Well, that may be a good thing for you all.”

“I don’t want a good thing for anybody. I want the truth.”

“Take my advice, Mr. Sayre, and don’t try too hard to get at the truth.”

“Now you’ve gone so far, go on.”

“You want me to?”

“I sure do.”

“There’s not much to it, but you know there was a bit of a fuss over those Atlantic City pictures.”

“For heaven’s sake, what are those pictures? I’ve heard them hinted at until I’m sick of it. Tell me about them.”

“No, I think not,” said Pennington, after a moment’s pause. “I’ve no right to. They were some pictures my wife and Emily Duane had taken down at Atlantic City. I’d rather not say anything about them, because I consider it Miss Duane’s secret. Were it only my wife I’d willingly tell you. But Miss Duane’s personal affairs are not for me to discuss, and I can’t honorably say any more. I’m sure you see this.”

Rodney did see it, and should Emily return he had no wish to tell her he had let Jim Pennington tell him of matters that she had not herself confided, so he urged it no more.

“Well,” he said, “you’re doubtless right. Emily would of course tell me about it, as your wife told you. I can’t think it’s anything very dreadful, anyway, but I ask no more about it. When are you going?”

“I think I’ll start to-morrow morning and run down to New York in my car. Then, I’ll stay there a few days looking after some business matters, and perhaps motor to some near-by place where it is quiet, for a time, or possibly start off to Europe by some mid-week steamer. It’s queer, but I can’t figure ahead at all while I’m here.”

“Not queer at all,” said Abel Collins, kindly, “it would be queer if you could, with decisions to make about packing, and then, clearing out the house—you have to leave it empty, don’t you?”

“Oh, you mean food and such things. Yes, Rosa, she’s a capable piece, and Mrs. Branch, that’s the chauffeur’s wife, they will attend to all that. I told them to get everything out and for Mrs. Branch to take any staples or edibles of any sort. Rosa has a new place in Tuxedo. She’ll go there to-morrow. Then all I’ll have to do is to turn the key and walk off.”

“Mrs. Bell hopes you’ll come over to dinner with us to-morrow, before you leave,” Rodney said, as they rose to go.

“If I’m delayed until afternoon, I’ll do that,” was the reply. “But if I can, I want to make a start in the morning, in that case I shan’t see her again. Please give her my regards, she has always been a kind friend to Pauline and myself. Oh, I’m an emotional sort, you know,” he brushed a hand across his eyes, “I can’t help it. I think I’d rather not go over to Knollwood to-morrow and say good-bye and all that. Tell them all good-bye for me, and let me go off by myself.”

Pennington’s voice shook and Rodney was sorry for him, so he told him not to come over unless he wished to do so, and with a silent handshake the men parted.

Abel Collins held out a friendly hand, and as he grasped the other’s shaking fingers, he whispered:

“Brace up, Jim, brace up. We’ll find Emily yet.”

“Oh I hope so,” said Pennington fervently, the tears welling up in his eyes, “I do hope so. Good-bye.”

“Half demented,” Sayre said, after they were out of earshot.

“Not quite that,” Abel smiled, “but in a fearfully nervous state. Indeed, it will be better for him to get away from the scenes and people about here.”

And so they went back to Knollwood, to the home that was no home, to the house whose atmosphere was even more depressing than the Pennington house, for there was simply desolation, while here was a feverish excitement, a will-o’-the-wisp of elusive hope and mocking despair that kept the nerves at highest tension with nothing to relieve them.

Rodney found Everett Craven waiting for him, and acceded to the lawyer's request for an interview.

"You see, Mr. Sayre," Craven said, coming straight to the point, "this Hindu, this theosophist, claims that Miss Duane's estate owes him a sum of money."

"Indeed," said Sayre, "and on what does he base that claim?"

"Well, you know in her will—"

"But Miss Duane isn't dead, that we know of. Just how does her will come into this?"

"I know, but the Swami assumes that after a certain time, if Miss Duane does not return she will be considered dead, and—"

"I think that time is seven years, or something like that. Tell him to wait seven years and then call again."

"But, this is his idea. That he be paid a certain sum down, a smaller sum than that mentioned in the will—"

"Discount it, eh?"

"Exactly. Or, rather adjust it, and give him the smaller sum now—"

"Is the excellent Hindu gentleman about?"

"Not that I know of," said Craven, a little scared at the fury in Rodney's eyes.

"Lucky for him. Now, Craven, come clean. What's it all about? You know as well as I do, this heathen Hindu is out for money and nothing else. Now has he any hold on Emily, other than the will, which of course doesn't count until she is proved dead?"

"Well, he says she promised him some money, verbally."

"Oh, she did? Well, that doesn't count, either, until she comes back and can verify his statement. Anything else?"

"Well—"

“Craven, I know what you’re hesitating about. It’s those Atlantic City pictures. Now, tell me, once for all what are they, and why are they so important?”

“I don’t know, Mr. Sayre. I know nothing of them except what the Swami has told me.”

“All right, what has he told you?”

“That Miss Duane would far rather have some money paid to him than to have him tell about those pictures.”

“He said that, did he?”

“Yes.”

“In so many words?”

“Practically, yes.”

“Now, look here, Craven, think carefully, are you in with him on this? Do you get a rake-off anywhere?”

“N—no.”

“I’m not sure I believe you but I want to believe you. Now, listen; the proposition of your Oriental friend and client, if he is your client, is blackmail, pure and simple, and will be treated as such, if carried one step further. Tell him this, and tell yourself the same thing. Moreover, it doesn’t at all rest with me. It would be better for you two precious scamps if it did. But if it is mentioned again, I shall take it straight to the trustees of Miss Duane’s fortune, and if you ask me, I can tell you that you’ll not fare very well at their hands. They’ll have it in for you far worse than I should ever dream of. Now, will you advise the Holy Hindu of this phase of the matter, or shall I?”

“I’ll look after it, Mr. Sayre, and don’t think I had—”

“I’m not going to think anything about you. You’re none of my business. But it is my business to see that Miss Duane is not blackmailed, whether at home or absent, and I shall look out for her interests in any and every way I have a right to.”

Craven departed, and Rodney sat for a long time thinking. Not about the Swami; he was beneath notice, so was Craven; but about the situation, the hopeless, fathomless situation.

And then the telephone bell rang, and his friend in New York told him that he had managed to corral Fleming Stone, and engage him, and that he would arrive at Knollwood Sunday evening.

Chapter XIII

Request For Ransom

Sayre was decidedly cheered up at the thought that the great detective was really coming to take up the case.

Himself a good organizer and an indefatigable worker, he could accomplish wonders in his own business or in fields with which he was familiar. But as a detective he knew absolutely nothing, and he didn't fool himself into thinking he did, as so many amateurs are fain to do.

Pete Gibby had vaunted his own powers a little, but of late he had subsided for he found he had no practical knowledge of sleuthing in any of its phases.

Saturday evening, the evening of the intended wedding day, dragged.

But after dinner some Hilledale people had telephoned over for such of the young people as cared to, to come to a small dance, and Betty and Nell wanted to go.

Gibby and Burton Lamb went with them, and Rodney sent regrets saying he would stay with Aunt Judy.

She smiled at him, well knowing wild horses could not drag him away from Knollwood.

The two sat alone and talked, after the others had gone. He told her of Stone's coming, and she too was glad.

"What do you suppose he'll do, Rod?" she asked.

“I haven’t the least idea. I don’t know whether he works alone or with a corps of assistants. I don’t even know what sort of man he is. But he’s recommended as the best in the country, so he’s the one for us.”

“He’ll want to know everything, of course.”

“Everything. Hold nothing back, Aunt Judy. If there’s the least mite of information you’ve been keeping quiet, out with it to Stone. You can’t expect him to get anywhere if we hold out on him. These Atlantic City pictures, whatever they are, must be shown to him. Get that? Never mind me, but take Stone right into your full confidence. Will you?”

“Yes, Rodney. I’ll show them to you, now.”

“Never mind, just now. They don’t worry me a bit. I know they’re not really compromising or that old heathen scum would make more of them. He sent Craven here to dig up some money for his silence about them. Oh, how can the Hildale people stand for that old fraud?”

“And I think he set Lawlor on the hunt in Emily’s room, to find the pictures.”

“Well, of course, Lawlor had a right to search her rooms in connection with the Pennington matter. But, yes, I think the Swami put a bee in the police bonnet about it. Haven’t seen Lawlor since, have you?”

“No. Mr. Collins told them to find Emily before they began to suspect her of any wrongdoing of any sort.”

“Collins has a way of putting things emphatically, hasn’t he? Aunt Judy, to-night I’ll go back to my own bedroom. Now that the wedding day is past, I’m convinced that something has happened to Emily. I hoped up to the last minute that it was one of her pranks, but if it had been, she would have been back here to-day. So, it’s foolish for me to keep up this farce of staying on the sofa until she returns. I have a little common sense, if I can’t ferret out what has happened to her.”

“What do you think, Rod?”

“I can’t think. I’ve thought until my brain is mush, now I’m going to wait for Fleming Stone, and let him think for us. He must have had

experience with mysterious disappearances, and abductions of grown-up people.”

“But if it is abduction, wouldn’t the demand for ransom come to us by this time?”

“You’d think so, Aunt Judy. But it hasn’t, and that makes it look as if abduction isn’t the explanation. I hope it is, for then we could just pay the price and be done with it. Let’s do all we can to help Mr. Stone, and nothing to bother or hinder him.”

“Yes, of course. And I’ll give him the pretty green suite, so he’ll be comfortable and well fixed. Nell leaves to-morrow.”

“Just as well. She’s a dear girl in some ways, but if she took a notion to make up to Stone, she’d pester the life out of him. Lamb has to go home to-morrow, too. You see, he expected to leave on Sunday, after—after Emily and I had gone away. And he has important business engagements. Well, he could be of no use here. When we get Stone, we won’t need any other help.”

Sunday was another beautiful, bright September day, another day of mocking emptiness to the hearts that yearned for their missing darling.

The girls had coffee in their rooms, but the men came down for breakfast and Aunt Judy was there to greet them.

Abel Collins drifted in, joined the group at the table, and then, to their surprise, Jim Pennington came.

“Thought I’d stop and say good-by,” he explained. “I found I was all ready to start, and I fidgeted about so, waiting, that I concluded to go along. The house is all shut up, and I can’t sit around all day.”

He was very nervous and looked worn and weary, as if he had had a sleepless night.

“You poor boy,” said Aunt Judy, “I think you are wise to get away as soon as you can. Now, you make a good breakfast, and then get an early start before all Hilldale is craning its neck after you. I know just how you

feel, and I'm sure you're doing wisely. Leave us an address so we can tell you when Emily comes back."

"I've no address as yet, other than my bankers', but they will always know where I am. I shall make some plans in the next few days, and I'll drop you a line, Mrs. Bell, so you'll know where I am. It's good of you to care."

"I've a notion to drive down to New York with you," said Lamb, looking thoughtful.

"Do, I'd be glad of company, and I'm a good driver."

"No," concluded Burton, "I'm not packed. And, too, I'd rather stay till afternoon, and see the girls again."

"As you say. Well, I'll be getting along. I won't try to say what I hope for you all—I'm—I'm pretty much all in."

With a few handshakes, he left them, speaking no further word.

Prall helped him into his car, and Pete Gibby also went out on the porch.

"Good-by," he said, noting the suitcases and hatboxes in the car. "Going right to the club?"

"Yes, or some hotel. I'll decide on the way down."

And Pennington drove off, sitting erect and firm behind his wheel.

"He's all right when he's alone," Gibby said, returning to the dining room, "but people seem to get on his nerves."

"No wonder," Rodney observed, "especially over here where he knows we have our own trouble."

"He's in a bad way," Lamb said. "I shouldn't have cared to ride with his driving. I spoke on an impulse."

"Oh, no," Gibby insisted. "He started off like a born chauffeur. He'll be all right, once he's quit of these harrowing scenes and that empty house

of his. I never saw such a nervous man. I suppose it's that artistic temperament. I don't see how his wife ever lived with him."

"Maybe it was because she couldn't, that—"

"No, no," Aunt Judy interrupted Lamb's speech, "Pauline was just as temperamental herself. They were happy together and understood each other. Her trouble was all caused by her grief at her child's death. When Jim gets away from all this and settles down somewhere, he'll get quieted down, probably write a new play, and regain his poise and balance."

"You're a wise woman, madam," said Abel Collins, bowing toward her. "Your remarks show acumen and wise prognostication. It might be added that our friend may find some other temperamental soul, who will—"

"Oh, let the poor man alone," said Aunt Judy. "Suppose he does, he won't be the first man to marry a second time."

"Who's going to marry a second time, you, Pete?" and Betty came in to the dining room in all the fresh glory of a summer-morning toilette.

"I can't until after I marry the first time, and you say you're not ready yet," Gibby answered, gazing hungrily at the lovely vision.

"Oh, well, there's no hurry. Any muffins, Prall? Big, fat ones, with lots of butter and honey?"

"Be careful, my child," Abel Collins warned her. "Soft curves are lovely now, but—"

"Don't bother, Mr. Collins," Betty smiled at him, "I know it all by heart. And as long as I'm at Knollwood, I'm going to eat muffins, if I have to bant the rest of my life. Nell's going home to-day, Aunt Judy."

"I know it, dear. You're not, are you?"

"No, please; I want to stay another week, if I may."

"Indeed you may, we'd love to have you."

“Then you’ll have to have *me*,” declared Pete. “I’m Betty’s satellite, you know.”

“All right, Satellite, stay on,” said Aunt Judy, glad to have these two favorites of hers as long as possible.

So that afternoon, Nell went down to New York in the train, escorted by Lamb, who was going down anyway.

The leave-taking was sad, for Rodney and Burton Lamb were real friends, but it had to be, and with few words, the wrench was over and the departing pair waved back from the car window, as they were driven off to the station.

“Our house party is getting smaller,” said Pete, with an effort at lightness, “just Aunt Judy and Betty and us two fellers left. Who’s for a game of bridge?”

It was a good suggestion and they all agreed, but the interest in the cards was half-hearted, and the play was not brisk.

At last they gave it up and went out to sit on the terrace, in a favorite screened corner, where they could see approaching visitors and escape them if so desiring.

But the only visitor in sight just then, was a dilapidated-looking urchin, whose wondering stares about proved him a stranger.

Yet he seemed sure of his destination and plodded up the broken marble pathway toward the house.

“I’ll see what he wants,” said Pete, rising and going slowly toward the boy.

“What is it, youngster?” he said, smiling good-naturedly. “You sure you’re on the right track?”

“Want to see Miss Bell,” said the boy, obviously a city gamin and about ten or twelve years old.

“Miss Bell? Well, I’m her agent, I guess I’ll do.”

“No,” and the decided head shook, “must see Miss Bell herself.”

“All right, come ahead,” and Pete piloted the lad to Aunt Judy, who sat on a swing seat in the corner.

“You Miss Bell?” he inquired very earnestly.

“Yes, child. Who are you?”

“Then this here letter is for you,” he tugged an envelope from his pocket, and was about to make off when Pete caught him.

“No, you don’t, sonny. You wait a minute. See?”

The boy began to cry.

“I want to go home,” he wailed, wriggling out of Pete’s grasp.

“All right, you can go in a few moments. We have to see if there’s an answer, you know.”

“No, the man said no answer. Lemme go.”

Aunt Judy read the short note, and passed it to Rodney, who read it, with Betty looking over his shoulder.

Without a word as to its contents, he handed it to Pete, saying:

“I’ll hold the kid, while you give that the once-over, Pete.”

Gibby took the paper and read:

Miss Bell if you will be in the woods in front of the miller house at midnight Sunday night and will give me ten thousand dollars in cash you will have your niece Emily back tomorrow safe and sound but if you tell anybody police or anybody else the deal is all off I will be in that place at midnight but you must come alone don’t try any gullery or you will queer the whole business it’s up to you play fair and I will play fair

kidnapper

Pete handed the paper back to Aunt Judy and turned to the boy.

“Now, don’t be scared, sonny,” he said; “we know you have done nothing wrong yourself. Who gave you that note to bring here?”

“A man,” said the boy, brightening a little, for Pete had a way with children.

“Where?”

“In Haverstraw, near the post office.”

“What’s your name?”

“Larry Shane.”

“All right, Larry, now tell us all about the man. Did you ever see him before?”

“Nope, never.”

“What did he look like?”

Larry considered. “Well, he was a fat man, short, you know, and stout. He had black hair and eyes—he was a Jew, I think. And he wore sporty clothes, kinder checkered and a ring with a big di’mond in it. And a red necktie; that’s all I noticed. And he guv me the note and said if I’d bring it here he’d pay me good. And he paid me and I brang it, and I want to go home. The man said I could ketch the six-forty back to Haverstraw.”

“How much did he pay you?”

“He gimme ten dollars and my ticket over here and back.”

“Clearly this lad knows nothing more about it,” Aunt Judy said, looking pityingly at the thin little chap. “Call Prall to feed him up and let him go home. We can consider what we’re going to do about his message afterward.”

“You’re right, Aunt Judy,” Rodney said, “the kidnappers wouldn’t trust a lad who knew any more about the business than Larry, here. They undoubtedly picked him up on the street to send him. He looks so bright, you see. What were you doing when the man tackled you?”

“Selling papers, sir. The New York papers. And he bought all I had left and then sent me on this errand. Now kin I go?”

“Have some supper first?” invited Pete.

Larry's eyes danced, and he said, “Yep, but I want to git that train.”

So Prall took the forlorn little chap to the kitchen and gave him such a meal as he had never before seen or heard of, and also a box of goodies to take home with him.

Pete had followed, determined to get any further information possible, but Larry, it seemed, had exhausted his store of knowledge of the stranger, and had nothing further to offer. Pete made him describe again the man who had given him the note, and the boy reiterated exactly the tale he had told at first.

“How do you know he had black hair?” demanded Pete, “didn't he have his hat on?”

“He told me so,” said Larry, his mouth full of cake.

“Told you he had black hair?”

“Naw, I don't mean that, I mean he told me to bring the note here.”

“Your supper has gone to your head,” said Pete, laughing at the way the child was still wolfing sweets after an incredible quantity of more substantial viands.

So Larry was let go, and he fairly flew down the path and along the road toward the railroad station.

“What about it?” asked Betty, as no one seemed inclined to take up the subject.

“Well,” said Pete, “if you ask me, or, even if you don't ask me, I think it's a fake, the whole thing.”

“Why?”

“Oh I don’t know, but it’s fishy, that child coming over from Haverstraw, and all that.”

“I’m not sure I agree with your views, Pete,” Rodney said, “but we don’t have to decide this thing. Fleming Stone is coming in a few hours, and we can put the matter in his hands for advice.”

“I shall do no such thing,” Aunt Judy astounded them by remarking. “You seem to forget the letter is addressed to me. You seem to forget that I am forbidden to tell the police about it, or to try any gullery—I think that was the word—but I am to be at the Miller house at midnight with the money if I want Emily back. I do want Emily back, and I shall be there with the money exactly in accordance with the stipulations. If nobody interferes no harm will come to me, and it may mean the restoration of my girl. At any rate, it is a chance I shall not miss.”

“But, Aunt Judy—”

“Don’t ‘But, Aunt Judy,’ me, Rod. It won’t do one speck of good. I shall follow directions implicitly. I am not afraid, I’m only afraid *not* to do it. Of course it isn’t a fake. Where would be the sense of sending a boy over from Haverstraw to hoax us? And who would hoax us, anyway, and why? I mean, none of our acquaintances would do it, and none of the working people in Hilldale have any spite or grudge against us. I can’t see any reason or motive for a hoax. The child was kidnapped for money, I’ve felt sure of that all along. Now, we have evidence of it, and we are told how to get her back. I’ve seen or heard of these cases before, and invariably the restoration is balked because the principals are unwilling to give up the money without apprehending the villains. You all know that. The police are dragged in, and they think they can cleverly hoodwink the abductors and get back the victim and save the money too. They can’t.”

“Good gracious, Aunt Judy, you seem to know what you’re talking about,” exclaimed Pete, who had the highest admiration for the intrepid old lady.

“I always know what I’m talking about, but not everybody believes it, as you do,” and Aunt Judy gave him one of her sweetest smiles.

She was an irresistibly pretty woman, not as old as her white hair made her seem, and her complexion, even when aided by various beautifiers, was as soft and fair as a girl's.

"Well, I wash my hands of it," Rodney said, decidedly. "I'm for having that note turned over to Fleming Stone as soon as he arrives. But it is, after all, Aunt Judy's property, and we cannot presume to advise her. But think it over well, dear, before you go out there to-night without Stone's knowledge. Why don't you just reserve decision until he gets here, and then see how you are impressed by his manner and attitude, and conclude then what you will do?"

"Now, that's downright bright of you, Rod," and Aunt Judy nodded her curls in entire agreement with his suggestion. "I'll do that very thing. And, children," she added, "I think we won't have supper till Mr. Stone gets here, late though it may be. It'll give him a nice send-off to have supper first thing."

Sunday-night supper was a highly honored institution of Hilldale. To be invited to it was a sign of intimacy or honor or both.

And the suppers at Knollwood were renowned, not only because of their superior food and drink, but because there one might meet celebrities or even more interesting people unavailable in other houses.

Guests rarely dropped in for Sunday-night supper. It was an unwritten law that an invitation was more or less necessary, though of course, many had standing invitations.

Abel Collins was among these, and he came over soon after dusk.

He was always a welcome guest everywhere, and was often chided that he favored Knollwood above other houses, usually followed up by a jesting reference to the attractions of the charming Mrs. Bell.

Of course, no word was said to Abel of the letter so strangely received, for that was Aunt Judy's property and she had the matter in charge.

But though Aunt Judy was of no mind to discuss the letter with the young people, who, however dear they were, seemed to her a lot of

children, she did want the advice of an older head, and as Abel came early, she concluded to lay it before him.

So she carried him off to her little sitting room and closed the door upon them.

“Well, Juliana,” Collins said, “Lord knows I’m sorry for you, and my heart is full of sympathy, but I’m free to confess it ain’t mussed you up a mite. You look younger and more bloomin’ than ever.”

“Don’t be silly,” said Aunt Judy with fine scorn. “Now, you listen to this, Abel, and put your whole mind on it, for I consider it most important.”

She carefully spread out the letter before him, and adjusting his reading glasses, Abel Collins perused it thoughtfully three times from start to finish.

“It’s a fake,” he pronounced, as he refolded the paper, and put his glasses back in their case. “Don’t you be taken in by it, Judy.”

“What do you mean, a fake? Won’t there be anybody there to-night to meet me?”

He stared at her.

“For the land’s sake! You don’t mean you’re going out there at midnight?”

“Of course I am. Think a minute. This is the only, the one single hint or chance we’ve had at finding Emily. Do you think I’ll pass it up? No indeed!”

“But, Judy, listen. This isn’t a real letter. Real kidnappers don’t write like that—”

“Don’t talk nonsense, Abel Collins. Anybody’d think you knew something about it. Pray how do real kidnappers write? Is there a school—a college for kidnappers? Or is it a correspondence course, and have you taken it?”

“Now, now, Judy, don’t lose your temper, or get sarcastic. It won’t do a mite of good. I tell you that letter is a fake, because it shows on the

surface. Whoever wrote that means either to hoax you utterly, and if you keep that appointment you'll find nobody there, or else, and perhaps this is more likely, there will be somebody there, who will blandly accept the money you bring, and bid you good-evening. But it will bring Emily not one step nearer to you."

"Why do you think that?"

Judy Bell was always willing to listen to the ideas of people in whose judgment she felt confidence.

"I'm not sure I can tell you. It's just a feeling, a sort of hunch, I guess that the thing is insincere, is a fraud of one sort or another. Are you positively going out there at midnight?"

"I want to. The children frown on it, and Rod, of course, wants me to lay it before Mr. Stone. But I'm afraid he won't let me go."

"He can't stop you, if you insist. Go, if you like. I'm sure no personal harm will come to you, nor any good. It will certainly not mean the return of Emily. If you want my advice, which of course you don't, I say, ask Mr. Stone what to do."

"I do want your advice, Abel, and I will put it up to Mr. Stone."

Chapter XIV

Fleming Stone

Shortly after eight o'clock Fleming Stone arrived. His train was late, and so the Knollwood car had waited at the station and brought him up to the house.

Sayre greeted him, and made general introductions.

Stone was a magnetic man, and they all took to him. He was middle-aged, perhaps fifty or so, and his strong, rather patrician features gave him a look of wisdom and authority.

Abel Collins looked at him keenly, to learn if this was real wisdom or a sort of mask that every detective ought to wear, and his conclusion was

that Mr. Stone was the goods all right. Than which, Abel knew no higher compliment.

Prall took the guest to his rooms, told him the supper was an informal affair and he need not dress, and at Stone's dismissal left him.

The detective went first to a window and looked over Hilldale Park.

"An ideal place to live," he told himself. "If ever I can decide to retire from this busy life of mine, this is the sort of place I'd like to settle in. And to think of crime and wickedness stalking rampant among these peaceful dales and picturesque hills."

He found himself in possession of a commodious bedroom and bath and a most comfortable and well-furnished sitting room, all of which delighted his soul. For though quite well able to adapt himself to the plainest and simplest of living arrangements, Fleming Stone was enough of a sybarite to enjoy elaborate appointments when offered him.

He went deliberately from one window to another, taking in the landscape from two directions, as his rooms were in a corner of the great house.

Owing to the slope, he could see tree tops from both sides, and some of the trees were already beginning to show the painting of autumn's fingers.

He saw parts of houses, and some towers and roofs, but the place was too thickly wooded to give any extended view. He saw what he assumed must be the ravines, of which he had heard, but these, too, were only partly visible.

So, with a final glance at the beauty of the general landscape, and a real joy in the thought of spending a few days under this delightful roof, he went downstairs to begin his work as soon as might be.

Everett Craven had been asked to come over, for it was thought he might be of assistance in telling Stone about Emily's affairs, and both Aunt Judy and Sayre had determined to tell the detective everything bearing on the case.

Supper was served and before the meal had progressed beyond its first course, Stone was ready to admit he had never been in a more delightful home, or one with more of real comfort and charm, and less of ostentation or pretension.

It seemed to be tacitly understood that the case was not to be discussed at the table, and so the conversation ran on lighter topics, and Aunt Judy's tact, assisted by her young friends, carried them past any references or allusions that might tend toward the tragedy.

Quickly understanding, Stone accepted the situation and filled admirably his rôle of casual guest.

He was a man of pleasing address, and his deep-set eyes flashed now and then with a sudden thought engendered by some chance remark. For though joining in the table talk, Stone was also studying the people who sat round the board, and gaining far more information than a less experienced observer would have deemed possible.

Supper over, they all went to the lounge.

"It is pleasant on the verandas now," said Aunt Judy, "but it will very soon grow dark and chill out there. So I think we will settle ourselves in the lounge and begin our conference."

"That is all right," Stone smiled at her, "but perhaps conference is not quite the word. I know only what I have read in the papers about this matter, and this evening I want all the information that any of you can give me. So I can't promise a conference, as the talking will be principally done by you, and my consideration of the facts you put before me may be a matter of lengthy consideration."

"I like that," said Abel Collins, nodding his gray head. "I don't want any snapshot judgment nor any smarty-cat deductions."

Stone looked at the older man, quizzically, not yet having sized him up exactly, for Abel had been rather silent during supper.

"Smarty-cat deductions are all right," Stone said, "if they get you anywhere. I suppose you mean the quick decision a detective makes

regarding the height and weight of the villain and the kind of cigar he smokes, when only a straw hat is in evidence, or something like that.”

Fleming Stone drew a small table up to an easy chair and seated himself, while the others grouped themselves about the room as they chose.

It was a much more informal proceeding than Stone was accustomed to, or than he liked, but he felt it incumbent on him to meet their wishes, and he felt he could swing the situation.

“You must remember, first of all,” he said, in his grave way, “that I do not know Miss Duane at all, and I am therefore handicapped as to any surmise of what she might or might not do of her own volition.”

“Here is her photograph,” said Aunt Judy, and Stone gave her an appreciative smile as he took the picture.

“That helps,” he said, “and now one or two of you will give me a bit of description of her character, or rather, of her ways and whims.”

“That’s a good word,” Aunt Judy conceded, “Emily is all whims. She flies from one thing to another like a butterfly from flower to flower.”

“Unreliable?” asked Stone, not smiling at all. “I mean, would she say she would do a thing or go somewhere and then later, not do it, or not go to the place?”

“Yes,” Aunt Judy agreed, “she would do such things as that. I suppose it isn’t to her credit, but we’re not discussing Emily’s good and bad points. We’re just telling you what you want to know.”

Stone nodded his acquiescence.

“Yes, I want to know especially such things as that. I don’t need to be told that she is a loving, warm-hearted girl, a young lady of charm and merit, but I want to know her idiosyncrasies, her fads, her faults, her outstanding peculiarities. Am I clear?”

“Yes,” said Sayre, who was getting restless at the seeming disparagement of his darling, “I begin to see. You mean you can size up the case better from her shortcomings than from her more lovely traits.”

“Exactly, Mr. Sayre, you’ve hit it perfectly.”

“As my contribution,” Abel Collins offered, “I’ll say that the girl is the stubbornest piece I ever saw. I make no apology for this statement, for it is true. I have known her all her life, and I never saw any child or young woman with such determination, such will power, such pig-headed obstinacy.”

Fleming Stone looked interested.

“That is the sort of description I want,” he said, speaking gravely. “As you must see, such a positive statement places Miss Duane at once in a niche of her own. Gives her a definite trait to start out with. You all agree with Mr. Collins in this matter?”

Most of them nodded a more or less decided agreement, and Betty said:

“Yes, it is true, Mr. Stone. At school we gave Emily the name of ‘The Immovable Post,’ because nothing would budge her, once she had made up her mind.”

“Unless she herself saw her error?” asked Stone.

“Yes; that was rare, but it sometimes happened. In such a case, she came off her perch at once, acknowledged her mistake, and thought no more about it. But I don’t mean really big questions, anyway. I mean, if she took a whim, or a notion, she’d stick to it through thick and thin.”

“And as to big questions—moral questions, say?”

“Oh, there she was like adamant. If she thought a thing was right, I mean if she knew it was right, nothing could change her there, either.”

“What we may call a decided character, then?”

“Most decided, always,” and feeling she had given her evidence, Betty sank back in her chair, waiting the next move.

As Stone sat silent, Everett Craven, always a bit eager to be in the limelight, spoke up.

“I suppose you want any sidelights on Miss Duane that you can get, Mr. Stone,” he said, “so as her lawyer, I’ll tell you a little about her determined ways. It is her habit to make a new will every few weeks.”

“As often as that?” said Stone, surprised.

“Yes, her whimsical disposition leads her to change her mind continually as to the disposition of her property.”

“Is it not in the hands of trustees?”

“Yes, so far as investments and that sort of thing go. But Miss Duane is in full control of it all, and she may leave it as she chooses. There’s no real reason why she shouldn’t make a new will every week if she wishes, but I thought you’d be interested in such a peculiarity.”

“I am. How did such matters stand at the time of Miss Duane’s disappearance?”

“Her main bequests are rarely changed. She has bequeathed large sums to the church here, also to the hospital, and to some other institutions. She has made ample provision for her aunt, Mrs. Bell, and she has remembered her girl friends and the household servants.”

“Are these latter items large bequests?”

“Rather large, yes, sir. I didn’t bring her latest will with me, but you can see it to-morrow. I suppose you are thinking it might be to the advantage of some of the legatees to put Miss Duane out of the way, and so collect their inheritance.”

“We have not the slightest evidence that Miss Duane has been put out of the way,” Stone reminded him, speaking a little coldly.

He did not especially like this young man, and he especially disliked having thoughts attributed to him that he had not announced.

“No,” Craven agreed, not a whit abashed by the other’s manner, “but you know if she has been, it may not be known for some time.”

“Then how can your supposititious wicked legatees benefit by her will?”

“After a time, she will have to be adjudged dead, and her will brought to probate.”

“There is no gainsaying your statements, Mr. Craven, but I think they are not in line with our present course of inquiry, which is the assumption that Miss Duane is living, perhaps in captivity, and the necessity of immediate effort to find her.”

“Oh, well,” returned the undisturbed Craven, “have it your own way. I only thought you ought to know about the wills, and, too, there is the Swami.”

“Who or what is the Swami?” asked Stone, noting the restlessness suddenly evinced by the younger members of the group.

“Mr. Stone ought to know about the Swami,” Sayre said, “so why not let Craven tell the story?”

“No,” objected Pete Gibby, who had been more than ordinarily patient and quiet. “Why let Evie have it all his own way? Let me tell about the Swami.”

“Go ahead, Mr. Gibby,” and Stone smiled encouragingly. “I like to hear from different observers.”

“Well, this Swami is a heathen fake, who has come into this community here and bamboozled most of the women and some of the men into thinking he is a real priest or whatever the holy theosophists call themselves.”

“Are you certain he is not, Mr. Gibby?”

“Well,” Pete wilted a little, “well, he hasn’t the earmarks of the real thing and he has all the effects of a fraud. He hangs round the women, and fawns on them, and picks up meals wherever he can—wonder he isn’t here to-night—and he gets contributions from them for his cause, which, to my way of thinking, is his unholy self.”

“Mr. Gibby, I am afraid you are prejudiced against this mystic, or whatever branch of religion he calls his own. Perhaps some more disinterested observer—”

“Wait a minute, Mr. Stone, let me tell you this one thing. Old Swami—Lal Singh, he calls himself—persuaded Emily Duane to leave him a large sum in her will, fifty thousand dollars, to be exact, and so, if there’s any putting out of the way to be done, what price Lal Singh as the guiding spirit?”

“This legacy appears in Miss Duane’s latest will, Mr. Craven?” Stone asked, in quiet, even tones.

“Yes,” Craven admitted, though for some reason seeming unwilling to give the assent.

“And if you please,” Pete was almost spluttering now, in his indignation, “already His Holy Nibs has tried to discount the sum, and have Emily’s estate pay him a part of the legacy and call it square!”

“This may or may not have any bearing on the matter of Miss Duane’s disappearance,” Stone said, “but it is assuredly an item of importance and must be thoroughly looked into. Was the Swami here at the time of Miss Duane’s going away?”

“I think he was just about leaving,” Sayre said, as no one else replied. “He had been here for some time, and at the time Emily went off, almost all the people were leaving or had left.”

“At the time Miss Duane went out to go to the hospital, the guests of the tea were leaving?” Stone queried, looking thoughtful.

“Yes,” Sayre agreed, “and Emily came to tell me where she was going and bade me tell no one else. Then she ran off.”

“And others were going away at the time?”

“Yes.”

“Then, how could Mrs. Pennington and Miss Duane meet on the ravine bridge and stay there, a few moments at least, while Mr. Pennington was over at the Wallace shop, without some of these departing guests seeing them?”

Everybody looked blank. To be sure, how could that be accomplished?

Stone checked a smile at the awe-struck faces that stared into his own.

“It is an interesting point,” he said, “but not a very important one. At least, it is important only if some departing guest did see the two ladies there. If nobody saw them, and I am inclined to think that, then the point is of no value.”

“But, as you said yourself, Mr. Stone,” Gibby ventured, “how could all those people pass over the bridge and not see the girls there?”

“I know only what you’ve told me,” Stone replied, “but I fancy all the guests that left at about that time had gone when Miss Duane went out. If you think hard, you may remember. Miss Bailey, what do you think?”

“I think they were about all gone,” Betty said, “for, though Emily whispered to me to say good-by in her place, there were only two or three people to say it to, and they were on their way out. Of course a lot of people stayed on.”

“Yes, that’s what I mean,” the detective told her. “Mrs. Bell, do you see it that way?”

“Yes, I do,” and Aunt Judy’s curls bobbed forward. “I looked about after I had said good-by to the Penningtons and there was only old Mrs. Marsden and her niece left, beside the people who were staying on.”

“Have you spoken to Mrs. Marsden or her niece on the subject?” asked Stone. “Would they remember if they had seen Miss Duane run out past them, or ahead of them.”

“I’m sure they’d remember it if they saw her,” said Aunt Judy. “I don’t know whether they’ve been asked about it or not.”

“Your local detective isn’t strong on inquiry, perhaps?” and Stone looked a little quizzical.

“Lawlor’s all right,” Craven spoke up, defensively, “but you see Mr. Stone, he had the Pennington death to look into, right away, and so—”

“Yes, I see. I know of course, about the death of Mrs. Pennington, but I know only what I have read in the papers. And apparently your citizens here are in league to keep the whole affair as quiet as possible.”

“That’s it,” declared Abel Collins. “They’re not in league exactly, but it’s one of the canons of Hilldale society, to keep out of the papers at all costs. I doubt if the most insinuating of reporters could get much information out of any Hilldale citizens.”

“But that information must be forthcoming,” Stone said austere. “The people have no right to conceal knowledge that might help in running down a criminal. From what little I have already learned, I am certain that Miss Duane’s disappearance is due to foul play. I have not the slightest belief that she is away voluntarily, either playing a prank, or carrying out some whimsical or freakish plan. There is possibility of an accident—I mean, say, a motor accident, where the driver took her with him to some hospital rather than have it known that he had run her down. But that idea is only a vague possibility to my mind. I think it far more likely that she has been kidnapped or abducted, and either held for ransom, or—”

“Oh, Aunt Judy, show Mr. Stone the letter!” exclaimed Betty.

“Sure enough,” and Aunt Judy produced the ransom letter which she had entirely forgotten, so absorbed was she in the conversation.

She passed it to Fleming Stone, who read it through twice.

“A remarkable letter,” he said, cryptically, as he refolded it and put it in his pocket. “A very remarkable letter.”

“Is it from the kidnapper, really?” asked Aunt Judy, wishing this queer man would talk more freely.

“It may be,” he said. “It’s one of those things that will take some thinking over. But I can tell you this, right now, there will be no one to meet you at the tryst to-night at midnight.”

Abel Collins said, “I told you so!” right out loud, and the others smiled and looked the same message.

Everett Craven, who had not seen the note, asked for a perusal, and Stone handed it to him, watching the lawyer’s face as he read the lines.

But Craven showed no ulterior knowledge, and not much interest as he returned it, saying:

“How can you all tell it’s a fake? To me it looks perfectly all right. Why didn’t the kidnapper write it?”

“Mr. Craven, the first thing a detective has to learn is to distinguish between a true communication and a spurious one.”

“Yes? Go on.”

“I am not giving a lecture on first lessons in sleuthing, but I will tell you one or two fundamental rules. A kidnapper is almost invariably an illiterate man. This isn’t a theory, it is a proved fact. Therefore, a note from a kidnapper concerning ransom, would nine times out of ten, be more or less illiterate in language or penmanship. The typewriter does away with poor penmanship, of course. But grammar remains. Now, the experienced detective can tell real lapses from grammar as differentiated from pretended lapses. That note, illiterate though it sounds, was not written by an ignoramus, but by one who pretends to be an ignoramus. First of all, there is not probably a human being in the United States to-day, who writes the personal pronoun *I* with a small letter. Children go to school long enough to learn that, however soon they may leave school after. The same with the other capitals. Any one who can use a typewriter at all, knows the capital shift, and any one who could compose that letter, which is fairly well made up, is not so ignorant as to write ‘Miller’ with a small *m*. Pretended illiteracy is one of the easiest frauds to discover that I know of.”

“Then why was the letter written at all?” asked Sayre.

“There are several answers to that; the right one, I do not yet know. As to going to the Miller house at midnight, go if you like, Mrs. Bell. I feel sure there will be nobody there, but if there is, and if you present him with ten thousand dollars, remember that it is a present, you will get no returns for it.”

“But he says he will give me back my niece—and he spelled ‘niece’ wrong.”

Aunt Judy triumphantly announced the latter fact, as if Stone was now hoist with his own petard.

“‘Niece’ is a tricky word,” he said, a slight twinkle in his eye. “It may well be that the writer of that letter didn’t know how to spell it himself.”

“Why, isn’t it right?” said Betty, taking the paper to look at, and speaking so innocently that they had to laugh.

“You see,” said Stone. “I think that word can’t be counted one way or another, for or against the writer who wants us to think him a numskull.”

“The way you put it,” Aunt Judy said after some thought, “I’ve decided not to go out there to-night.”

“There speaks the wise woman,” Stone applauded her. “But, we must have some spy stationed. For my deductions from the letter may be all wrong, and the miscreant may bob up serenely after all. I propose that we dress up some man in some of Mrs. Bell’s costumes and send him out there at the witching hour, so as to be on the safe side.”

“Then the thing to do,” said Pete Gibby, “is to pick the chap who’s nearest the lady in size and also the best looking. I offer my services.”

They laughed at his words, but Stone looked at him appraisingly and said:

“You’re the one for it, my lad. Don’t take the lady’s best clothes.”

“No, there may be a scrimmage,” and Pete smiled at the thought.

After some further talk over the matter, Abel Collins and Lawyer Craven went home, assuring the detective that they would be at his call at any time if needed.

It was after eleven, so the family set about rigging Pete up in a gown, coat, and hat of Aunt Judy’s. Betty cleverly fashioned a wig, whose curls of cotton wool were so realistic that Aunt Judy declared she should sometimes wear it herself when her hair wasn’t curled.

Pete carried no ten thousand dollars, but he carried a serviceable automatic, which he hoped he should have no occasion to use.

He was all ready some time before the witching hour, and declared he meant to start at once and await developments at the tryst.

They watched him from between half-closed blinds as he made his way down the park of Knollwood and out to the road. Along the footpath they could follow the cloaked figure, across the bridge of the big ravine, and then Pete turned in at the Miller house and the watchers lost sight of him.

They went to their rooms, but no one undressed, for they must know the result of the expedition.

The time passed slowly, Betty and Aunt Judy watching from one window, and Sayre from another. Stone threw himself on a couch in his sitting room, knowing he would be called if anything happened.

He thought over the knowledge of the case he had gleaned that evening, and tabulated the information in his methodical mind.

Then he heard Betty's flying feet on the stairs, and he knew the farce, as he felt sure it would be, was over.

As Gibby was coming in the front door, Stone joined the group in time to hear him say; "Sat there an hour, and not a darned soul showed up! Gimme a drink."

Chapter XV

Miss Marsden's Story

Monday morning Fleming Stone came down to the dining room in a hopeful frame of mind, and announced the fact.

"Why are you hopeful?" queried Pete, not with undue curiosity, but with deep interest.

"First, because I feel pretty sure we'll get Miss Duane back, and, too, because I hope to track down the villain who is responsible for her absence."

“Have you any idea who he is?”

“Frankly, no. But I hope to find out. I don’t mind admitting it is the strangest case I have ever been up against. It presents the most seemingly incongruous features, and has some apparently inexplicable conditions. But, it is an axiom among detectives that the more bizarre a case is, the easier it is of solution. I’m not ready to agree with that, unqualifiedly, but there’s a lot in it.”

After breakfast, they held conclave in the library, a pleasant room, of moderate size, whose furniture and appointments greatly pleased Fleming Stone.

“This is a house after my own heart,” he exclaimed, enthusiastically. “If ever I can retire to country, or semi-country life, Hilldale for me, and a home as nearly like this as possible. Do you expect to live here after your marriage?” he asked of Rodney, so casually that the young man could have hugged him out of sheer gratitude.

For the implication that Emily would surely be found and the wedding surely take place was as balm to the soul of Rodney Sayre.

“We hadn’t quite decided that,” he said; “we proposed to go abroad for a time and make our future plans at leisure.”

“Then perhaps some day this house will be in the market,” Stone said, smiling.

The library, like all the other rooms was simple in design, but of fine woods and well-placed book-cases. The ceiling was slightly vaulted, giving the room dignity, and there were well-arranged chairs and tables for convenient and comfortable reading.

“I shall adopt this room while I’m here,” Stone said, “but that does not mean exile for the rest of you. Come in and out as you choose. I’m not fussy in my habits, and no lover of solitude, except when necessary to my work, and then I’ll retire to my own quarters.”

“Do you tell what you’re doing as you go along?” asked Pete. “In the story books, the detective is above all secretive.”

“I must uphold the traditions,” Stone said, with a slight twinkle in his deep gray eyes. “But, the truth is simple. If I learn anything that I feel free to tell you, I shall certainly do so. But if I discover any facts or get any hints that it seems to me unwise to pass on at once, I must keep them to myself for the time being.”

“Fair enough,” Rodney said, who was more than willing to leave the whole matter in the detective’s hands. If he would only find Emily and bring her home, he was at liberty to keep his secrets to himself now and forever, in Rodney’s mind.

“I should like,” Stone went on, “to visit Miss Duane’s rooms. This is in no sense a search, but I want to get any possible mental picture of her that I can. And nothing is so suggestive as the rooms where one lives when alone.”

“The police searched her rooms—” Pete began, but Stone interrupted him:

“As I said, I’m not searching. You must all understand that this is not like a mystery a detective is usually asked to solve. There is no known criminal, no witnesses, no clues, no *corpus delicti*, no evidence, so far, of any importance. It may be, Miss Duane went away of her own volition. I do not think so, but we have no real proof to the contrary.”

“Do you connect the death of Mrs. Pennington in any way with the disappearance of Emily?” Pete asked. Since the detective was so obligingly talkative, Gibby determined to learn all he could of his opinions.

“Impossible to say, as yet,” Stone told him. “There are three plausible explanations of Mrs. Pennington’s death: accident, suicide and murder. It seems to me that in the course of inquiry some facts must turn up to make one of those three seem more true than the others. Until we know that, we can predicate little about the possible connection of the two tragedies. The finding of Miss Duane’s fur and diamonds with Mrs. Pennington’s body, may or may not imply that the two were together when Mrs. Pennington went over the rail of the bridge. That she did go over is the one solid fact we have to work on.”

“From whom are you going to make inquiries?”

“That’s where I want the help of you young people. I would like to question everybody in Hildale, but as that is hardly possible, I’ll take the most prominent or likely people. I thought if we visited a few houses this morning, and if Miss Bailey or Mr. Gibby, or both, accompanied me, I might get some information.”

“Glad to go,” Betty responded, quickly, “but don’t think you’ll get anything out of the Hildale folks. They’re the tightest-lipped people I ever saw. I don’t know why, I’m sure, but they won’t tell a thing, whether they know it or not.”

“All the more reason for worming it out of them,” said Stone. “Can we walk and take the near-by houses first?”

Betty and Pete set off in company with the detective, and Aunt Judy confessed to Rodney that she was a bit disappointed in Mr. Stone.

“I thought,” she said, “that he would look over Emily’s things, maybe her letters, and then announce where she is and how to get her back.”

“You’ve been reading detective stories,” Rodney told her, smiling at her dissatisfied expression. “They work it like that in books, but not in real life. But I have confidence in that man, and I’m going to believe that he’ll find our girl for us. You feel like that, Aunt Judy, and you’ll be happier.”

So Aunt Judy braced up, for Sayre’s hopeful attitude was infectious, and she went about her household affairs with renewed belief in Mr. Fleming Stone.

The walking trio passed down to the roadway, and along the footpath till they came to the first bridge.

“This is the big ravine,” Pete informed; “it’s much deeper and wider than the little ravine. Otherwise they’re the same sort.”

Stone went to the railing and looked over. It was a big gorge, nearly a hundred feet in depth, and lined entirely with trees, shrubs and tangled undergrowth.

“Very beautiful,” Stone said, after a prolonged survey. “But a bit dangerous, I should think, in spite of the strong railings.”

“Yet they say Mrs. Pennington’s was the first accident ever known in either of the ravines,” Pete told him.

“Well, people are naturally careful, and the railings are certainly high enough. Also, there is so much underbrush, a person falling over could catch onto some branch or tree trunk, I should say.”

They went on, and Stone inquired whose was the house they were passing.

“That’s the Miller house,” Betty told him. “They’re abroad, and the place is all shut up. That’s where the letter said to come to meet the kidnapper, you know.”

“And a good trysting place, too. The house is nearly hidden in the trees, and passers-by would not see the conspirators. Let’s go in a bit.”

They walked up the short path, for the Miller house was nearer the road than most, but Stone’s interest soon gave out, and he turned back to the road.

“There’s a street opposite,” he mentioned.

“Yes,” said Pete, “an apology for a street. The residents over here don’t want any real streets to spoil their woodsy effect. But that little street is just to hold Wallace’s, which is a necessary institution.”

“Let’s go and see it,” Stone said, and they all crossed the road and went to Wallace’s.

Able to get Mr. Wallace to themselves a moment, Stone went straight to the point.

“I’m looking into the mystery of the disappearance of Miss Duane,” he said, “and that more or less includes the mystery of Mrs. Pennington’s death. Can you give me a bit of information?”

“As to what point?” asked Wallace, with true Hildale reticence.

“Just this. When Mr. Pennington was in here, buying cigarettes that afternoon—about five-thirty, wasn’t it?—was any other customer in your shop?”

“It wasn’t five-thirty, it was just a few minutes after five, and there was no other customer in the shop at the moment.”

“How do you know the time so accurately?”

“First, because some dozen or more people have asked me about it, and, second, because the postman was just cleaning out my letter-box, and he always comes at five.”

“And the postman goes where, next?”

“On down the street, to the post office.”

“Is this a branch post office?”

“Oh, no. I just have a letter-box for the convenience of the neighborhood. That’s all this place is, just a convenience to the Ravines crowd.”

Stone looked around and noted the high-class stock, comprising the most elaborate confectionary, the Frenchiest cosmetics, a large glass case of hothouse flowers, and a well-stocked tobacco department.

There were also some trinkets, evidently meant for bridge prizes, some expensive stationery, and all the things that might provide for an emergency in the houses of the well-to-do residents of the Ravines district.

“I see,” murmured Stone, “and I think more than ever I’d like to live here.”

“Thinking of settling?” asked Wallace. “I can recommend one or two fine sites.”

“Not yet, not yet,” Stone said, and with an airy wave of his hand relegated the question to the indefinite future.

Then he bought some cigarettes for Betty, having asked her preference, and was ready to leave.

“Find out anything there?” asked Pete, whose ebullient curiosity could not be kept down.

“The merest straw,” Stone returned. “Dunno whether it will show which way the wind blows or not. Now, back to our trail.”

They retraced their steps to the Ravines road, and going on, came at once to the little ravine.

In this Stone was, naturally, greatly interested.

He leaned over the rail, a rail slightly lower than on the other bridge, and looked down into the chasm.

“Not so deep as the big ravine,” he said, “but a long enough fall to kill anybody. I see they’ve fixed up the vines.”

“Yes, the Village Improvement Society looked after that as soon as the police allowed it. Now,” as Stone started on again, “there’s the Pennington house.”

“Where?”

“Look higher up. See, you can just see the roof through the trees.”

“Gracious, I shouldn’t want to live there. Why don’t they cut out enough to make a clearing?”

“It doesn’t seem quite so treesy when you get up to it,” volunteered Betty. “Want to go up?”

“Can’t see any reason for it,” Stone said, looking at his watch. “Guess we’d better be about our business. Where’s the hospital?”

It was pointed out to him, but he took slight interest.

“What I want now,” he said, “is to have you take me to call briefly on two or three of the most knowing people in Hilledale, I mean the ones who know most about gossipy goings on, and include, if you please, the lady who was last at the tea—Marsden, is the name?”

“All right,” Betty chirped, feeling that this was her chance. “I’ll know where to go, Pete. Not the Stevensons’, not the Ballards’. The Marsdens’ come first, and then Sally Kirke’s and Jane Wolcott’s.”

“Good choice,” Pete approved. “Marsdens’ it is.”

They went to the Marsden house, another large, beautiful mansion, and were received most kindly.

Mrs. Marsden, an elderly dame, was disinclined to talk much, but her niece a vivacious young person more than made up for it.

“Isn’t it just too terrible?” Miss Marsden exclaimed. “To think of Emily and Pauline both being there with us at the tea, and now—where are they?”

Her dramatic rendition of these words was accompanied by eloquent gestures of despairing inquiry.

Fleming Stone gave her no direct answer, but said:

“That’s what we’re trying to learn, Miss Marsden. Maybe you can help us. Have you a good memory?”

“Fine,” she declared. “Why, Auntie says I can remember—”

Stone cut short her reminiscences, not rudely, but decidedly.

“Then, please see if you can remember the exact happenings of your departure from Knollwood after the tea there last Thursday.”

“Of course I can; I’ve often thought it over. It seems so strange—”

“Tell it, just as it happened.”

“Why, it was this way. I don’t know anything about time, for I never do. But Auntie and I were waiting to shake hands and say good-by to Mrs. Bell. We had already told Emily we were going. The affair was informal, you know, but we always are careful to be polite to Mrs. Bell. She’s such a dear. Well, we were about the last ones. Just ahead of us the Penningtons were saying good-by. As soon as they turned away from Mrs. Bell, Auntie and I stepped up to her and told her what a nice time we’d had, and all that, and then we came away. The Penningtons were just in front of us, but not quite within speaking distance. Anyway, we didn’t speak to them. They went on till they came to the place where the street goes off to Wallace’s, and then they stood still and said a few

words—I didn't hear, of course—and then Mr. Pennington turned off toward Wallace's and Mrs. Pennington kept straight on. She came to the bridge over the little ravine, and she stopped and stood there, as if she was waiting for her husband. So, we passed her there. I was going to speak to her, but she was leaning over the rail, and she didn't look up or turn around, so I didn't think I'd better speak. I don't know her so awfully well. So, we went on, and of course, I thought no more about it then. We turned at the bend, and I couldn't see her any more, and I didn't look back anyway. I simply assumed that she waited for her husband and they went on home together. That's all I know about it."

"Thank you, Miss Marsden, you've stated it very clearly. And you saw nothing of Miss Duane?"

"Nothing at all."

"You don't know whether Mrs. Pennington had on a fur neckpiece or not?"

"I couldn't swear to that. I think she had nothing of the sort, anyway not around her neck. But she might have had one in her hand."

"You've told this story before?"

"Oh, Lord, yes. Every member of the police force wanted to hear it, so I've told it over and over again. But always the same. I'm sure of my facts, and I saw everything just exactly as I've described it, and I saw nothing more."

"If Miss Duane had been ahead of you and your aunt, would you not have seen her as you turned the bend in the road, after passing Mrs. Pennington?"

"Why, yes, probably. I never thought of that. Still, it was getting dark and I might not—"

"Dark at five o'clock?"

"Yes, it was that day. It was very cloudy, and we thought a thunderstorm was coming up, but it went around to the north, as they so often do."

"Miss Marsden, what is your opinion of the Hindu, Lal Singh?"

If there was one thing Cora Marsden loved better than another it was to express her opinion of people, so she went at it with gusto.

“He’s a dear,” she said, “a perfect dear! Some people say he’s a faker, but I don’t care anything about that. I mean, I don’t care whether he is or not. He interests me tremendously, and I just simply adore him. Oh, he has such ways with him! Why, just the way he rolls his eyes is *too* adorable! You can’t get me to say a word against that gorgeous person!”

“I don’t want you to,” and Stone smiled in sympathy with her enthusiasm. “But, with all your admiration of him, don’t you sometimes think he’s just a wee bit mercenary?”

“Aren’t we all?” she challenged. “Now, don’t you stir up any trouble for that ray of sunlight, or you’ll have me to reckon with.”

Clearly, Miss Marsden was far more deeply interested in the Hindu than in either of her two friends to whom disaster had come, and feeling he had learned all she could tell him, Stone rose to go.

“Well, by ginger, I’ll bet you didn’t learn much there,” opined Gibby, as they took to the road again.

“All’s fish that comes to my net,” Stone murmured in reply. “Now for the gossipiest tongue in all Hilldale.”

“Follow me,” said Betty, importantly, and she led them to Sally Kirke’s charming cottage.

Smaller than most of the houses, it was a love of a *bijou* residence, and again Stone found his sense of æsthetic values gratified by the exquisite interior of Miss Kirke’s home.

She was a bachelor girl, living with a duenna, which fully satisfied Hilldale’s requirements of propriety, and she prided herself on being afraid of nobody’s opinion. She said what she chose and did what she chose, regardless of social comment, and so greatly did she possess the superior complex that she managed to remain top of the heap, above and beyond criticism.

She greeted the trio with warmest welcome, ordered refreshment for them, put Betty in a big lounge chair, with pillows about her, landed Pete comfortably, and then turned her attention to Fleming Stone.

“You’re splendid!” she said, as she shook her black Dutch bob at him. “I knew you’d be like this, you superman, you!”

She shepherded him to a sofa, and seated herself beside him.

“Now, let me help,” she pleaded, with earnest eyes, “I’m sure I can.”

Her style and manner were saved from blatant vulgarity by the fact of her obvious sincerity. There was no trace of self-consciousness or intentional posing about her. She was really what she seemed to be, and in spite of her absurd talk, Stone rather liked her.

“If you can help me,” he said, giving her one of his best magnetic smiles, “it will be by giving me sidelights on the principals in these two cases. We need not waste words, tell me what you think of first regarding Emily Duane.”

“Her mulish obstinacy,” Miss Kirke returned without an instant’s hesitation. “It is not a bad trait, yet sometimes she carries it so far that it works ill to herself.”

“That might well be a factor in her disappearance,” suggested Stone.

“I suppose so, though I don’t see how. Next, I’d put her sense of justice and right. Not everybody appreciates that in Emily, but it’s there. She’d be a martyr to a cause, if she felt it her duty.”

“Surprising in such a young girl.”

“Emily isn’t such a young girl—she’s twenty-two—”

“Young for martyrdom,” and Stone smiled again.

“Well, then, after that comes Emily’s loyalty to her friends, but we all have that and of course, loyalty to Hilldale and its people and its traditions and its ways.”

“All right for Miss Duane. Now, do up Mrs. Pennington.”

“Nice, good, clever, but shattered mentally, morally and physically by the loss of her baby. I never knew any one to take on as she did or to have the melancholia last so long. She couldn’t help it. We often talked it over, you see. And she would promise to try to forget, and to try to take more interest in social doings and in public things and all that. She did get interested in the hospital, but when that was all finished and dedicated, she sank right back into—what do you call it?—a sort of neurotic apathy, I guess.”

“All right, she’s docketed. Now, Mr. Pennington?”

“Jim? Oh, he’s a good sort. Stuck on himself, thinks he’s a genius, fond of his wife, not interested in any other ladies, no real faults, I should say, except a—well, a nervous superiority, that makes him look down on everybody who isn’t in his class mentally.”

“Thinks other people morons?”

“Not quite that, but pretty nearly. I’m not surprised that he lit out of here after Pauline’s death. She acted as a sort of balance wheel. Now, he’ll probably fly to pieces.”

“Next, His Majesty the Swami,” Stone suggested, enjoying himself hugely. He really did want to get any possible sidelights on these chief actors in the drama that engrossed him, but he was also interested in this woman who was so outspoken, and yet so just and honest.

“Oh, him!” she spoke contemptuously. “The less said about Lal Singh the better.”

“Why, won’t he flirt with you?” put in Betty, her eyes round with pretended innocence.

Sally Kirke made a face at her and proceeded to tell Stone her woes.

“The chit has struck it,” she said, with an enormous sigh. “The darling of the gods won’t play with me much. But it’s because I see through him and he knows it.”

“You don’t believe in him, then?”

“Believe in a man who talks about the Constellatory Practice and the Talismanic Magic! Would you?”

“You seem to know a bit yourself, Miss Kirke.”

“I know enough to distinguish an honest student of occult lore from a fraudulent confidence man, making dupes wherever he goes.”

“Did Miss Duane agree with your sentiments regarding the Hindu?”

“No, I think not. But that was because she never looked into the matter deeply. Like most of Hildale, she was carried away by the glamour of his turban and the glory of his swishing white robe, and, too, she was busied with her wedding matters, and never took Lal seriously.”

“She agreed to give him a legacy in her will—”

“Yes, and if you ferret deep enough into the matter, you’ll find that he is at the head of the plotters who carried her off. You’ll find that the Oriental either has killed Emily, thinking he can thereby get that money, or he has her held somewhere for ransom!”

Fleming Stone permitted himself to stare at the speaker. She had raised her voice, she had almost lost control of her temper. Her face was white and drawn and Stone began to be afraid she would work herself up to a nervous frenzy.

So with gracious tact, but with steady determination, he made his adieux, and left the house, Betty and Pete following in his footsteps.

“Ain’t she the corker?” exclaimed Pete, as soon as they were out of earshot.

“She’s a wonder!” agreed Fleming Stone.

“Did she help you?” asked Betty.

“She helped me a heap. Come on, let’s go home now.”

So they went home.

Chapter XVI

Miss Wolcott's Books

The police, jointly and severally, had made up their minds as to the facts of Pauline Pennington's death. They were certain that Emily Duane in a moment of impulsive anger had pushed her over the rail and then, horrified and frightened at what she had done, had run away to hide.

They reconstructed the crime to their own satisfaction, timing it to coincide with Jim Pennington's absence at the Wallace shop. They were sure that Emily came along just after he had left his wife, and that the two women quarrelled, and Emily, with her quick temper and her active muscles, had given the other a push that sent her to her death.

This, they conceded, was probably impulsive and not intentional, but perhaps Mrs. Pennington was standing insecurely, and the rail of that bridge was admittedly rather low. As she went over, they assumed, she had clutched at Emily, grasping her fur collar, and also the necklace, which broke in her hand, and a portion of it went over with her.

"That's how it all happened, no two ways about it," Lawlor told Fleming Stone, who listened with interest.

"But I've been checking up on Miss Duane's character and characteristics," he argued, "and she doesn't seem to me the sort of girl who would run away."

"Yeah, that's the way you hifalutin 'tecs' do, size up a person's character and call it law and gospel. Why ther's no telling what anybody will do in the face of a real emergency like that. Anyway, we can't do anything till we get hold of Miss Duane, and then you bet we'll arrest her, mighty quick."

But Fleming Stone did not entirely agree with the police.

After his trip round Hilldale with Betty and Pete, he retired to his own rooms for a long think over the matter.

At tea time he reappeared, but he was not in jubilant mood, by any means.

Aunt Judy, who had learned already to read the signs on his face plied him with tea and muffins, and wisely forbore all reference to his work.

“I’ve been in Miss Duane’s rooms,” he said, at last, “and I find nothing there to change my ideas of her. She is impulsive, even erratically so, but I am more than ever convinced that she never left Hildale voluntarily. She was carried off by force, or cajoled or inveigled away by trickery.”

“Can’t you form any idea of the villain back of it?” asked Rodney. “I would like to kill him myself.”

“Don’t fling around suggestions of killing, young man. You well know, if you kill anybody you’re fairly likely to get punished for it. Yes, I have an idea of the villain back of all this, but the idea is founded entirely on theory and imagination, and they are vague things to work with. If I could get some tangible bit of evidence, now.”

“What about Lal Singh?” Pete asked, thoughtfully. “Say, he abducted Emily, not for the legacy, that’s too far-fetched, but for her diamonds. I think that chap is a real crook—”

“But he seems to have an alibi,” Stone said. “You can’t imagine him getting Miss Duane away—”

“Yes, I can,” Pete interrupted. “He didn’t have to do the bandit act, you know. Say, he lured her somewhere, on some pretext—the women follow wherever he beckons—and then he shut her up, or sent her away, or did whatever abductors do with their victims.”

“Not a mite of proof or evidence of any such thing,” Stone said, wearily passing his hand across his forehead. “I’ve never had such a baffling proposition as this whole matter seems to be. There’s nothing to take hold of, no pointing facts, no clues of any sort. Emily was here one minute and gone the next, and that’s all we know about it.”

“And Mrs. Pennington?”

“There again, we’ve nothing to work on. Accident, suicide, murder. It may have been any one of the three.”

“And we don’t know that the cases are connected at all.” Pete was trying hard to put forth some new theory or idea, but none seemed to come to him.

“No, we don’t know it, but the broken diamond chain makes it seem so. I can’t see how Mrs. Pennington fell over the rail with the diamonds in her hand unless she had clutched at the chain round Emily’s neck. For that chain wouldn’t be anywhere else but on its owner’s neck.”

“Unless the bandit had already stolen it from Emily, and Pauline clutched it from him.”

“Then he would have retrieved those six diamonds before pushing the lady over. The police theory of Miss Duane’s killing Mrs. Pennington, either intentionally or not, is, to my mind, absurd. But the bandit theory, allowing said bandit to be Lal Singh, or a stranger, necessitates the abducting of Miss Duane and the killing of Mrs. Pennington in such a short time as to make it seem impossible. Though, I suppose, if the villain had been waiting—”

“Why would he be? He couldn’t know Emily was going out at dusk, with her diamonds on.”

“No, it must have been coincidence that he came along. That is, if the diamonds constitute the main issue. But if he merely was out for an abduction, for ransom, then, he would lie in wait for hours, if need be, on the chance of getting her.”

“Where’s that letter the boy brought?” Rodney asked, suddenly.

“The police claimed it, and I gave it to them. I have all I want from it. Did it strike you people that ‘gullery’ was a strange word to use?”

“Why, no,” said Aunt Judy, “we often use it. It was a great word with Emily. She frequently said, ‘no gullery now,’ meaning no trickery or fooling.”

“It’s not very familiar to me,” Stone said, thoughtfully. “I daresay it’s an English expression. Anyway, that note was gullery. But, even at that, there must have been some reason for its being sent. Nobody is going to pay ten dollars to have a note delivered over here, just for fun. I know

people have distorted ideas of humor, but they don't usually go to much expense to carry them out."

"Are you discouraged, Mr. Stone?" asked Betty, so gently and sympathetically that Stone answered her in kind.

"Discouraged? Yes," he said. "Disheartened? No. I am up against it, as I have never been before in all my experience. I must have a suspect. How can any self-respecting detective get along without a suspect?" He smiled whimsically. "All the available suspects are too absurd. Even the wicked Lal Singh would scarcely dare commit a real crime in this place where he is so well known—"

"Not if he were a downright crook?" asked Pete.

"He isn't a downright crook, nor an upright one, either. He is a parasite, a fawning hypocrite, a fraud, if you like, but not a gunman or bandit in any sense of the word. He might steal Emily's diamonds if he got a good chance, but he wouldn't have the nerve, nor the unwisdom to abduct her and throw Mrs. Pennington overboard in order to get the diamonds. He'd realize the risk too strongly."

"Then he's out of it," Rodney sighed. "I rather fancied him in the villain's rôle. And you've no one else to offer?"

"No one, individually. There's a chance of some bad man who lives round here, some servant or chauffeur, say, but no such person has been mentioned to me."

"There isn't any such person," Aunt Judy said, decidedly. "All servants or tradesman or anything like that love Emily. She's been a favorite with such people all her life. No, her abductor came from outside Hilldale, that's certain."

"Maybe," Fleming Stone said, non-committally. Then he gave a little laugh. "I daresay I'm a howling disappointment to you people," he said frankly. "I've no doubt you expected me to walk in here on Sunday, and produce Emily by Monday morning, at latest. And I haven't lived up to your expectations, have I? But, don't be entirely hopeless, for I've learned several helpful points to-day, and I rather fancy I'll get some more to-morrow, and all is not yet lost."

“Good for you, Mr. Stone!” cried Betty. “I don’t know about the rest, but I was beginning to wonder when the fireworks were going to begin. I see, the game goes more slowly than I anticipated, but if there’s a glimmer of a glow of hope, I’m satisfied.”

“There is,” and Fleming Stone looked very serious. “That’s about all it is, a glimmer of a glow, but where there’s a glimmer there must be more light behind it, and we’ll get there yet. My clue, for I have a clue, is so frail, so uncertain, that I almost fear to follow it up, but a hunch tells me to go ahead. I am not the sort of detective who depends on hunches, but there come times when all else fails, and then a hunch isn’t a bad thing to have. What about your other friend, Miss Wolcott? We hadn’t time for her this morning, you know.”

“No,” Betty said, “let’s run over there now. Just you and me.”

“Say we do,” responded Stone, boyishly, and the two started off.

It was not a long walk, for they went cross-lots, and found Miss Wolcott serving tea to a few friends.

They dropped into place, and Stone sat next Miss Wolcott, who was ready and willing to talk to him.

“Come into the library,” she whispered, “I want to tell you something.”

They went into a small book room, and as his hostess closed the door Stone wondered if he would really hear anything of importance.

Miss Wolcott began to talk, and as Stone listened he gazed idly round on her collection of books. They seemed to be mostly poetry and plays, with a sprinkling of modern novels.

“You’re fond of the stage?” he said, and was surprised to see a wave of crimson sweep over her cheeks.

“It’s my despair,” she said, passionately. “I want so terribly to be an actress, and I could do it, too, but for a foolish ego complex that makes me a victim to stage fright at the crucial moment.”

“Too bad,” said Stone, with real sympathy. “And so you read and study plays and then, you can do nothing with them.”

“Yes, I buy every play that is published, and learn a part in it, and play it here alone, with only myself as audience. But why am I telling you all this?”

“Because I’m really interested,” Stone said, kindly.

Then he asked her a few questions concerning Emily Duane, but Jane Wolcott was of small benefit in an informative way.

At last Stone rose, but Miss Wolcott said, hesitatingly:

“I haven’t yet told you what I want to tell you.”

“Get on with it then,” he returned, looking at his watch. He had already learned how to talk to this vacillating young woman.

“It’s—it’s about a sort of society—not society, but a band or a clique or something for—for forming a new race—”

“Let me help you,” said Stone gently. “You’ve in mind a movement for an institution or community that shall have as its progenitors only the best and finest specimens of our young people, and they shall be held captive and made to become the fathers and mothers of a superior race of human beings that shall live in a sort of Utopia—”

“Yes, yes, how did you know?”

“I know all about that thing. It may be sincere in its intents, but it is not above suspicion in its ways and means. Now, you think that maybe Miss Duane was abducted for that purpose, and spirited away to the lair of these people and will never be seen or heard of again.”

“Yes, Mr. Stone, yes. That’s what I think, and you see, when they took her, Polly Pennington was with her, and they had to get rid of Polly, or she would tell on them.”

“I see. Now, Miss Wolcott, dismiss all this from your mind; there’s nothing in it. For, in the first place, they don’t want young people of Miss Duane’s type; they want large, handsome blondes, Nordics, the type that they have decided is best for this scheme of theirs. This is no disparagement to Miss Duane’s beauty or charm, but I happen to know that she is one of the persons they would not select. And, another thing,

no use painting them blacker than they are. I'm very sure they would not resort to murder, or to crime of any sort, other than their abductions, which they do not consider crime. If you'll take my advice, you'll not mention this theory to anybody else, for I assure you it is not the true one, and why stir up a hornet's nest over nothing at all? We're going to find Miss Duane, and you have already been of the greatest assistance to me. Now, will you let me linger here a moment to look at some of your interesting books, and then I will collect Miss Bailey and run along home."

As good as his word, Stone remained in the tiny library a few moments, and then reappeared, and he and Betty said good-bye to their hostess and made for their way back to Knollwood.

"You've learned something!" Betty exclaimed. "You don't have to tell me! You learned something important."

"I did, you little witch. How do you read me so well?"

"Oh, when a man is beaming all over with satisfaction, and impatient to get home and think it all over, it doesn't require second sight to gather that he achieved something worth while."

"You're perfectly right. Now, if you don't ask me what I learned, you'll be a real angel."

"You wouldn't tell me if I did ask you," said Betty, philosophically, "so what's the use?"

"No use, my child. Your friend, too, put forth a most amazing theory of Emily's disappearance."

"Yes, I know. The New Race."

"I thought you'd know about it. Miss Wolcott told you?"

"Yes, and I've heard of the ridiculous business elsewhere. I live in fear of being gobbled up by them."

"You're blonde enough," said Stone, critically, "but you're not big enough. They want young Amazons—"

“Don’t talk about it, I think it’s horrid. That isn’t the help Jane gave you, is it?”

“No, that isn’t the help Jane gave me. The help she gave me she didn’t know she was giving.”

“Well, I won’t tease. I know you’ll tell us when you get ready. And now can you get Emily back?”

“I hope so; I sincerely hope and believe so.”

At Knollwood they found Abel Collins also the Reverend Mr. Garner.

And these two guests were engaged in a spirited discussion about the general character and spirit of Emily Duane.

Sayre had become so incensed at their remarks and insinuations that he had left the group and gone to the library, where Stone found him, idly looking over some illustrated papers.

“Cheer up, boy,” he said, “brighter days are coming.”

“I couldn’t stand that old parson,” Rodney exploded, “he insinuated the worst things about Emily!”

“Such as?”

“Oh, you know her little foolishnesses about the wedding ceremony. She intended to omit the word ‘obey’ and she said she meant to keep her maiden name after we were married, and such matters. As if I cared. Probably she’d change her mind about it anyway. But that dreadful man implied that any girl who held such ideas was quite capable of throwing her friend down the ravine or anything else. I wanted to throttle him.”

“I don’t blame you,” said Stone. “But let him go, and forget it. He isn’t worth worrying over. Now Sayre, I have to go to New York to-morrow. And I want you to hold the fort here.”

“Of course; but what can I do?”

“Nothing but wait. And watch. I don’t expect anything to break, but something might. As I told Betty Bailey, I have a glimmer of a gleam of

light, but it's so faint I hardly dare call it a clue. Still, if I'm right, the end is in sight. And if I'm wrong, we have to begin all over again. I'd gladly tell you what it's all about, but it's wiser not to. You'd say so yourself, if you knew all. Now, I see your friend the parson is departing, so you wait a minute till he's really gone, then you go out and play with Betty and Pete and send Aunt Judy in here to me. I would converse with her."

Sayre did as he was told, and in a few minutes Aunt Judy came fluttering in, all excitement that she should have been summoned.

"Just a few minutes' chat, Mrs. Bell," Stone said, smiling at her. "I want you to tell me exactly all about the so-called Atlantic City pictures."

"Oh, those," and Aunt Judy looked a little disturbed.

"Yes, I can't think they were very terrible, were they?"

"Not really, but it seemed—well, I'll tell you all about it. You see, Emily and Pauline Pennington went down to Atlantic City for a week by themselves. Pauline had had one of her tantrums—I mean one of her nervous breakdowns—and Jim thought it would do her good to get a little change. He would have gone with her, but she wanted Emily, and Emily thought it rather a lark and said she'd go. So the two went, and they had a high old time. I don't know what possessed them but they thought it would be fun to pretend Emily was married and Pauline was not. So they just changed names, and let it go at that. Nothing dreadful happened, except that they met the Swami."

"For the first time?"

"Yes, they had never seen him before, and he was holding meetings and they went, and somehow he spotted them as easy marks, and he attached himself, rather, and he got money from them for his cause. Well, then one day, he proposed they all have their pictures taken, and they did, Pauline and the Swami, and Emily and the Swami, and all three together. Then, and I never was sure it was the Swami's doing but I strongly suspect it, the photographer took some trick pictures, as they call them. You see—and probably you know more about it than I do—they have a prepared plate or something, and a girl sits on a bench and has her picture taken, but when it is finished up there's a man on the bench also, with his arm around her."

“Yes, I know, a common game. And all right if done by the right people in the right spirit, but a dangerous weapon in the hands of sharpers or blackmailers.”

“Yes, so it proved. The photographer’s agent—but I think it was the Swami’s agent—came to them several times and demanded money or he would put the pictures in the paper. He only asked small sums, so Emily and Pauline paid him, but they were glad to get home and get out of his clutches.”

“He never bothered them after they came home, then?”

“No, I suppose they learned that the girls had plenty of protection here. But since Emily’s gone, that Lal Singh is eternally throwing out hints about those pictures.”

“Leave him to me. If he says another word about them, I’ll settle with him. Wasn’t Mr. Pennington annoyed at his wife’s foolishness?”

“At first, yes, but Jim’s rather happy-go-lucky, and he knew Polly meant no harm. Their crowd is always cutting up didoes of some sort. You know what the young people of to-day are.”

“Yes, I know what they are. But you don’t count the Penningtons among the flapper crowd?”

“No, nor Emily, either, for that matter. But the younger married set and Emily’s set have pretty much mingled, until they’re like one crowd. The lines are not drawn hard and fast in Hilldale.”

“Well, Mrs. Bell, I have to go to New York to-morrow, and I do hope that I can unearth some facts there that will help us. I am almost certain I am on the right track, and if so, it’s only a question of time before we have Emily back home. I admit I have never been so baffled by a case before, but I am making no apologies. I am doing my best. I am in no way interfering with the work of the police. And if all goes well, I hope and expect to succeed in my quest before very long. While I am in New York—I’ll be back by tea time—please keep your eyes and ears open. I don’t think anything will happen, but if it should be ready for any emergency.”

“You quite thrill me, Mr. Stone. Indeed I will do just as you tell me and whatever happens they won’t catch us napping.”

“That’s the brave woman, as you always are,” and Fleming Stone’s sincere tones robbed the speech of all banality or flattery.

The next morning Fleming Stone started out by himself for a short walk, he said, before he took the train to New York.

Aunt Judy offered him the cars in the Knollwood garage, but he said he preferred the train this time.

His short walk took him to one place only, a small house on the edge of the town. An unpretentious place, clearly not the abode of society people or even well-to-do citizens.

But Stone was satisfied with what he learned there, and took the train at the little railroad station with hope high in his breast.

He put in the day in New York on some quest that seemed to involve hasty trips from one great business building to another. And from each of these Fleming Stone emerged, more and more perturbed, more and more crestfallen, more and more with the ashy grayness of hopeless despair settling down upon his fine, strong face.

“Done!” he told himself, with bitter anguish. “Done! Yet how could I know? How could I guess? Have I really met my Waterloo at last? It can’t be possible. I’m so near the truth, so near a solution, and yet—where’s Emily?”

He went back to Knollwood, broken and heart-sick. Not entirely despairing, for that was not his nature, but so near it as to leave but small leeway for hope.

As he saw the car that was at the station to meet him, and realized there was no one in it but the chauffeur, he was glad, for he didn’t feel like talking to the young people just then.

By the time he reached the house, he was his own man again, and had concluded that to keep up the morale of the whole case, he must put on a more cheerful attitude, which he proceeded to do.

The result was that he presented rather an unreadable countenance to the group awaiting him at the tea table.

“Good hunting?” Gibby asked lightly, for he knew better than to be definitely curious.

“I know,” said the astute Betty. “Mr. Stone got part of what he wanted in New York, and part he didn’t get.”

Again Stone was amazed at her perspicacity, though he sadly realized that though she spoke truly the part he didn’t get was what is known as the lion’s share.

But he only said, “Right you are, Betty, as usual,” and then he changed the subject to other topics and they all took the hint.

Chapter XVII

Emily!

The next day, Fleming Stone kept to his rooms much of the time. It was Wednesday. One day more and Emily would be missing a whole week, and already the consensus of Hilldale opinion was that she would never be seen again.

Whatever had happened to her, or wherever she was, they felt sure she would never be found alive, if at all.

Some few believed, with the police, that she had inadvertently killed Pauline Pennington, that her sudden temper had caused her to push Pauline over the railing of the bridge, and that, horrified at the position in which this put her she had run away and would never come back.

Others pooh-poohed this theory as being not at all like Emily Duane to refuse to face the music in any emergency, and these stuck to the belief that she had been seized for the diamonds she wore, and having put up a fight had been killed or mortally injured and had been carried off.

Stone rejoined the family at tea time, and he looked pale and anxious.

“Where does the doctor live?” he asked. “Doctor Eaton.”

They told him and he asked for a car to take him to call on the medical man.

Betty offered to go along, but Stone gently declined her company and went off alone.

“That man’s awfully worried,” Betty said, and Pete responded:

“I’m glad of it. And I don’t mean that the way it sounds. I mean, I’m glad he’s got something to worry over—something to chew on. It’s more hopeful than when he’s serene and calm because there’s nothing to look into.”

Stone had a short interview with Doctor Eaton, but it was a satisfactory one. He learned from the medical man some facts that he could have found out in no other way, and they went far to confirm what he had called the glimmer of a glow of light on the dark subject.

He went back, and going at once to his rooms, he dressed carefully for dinner. For some æsthetic reason, it always helped Fleming Stone to be well dressed. Especially when he felt dissatisfied with himself or his work. And in this case he did feel so. Never before had nearly a week elapsed after a crime, without his having found some strong dues or evidence, if not, indeed, having solved the whole question.

“But you have some clues—some evidence”—he remarked to his reflection in the mirror. “Now the thing is to hang on to them and work them up, don’t let go of a single loose end.”

“I shan’t,” the reflection in the mirror promised him.

He went downstairs, to receive very genuine compliments from Betty on his dressy effects. A few guests were expected, as Aunt Judy persisted in keeping up the family traditions of hospitality.

But the guests were a little ill at ease and they left early.

The five left sat round the lounge. Rodney in his usual place on the sofa. Betty and Pete near by, Aunt Judy in a big easy chair, and Fleming Stone standing by the fireplace, his elbow on the mantel.

The outside door was open, as the evening was warm, and a footstep on the porch was heard. A stumbling, irresolute footstep, and all looked toward the door.

There, framed in the door-casing stood Emily Duane.

But what an Emily! Wide-eyed, staring vacantly, trying to lift one foot to the doorstep.

Sayre was paralyzed, not believing his senses, the others, too, sat for a moment spellbound, and it was Stone who dashed across the room and gathered the fainting figure into his arms.

“Here—lay her here,” cried Rodney springing to life at last, and helping Stone lay the girl down among the pillows.

“Send for Doctor Eaton,” Sayre ordered, and Betty flew to the telephone.

Black Pearl, overhearing something indicative, hovered in the hall.

“Come in, Pearl,” Aunt Judy cried out almost hysterically, “Miss Emily is here!”

“Bress de Lawd,” murmured the young negress fervently, and then fell back unobtrusively, yet at hand if needed.

“Whar’s she been, Mis’ Bell?” Pearl whispered.

“Hush, we don’t know. Don’t make any noise.”

“No, ma’am.”

Yet noise did not disturb Emily Duane. She lay in a dead faint, and beyond holding sal volatile to her nose and fanning her lightly, they dared not go. Almost no word was spoken as they awaited the coming of the doctor.

Betty quietly scanned her appearance.

She was attired just as she was when she had left the tea. When she had told Rodney she was going to the hospital and had gone—where?

Her frock, though somewhat tumbled, was not torn or soiled. Her shoes showed no sign of hard wear or unusual dust or dirt.

She had on no wrap and no hat, and one hand clutched tightly the diamond necklace that hung round her throat.

Sayre, on his knees at her side, looked at her as if he could never look his fill; as if he feared it was all a dream and he must soon awaken.

Aunt Judy went back to her chair and sat there, wondering yet grateful that Emily was back with them, whatever her lot might be.

For Aunt Judy thought the girl was insane. She had caught a wild gleam from Emily's eyes as Stone had lifted the collapsed figure, and she never expected to see the light of intelligence again in her darling's eyes.

But she said no word of this, she said no word at all, nor did any of the others. Rodney held Emily's hands in his own, Betty hovered at the head of the couch, and Pete nervously strode up and down the porch looking for the doctor's car.

At last he saw the lights gleam through the trees, and Doctor Eaton hurried in.

He said no word but felt Emily's pulse, took her temperature and blood pressure, and examined her heart.

"It isn't a faint," he said, at last. "She is in a coma, induced by some illness or shock. Probably the latter. We can tell nothing about that, and should she wake, she must not be questioned. I cannot tell much about it myself, for I dare not disturb her too much. She may be hovering between life and death; she may be hovering between sanity and madness. Only the most meticulous care and the fact of her youth and fine constitution may bring her through—and it may not."

"What can we do?" asked Aunt Judy, on the warpath if there was anything to be fought.

"I'm thinking. She must be put to bed, of course, but whether here or at the hospital is the question. Over there it would be better, because there

are appliances if oxygen or any special treatment is called for. Yet you would rather have her here at home?"

Rodney's appealing glance showed how much he wanted to keep her at home, but Aunt Judy said:

"You must decide, Doctor. If you think the hospital better for her, it doesn't matter what we think."

"I do," Doctor Eaton said. "And it may mean the difference between recovery or not. Shall we take her at once? I'll call an ambulance while you pack a few necessary things. Not much, for we don't know yet what she'll want, and you'll be back and forth continually anyway."

So Pearl and Aunt Judy went off to pack a bag for Emily, and Betty sat still watching the face of Doctor Eaton as he watched the quick spasmodic breathing of his patient.

Rodney, rapt in his own thoughts, which were chaotic, continued to kneel by the side of the sofa where he had sat so long waiting for Emily.

And now she was there, there, in front of him, and he could not speak to her, could not tell her how dear she was and how glad he was to see her again—his thoughts became incoherent.

Pete Gibby studied Emily's face. Not exactly thinner, it had a drawn and haggard look as of one who had suffered poignantly. Her hair was as she usually wore it, though showing slight signs of a lack of care.

Her hands seemed whiter than usual, and the finger nails were a little uncared for, but not much; to Pete's eyes she seemed almost the same as usual.

But when at last she opened her eyes there was an involuntary sound of grief or amazement from nearly every one present.

For the eyes held no intelligence, no recognition or understanding.

They closed again at once, and Doctor Eaton said kindly:

"Don't make too much of that; it may all pass and soon, now that she is with us again. The child has had some terrible, some fearful shock or

succession of shocks. She has suffered no maltreatment, she hasn't a bruise or a scratch, nor is she undernourished. But we must curb our natural curiosity and devote all our energies to restoration before we question or disturb her in any way."

"Yes," said Rodney, reverently bending over the hands he still held tightly clasped in his own.

"Get up, Sayre," said the doctor bluntly but gently. "We must take her away now, but remember it is for her own good and probably to save her life or reason."

"All right," and he relinquished Emily's hands, which fell lifelessly down, and rose to his feet.

"Take this, Sayre," directed the doctor, removing the diamond necklace and passing it over.

Sayre took it mechanically and was putting it in his pocket when Pete took it from him.

"Let me have it, son," he said and with the same air of not knowing just what he was doing, Rodney obediently handed it over.

"I'll get Aunt Judy to put it in the safe," Gibby said, noticing quietly that the two ends were tied together with a black silk thread. The ends left by the removal of the six stones now in the possession of the police as evidence.

At the thought Pete Gibby turned cold all over. The police were waiting the return of Emily Duane to arrest her for the murder of Pauline Pennington!

He fairly pushed the thought out of his brain, and then the ambulance arrived and Emily was carefully laid in it and taken to the hospital.

To the hospital at last, where she had started to go nearly a week ago and would only arrive to-night!

How strange everything was.

Fleming Stone watched everything and said almost nothing.

He and Doctor Eaton had had a few whispered words and a few silent nods of understanding and agreement, and then the doctor got into the ambulance himself and was driven off.

“Let’s go over,” said Betty, and she and Pete and Rodney started off.

Aunt Judy and Fleming Stone remained behind.

“Don’t cry,” he said, as the tears began to come.

“No,” she smiled, brushing them back. “And they’re tears of joy, anyway. Emily’s back! We needn’t say ‘Where’s Emily?’ any more, we *know* where she is. I am sure she’ll get well. She’s such a fine, strong girl, and now, with nothing to trouble or worry her, she’s bound to get all right soon. Don’t you think so?”

“Yes,” said Fleming Stone, and truthfully, for he thought the chances were in the girl’s favor.

At the hospital, Emily was put to bed in the best available room, nurses were detailed, and Doctor Eaton held consultation with his colleagues.

They all agreed that Emily’s condition was brought about by shock of some frightening nature, and concluded that nothing definite could be done until she regained consciousness.

She lay quietly, for the most part, though now and then her hands would twitch, or she would give a low moan as if in mental anguish.

The head nurse, Miss Holcomb, came in the waiting room to talk to Betty and the two men, who sat waiting for news.

“There’s nothing to be done,” she said in a kindly way. “Miss Duane may stay as she is now all night—probably will—so I think you had all better go home. If there is any reason to do so, I’ll call you on the telephone.”

“All right,” Betty said, somewhat relieved by the nurse’s calm acceptance of the situation. “Come on, Pete, come on, Rodney, let’s go. We can come over in the morning, nurse?”

“Come whenever you like, but of course, I can’t promise you’ll see the patient.”

“Tell me, nurse,” Betty cajoled, “have you ever seen just such a case before? Exactly like this, I mean.”

“I can’t tell that until I know what ails her. I’ve seen bad shock cases, and if this is a shock case she’ll likely come out of it all right.”

This was encouraging, but vague. However, Betty knew they would get nothing more definite.

“How is Mrs. Laurence?” she asked.

“Oh, she’s fine, and the baby, too. When you come over to-morrow, probably you can see her.”

So Betty and Pete went home.

Sayre positively refused to go. He declared he would stay the night in the visitors’ waiting room and be there in case Emily came to herself and asked for him.

The nurse smiled at this devotion, but told him if he chose to stay there was no real objection. But, she added, there was no chance whatever of his seeing Emily during the night and he’d much better go home and get his rest.

But Rodney was immovable, and he sat on the hospital sofa with the same air of determined patience that he had shown at Knollwood.

Aunt Judy only smiled when Betty reported, and said she believed in people’s doing what they wanted to do, and if Rod wanted to stay over there she was glad he had stayed.

Fleming Stone was elated at Emily’s return. He said:

“Her reappearance is in no way due to my efforts. I don’t know at all where she has been, but I do know I’m going to track down the man that is responsible for her abduction.”

“You can do it?” asked Pete, not doubtfully, but greatly interested.

“I can do it,” returned Fleming Stone, so positively that they were all impressed.

So the people at Knollwood went to bed, and meantime Rodney sat on his new sofa and the doctors and nurses took care of Emily Duane.

The first part of the night there was nothing to be done, but shortly after midnight the patient grew restless and the night nurse called Doctor Eaton.

By the time he reached her bedside, Emily was screaming in an attack of acute hysteria. He quickly administered a sedative, but its effect was slow and the girl went through a series of alternate rigidity and convulsive movements, until the nurses began to fear the end was near.

“No,” Doctor Eaton said, “these spells are to be expected. She will have more of them. But they are physical. If we can keep her mentality, we can pull her through physically, I feel sure. The trouble will come when she wakes to consciousness. On no account question her, or say anything definite of any nature. Should she become rational when I am not here, just soothe her and murmur words of general comfort. Tell her everything is all right and for her to go to sleep. Probably she will obey, but call me in any case.”

Rodney Sayre, in the distant waiting room, could hear nothing of these developments, and he sat in the corner of the big chesterfield, now and then lightly dozing, but for the most part just revelling in the thought that Emily was home again, whatever the future might hold for them.

And being young and of a hopeful, optimistic nature, he let his fancy run riot as to the coming days when after a simple wedding ceremony, he would take his bride away to some lovely, quiet spot to get back her health and strength.

Not for a moment did he apprehend any mental trouble for her. He knew too little of such matters to know what terrible effects severe shock may bring about.

Could he have seen Emily at that moment, her eyes staring and wild, her hands tightly clenched and her whole body contorted as if in a convulsion, he would have been less sanguine.

But he was mercifully spared this knowledge, and after the doctor's persistent ministrations, poor Emily sank into a heavy slumber induced by narcotics.

Doctor Eaton left the sick room, with a heavy heart. He knew a lot about the results of shell shock, and this present case showed many similar symptoms. His diagnosis, corroborated by his confreres, was that the whole illness of Emily was the result of shock by some frightening occurrence or series of occurrences. The latter most likely, for one shock, however great, could scarcely reduce a strong healthy girl to this pitiable, trembling wreck of humanity.

But the doctors all agreed there was nothing to be done but wait and let nature do all it could by itself in a recuperating way.

Emily took the nourishment they offered and swallowed milk or broth naturally and with no unwillingness. This led to a more assured opinion that physically there was little the matter with her.

But when the sedative effect wore off and consciousness began to return, then came about the terrible spells of hysteria and apparent dementia.

About dawn Emily had one of these attacks and became so violent that they were obliged to restrain her by force.

"I must get out of the window," she cried, not loudly, but with a low, piteous moan. "I *must* get out of the window!"

"Yes, dear," soothed the nurse, "yes, you shall get out of the window. Just wait till afternoon. Take a little nap first."

And so receptive was Emily's disordered brain that she obeyed and went to sleep as suggested.

Then in a moment she was wild again, tossing her restless head and throwing her arms about.

Patiently the nurse soothed her and tried to calm her. Sometimes the efforts were successful, sometimes not, but the nurses, frequently relieved, were indefatigable and persistent in their determination to do their part toward the recovery of Emily Duane.

Not only was it a celebrated case, as well as the most important and interesting case the hospital had ever had in its brief career, but they all loved Emily, they all admired Rodney, and they outvied one another in their work of rescue.

At seven o'clock, when Emily chanced to be quiet, a nurse took occasion to tell Rodney he would better go home and freshen up and get his breakfast.

"You can breakfast here if you like," she went on, smiling at him, "but I'm sure you'll fare better at Knollwood. And you can't see Miss Duane to-day in any case. Perhaps not for several days."

"But she's getting better. She's doing all right?" begged Rodney, and the nurse was moved to give him some details.

"Yes," she said, picking her words carefully, "she's doing all the doctors can expect or hope for at present. They want to build her up physically before she is questioned or even spoken to."

"Has she said anything at all?"

"Nothing coherent. I was with her about three or four o'clock, when she woke suddenly and seemed to want to talk. I didn't discourage her exactly, and she tried hard to say something. But she couldn't get the words right. Then she waved her arms about and said thickly, 'Can't talk—get pen—' So I offered her a pencil and a paper pad. But she only stared at me and said, 'No, no—get pen—' Well, of course, I didn't dare bring pen and ink, for she'd likely fling it all over the sheets, so I said, 'Yes, dear, to-morrow we'll get a pen for you,' and she smiled almost rationally, and dropped off to sleep like a lamb."

Rodney listened, glad to hear any details, and then he said:

"Thank you, nurse. It's plain to be seen she wants to tell of her experiences but she can't command her speech yet. If the doctor will let her, give her a pen to-day, but, of course, don't do anything he thinks unwise."

"No, sir," said the nurse demurely, quite willing to let this nice young man think he was giving her valuable advice.

Sayre went back to Knollwood, greatly heartened by his talk with the nurse. It brought Emily nearer to him to hear these details of what she was doing and saying. Had he known the real truth of her terrible night, he would have felt less secure of her ultimate recovery.

At the breakfast table all tried to be cheerful and hopeful. Aunt Judy was frankly jubilant over Emily's return and was sure that she would soon be her own self again.

Pete was worrying about the police. He hadn't mentioned it, but he felt sure the moment Emily was well enough they would arrest her for Polly Pennington's murder.

Emily arrested for murder! The idea was so absurd as to seem impossible, but Pete knew how strongly Lawlor believed in the girl's guilt, and whatever the outcome might be it would mean a lot of trouble and publicity.

Betty was a little downcast, for she had had a relative who had lost his mind through the effects of shock, and she secretly feared for Emily.

Fleming Stone, pleasant and kindly as always, was abstracted and thoughtful.

He roused to sharp attention when Rodney related what the nurse had told him.

For Sayre, so pleased himself to learn details of his darling's doings, wanted to pass the story on, to interest Aunt Judy and Betty.

But of them all Stone showed the deepest interest.

"Tell that again, Sayre," he said, excitedly. "Tell it exactly as the nurse told it to you."

Nothing loath, Rodney repeated it all, being careful to quote the exact words of the nurse.

"I shall have to go right to New York," Stone said, as they rose from the table. "Pete, you keep an eye and ear for anything that may happen. Of course, nobody can question Emily or even see her, I suppose, but get from the nurses a full account of anything she says or does. It may mean

everything in our search for the villain who brought all this about. I shall stop at the hospital before I go to the train, for there may be some further news.”

Stone hurried off, and though wondering what had given him this new impetus they could scarcely think it was Emily’s suggestion of writing what she could not say.

And yet it was.

Chapter XVIII

The Whole Story

Fleming Stone stopped at the hospital on his way to the station and asked for Doctor Eaton and for the nurse who had been with Emily during the early morning hours.

“You see, doctor,” the detective said, “our suspicions are well founded. I don’t know where Emily has been kept these six days, but we do know who kept her captive. We don’t know how she got out, and we can’t know until either she or her captor tells us.”

They talked a few moments longer and then the nurse they had summoned appeared.

“Has Miss Duane said anything rational?” Stone asked her.

“Not rational, no,” she replied. “But she babbles a great deal. Most of it is incoherent and of no sense at all. But some few phrases recur continually. She is always asking for a pen, but given either a pen or a pencil, she cannot use them. She makes meaningless marks on the paper and then throws them down. And she says over and over ‘double you, double you.’ Whether she means the letter *W* or what she means, I don’t know. But it’s everlastingly, ‘double you, double you,’ and once she said clearly, ‘Remember, double you!’ and then she went off into unconsciousness again.”

“Thank you,” Stone said, speaking so fervently that the nurse stared.

He went off to the station and thence to New York, looking very much elated indeed.

But the watchers by Emily's bedside were not elated. There were moments when they thought she was really coming back to her rational senses, and then the next instant she would be screaming in hysteria.

Certain things seemed to throw her into a panic of fear.

One was tomato soup. When the nurse brought her a small bowlful for a mid-morning lunch, she flew into such a spasm of mortal terror and anguish that the frightened attendant ran from the room with it.

She returned to find Emily panting with fright and terror.

But given another sort of soup, she ate it with relish and seemed grateful.

"Yes," Doctor Eaton said, told of this incident. "She will be like that. Until we know what she has been through, we can give no explanation. But doubtless tomato soup was in some way connected with her imprisonment. Don't bring it to her again."

By afternoon Emily was more tranquil and the nurses began to feel hope of her ultimate recovery.

Betty came over but was not allowed to see her, as it might rouse memories for which the poor disordered mind was not ready.

They arranged that Betty might look into the room and catch a peep of Emily in a mirror.

But when Betty did this and Emily by chance cast her eyes toward the door, the lack-lustre gaze and the blank stare so frightened Betty that she fell back sobbing and despaired of Emily's ever getting better.

"Oh, Pete," she said, later, "don't tell Rodney, but I know Emily's mind is gone forever! Nobody could look like that and ever get over it. Why, she is mad! She can never recover."

"Now, now, Betty, don't look at it like that. Give her time. The doctors all say it may be a long siege, but they think her youth and strength will pull her through."

“Oh, I hope so, I do hope so, but I don’t want to see her again while she’s like that. And don’t let Rodney see her. It would haunt him all his life.”

Stone telephoned up that he would remain in New York overnight, and asked Pete if he had any further details for him.

But Gibby hadn’t, so a period of quiet waiting settled down upon Knollwood.

The family routine went on as usual. Different ones went over and back to the hospital as they chose.

Pearl went frequently, carrying choice dishes, prepared by the Knollwood cook, which Emily ate and enjoyed.

No one was allowed to see her, but reports were willingly given, and if the more alarming phases of the case were not given out, that was better for the inquiring ones.

By Friday afternoon, the nurse proposed that they bring in Mrs. Laurence’s baby in the hope of pleasantly diverting Emily’s thoughts.

But, to their amazement, the result was the opposite.

At sight of the child, Emily became so violently agitated as to cause deepest alarm.

The nurse, frightened and remorseful, tried to quiet her, but Emily had one of her very worst attacks of hysteria and afterward, exhausted and spent, lay moaning, ‘the baby—that must be the baby—’ and it was a long time before they could make her forget the child.

“What does it mean, Doctor?” the nurse asked, having made a clean breast of the incident.

“It means,” he said, “that during the six days of her imprisonment, wherever she may have been, Miss Duane went through some severe experiences. We shall never know about it unless she recovers her mind and can tell us. But probably there was a baby or small child involved somehow, as there must have been tomato soup. Perhaps other similar matters will come up, so bring in no outside interests of any sort, for

anything may stir up trouble. I think there is a little improvement, but the least thing untoward will send her off again.”

So care was taken to introduce no new factor of any sort. They continued to use the foods that Emily had already accepted, and she saw no one but the attendants to whom she had become accustomed.

Stone, returning after two days, was deeply interested in the story of Emily’s antipathy to the Laurence baby, and nodded his head.

“Of course,” he said, as if to himself, “of course. It would be so.”

But explanation of this cryptic remark he would not give.

“Don’t ask questions now,” he begged of Pete, who was agog to know the detective’s conclusions. “If Emily comes to herself, all will be well. If not, *that* is our trouble, not the police.”

And then the day came when Emily did come to herself.

Doctor Eaton arriving one morning saw the light of reason in her eyes, and hiding his elation, he spoke gently to her.

“How are we this morning, my dear?”

It was Sunday now, and Emily had been four nights in the hospital, hovering between sanity and madness.

But each twenty-four hours had shown some slight improvement, and now the veil had lifted, and, whether temporary or permanent, reason was again enthroned.

“I want to go home,” Emily said, looking at the doctor in a half daze.

But her voice was normal and her eyes clear and understanding.

“Yes, my dear, you can go home whenever you like.”

The doctor was a little at a loss just how to treat this new development, fearing to deny her anything lest the startled bird of reason take flight as suddenly as it had come.

“Now?” Emily asked, still seeming rational.

“If you’ll take a nice, long nap first, you may go when you awaken,” the doctor promised her, and he gave her a draught that ensured the long nap whatever was to follow.

So Emily fell into a deep sleep and when she awoke it was late afternoon.

She was refreshed and still sensible and rational.

“Now, can I go home?” she asked, and though her voice sounded small and far away, it was in no way flighty or wandering.

“I ’spect so,” replied the nurse who had had her orders, and Emily was made ready for the journey.

In an ambulance again, she was taken back to Knollwood where she was met by only Aunt Judy and Pearl, the doctor not yet willing to risk the excitement of seeing Rodney.

Put to bed in her own room and again given an opiate, Emily slept quietly all night and next morning woke almost her own old self.

“My room,” she said, smiling as she patted the dainty bedclothing and looked about upon her own belongings.

“Nurse,” she said at last, and the watching attendant stepped forward. “I’m a whole lot better.”

“Indeed you are, Miss Duane,” and the nurse spoke with glad truthfulness.

“I am not quite well yet and I shall have to rest up a little before I get up, you know.”

“Yes, indeed. Now don’t talk any more until you have had some breakfast.”

“All right,” and Emily’s eyes closed and she lay very still until the tray arrived.

As she sipped her cocoa she seemed to be thinking deeply, and the nurse became anxious.

“Don’t think, Miss Duane, don’t try to think at present. You’ve lots of time ahead of you. Take it easy now. The doctor will be here soon.”

“Very well,” and Emily smiled again, with that strange newborn smile of hers that meant returned sanity and power of thought.

“Well, well,” said Doctor Eaton, coming in. “Well, well! Very well indeed, I should say. You won’t want a doctor much longer, Emily.”

“No, Doctor Eaton, I don’t want a doctor, I want a detective.”

“Bless my soul! You want what?”

“A detective—a first-class detective.”

“Too easy. That want can be supplied in a few minutes. But what do you want of him?”

“I want to tell him things. I’ve a lot to tell, and it must be told to the right person, to somebody who can take the whole matter in charge and do what is right and best.”

“Is your memory clear, Emily?”

“Perfectly clear. I am tired, but I shall never be able to rest till I tell what I have to tell. Where’s Rodney? On the sofa?”

She gave one of her old-time roguish smiles, and the doctor responded.

“I guess he is. He’s there mostly, waiting for you.”

“Dear Rodney. I want to see him, but—”

“But you want to get this other matter off your chest first. That it?”

“Yes, that’s it.”

“Well, Emily, as you seem to realize yourself, you’ve been pretty ill, and you’re not yet entirely well. If I give you your first-class detective right now, will you consent to a short interview and a quiet one. No storming about, you know.”

“I’ll agree, and as soon as it’s over, I’ll rest before I ask to see Rodney.”

“You’re a brick, my girl, you’re really a wonder. All right, fix her up nurse, in a fetching boudoir robe and cap, or whatever the girls wear nowadays, and I’ll serve up one detective.”

And so, when Fleming Stone came into the room, he saw a pretty girl with a sweet but troubled face sitting up against the pillows waiting for him.

“Let me do the talking,” he suggested, “we want to cover all the ground we can, with the least exertion on your part. I’ll tell you what I know and what I think, and you can set me right if I go astray.”

And so expeditious was the detective’s procedure, and so true his deductions and conclusions that Emily had little to do but acquiesce, and tell him a few points that he had no other way of learning.

“Now,” he said, as they finished their confab, “I wonder if you would be willing to put this all out of your mind for twenty-four hours. Forget it utterly and leave it all to me. In the meantime, you get thoroughly rested, give poor Mr. Sayre a sight of you, and your aunt, too, if you feel equal to it, and then, to-morrow, if you’re up to it, tell the whole story to us all.”

“That would just suit me,” Emily smiled at him. “This talk with you is about all I can stand for one day, but to-morrow I’ll be ready to face the whole world.”

“I believe you will be,” and Stone realized that severe though the shock had been this young, healthy constitution was going to throw off the effects with astonishing rapidity.

At the nurse’s orders, Emily had a long rest, and after luncheon Rodney was allowed to visit her.

Warned not to be too emotional, he just took her into a strong, silent embrace, and then, laying her back on the pillows, he said:

“Not much talky-talk, my lady. You’re just to be still and look at me and let me look at you for the space of twenty minutes, and then it’s good-by until to-morrow.”

“We’ll have our twenty minutes,” Emily assured him, “and something tells me we won’t wait till to-morrow for another twenty. If I wheedle the nurse, I’m sure she’ll let you come in and say good-night to me, and oh, Roddy, darling, in a day or two, I’ll be absolutely all right again. Won’t that be fine?”

Sayre fully agreed with this, and then the twenty minutes flew by as if on wings.

Aunt Judy was allowed a short interview and Betty and Gibby a peep, and then Emily was ordered to rest up for the interview of the morrow.

It was an important affair.

Emily, dressed, in her right mind, and fairly strong and well, sat on the sofa in the lounge, with Rodney beside her.

She was about to tell her story to those most concerned to hear it, and her audience included Chief Jennings and Detective Lawlor, as well as Fleming Stone and the Knollwood household.

“I shall tell this just as it happened,” Emily began, in a low, clear voice. “I shall make it as short as I can, and I can fill in details later. For, I don’t want to give out before I finish.

“As you all know, I left here about five o’clock the day of the tea, to run over to the hospital to kiss Mrs. Laurence’s new baby. A foolish notion, perhaps, but that doesn’t matter, that’s what I started out to do. I had on my diamond necklace and I caught up my sable fur and put it on, with a vague thought of covering up the necklace. Not that I feared robbery, but it seemed a sensible thing to do.

“I went straight down our path, and along the road toward the cross-lots cut to the hospital. The Penningtons had left here about ten minutes before I did, and as I crossed the big ravine, I thought I saw Mr. and Mrs. Pennington on the bridge over the little ravine. They did not see me, and they were quarrelling, or it seemed so to me. Anyway, I didn’t think much of it, for they often had tiffs, but as I got nearer, I saw—I saw *Jim Pennington throw his wife over the bridge rail*. There is no doubt about this, I saw it, and I heard her faint cry.

“I went on and came to the bridge where Jim Pennington stood alone.

“‘You’ve killed Polly,’ I cried. ‘You threw her over into the ravine!’

“‘Nonsense,’ he said, ‘you’re dreaming; I did nothing of the sort. Come along with me up to the house and I’ll show you Polly there, alive and well.’

“I felt dazed, I didn’t know what to do, and urged on, in fact he half carried me, I found myself in the Pennington house.

“‘Where’s Polly?’ I demanded, for I saw only Rosa, the maid.

“Without a word, Jim picked me up and carried me upstairs. He opened the door of the nursery and put me inside, and came in himself.

“‘Now, Emily,’ he said, speaking with perfect calm, ‘you saw me. I did push Polly over. Never mind why or how. Are you going to tell?’

“‘Tell!’ I cried, ‘of course I’m going to tell! I can’t wait to get to some place where I *can* tell.’

“‘Then you must never reach such a place,’ he said, so coldly and cruelly I thought he was going to kill me then and there.

“Well, you know the nursery at the Pennington house. It’s a lovely big room, all white enamel paint and exquisite furnishings, and a bathroom all white and silver. Polly had it done up for the poor little baby who died. And it is soundproof; not a bit of noise can get through its walls. Polly had that done to keep the child quiet and to prevent its disturbing the house if it cried. Also, the windows are strongly barred. Can you imagine a better prison? Jim locked me in there and said I could think the matter over. If I would promise not to tell on him until after he had time to settle things up and get away from Hildale, I could go free at once. He was perfectly willing to trust my word.”

“What a great story!” murmured Stone, as Emily paused for a moment, and was given a refreshing draught by the nurse.

Abel Collins had arrived and also Everett Craven, but Emily seemed not to care what additions were made to her audience. She went ahead with her tale as if she had but the one idea, to get it told.

“So he went away, Jim did, and about half past six, he looked in again to see if I had changed my mind.

“I told him no, I’d sit there till doomsday, before I’d do one thing to help him escape punishment for his awful crime. He took it lightly, as he does everything and went off, locking the door behind him.

“I was mad, more than frightened, and I banged on the door and I yelled and I did all I could to make a racket. Then, about seven, Rosa came up with a tray of dinner. Perfectly good food, but I couldn’t eat, of course. I tried to get around Rosa, but she is bound heart and soul to Jim Pennington. She adores him, and either he took her away with him, or she thought he would, I don’t know which. Well, she left the tray, and came back for it at eight or so. As I hadn’t touched it, she just shrugged her shoulders and went off and left it there.

“That was Thursday, you know. Well, after that, Jim Pennington came to the nursery twice every day, and all he said was to ask me if I had reconsidered and if I would promise not to tell on him until he had time to make his getaway. I refused to do this, naturally, and he went away every time. Rosa brought me meals three times a day, and I just stayed there. I didn’t know what to do, but I did know that I was not going to promise to shield that murderer! Of that I was positive, no matter what else happened.”

“You obstinate little piece!” Abel Collins murmured beneath his breath.

“So the days went by. Of course, I was perfectly comfortable, physically. The nursery has a lovely nurse’s bed and all the bathroom appointments are perfect, and there were books about and magazines. And Rosa brought me lovely things to eat.”

“Rosa knew all about it, then?” asked Lawlor, who was eagerly listening.

“Oh, yes. Whatever Jim did was perfect in her eyes. Then came the funeral. I knew because Jim told me. He was most straightforward and casual about it all.

“‘I’m sorry, Emily,’ he would say, ‘that you’re so obstinate. You could just as well be at home, and have your wedding as planned and all that—’ but

I cut him off every time and told him the moment I got out of that place, I should go straight to the police with the whole story.

“And you can’t keep me here forever,’ I said.

“And he said, ‘Oh, I don’t know,’ in a meaning way that gave me my first feeling of fright. Suppose he should go off—he said he was going away—and leave me there to die! I couldn’t make anybody hear, I had tried and tried. I had yelled out of the windows, but they face up the mountain, you know, and the room is between two extensions, so my voice couldn’t carry far.

“On Sunday morning Jim came in and said I had lost my last chance. ‘You’ve been obstinate too long,’ he said. ‘Now take the consequences.’ He wasn’t ugly in his manner, just hard and cold, like ice. ‘I am going away to-day,’ he said, ‘and I am not coming back. I shall go where I cannot be found, by detectives or anybody else. Now here’s what I plan for you. You see this safe.’ There was a small safe in the room, evidently put there to get it out of the way, as it had nothing to do with the baby clothes. ‘In it I put the key to this room; I have a duplicate.’

“He put a key in the safe and then he fiddled with the combination lock. ‘See,’ he said, ‘here’s the combination, 31—17—8.’ He showed me just how to work it. ‘But,’ he said as he finished, ‘it is a time lock and you can’t open it until Wednesday, that’s the day it’s set for.’

“And I’m to stay here until Wednesday?’ I exclaimed, still more mad than frightened.

“Yes,’ he said. ‘Rosa will leave food for you. I’m sorry it must be mostly canned goods. But they’re the best quality. They were in the pantry.’

“And Rosa brought in a lot of cans of baked beans and sardines and chicken and ham, and tins of crackers and condensed milk and bottled coffee, you know that nice kind that you take on board a steamer. Well, Rosa piled all the stuff on a table without a word and started to leave me. I grabbed her and offered her money or anything if she would get me out. But she was too loyal to Jim and she wouldn’t move a finger to help me. She left two or three can openers and corkscrews and went away.

“I only saw Jim once after that, just for a few minutes. He said, ‘Remember you’ve brought this all on yourself by being such an obstinate little piece. You haven’t accomplished anything, for I shall get away all right.’

“And just then, I heard Rosa whisper to him, ‘The Double you?’ and he said, ‘Yes, shut up!’ so I remembered that.

“Then he said, ‘Sorry but I have to have the electricity and the gas turned off. But I’ll leave the water on. I can’t let you have a light, you see. Remember, it’s all your own fault that you are here.’ Then he went out of the room, but he poked his head back to say: ‘I hope the time lock works all right. But it’s a bit old and rusty and maybe it won’t. If not—’

“He shut the door and locked it, and that’s the last I saw or heard of any human being. I tried to be philosophical, and I could have pulled through all right if he hadn’t said that about the time lock’s being rusted. If that didn’t work, I was shut up there in a living tomb, where no one would ever think of looking for me. I tried to amuse myself with the baby things and the books and papers, but when it got dark Sunday night and I had no light I gave out. I cried myself to sleep and woke in a pitch-black room, not knowing the time or anything.”

Rodney put his arm round Emily and drew her closer to him. She smiled up at him, but said, “Let me go on, I must get it over.”

“Well, then,” she said, “the hard days began. I thought it was bad enough when Jim and Rosa were there, but this awful solitude and silence were worse. And the thought of that rusty time lock got on my nerves. Then one night there was a terrific thunderstorm and I’m so afraid of thunderstorms. And once I heard a mouse nibbling. And I’m terribly afraid of mice!”

She shivered all over, but went bravely on.

“Of course the thing that got on my nerves worst was the fear of that time lock. I tried to forget it but I couldn’t. Then one night I ate some tomato soup and it was spoiled or something, and I had ptomaine poisoning, or I thought I had. Oh, I was so sick! And that’s about all, only the fright and the illness from the soup and the fear of that old lock nearly drove me insane!”

“They nearly did,” said Doctor Eaton, looking very grave.

“And at last Wednesday came. I thought the day would never pass. I tried the lock a million times for I didn’t know at what hour it would be freed. And when it began to get dark and the safe wouldn’t come open, I fainted and I don’t know how long I lay on the floor there, in front of that safe. But when I came to, I tried the combination once more and it worked!

“I stumbled out of that room, and downstairs, somehow, I don’t know how, and their front door has a Yale lock, so I could open that from the inside. I came out, closed the door behind me, and I managed to get over here, and that’s all.”

Emily fell back against Rodney, who, at a nod from the nurse, carried her straight back to her room and laid her on the bed.

“Go away now, darling,” Emily said to him. “I’ll be better to-morrow.”

The nurse put her back to bed, and Aunt Judy came up and petted her, and, her mind relieved of its burden, Emily fell into a natural and refreshing sleep at last.

“Now, for my part in this drama.” Fleming Stone’s deep voice was saying as Aunt Judy returned. “You have all heard who is the man responsible for the death of his wife and for the abduction of Miss Duane. I will produce him and let him speak for himself.”

And, handcuffed between two stalwart policemen, Jim Pennington was led into the room.

“I’ve nothing to say,” he declared insolently. “You’ve got the goods on me, and I can’t help myself. But I don’t have to talk.”

“You don’t have to,” said Jennings, “but perhaps you’ll tell why you killed your wife.”

“I was sick and tired of her,” Pennington burst forth. “She was no sort of wife for me. We were always incompatible, and after the death of the baby she was a neurotic. I couldn’t stand her. And that day there was such a good chance, as I thought, I just put an end to my troubles. All

would have gone well if Emily hadn't happened along just at that minute. But I couldn't have foreseen that, and so I did for her as best I could. I wasn't going to be shown up by that minx, so I just shut her up till I could get away. There was no danger of the time lock's not working, I said that to scare her, for she was so cocky and so obstinate."

"What did you do with Rosa?" said Jennings.

"I paid her off in New York, and let her go," said Pennington sullenly.

"Where were you hiding?"

"On a ranch in the West, where I thought nobody could ever find me. I don't know yet how anybody did."

"It was this way," Stone explained, suavely. "Your friend Rosa let slip a word about 'Double you' which Miss Duane caught and remembered. As I happen to know of the Double U ranch, a small ranch owned by one Ulysses Updyke, I thought that's where you were. I telegraphed the authorities near there, and that's how they knew just where to find you and bring you here.

"I was also put on the right track by Miss Duane's insistence, in her delirium to 'get pen'. I felt sure she meant 'get Penn,' and she did. She has told me since. Then, her aversion to the tomato soup and also her aversion to the baby she saw in the hospital are explained by her disordered mind's retaining the memories of the soup that made her so ill, and also the nursery, brought to mind by the sight of the baby. It's a wonder her mind didn't really give way under the strain, beyond recall."

"It's a wonder mine hasn't given way, having to live the life I've lived," said Pennington, and forthwith he began a tirade against Pauline and her shortcomings. "I didn't exactly mean to pin the crime on Emily, but you see Emily fought me like a little tigress when I first tried to take her to my house. If any one had come along then it would have been all up with me. But once I had her under lock and key, I was safe enough. Then I found her fur and a bit of her necklace on our living-room floor, as a result of her struggles, and when I came over here that night later, I just pitched them over the bridge to get rid of them."

"Then you were in at Wallace's, just as you said?"

“Of course, I was. And when I was there, I had no intention of committing a crime. But when I joined Polly on the bridge and she began to rag at me about Rosa—which was too silly; I detest Rosa—I just acted on impulse, homicidal mania I suppose it might be called. And if Emily hadn’t happened along—”

“You said that before,” Jennings interrupted him. “Come along, Mr. Pennington. I don’t believe these people want to see any more of you, but I know some people who do.”

And still with a nonchalant, almost jaunty air, Jim Pennington was led away, on the route that has no return.

“What gave you your first hint of Penn’s guilt?” asked Pete of Fleming Stone, who seemed in talkative mood.

“The use of that word, ‘gullery’,” Stone replied. “It’s such an unusual word, yet I knew I’d heard it. Then I remembered it was in one of Pennington’s earlier plays. So that started me off. Miss Wolcott has a complete set of his plays, and I verified it when I was there. I felt sure that hoax letter was merely to divert attention from the real abductor, and so it was. Pennington was very clever, but when I went down to New York and found he had gone away without telling his bank his address, and he had taken a lot of money with him, I began to think where he could have gone. He didn’t get a passport, so I knew he was still in this country, and I thought of a ranch as a fine hiding place. Then when I heard Miss Duane had mentioned the Double U, I knew just where to put my hand on him, and did, through the medium of Uncle Sam’s troopers and police forces.

“If there’s anything more you want to know, let’s leave it till to-morrow, I’d rather celebrate to-day.”

So they celebrated, for none of them had any very deep sympathy for Jim Pennington; they had only room in their breasts for gladness at Emily’s return and recovery.

And so therapeutic is happiness that before the evening was past, Emily was back again on the sofa by Rodney’s side, making new plans for the postponed wedding ceremony and for the wedding trip.

“We won’t have such a dressy wedding,” Emily decreed, “and we won’t need the services of old Spinks, but we do want an honored guest who wasn’t invited before, Mr. Fleming Stone.”

And with his best bow Stone accepted the invitation.

THE END

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