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The Crime in the Crypt

by
Carolyn Wells

Chapter 1 **The Crime In The Crypt**

WELL, YOU MUST admit it was a surprising sight, to say the least.

A dead man of today, in an old, crumbling sarcophagus, in an old, crumbling crypt in the old, medieval cathedral at Welbury.

No member of a sight-seeing tour would expect to see such a sight or would fail to lose a little of his equanimity if he did see it.

As for me, I not only lost a little of my equanimity, but my whole consignment of that valuable and desirable commodity went by the board.

For I was the one who first saw it,—saw that modern corpse in that ancient casket, and I was so flabbergasted that I almost yelled aloud in my fear and terror.

But though my poise was seriously disturbed, my common sense stood by me, and I quickly realized that I must meet this emergency as a hundred per cent American should meet it, and behave as a member of the Tripp and Hastings Personally Conducted Foreign Tours Company would be expected to behave.

I was ahead of the group being conducted through the old cathedral by a venerable vergers, who intoned his lecture in cultivated English accents.

The group numbered about twenty-five, for the Tripp and Hastings concern was of the first class, and limited its clientele as to quality and quantity.

Personally, I was the despair of all vergers and caretakers, for I just couldn't hang back and listen decorously to their droning voices. I wanted always to forge ahead and see what was coming next, and learn for myself whether I was going to be interested or not.

It was, I often thought, a mistake, my coming over with a conducted party at all. I am by nature a conductor myself, rather than a passive passenger.

But I was only too thankful to make the trip to Europe, and I had wasted no time after receiving my uncle William's legacy. I betook myself at once to the agencies and was quickly informed that a conducted party

was the best way to travel. I was told that all one-time prejudices against such arrangements had been overcome, and that in this year of grace, a conducted tour was just the very best plan ever.

Especialy, I was informed, if the tour chosen was one of those engineered by the Tripp and Hastings Company, and so positively was this affirmed, that I came out of their office with my tickets arranged for and my pockets filled with folders and leaflets of many materialized air-castles.

Nor did I really regret it.

The summer had been delightful, the tour most successful, and now, the richer by three months' travel experiences and several more or less intimate friends, I was about to turn my steps homeward.

These last weeks included glimpses of the southern counties of England, and our leisurely progress gave us the delights of beautiful Devonshire and picturesque Cornwall as well as some cathedral towns on our way to Canterbury and Dover, from which point we were to cross the Channel and go home on a French steamer.

Although an acquired taste, I had grown fond of cathedrals. I had learned, too, to understand and appreciate their points, for architecture was one of my hobbies and antiquity had always held a charm for me.

So our party was personally conducted that lovely August morning to the Welbury Cathedral, where we were handed over to the tender mercies of the old verger.

Absorbed in his discourse, I followed him through nave and transept, choir and shrine, but during some of his more long-winded descriptions or explanations, my attention wandered and I cast about me to see what might happen next.

We were near the dark little staircase that descended to the crypt, and moved by a sudden impulse to explore, I slipped away and ran down the steps.

The crypt was Norman, and passing through a chapel of the undercroft, I came upon a beautiful chantry and then the tombs.

But here there was much evidence of ruin and depredation. Aside from the great tombs, there were many small rooms, which oftener than not, contained a few broken columns, with bits of pilasters and cornices lying on the floor, and stone coffins empty and overturned, here and there among the débris.

There was no untidiness, these stray bits were relics of dead and gone centuries, of interest to the archaeologist and antiquarian.

I was about to examine some of them more closely, when I saw what seemed to be a sarcophagus, containing a human being.

Though not as light as in the church above, the crypt was only a little dusky and in the dimness I discerned the outlines of a man, in modern garb, lying in the stone coffin.

The coffin was on the floor, and as I neared it, to look more carefully, I saw the man was dead. There could be no doubt about that, for it was only too apparent that he had been shot in the left eye.

Stunned at the sight, I stood a moment trying to collect my wits, while my brain functioned with amazing rapidity.

“Shot!” it seemed to say; “Killed! Murdered! In the crypt—dead, in a coffin—” and then I laughed foolishly, as an idiot might, and babbled, “of course, dead—in a coffin—where else should a dead man be?”

The sound of my own half-witted cackle brought me to my senses, and I straightened up and admonished myself.

“Stop your nonsense! Don’t act like a fool! What is to be done?”

Occasion for action always affected me as a stimulant and a spur.

I awoke and became my normal self in a jiffy. I sprinted back to the staircase by which I had descended, and rejoined the group above, still trailing the droning verger on his rounds.

I looked doubtfully at the verger.

No, he was too old, too root-bound, to take any active part in this matter. I must seek some more energetic helper.

So I hunted about until I found a younger and more athletic-looking caretaker or official of some sort.

I had to tell him my story three times before I could get it into his head. But what I had seen was so vivid in my own brain, I finally convinced him it was no figment of the imagination, and he consented to go with me down to the crypt.

He could not doubt his own senses, and stood looking at the strange sight as if petrified himself.

“Will they come down here? The crowd?” I asked.

“I haven’t a notion. It may be. Some parties do,—some not.”

“Well, they mustn’t come,” I said, annoyed at his dazed helplessness. “I’ll go and tell the verger not to. There are ladies in the party, they mustn’t come down here.”

“Who is it?” he said, staring at the dead man.

“Good Lord, I don’t know who it is,” I returned. “We must get the police, or the cathedral authorities or somebody.”

“Yes,” he said, nodding his head, as if agreeing that it was a nice day.

I saw he could be of no help, and that whatever was to be done as a preliminary measure must be done by me.

“All right, buddy,” I said. “You stay here and I’ll go up and see what’s to be done.”

“No,” he said, coming to life at last. “I must go, it is my duty. You stay here. You didn’t kill him, did you?”

“No,” said I, as casually as he had spoken, “no, I didn’t kill him.”

He went away, once more the stolid Britisher, and I stayed behind, wondering who the dead man was and who had dealt him his death.

I went a little nearer the coffin, though careful to make no confusing footprints.

But there seemed to be no possibility of indicative footprints, for the floor of the place was a sort of broken and gravelly stone, patched here and there with cement, which, in its turn had broken and gravelled.

There were six coffins in the room, I counted, besides some fragments of others. The room itself was low-vaulted and irregularly shaped. It had two windows, high in the wall, and opening out on fresh green grass.

The atmosphere, though not definitely unpleasant, was old and musty of smell and damp of feeling.

I took a good look at the dead man, and though I didn't recognize him I felt certain I had seen him before.

He was an American, of that I was sure, and his general effect was that of a tourist. He was not of our party, that I knew, but he had the unmistakable get-up of a man travelling for pleasure.

Moreover, there were several of his belongings, or apparently such, scattered about.

Flung over a near-by coffin was a light-weight overcoat, and a hat; near them, on the floor was an umbrella and a camera, and a folded newspaper.

I stared harder than ever as the strange situation crystallized before me.

Why should that man, or any man, take off his hat and coat, arrange himself comfortably in an old coffin and let himself be shot?

For shot he had been, there was no other explanation of that wound that seemed to include an eye, a portion of the temple and a part of the cheek.

I looked about for the weapon, but saw none, and I had no intention of investigating from any nearer point of vantage than where I now stood.

Again I scanned the floor for footprints, but all the marks there were so vague and indistinct as to be of no indication whatever.

I did see some whitish yellow grains, and I wondered what they could be.

Unable to answer my own questions concerning them, I scraped up a few of them, and placing them in an old letter I had with me, I put it back in my pocket.

And then people came. Two or three dignitaries or custodians of the cathedral and three or four of the constabulary.

They all looked at me sharply, and I wondered anew why it is that the man who first sees a victim of murder is invariably picked for the murderer.

It seems to me absurd. Had I been the man who did that killing, I never should have called attention to the deed!

No, I should have been in the next county by that time.

But here I was, being put through a gruelling by the police in regard to the murder of a man unknown to me.

“Your name, sir?” they said, sternly.

And I answered truthfully, “Mottram Oakley.”

I didn’t like my Christian name any better than they did, but having had it wished on me by my sponsors in baptism, of course, I had to stick it.

I informed them further, in response to their fervent pleas for information, that I was from New York City, U. S. A. and was on a pleasure tour under the auspices of Tripp and Hastings, Ltd.

That I was for the current few days at the Terrace Garden Hotel on High Street.

“Then you belong to that party now being shown through the cathedral!” declared the most inquisitorial of the policemen, and I admitted his deduction correct.

“Do you know this man?” he asked, pointing with his pencil to the quiet figure in the stone coffin.

I hesitated a moment, for I strongly desired to keep out of this mess if possible. But a glint in the eye of my questioner gave me an immediate impression that I’d do better to tell the truth, so I did.

“I don’t know him,” I said, positively, “that is, I do not know his name. But I have an indistinct impression of having seen him before, though this I cannot swear to. I only can say, that I think I have seen him before, but if so, I do not know who he is, and I am sure I have never spoken to him, nor he to me.”

“H’m,” he remarked irritatingly, “you tell it well, but how do I know you are speaking the truth?”

“Look here, Mr. Snelgrove,” I said, wrathfully—I had gathered in his name by this time—“it’s a detective’s business to know when a man is speaking the truth. And, too, if I knew that man’s identity, I should be only too glad to divulge it, for I feel pretty sure he’s an American; and if a countryman of mine has come to grief in a foreign land, I’m ready to do anything I can to track down his assailant. Now, get it into your head that I am telling the truth, and we’ll get along faster. How do you propose to learn who the man is? If, as I think, he is an American tourist, it ought not to be difficult to find out his name.”

“No,” said Snelgrove, looking at me with that provoking dilatoriness that characterizes the British official class. “Do you think he belongs to the party now going through the cathedral?”

“I do not,” I replied. “That party is a small one, not more than twenty odd, and if he had belonged to it, I should of course have known him. All the members of that party know one another, at least by sight.”

“I see,” said Snelgrove, and fell into one of his brown studies.

“Well,” said another policeman, who, it seemed, rejoiced in the name of Pollard, “if that’s all we can get out of Mr. Oakley, we might better go on with our business.”

Snelgrove nodded silently, and Pollard and an assistant went busily to work on the mysterious occupant of the coffin.

I watched with deepest interest and was surprised at the neatness and despatch shown by the men whom I had deemed apathetic and inefficient.

They fairly sprang into life, and they deftly and gently investigated every detail of the dead man's person and effects and turned to Snelgrove to render a report at once.

"He's Warren Glynn," Pollard announced; "an American, travelling over here. He lives in New Jersey, in the States. He's staying here at The Lanthorn, on Park Place. There's no doubt about these things, for his pockets are full of letters and bills, and here's his initials on his handkerchief, and on his penknife, and on his wrist watch."

"All right," said Snelgrove, holding up a hand to stop this flow of identification evidence. "That's enough. Now, doctor, what killed him?"

A quiet-mannered medical man stepped forward, and after a very short examination, replied that the unfortunate Mr. Glynn was shot and killed by someone standing about two or three feet from the coffin, in which receptacle Mr. Glynn must necessarily have been when he was killed.

"Was he then, unconscious?" I cried out, unable to reconcile otherwise the astonishing circumstances.

The doctor flashed a penetrating glance my way, and ignored my question.

And now Snelgrove came to life himself.

It was uncanny, the way these men had of lying dormant until their turn came, and then becoming suddenly alert.

Snelgrove went to the coffin, looked carefully at the inert body therein and then said:

"Yes, he was shot after he was put in the coffin."

"Put in?" interrupted Doctor Stapley.

"Well," said Snelgrove, "I can't see him climbing into the coffin, lying all straight and proper, as he is, and then calmly accepting a shooting. I assume he must have been put in the coffin after his death, from some other cause, and then shot to give the appearance of a murder by firearms."

"Won't do," Doctor Stapley said, after a further scrutiny of the victim. "The shot that killed him, that shot whose effects you can so plainly see, was fired at the man while he was alive. I could tell in a moment if it had been fired at a man already dead. He may have been unconscious—"

Now that was the suggestion I had made and which had been so summarily dismissed without a word. But I realized that at the time I voiced the question they were not ready for it, and now they were. So I determined to keep quiet unless personally addressed.

"You find no other cause of death, then?"

"None," returned the doctor.

Snelgrove looked around at the various articles near by, so ordinary in general appearance, so sinister in view of a murder committed there.

He picked up the coat and the hat, and studied them in connection with the clothing the dead man was wearing.

There was nothing inharmonious. The quiet, well-made suit of clothes was such as might be worn by a man who had chosen the overcoat, yet, stay, was it?

The suit was of better quality, and a trifle more expensive-looking than the overcoat. Also, it was of plainer taste.

The suit was of dark blue material, with a hairline stripe of lighter blue. The overcoat was of light weight, and was of brown plaid, an inconspicuous, almost invisible plaid of varying shades of brown.

“Don’t look like the same man’s choice,” I said, and received a snub for my pains.

“It may easily be,” Snelgrove said, coldly, “for the suit of clothes is American-made, while the overcoat was bought in London.”

“No intent of matching, then,” I returned, airily, for I had no intention of being put upon by this superior complex in uniform. “What about the hat?”

“The hat was bought here in town,” I was condescendingly informed.

But there was no doubt as to the identity of the victim of this dastardly crime. Warren Glynn it must be, for the camera had his name inside on a card, and all the belongings and clothing were mute witnesses to the same.

“Send for the hall porter or his representative from The Lanthorn,” Snelgrove said. “And now, what evidences of the murderer can we find? The victim is definitely placed, now for the criminal.”

But this was not so easy. No amount of hunting on the part of the detectives brought forth any evidence or any clue as to the perpetrator of the deed.

Amazed and astounded at the absolute dearth of traces of the villain’s presence, they began to talk of suicide.

“Then where’s the weapon?” I said, unable to keep my vow of silence.

I regretted my speech, however, for with one accord they turned on me as if I had confessed my own complicity in the crime.

“You speak lightly of the weapon,” said the man named Pollard; “perhaps you know something of its whereabouts.”

I was tempted to answer flippantly, but I realized the foolishness of that just in time. I said:

“No, Mr. Pollard, if I knew anything at all about the crime, the criminal, or the weapon, I would tell you. Unless it incriminated myself, in which case I should never have referred to it at all.”

He looked at me dubiously, and I made a fresh resolve to say nothing at all, for that way danger most certainly lay.

In response to the police summons, a messenger appeared from The Lanthorn. He was a pleasant-spoken young man, and though noncommittal in expression and bearing, I felt it not unlikely that he would prove of more importance as time went on.

But he was not that type, after all, and when he was confronted with the grewsome object in the stone coffin, he gave a shriek and covered his eyes.

Had he been the murderer himself he couldn't have acted more upset and flustered.

"There, there," Snelgrove said, kindly enough, "pull yourself together, Larkin. We just want you to tell us who this feller is."

Larkin peered out through his fingers, gave a convulsive shudder as his glance rested on the face, and turned to the pile of clothing and belongings.

"It's Mr. Glynn," he said, his voice shaking. "It's him all right, and that's his hat and coat and camera, yes, and his guide book, he always carried that guide book, with a yellow ribbon book marker—see?"

We all saw that inch-wide yellow ribbon, and opening the book, we saw that it was at the pages that described the Welbury Cathedral.

But we had no doubt that the dead man was Warren Glynn; what we wanted to know was who had brought him low.

Snelgrove allowed the trembling Larkin to turn his back on the coffin, and then questioned him.

"You knew Mr. Glynn well?"

"Only as I know anybody who stays at the house a few days or so."

"He had friends there?"

"Everybody was friendly to him. He was a sociable sort. But if you mean personal friends, he came alone, and he didn't make any real chums, that I know of."

"Did he make any enemies?"

"Oh, I'm sure he didn't. He was always smiling and jolly. He would sit around and talk and smoke with this one or that one, and they would laugh and joke, but he never quarrelled—oh, no."

"Then," Snelgrove said, decidedly, "this is the work of some enemy he had, of whom we know nothing. Somebody who trailed him, perhaps, or shadowed him, but not somebody who had a sudden quarrel with him in this town."

"He took pictures often?" said Pollard, looking at the camera.

"Most always carried that thing with him. Had a lot of films printed first day he got here. Often showed his pictures to anybody who'd look at 'em."

“Was he a bore?” asked Snelgrove.

“Oh, no, not quite that. Most folks liked to talk with him. But he was long-winded, I guess. Oh, say, now, he’d only been with us three or four days. I can’t know all about him.”

“No, of course not,” Snelgrove soothed him. “Now, think once more, and if you can’t think of anyone—anyone at all—who had a grievance against him, you can run along.”

“No, I can’t think of such a one,” Larkin declared, after a pause for thought. “But there must be somebody.”

“Yes,” Snelgrove agreed, a little drily, “there must be somebody.”

Larkin was dismissed, and he made a quick getaway, not glancing over his shoulder for another glimpse of that grisly sight.

And yet, save for the disfigurement on one side of his face, Warren Glynn looked no more gruesome than any dead person at his own funeral.

“Now,” Snelgrove said, “we’ll take Mr. Glynn to the morgue, but we’ll first have the cathedral emptied and closed. There’ll be plenty of red tape to this, a deed of blood done in a church, you know. And then we must look up Glynn’s people, and then begins the real work, the hunting down of the murderer. You may go, Mr. Oakley, but be ready to come at once if summoned.”

Chapter 2

John Clevedon

I AGREED TO answer any summons I might receive from the police and then, assuming a casual air which really covered a breath-taking apprehension, I turned to the doctor, and said:—

“How long, do you judge, has the man been dead?”

As I had confidently expected, this brought further accusing glances and I almost feared Snelgrove was about to order my arrest then and there.

“Why do you ask that?” said the doctor, fixing his penetrating gaze upon me.

“From entirely justifiable interest in the case,” I returned, speaking quietly but giving him a straightforward stare equal to his own.

“Are you a detective?”

“I am not,” I said, and then was unable to resist the impulse to add, “but I am always interested in detective work.”

“Ah, you have the detective instinct, so common to young men of your country.”

The tone roused my ire, but I quickly bethought myself that the assertion, even if true, carried no real opprobrium, and I smiled a little as I nodded assent.

“Well,” the doctor said, and I thought he thawed a degree, “it is hard to say accurately, but he was certainly alive less than twenty-four hours ago.”

“You mean this did not happen this morning, then?” I pursued.

“No, I am sure of that. I should say death occurred last evening between six and twelve. That may seem indefinite, but I do not care to set a more specific hour at present.”

“And the weapon?” I went on, determined to press my advantage to its limit.

“Now, Mr. Oakley,” Snelgrove interrupted, “don’t ask so many questions. Don’t get it into your head you can help us in our work. When we want information from you, we’ll ask you for it. Meantime, you’d better keep your finger out of the pie.”

“Certainly,” I said, putting on a slightly amused air, that I felt sure would irritate him. “I’ve no interest in your pie, I’m sure, except as a countryman of this victim of a murderous assault. We have to assume, of course, that the murderer carried his weapon away with him.”

Since the victim had been undeniably shot, and as the bare room in the crypt offered no hiding place, the absence of the weapon made it extremely probable that my assumption was correct.

But it seemed to stir the police to further search, and there was a little furtive hunting around among the broken marbles and bits of stone.

Owing to the hostile attitude shown toward me, I concluded to say nothing of the yellowish grains I had picked up from the floor, and which I knew to be powder grains. I felt justified in this course, for, as I perceived, there were more grains on the floor, quite sufficient to prove a potential clue, if they noticed them.

So, with one further comprehensive glance at the strange scene, I bowed slightly and went out of the room and through the chantry and the chapel, up the dark little staircase, and out of the now empty cathedral into the light of day.

It was about two o’clock, and I went to an inn for luncheon, and then for a long walk before returning to my hotel.

The scene was indelibly photographed on my memory. Never could I forget that low-ceiled, dimly lit vault, with its broken monuments and its coffins, one holding the quiet, composed figure of a dead American.

Had the deceased been an Englishman, I should have been less deeply impressed, but for one of my own countrymen to be done to death on British soil roused all the indignation of which my spirit was capable, and that was a goodly lot.

The weird surroundings, too, the dramatic setting of the scene, the dastardly act of the murderer, all went to make up an inexplicable mystery.

And most amazing of all was the dead man’s attitude.

His body lay as composed and natural as if arranged by a skilful undertaker.

The doctor said he had been killed by the shot, but I reasoned that he might have been shot, and placed in the coffin afterward. For I could predicate no conditions in which a man would deliberately get into a coffin alive.

The matter absorbed me more and more, and I pondered on exchanging my tickets and remaining in Welbury until the affair was explained.

Though I felt grave doubts whether those stupid policemen could ever solve that mystery.

Still, I was, perhaps, misjudging them. I remembered that when roused to activity they got busy to good effect. I also reminded myself that this was the land of Sherlock Holmes and, incidentally, the land of Scotland Yard.

Surely, the English were not dubs in the matter of detection, and all my impulses urged me to make arrangements with Tripp and Hastings to let me stay over another steamer, at least.

At last I turned my steps homeward, wondering how much of the truth had been vouchsafed to our sight-seeing party when they were turned out of the cathedral.

Reaching the Terrace Garden Hotel, a charming place that lived up fully to its attractive name, I went in, and I saw at once, that the news had spread.

But, as might have been expected, it had spread in garbled and exaggerated versions, and the stories told by one and another were so different as to seem narratives of separate occurrences.

“Oh, Mr. Oakley, what became of you? Where were you when we were driven out of the cathedral?”

“Have you heard about the murder? I think that Mr. Glynn was on the steamer with us, coming over. Don’t you remember the man who was everlastingly taking pictures—”

Of course I did! That was why the man in the coffin had seemed vaguely familiar to me. He had been on the steamer with us, and he had been everlastingly aiming his camera at everybody on board.

I had never talked with him, for individual passengers do not look kindly on tourists belonging to parties. But I had seen him a few times in the smoking room or on deck, and I now distinctly remembered that brown-plaid coat.

I turned to the girl who had thus enlightened me.

She was Katherine Brownlee, a rather vivacious young woman, who looked on me as her special and individual property; but as she had a “bespoke” at home, under the Star Spangled Banner, I was willing to let her have her way for the duration of the trip.

“Yes,” I told her, “I do remember, and he is the man. I’m told he was from New Jersey.”

“Who told you? What do you know about it all? Any more than we do? Who killed him, anyway?”

These questions were not from one speaker, but were hurled at me by various members of the Tripp and Hastings bunch, who had gathered in the hall, awaiting tea time.

I suddenly realized that though I had not been bound to secrecy by the men at the crypt, yet it was surely the way of wisdom not to blurt out to these gossipmongers all that I did know of the matter.

"I've no idea who killed him," I said. "Some of the cathedral attendants told me his name, but I've only just realized from what Miss Brownlee said that the victim is the Glynn who was on our steamer coming over."

Taking this to mean that I had no further knowledge of events, they left off questioning me, and returned to their own surmises and conclusions, based on the scantiest and faultiest of data.

When I went up to my room to dress for dinner, I found there some mail and some American newspapers, but I was unable to put the crypt affair out of my mind, and I went down to the dining-room, still deeply absorbed in its consideration.

But I did not want to mull it all over with those chattering girls and those opinionated men. I knew beforehand just what they would say about it, and I wanted a confab with somebody who had some original ideas on the subject.

There was just one man I could think of from whose conversation I could derive any profit, and that was John Clevedon. He, too, had been on the steamer coming over. From him, too, I had stayed away, fearing he would resent advances from a member of a personally conducted tour.

I was probably supersensitive about that matter, for lots of our party made friends with the other passengers who were not conducted, but I couldn't face the possibility of a snub, so confined my acquaintances to the Tripp and Hastings crowd.

But being a lover of detective fiction, I had noticed that Clevedon was of like tastes. Several times I asked the Library Steward for this or that book only to be told that Mr. Clevedon was reading it and I could have it next.

It was not until the day we landed that, chancing to stand near him as we waited to disembark, I spoke to him of a volume he was carrying, a new and popular detective story.

"Yes," he had responded, enthusiastically, "it's great! One of the best. Have you read it?"

I had, and we discussed its fine points with eager interest until separated by the crowding passengers.

I heard no more of Clevedon, none of our party seemed to know him, until a few days before, I had chanced to read in the local paper that he was in Welbury, at the Grand Hotel.

It had passed through my mind that I should like to see him and renew our brief acquaintance, but I had promptly dismissed the thought, feeling that I could not presume upon that short chat we had had on the steamer deck.

But now, I toyed again with the idea.

If Clevedon were really a detection enthusiast, might he not welcome someone with whom to discuss this very mysterious affair of the cathedral?

All through the dinner hour, I thought over the matter, and rose at last from the table with a resolve to try it on, at least.

And so, a few moments later, I started off, in the soft English summer evening, and went in the direction of the Grand Hotel.

“Don’t be a fool,” I admonished myself, as I became aware of a slight chill in my feet, “if he doesn’t want to see you, he won’t. And if he doesn’t like you after he does see you, you can come home again.”

This was logical, to be sure, but still I was a bit embarrassed as I sent my name up to Mr. Clevedon.

The response was that I was to go to his rooms, and so I allowed myself to be led thither.

A knock at his door brought the summons to come in, and in I went.

My host rose and met me with a smile.

“I remember you, Mr. Oakley,” he said. “We crossed on the same boat—”

“Yes,” I said, eagerly, “and you remember, we had a most interesting conversation, just before we landed, about detective stories.”

“Indeed, I do remember. Now, sit down, and let’s chat some more. I can’t offer you my hand, for I’ve had a bad accident.”

I had noticed the bandages as I entered, but I saw now that the matter must be serious, for the hand was in splints and the arm in a sling.

“What happened?” I asked, in sincerest sympathy.

“My own stupidity,” he said, with a rueful smile. “Awful hot last night, you know, and I had an electric fan going. Cooled off toward morning, and I reached out of bed to turn the thing off, and—well, never mind details—but, somehow my forefinger got in the way and—paid the penalty.”

I felt sick all over. I’ve always had a fear of an electric fan, and I said so.

“It’s an obsession with me,” I went on. “I shouldn’t dare have one near me, for I know I’d stick my finger in the thing. Don’t tell me I’m absurd, I know it. But the fact remains, I would do it, and so I take no chances.”

“But I didn’t stick my finger in it,” he cried, again smiling in that resigned, patient way. “I thought the key was on that side of the thing, and it wasn’t.”

“I know—I know. Of course it was an accident with you, but in my case, it would be done on purpose. It’s an ungovernable impulse! I can’t help it. So I don’t ever have one of the infernal things about.”

“I wish I hadn’t,” he said, ruefully. “The doctor says I’m lucky, to get off as well as I did, it might have drawn in the whole hand—oh, forgive me, I’m not going to dilate on it! I say brace up, help yourself to a drink, it’s over there on the table. Now pull yourself together.”

I was thoroughly ashamed of myself, but the horror of his plight chilled my very blood, and I was only too glad to accept his hospitality.

“Now, I’m all right,” I said, after two libations from his decanter, “and I apologize.”

“Not at all. Tell me what brought you here. My mishap isn’t in the evening papers, is it?”

“No,” I said, “but something else is. You’ve heard of the murder in the crypt?”

“Yes, I read of it. Wonderful title, isn’t it? Or, the crime in the cathedral. How’s that?”

“Even better. But I say, Clevedon, you wouldn’t be speaking of it so lightly if you had seen it.”

“Seen it? Did you?”

“Yes. And of all ghastly, picturesque, weirdly mysterious scenes! It had Poe beaten to a frazzle!”

“Tell me about it. How did you come to see it?”

“That’s why I’m here. I noticed on board ship that you read detective stories continually and I wondered if you had what is known as the detective instinct. I never quite dared come and ask you, until this thing happened, and then I concluded to take a chance on your amiability and come over to call.”

“I’m darned glad you did. I’m very fond of sleuth yarns and as I’m travelling alone, I read most of the time. Can’t just at present, though, as I’m having my eyes treated and by a new process. The doctor prophesies that I shall soon see all right, and not have to wear these glasses any more.”

“Fine,” I said, glancing at the glasses Clevedon had on. They were light, rimless affairs, rather becoming than otherwise.

“I’ve worn these for years,” he explained, “ever since I strained my vision over close microscopic work in college. Now, if this specialist is right, I’m going to be able to discard them soon. Then, when my finger heals up, I shall be as good as new. Now, go to it. Tell me all about the crime. And how you chanced to be mixed up in it.”

“Well, I wasn’t exactly mixed up in the crime,” I protested.

“And I didn’t quite mean that,” he smiled. “But spill the story.”

Nothing loath, I told him the whole tale of my going down into the crypt, of my finding the dead man there, and all the occurrences afterward.

I could not have desired a more attentive listener. Save for an intelligent question now and then, he listened in silence, but was, I could plainly see, greatly interested in the mystery.

“Who did it?” he cried, as I finished. “We must find out!”

“Not an easy job,” I demurred. “Anyone who could conceive and carry out such an ingenious and deep-laid scheme is not going to be caught too easily.”

“I’m not sure,” he said slowly, “that it was a deep-laid scheme. Why not an impulsive crime? All the slayer needed was a pistol. Perhaps he always carried that, some men do. As you tell it, there’s not a pin’s worth of evidence of the killer’s personality?”

“Not a shred,” I told him. “All the accoutrements seemed to belong to the victim. There were plenty of these.”

“What were they? Go over them again.”

“Hat, overcoat, umbrella, newspaper, camera, guide book,—those were the extraneous lot. And in his pockets were a dozen or more belongings, some with initials or monograms of Warren Glynn.”

“Most interesting case,” Clevedon said, nodding at me in his enthusiasm. “But queer there was absolutely no trace of the murderer. No footprints? fingermarks?”

“Not that I know of. Still, there’s no telling what those police people may dig up. At any rate, there was no weapon left about.”

Suddenly I bethought me of the few grains of powder I had picked up from the floor, but like many amateurs, I had just the bit of vanity needed to make me keep that matter to myself, and I made no mention of it at that time.

“No,” said Clevedon, musingly, “yet it seems as if he must have left some sign. I bet, if I’d been there—beg pardon, I didn’t mean that the way it sounded.”

“Oh, I don’t mind,” I told him. “I’m the rankest amateur. I’ve no doubt you could dig up evidence that I completely overlooked. Can’t you go over there tomorrow?”

“’Fraid not. Doctor for my eyes wants me to keep in the house by daylight, and doctor for my busted finger wants me to lie quiet for two or three days. So if we do any sleuthing, you’ll have to do the outdoor work, and bring back reports and we’ll talk it over.”

“Let’s keep it to ourselves, then,” I suggested.

I was flattered at his readiness to chum with me, and, too, I didn’t want any more to do with the police if I could keep out of it.

“Oh, yes. Probably we can’t get anywhere, anyhow. You would have seen it if there had been any trace of the villain, and since you saw nothing, I’ve no doubt there was nothing to see.”

“I don’t believe there was or is anything to see in the crypt,” I said thoughtfully. “I think we must get at it from the other end.”

“From Glynn’s side,” he said, understanding.

“Yes. Though how we’re to do that, I don’t know. We can’t get access to his rooms.”

“No. Though perhaps you might compass that. Tell them you’re a great American detective, travelling incog, and I’ll bet they’ll let you go in.”

“I doubt it, and I doubt I’d find out anything if I did get in. I think I’m better at talking over a case than at really working it up.”

Clevedon smiled.

“I’m like that,” he said, “but I didn’t think you were. Well, I wish we could get the wretch who did old Warren in. I knew him fairly well, you see.”

“You knew Glynn?”

“Yes. Not intimately at all, but casually, you know. I met him first on the steamer. We all came over on the same boat. He and I chummed a little, and I met him once or twice during the summer. We had a bond in our liking of old books.”

“Old books!” I cried, “that’s my hobby. Detective stories I read for recreation, but old books are really my life work. I’ve hunted them a lot over here, and I’ve been to all the libraries I could find. Libraries and cathedrals are my happy hunting grounds.”

“I hope your hunting has been happier in libraries than in cathedrals,” Clevedon said, suddenly grave. “Yes, Glynn was a collector, but he hasn’t been buying over here. His plan is to browse around and make notes and then go home, and think it all over, and select his favorites. Then he sends for them through an agent.”

“A good way,” I said, thinking it over. “I’ve bought some few, but not great or noble numbers. You see, I’ve been a poor man all my life. And I’m no plutocrat now, but a kindly disposed uncle made me his grateful heir, and at last I could come over here and collect a few odd volumes.”

“I’ve picked up some, too. Some day, soon, you must come round again and give ’em the once over.”

“And I must be going now,” I said, struck with remorse at my thoughtlessness in staying so late.

“Oh, that’s all right,” he smiled, “I’m mighty glad you came over. Do come soon again. Staying here long?”

“No; that is, the crowd goes along on Saturday. I suppose I shall go with them, though I’ve been thinking I’d like to stay here and clear up Glynn’s death.”

“Relation of yours?”

“No, but he’s American born.”

“Yes, and your heart’s in the right place. But after all, can you do any real work on a case like that? In the first place, you admit you’re inexperienced and in the second place, the English police are not overly cordial to uninvited assistants.”

I felt like a rebuked schoolboy, and I said so.

“No, no,” Clevedon said, sensibly, “don’t take it like that. Realize for yourself that you have little if any data to work on—as to the murderer, I mean. Remember that if there are clues to be found, Scotland Yard’s representatives will find them. If you should find out anything, you’d have to follow it up yourself, they’re not receptive of other people’s findings. Altogether, Oakley, while I understand and approve of your spirit, I don’t exactly see you succeeding in your quest.”

“I know you’re right,” I said, slowly. “I’m sorry your injured hand and your impaired vision won’t let you get out and help me—”

“Wait a minute, right there. If I had two good hands and two perfect eyes, what could I do to help? I mean, if there’s anything to be done in the way of sleuthing about, looking for evidence, clues, or what not, you can do that equally well without me. Then, if there’s anything to be gained by talking the case over and using our gray matter, you can come over here and we can just get right down to it. I don’t say we can’t accomplish something, but I do say it will all depend on what material evidence we can dig up. This isn’t, to my mind, a case that can be solved by ratiocination. And, the thing that militates against our getting

much in an evidential way, is the fact that though we knew Glynn slightly, we know none of his friends or foes, none of his cronies or enemies. What way can we look? How get a start?"

"You're right, I feel you are right. But I'll go home and think the thing over, and if I can get any dope on it at all, I'll come back to talk it over."

"Come back, anyway," said Clevedon, cordially and then I rose to go.

Chapter 3

A Domineering Doctor

AT THE SAME moment the doctor arrived, and entered the room without knocking, after the privileged ways of his race.

"Sit down a minute, Oakley," said John Clevedon. "I'd like you to know Doctor Pinckney. He's the good fellow who came flying to my rescue when I cut up that silly trick at five o'clock this morning."

"Now, now," and the pompous-looking little man rubbed his hands in deprecation. "That's my business, that's my life work, to answer promptly the call of illness or physical distress."

He was short and stout and red-faced, and had the general Dickens effect seen in pictures of that era.

I liked him at once, for his eyes had a perceptive twinkle, and he nodded an appraising greeting at me, as he sat down by his patient and began to unwrap the bandages.

I took up a book, for I am not a keen student of pathology, and waited for the surgical treatment to be concluded.

When it was, the rotund physician sat back in his chair with a satisfied smirk.

"Jolly good piece of work," he commented; "I may say that of myself, I think."

"Yes, do, doctor," laughed Clevedon, "as there is no one else here to appreciate or applaud your labors. I'm ready to agree the work's all right, but it does hurt amazingly. An anodyne, now—or whatever you call a sort of—er—pacifier?"

"No, no, sir. Nothing of the sort. Pooh, pooh, man, can't you stand a bit of pain?"

"Oh, of course, I can stand it if it's necessary. But if not—"

"Well, it is. No local anesthetics in this case. You bear it for another twenty-four hours, and if all goes well, you'll find it no more than an uncomfortable ache."

"And if all doesn't go well?"

"Oh, then, we'll begin all over again. Your friend's mighty lucky," he added turning to me. "Instead of a real calamity, he has merely a trifling injury."

"Just what happened?" I asked, conquering my distaste of such details in my effort to be politely interested.

“Oh, he just cut off the end of his right forefinger, about half an inch down. Fine, clean cut, going to heal properly, I’m sure. Not unsightly, probably, and only slightly inconvenient. Yes, a bit of luck, say I.”

“I agree, Clevedon,” I put in. “It’s a pity you did it, but it might have been so much worse that I congratulate you.”

“Thanks,” he returned drily. “But I am duly thankful it’s no worse. By the way, Oakley, it turns out that Doctor Pinckney knew my father, years ago.”

“Yes,” Pinckney said, “and a fine man, too. You look like him, Mr. Clevedon, and you have his manner of speaking.”

“Good,” was the reply. “A man always likes to be told he is like his father. I say, doctor, what do you know about the crime in the crypt?”

“Only what others know. I’ve no time for wonderment or investigation. The man was murdered, I take it. It’s up to Scotland Yard to apprehend and punish the criminal. But I congratulate him on his choice of a setting for the affair. To select a cathedral for his fell deed savors of a chiaroscuro of crime that would have delighted Poe or De Quincey.”

“If he did select it,” said Clevedon, thoughtfully. “It seems to me more likely that it just happened. That he had it in for his victim, and meeting him there alone, he just grabbed his chance.”

“No,” I said, “unless he always carried his pistol.”

“That’s so. And, anyway, it’s too much of a coincidence, to find your man, alone, in a dark crypt—”

“You don’t know it was dark. They say the crime was committed between six and midnight—”

“They can’t be sure,” Doctor Pinckney said, a little irritably. “The way doctors in detective stories tell just the hour of the sinister deed is too ridiculous. Many factors must be considered before determining that hour, and usually there’s no data for them.”

“For instance?” asked Clevedon.

“Well, atmosphere, temperature, conditions of dampness, or foul air, as well as the victim’s own physical peculiarities and state of health.”

“Even so, six hours gives a long leeway.”

“Yes, and doubtless the man did die during those hours. But it can’t be stated as a fact. That’s why I’d never do for a detective, I’m too leery of wrong interpretation of casual effects.”

“Well, we’re detectives born, both of us,” I said, winking at Clevedon. “We want to look into this matter, if we’re allowed, and see if we can dig up anything overlooked by the omniscient Yard.”

“Which is Holmes and which is Watson?” asked the doctor, as he rose to go.

For reply we bowed ceremoniously to each other, and the doctor laughed outright.

“You two boys know about as much as a pin’s worth, compared to the least of the Yard detectives,” he said. “And anyway, they won’t let you run around sleuthing. Now, Clevedon, just keep yourself quiet tomorrow, and after that, I’ll give you free foot. Going my way, Mr. Oakley?”

“Yes,” I said, half thinking he divined my intent of staying behind a few moments to talk over things with Clevedon.

“My patient must get his rest,” he went on. “He called me over here at the unearthly hour of five o’clock this morning, and I doubt if he has had any sleep since. I know I haven’t!”

I rather liked the easy-going old chap, and I said goodnight, and went off with him.

“Been a friend of Clevedon’s long?” he asked, as we walked away.

“An hour or two,” I answered, and he laughed.

“We met a few moments on the steamer, coming over, and I made him a call this evening.”

“To get him all messed up with this murder business, I’ll wager! Now, look here, young sir, you go ahead on that wild-goose chase as far as you like, but don’t drag Clevedon into it.”

“Why not?” I asked in astonishment.

“Only because with his excitable temperament and idle time on his hands, he’d be liable to go into it so whole-heartedly that he’d work himself up to boiling point, get excited and perhaps bring about a physical reaction that might induce fever and raise the devil with that finger of his.”

“Oh, I see. Is it a bad wound?”

“Not if he keeps fairly quiet and free from overexcitement. But if he gets all stirred up, and goes about hunting for clues and gumshoeing here and there, it can easily spell trouble.”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

“It isn’t as if you two had the matter in your hands. Or were in any way responsible for the tracking down of the murderer. In fact, I’m pretty sure your well-meant efforts would be not only frustrated, but censured, by the authorities. I suppose you think you can see farther into a maze than we can over here, but not so, my boy, not so. Of course, I’ve no right to comment on your actions, but, as a patient under my care, I have a right to dictate John Clevedon’s movements, and I propose to do so.”

“Will he obey you?”

“I’ve known the Clevedon family all my life. I’ve no reason to think this latest scion will prove intractable, if let alone by tempters.” He grinned at me. “John’s father was a loyal, obedient citizen. His mother, a fine, upstanding woman. The boy’s all right, unless overpersuaded.”

“Why call him a boy? He must be thirty.”

“No, he’s twenty-eight. I saw him as a child. I lived in America then. I’m American myself, but my mother is English, and she wanted to settle over here, so I did. It’s a long story, and an uninteresting one—mine I mean. But, as to John, don’t drag him into this, will you?”

I laughed at the man's earnestness.

"Doctor Pinckney," I said, "I give you my word, I will not abduct, entice, persuade, urge, or ballyrag your patient into any sort of connection with this, to me, entrancing mystery. I admit I'd like to, for we're both interested, but as there's the danger you describe, I am most glad to promise that he shall never be lured into its devious tangles by me."

"Thank you, Mr. Oakley. Your voice has the ring of sincerity, and I accept your word. This is my corner, I'll turn off here."

"You don't mean, doctor, do you," I detained him, "that you forbid me to see Clevedon at all?"

"Oh, no," he said, a little pettishly, I thought, "only steer clear of the murder case. Talk about other things—any subjects in common?"

"Lots."

"Well, stick to those. If he asks about the murder, turn the subject. If you can't do that, tell him you've lost interest in it, or been ordered out of it by the authorities, or anything you like. If you can't do this, then, yes, then I will ask you not to see him at all. I know you think I'm a fussy old granny, but I've seen too many wounds get troublesome by fevered conditions, when they might have healed sweetly had the patient been kept quiet."

"I'm not criticizing your attitude at all, Doctor Pinckney," I said, a little coldly, "in fact, I'm obliged for your advices. I'll see Clevedon tomorrow, and if we can't get on without the cathedral tragedy cropping up, then I'll go off and play by myself."

"Aren't you going home soon?"

"Haven't decided," I returned, "good-night."

"Good-night," he responded, pleasantly enough, but I had a queer feeling that he didn't like me.

As I walked along toward the Terrace Garden Hotel, a somewhat pretentious but very attractive house, I remembered the allusion to Holmes and Watson.

I bristled a little. After Doctor Pinckney's restrictions there could be no alliance of this sort. But, I mused, had there been, I most certainly should have been the Sherlock Holmes end of the firm, or I shouldn't have been in it at all. Mine is not the amiable, Watson nature, nor the adoring, Boswell nature. I have to be the leader myself.

This is not because of a conceited or vain mind. Indeed I should be willing my assistant should take all the glory, if any, but I must give directions and lay the plans.

Conference, discussion, exchange of opinions, all that, of course. Nor would I insist on the final decision. But I could never be at the beck and call of anybody, however wise or gifted.

So, smiling at the thought that there would be no such combination, I decided to be the chief of our imaginary imitation of the Baker Street ménage.

My way led past The Lanthorn, the inn where the unfortunate murder victim had been staying. The place was well lighted, and as I found it was earlier than I thought, I went in.

“Inspector Snelgrove here?” I asked at the desk.

“Your name, please?”

“Oakley,” I replied, “If Snelgrove is up in the Glynn room, I’ll go right up.”

The assuredness of my manner seemed to impress him, and he jerked a finger in the direction I should take, and murmured a few words of direction.

Reaching the door number I sought, I gave a light rap of two short and one long and two short sounds.

This had a cabalistic import, whether understood or not.

A guard came to the door unlocked it and peeked out.

“Who from?” he whispered.

“Snelgrove,” I brazenly returned. “He said you’d know that knock.” I, too, whispered in most approved mystery-play fashion.

I had no particular reason for the whole business, save an inordinate curiosity to learn how things were going, and to get my forbidden finger into that forbidden pie.

I gathered that the sentry was merely a guard there for the night, and knew little of the case itself. Quite willingly he stood aside and let me enter, and then locked the door again.

I walked about with a grave air of importance, and drawing a notebook from my pocket, made a few jottings therein. The man watched me intently, but with a rapt attention that showed me, at least, he was not of the police at all, but one of the hotel employees.

“Lessee how you do it,” he begged, his face aglow with interest.

“Easy enough,” I said, airily. “At this stage of the game, all you do, is to observe, and observe, and observe.”

“Don’t believe I understand,” and his vacant stare corroborated his statement.

“This way,” I said, more abstractedly now, for I had become absorbed myself.

I went round and round the one room—there was but one—looking for clues with more intentness than Sister Anne looked for somebody coming.

I had never before had a chance to look for real clues, in a real murder case, and I meant to make the most of it.

But not a clue could I find. I scrutinized the furniture and ornaments, the few belongings of the dead man and the indigenous appointments of the room; nothing elicited so much as a “Ha!” from my assumed rôle of the great detective.

My potential Watson, by my side, was clearly disappointed.

“Don’t get much, do you, sir?”

“No, not much. You see, I’m making a—er—mental photograph of the place.”

“I see. To keep it in your memory like.”

“Just that. But there’s little to get, as you so astutely remark. Is there a bath?”

“No, sir. Just this washstand, sir, behind this curting.”

I looked, half interested, behind the portière.

Only a wooden wash-hand-stand, with a small array of trifles on it that the police might consider important, but I couldn’t.

The usual brushes and combs; a tube of tooth paste; shaving soap; a small bottle of hair wash; rubber sponge bag; bottle of bath salts—rather odd, I thought, for a man tourist—bottle of scent, not quite in keeping, either, with the man, who had not seemed to me effeminate.

Well, that’s all I noticed. There may have been shoe polish, bay rum, any such things, but I didn’t notice any. I grew tired of the game, and beside, my Watson was not up to form. He gave me no admiring glances, no flatteringly imbecile questions, no humble doglike devotion.

I gave up the laving alcove and turned to the clothes closet.

No better luck here. Two or three suits of clothing hung limply from their supports. They were a little more pronounced in tone than those the man had worn to his death couch, but were in no way loud or conspicuous. His dresser drawers showed a supply of underclothing and haberdashery, sufficient for a tourist, but not of course, lavish. All was just what might have been expected. The gay-colored neckties were bright and cheerful but not startling.

I turned to the writing table.

“Too late, sir,” said the helpful one at my side. “The police took all his papers.”

“All?”

“Every bloomin’. But I heard there was only hotel receipts and a few business letters and mash notes. He travelled light, that one.”

I looked into his round mush-and-milk face.

But I gained from it none of the stimulating stupidity that always emanated from Watson.

“What do you know?” I asked him in a matter-of-fact tone that I hoped would draw him. It did.

“Not much. Only what I heard the ofricers say. They seem to know his name and address, and about there their knowledge gives out.”

“He had a passport?”

“Oh, yes, they have that kind of knowledge, but I mean they can’t seem to find any killer or any motive or—”

“That’s enough. If they had a killer and a motive, their work would be done. The method we know. Have they found the weapon?”

“I don’t know. I’m only a caretaker here. A guard for the night. Who are you, sir, anyway? Did the police send you here?”

“No matter what sent me here,” I said, quietly. “This is what takes me away.” And I gave him a Bank of England exit ticket that was large enough to make him drop his Watson pose instantaner.

I went on home. I had done nothing wrong. I had gratified an inordinate, an undignified, perhaps an illegal curiosity, but I had disturbed nothing; I had taken away not even the tiny shred of fabric, usually picked up, or the ash of a cigar, or a tiny crumpled wisp of lace handkerchief.

I had no qualms of conscience, I had done nothing.

But I was by no means sure my time had been entirely wasted. I had noticed a thing or two that struck my attention, and when I could do so I meant to set down in an orderly list everything I saw in that room. It might mean nothing or everything. I couldn’t say, and I didn’t care.

I was in the game as a game. I didn’t know the dead man and I was willing to leave to others the avenging of his death. But there were a few cards in the deal that looked good to me, and I meant to try them out.

But I would remember my promise to Doctor Pinckney and keep from John Clevedon the knowledge of these things or my interest in them.

I hadn’t asked the moonface to whom I had made my not inconsiderable gift to say nothing of my call to the police. I rather fancied he wouldn’t anyway, his gratitude being, I felt sure, of the sort described as a lively sense of favors to come. And, too, if he did tell them, I could give them a few hints that had flashed into my mind while in that room, and so square myself.

My hints were too vague and unsatisfactory to put into words as yet, but a few moments with pencil and paper would straighten and clarify them a heap.

Yet, when I reached the Terrace Garden Inn and gained my room, I was too wearied to do aught but tumble in amongst the pillows and sleep till morning.

The next day was dull and cloudy. Not an unusual occurrence in England, but it somewhat damped my ardor in the idea of waiting over a steamer and I thought it over at breakfast time.

I did want to “work on the case” as I had already begun to express it.

And could I have had the co-operation and companionship of John Clevedon in the matter, I should have had no doubts as to my procedure.

Still, the dead man was nothing to me. I yet had some unaccomplished plans and errands and I was half inclined to put the whole affair aside and go on about my business.

It seemed a pity to desert Scotland Yard like that and leave it on its own unaided resources, but then, it hadn’t really urged me to stand by and I was under no obligation to it.

After breakfast, I concluded first to run around and see how Clevedon was this morning and make my decision thereafter.

I found him up and dressed and in good spirits.

That is, he was dressed, in so far as was permitted by the rather cumbersome splint and sling which he still wore.

“That old mollicoddle doctor!” he aspersed him. “I don’t need all this harness one bit! Imagine a doc in America swaddling me in these contraptions! The finger is terribly hurt, of course, but it isn’t a case of major operation! Well, I’m in his hands for a day or two, I suppose, and then I’m out of here.”

“Where bound?”

“Not sure yet. I’m going to wrastle that matter today. You see, my plans are knocked galley-west by west, on account of this insignia of office I’m wearing. I had planned a leisurely trip through the northern high spots of France. Say, Le Touquet, Deauville, or Trouville, and—but, oh, Lord, what’s the use? How can a feller go skylarking in such places with only one wing?”

“So, what’s your alternative?” I asked. “Stay here?”

“Can’t stick it. It’s too dull. Particularly as that old Miss Nancy has forbidden me to go into the sleuthing business.”

“Yes,” I returned, gloomily, “he forbid me, too.”

“Forbid you!”

“I mean, forbid me to let you—”

Clevedon stared.

“I don’t wonder you look like that,” and I laughed outright. “I mean he said if I wanted to dig into the matter, to do so, but to hold you inviolate from any word of news or discussion of the whole subject.”

“And do you want to dig into it?”

“Why, yes, of course I do.”

“Then, go ahead, Oakley,” he said, and I thought he sighed a little.

“It’s no fun without you,” I began, when I paused, wondering at the way his face lighted up.

“Look here, old chap, I’m going to chance it!”

“Chance what?”

“The possibility of your liking to be with me. Now, wait, don’t faint or fall off your chair. But it’s this way. I thought about it nearly all night. You’re a whale on libraries, aren’t you?”

“Well, I shouldn’t say that myself, but let’s agree that I’m a little fish.”

“Just as good. And we’re both keen on old books. And I’ve had to give up my round of French watering places. And owing to this confounded finger, I shall have to have a secretary. And—oh, hang it all, I don’t know how to put it!”

“You’re offering me the post of secretary?” I asked, in a non-committal tone, but only half certain whether I was deeply insulted or highly complimented.

“Well, I had some such thing in mind—but, if you look like that, I’ll call it off—in fact, I have called it off!” he added, quickly, as he sensed my resentful pride rising.

But he looked so pleading, so wholly hopeful, and his besplinted and beslung arm looked so pathetic that I gave way.

“Clevedon, old man,” I cried, “I’m a fool. I did cringe at the idea of being at anybody’s beck and call, but—”

“Great Scott! You won’t be at anybody’s beck and call! I don’t mean that sort of secretary. I mean a good-fellow sort of chap, who will keep my rare books in order and catalogue my library, and—well, yes,—for a few weeks help me very occasionally when I really need a helping hand. Then perhaps the writing of an occasional letter, and the rest of the time is your own. Oh, yes, of course, a compensating salary. Well?”

“Yes,” I said, “Clevedon, yes.”

Chapter 4

The Letter

“GOOD!” CLEVEDON SAID heartily, as I gave consent. “I’d shake hands on it, but I won’t offer you a left-handed grip, it might bring us ill luck. Now, let’s understand our position. I want a secretary and librarian. You are qualified for both. You can do as much or as little work as you like, according to your conscience and your friendship for me. That sounds a little queer, I daresay, but I am queer. Moreover, I size up people pretty accurately and I’m not at all afraid of your scamping your work or wasting your time. For the rest we are to be on a general footing of comradeship, with no idea of employer and employed. Your salary will be fifty per cent more than you have been getting, whatever that may be. I am a rich man, though not among the richest.”

“You are too generous,” I told him, “but I accept all you offer, in the spirit of your plans. In return, I shall do my best to meet your wishes as to your library work, and also your secretarial affairs. And you must feel at liberty to direct me as you would any secretary. If I feel resentful, I shall kick over the traces and we’ll fight it out.”

“Let’s wait till this foolish finger is well before we have a real fight,” he said, smiling. “And, of course,

Oakley, that is the primary reason that I need a secretary just now. I have never had one, but I can’t write a letter or sign a check with this injured hand. You’ll have to do such things for me until I am able to use a pen again, or can learn a typewriter. I’ve never favored the things, but I suppose I’ll have to have one now.”

“You can learn to write with your left hand,” I suggested. “Lots of men have had to do that.”

“Yes, I daresay. You see, it is all new to me yet. I’ll get accustomed to it, of course, sooner or later. Well, one of your chores will be to keep up my diary. That is not as formidable as it sounds, for it is only a jotting down of a line or so each day, that I may remember where I was and what I saw.”

“That’s fun. I shall like to do that,” I returned enthusiastically, for such things were right in my line. “I have always loved to make records or lists and though I never had a sufficiently eventful life to keep a diary, I’ll be glad to help keep yours.”

We talked over some further details of our new arrangement, and the more I thought about it the better I liked it.

Clevedon was an unknown quantity as yet, for I hadn’t his gift of sizing up people on sight.

A good-looking chap he was; of medium height, but carrying himself so well that he seemed taller. Well dressed, in a quiet, unobtrusive fashion, and of a demeanor dignified, but now and then breaking loose in some gay speech or bit of American slang.

His deep-set gray eyes were keen at times and again they seemed to look out upon the world with an utter lack of interest.

I began to suspect he was a man of moods, and I have little patience with that sort of thing.

However, I was in for it now, and I determined to see the thing through.

The salary was tempting, when considered with the position, for the work in prospect was most congenial to me, and, granted that I was no man’s servant, I was willing to do all I could to fulfil my contract.

“I only wish,” I said, “that we could do detective work together.”

“All the time, or just on this one case?”

“I meant on this one case. Though if we were brilliantly successful we could adopt it as a business.”

“No,” he said, “that wouldn’t do for me. You see, while I enjoy delving into mysteries and crimes, I’m supposed to be a scholarly person whose mind is above detective work.”

“Fine detective work is as much an evidence of brain power as many other lines of scholarship,” I said, crisply.

“I quite agree with that, old man, but lots of people don’t. Anyway, my people and friends at home don’t. However, you and I can discuss such matters all we like, only we can’t do it professionally.”

“No, of course not, and I didn’t mean to. But I’d like to stay here a few days longer and look into this very attractive murder in the cathedral.”

“Why attractive?”

“Because it has such a novelty about it. A deed of blood in a church is dramatic in itself. A man shot in a coffin is bizarre and inexplicable.”

“They say the most bizarre crimes are the easiest to unravel,” said Clevedon interestedly.

“There you go!” I cried, “and I brought up the subject, after I promised your old medical schoolmarm I wouldn’t! Now, I think I’ll run away and settle up my own business affairs, so I can join you, when you want me. I’ll have to cancel the remainder of my time with the Tripp and Hastings people. But I’ve had more than three quarters of the journey, and I’m content.”

“Skip, then, and come back tonight and have dinner with me. I’m dining up here at present, do you mind?”

“Not at all. I’ll cut up your food for you—”

“No, not that. There are waiters and things. But I suppose I shall have to have a man. I’ve never kept a valet, but when I’m ready to mingle again, I’ll have to have somebody to curry me.”

“Seems so. Anything I can get or buy for you?”

“No, I think not. Oh, yes, get me some brilliantine, will you? I can’t make my hair behave with only one hand to brush it. And I’d like a new tooth brush, while you’re at the chemist’s. A left-handed one,” he smiled.

I went off, wondering a little why he didn’t get his toilet supplies from the barber who came in to shave him, but I had no real objection to doing his errands. Unless, the thought struck me, unless he was trying me out to see if I’d balk at such requests.

Well, I wouldn’t, so long as he was crippled, but when he was his own man again, I didn’t propose to fetch and carry for him.

I had his order sent from the chemist’s shop, and then turned toward the police station to learn any further news there might be concerning the murder.

Snelgrove was, for a wonder, willing to talk to me.

Whether he had revised his opinion of my acumen or whether he felt he was at the end of his own rope, I didn’t know. Nor did I care. The case was closed for me, if I went away with John Clevedon, as I had every intention of doing.

But I was interested in any new light on the matter and very much hoped the mystery would be cleared up before we took our departure.

“Just how well did you know Mr. Glynn?” Snelgrove asked me, quite as if I were in the witness box.

“I didn’t know him well at all,” I told him. “I saw him, of course, on the steamer, but I never spoke to him, that I remember. If I did, it was a mere good morning or that. You see, I’m travelling with a conducted party, and that is a sort of bar sinister in the sight of some exclusive natures.”

“Meaning Mr. Glynn?”

“Yes, I think so. Not that he ever showed it—at least, not to me—but I did have the feeling that he preferred his own type of travellers.”

“Do the other members of your conducted party have that same sensitiveness?”

“Some do, though perhaps not to the same extent. I own up I am supersensitive, but I can’t help it.”

“All right. Tell me, then, anything you noticed about Warren Glynn.”

“I noticed very little,” I returned, honestly trying to recall some data for him. “We had our own party, you see, and seldom chummed up with anyone outside it, and I am not of the observant sort who looks at other passengers with any degree of curiosity or even interest.”

“Well, did Mr. Glynn strike you as a belligerent man? A man who would be drawn into an altercation or even a fight?”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Snelgrove, but I can’t tell you those things because I don’t know them. He was a stronglooking chap, who, I should think, might take care of himself if attacked. But whether he’d hunt trouble or not, I’ve no idea.”

“Nobody seems to know anything about him,” and Snelgrove’s voice distinctly told of his resentment at this state of things.

“But how should they? We crossed nearly three months ago. The passengers of the ship are scattered all over Europe. Our party chances to be here, but I doubt if many of them knew Mr. Glynn to speak to.”

“No, most of them did not. However, I don’t suppose it matters much. About knowing him, I mean. Of course, whoever killed him is miles away by this time and there’s no evidence of any real import. But we do feel sure that there was a fight before he was killed.”

“Now what in the world makes you think that?”

“Clues,” and it seemed to me that Mr. Snelgrove showed the true Jack Horner complex, so proudly selfpraising was his tone. I gathered at once that said clues had been the result of his own efforts and I felt instinctively that this was the hitherto unguessed reason of his urbane verbosity this morning.

“What clues could show a fight?” I asked, in a half scoffing tone, for I feared he wouldn’t tell me unless egged on through his pride.

“Well, they’re subtle, truly subtle, I must say. But there’s no doubt but that the body was all smoothed out and fixed up afterward.”

“How? Tell me about it.”

“In the first place, the dead man’s necktie was straightened and retied.”

“Retied?”

“Yes: looks like there was a scrap, not perhaps much of one, but his tie was all awry and had to be tied over.”

“How do you know?”

“Because,” and Snelgrove wagged an emphasizing forefinger at me, “because there was a spot of blood on the front of his shirt, under the tie.”

“Good work!” I cried, both because I really thought so, and because I wanted to give him his well-earned praise. “What else?”

“Then, his hair had been combed.”

“Been combed—after he was dead?”

“I’m sure of it. There were a few short hairs and a bit of dandruff on his coat collar that gave the appearance of it. And his hair, which must have been a little tumbled in the tussle, was smooth and tidy.”

“Well, those are fine points. I congratulate you. Any more?”

“Only that his glasses were missing, probably smashed in the row, or carried off by the murderer, as too evidential. And he had no handkerchief on him. That, too, was doubtless pouched by the criminal.”

“But, my goodness, man, there were dozens of indicative clues. Letters, wrist-watch, guide book, camera, clothing—all these things at once proved the man was Warren Glynn and no other.”

“Yes, I know. Well, I’m only telling you what we found that looked like rough work beforehand. Maybe the handkerchief bore a bloody fingerprint of the murderer or something like that.”

“Yes, and just why did the hair have to be brushed neatly? And how do you know he wore glasses?”

“We don’t know as he had them on at the time, but there is a crease over his nose that comes from the use of glasses. And there were none about. I think the murderer picked them up and then, fearing his own fingerprints were on them, didn’t dare leave them.”

“Same as the revolver or whatever he was shot with.”

“Yes.”

“Is his money all intact? Valuables?”

“Oh, yes. Of course, we don’t know how much money he had on him, but there’s quite a bit, and some traveller’s checks and his watch and cuff-links and a gold penknife with his name on it.”

“The murderer must have known of these things.”

“We think he was destroying or removing the evidential bits when he was frightened off by some sound or fancied sound.”

“Well, you seem to have it all doped out. What are you doing next?”

“Waiting to hear from his people in America.”

“What relatives has he?”

“Can’t find any, really. There’s a lot of letters and post cards from home in his portfolio, but they’re mostly signed with initials or Christian names. Several are from Newark, that’s his home address, and one from a club there. So we cabled the club, saying he had been killed and to wire instructions at once. No answer yet.”

“Well, it’s a strange case.”

“It’s a very strange case. The way I read it, some enemy, probably well known to Glynn, followed him here and trailed him till he got him into the crypt, after dark, or during the dusk. Then he knocked him senseless, put him in the coffin, shot him, fixed him up nice and neat, and walked off.”

“What did he put him in the coffin for?”

“That’s what gives the whole snap away. He was a paranoiac or possessed of a homicidal mania. He wasn’t a sane, normal man. And it may be, he didn’t know Glynn at all. Merely chanced to meet him and wreaked his horrid dementia on him.”

“Implausible; but the whole thing is implausible. If I hadn’t seen it myself, I could scarcely believe these details. Do you suppose he had some distorted idea of the dramatic or macabre effect and worked up to that?”

“Must have, I should say. Well, we’ve done all we can. The inquest’ll be a mere formality. You’ll be expected to tell your story once more. The people at his hotel will tell what they know of Mr. Glynn’s doings that day and a few of the Tripp and Hastings crowd may be called in. But there’s nothing for it but an open verdict, and then await instructions from New Jersey concerning the body and the effects of the unfortunate man.”

“What about the films in the camera?”

“They told nothing. We had them developed, but they were merely bits of scenery round about or snapshots of his fellow passengers.”

I went away full of conflicting thoughts.

I felt sure there must be clues in these camera pictures. How could the man take a lot of pictures unless they gave some hint as to his companions or neighbors?

I began to think the police were a bit bored with the insoluble problem and were anxious to shelve it. Had the victim been some prominent man or a townsman of their own, the case would be different.

But a mere American tourist, with, seemingly, no friends or acquaintances, why worry?

At any rate, it was to be laid over until word came from America, and action would follow on that.

Or inaction. Probably the latter.

I almost felt I would like to cancel my promise to John Clevedon, and stay there to puzzle out and avenge the death of one of my countrymen.

But it is one of my innate traits never to deceive myself, and on thinking the matter over, I had to confess to myself that the puzzling out attracted me far more than the avenging.

Had it been a shooting in commonplace or sordid surroundings, I acknowledged to myself that I should have felt far less righteous indignation.

It was the sinister touch of the crypt, the bizarre note of the open stone coffin that attracted me, and I owned right up to it.

Moreover, the dead man's friends had been notified, or would be, through the medium of the club he belonged to, or his friends belonged to. They, without doubt, would take the affair in charge. It could all be attended to by cables, and it was not, really, my business.

Had a countryman of mine been ill, or destitute, I might have a responsibility to consider, but as this man was dead, I could do nothing for him, and I might easily make a bad matter worse.

So I went on home to luncheon, abiding by my resolve to throw my fortunes in with John Clevedon's affairs, and deeply grateful that I had the opportunity.

I should have to see the conductor of our party and arrange to leave it, but I concluded not to tell the other tourists what I proposed to do.

Though not unduly conceited, I knew there were several who would regret my defection, and I preferred to be spared their protestations.

I had no idea, as yet, whether John Clevedon's departure would antedate that of our crowd or not. Nor did I care. Once having made up my mind to a hazard of new fortunes, I threw myself heart and soul into my new life, and prepared to meet it with the best possible equipment.

Having noted Clevedon's smart but quiet taste in dress, I bought me some new things that should be more in keeping with my position. Clothes I could not order until we reached some metropolis, but certain items of haberdashery and luggage could be greatly improved among my appointments.

These various matters kept me most of the afternoon, and it was about tea time when, finding myself in the vicinity of The Lanthorn, I went inside for refreshment.

To my surprise a crowd had gathered round the desk in the lobby, and the house porter was looking rather white and sick.

He held a paper in his hand, a letter, which seemed to be the cause of the commotion.

"Oh, Mr. Oakley," he cried, evidently in relief at seeing me, "will you look at this!"

The Lanthorn people, knowing that I was the man who had found poor Glynn, persisted in acting as if I were in authority of some sort, and indeed treated me as if I were of the police.

But seeing the great excitement seething all about, I went to him and took the paper.

"It's a letter from Mr. Glynn!" he said, in a faint, scared voice.

"Mr. Glynn in America?" I asked, my thoughts leaping to relatives.

"No, sir, Mr. Glynn himself—Mr. Warren Glynn."

I couldn't help a creepy feeling as I quickly turned to the signature and saw it was the truth.

Then, calming myself to read the thing, I found it was a letter written by Glynn the day he died, two days ago. It had been left with the house porter with strict injunctions to hold it for forty-eight hours and then, if Warren Glynn was unaccountably absent, to open and read it.

The letter ran thus:

Today is Wednesday. It is five o'clock. If, by any chance, I am not here by Friday at five o'clock, you may conclude I have met with foul play. In that case turn this letter over to the police.

But be it understood. Should I be dead,—murdered, even,—make no effort to apprehend the criminal. For first, it will be impossible and second, I forbid it. Therefore, I direct, that in the event of my decease between now and Friday afternoon, my body shall be duly decently interred, my just debts paid and the residue of such monies as may be found in my belongings given over to some worthy charity.

It is not necessary or advisable to ask directions from my people in America, for I have no near relatives, and a simple announcement sent to the Newark, New Jersey daily papers will be all-sufficient.

If this seems strange to anyone, let him rest assured it is all in accordance with my wishes and my requests. If I am removed from this earth, it is wiser and better so, and it will serve to right a wrong and to remedy a grave error.

Written in full health and sanity by me, WARREN GLYNN

The signature was unmistakable. I was familiar with his penmanship, his autograph especially.

It was all inexplicable, astonishing, but it was his writing.

The whole document was handwritten, not typed, and it was obviously, the work of a quiet, steady hand. There was no indication of haste or stress of emotion. The words were evenly spaced and correctly written. There was nothing that looked like coercion and no possibility of forgery.

How I regretted my enforced promise to the doctor not to discuss this matter with John Clevedon. I felt sure if I could lay this screed before him he could get at much that was hidden from me.

But I dared not break my word, and too, the matter had to be laid at once before the police.

I asked to be allowed to carry the letter to Snelgrove, and the head porter seemed relieved to have me do so.

So again I visited the police that day.

Snelgrove nearly fell off his chair when he read this bewildering letter.

“What—what’s it mean?” he asked, helplessly, forgetting for once his rôle of omniscient detective.

“I can’t get it at all,” I confessed. “But it seems Glynn looked for his death, it was not an unexpected blow, and he left this behind him when he started off on what he knew might be his last journey.”

“You mean, he kept tryst with his murderer in the cathedral! Let himself be put in the sarcophagus and then shot! Knew his death was imminent, or at least probable, and left this notice to be held forty-eight hours without opening!”

“Looks that way, doesn’t it?” I said. “There’s no chance of forgery, that is Glynn’s own writing, several people swore to that. The head porter received it from Glynn Wednesday afternoon, and held it as requested. Of course, when Mr. Glynn gave him the note, Glynn being then alive and well, the porter

thought little of it. Merely put it away for safe-keeping. It was when he opened it that the strangeness began.”

“Yes,” Snelgrove nodded, “but I don’t get it. If he expected to be killed that night, why hold up matters for forty-eight hours?”

“But he doesn’t want the matter pushed. He wants it held up—permanently. Don’t you see, he says so.”

“I can’t get head or tail to what he says,” poor Snelgrove wailed.

“You don’t have to,” I soothed him. “Just do as the letter directs. It’s the easiest and best way out.”

“Maybe,” Snelgrove said, not heeding me at all, “maybe it was a fight, and they didn’t know which one would win out. If Glynn had, he would have gone back and retrieved his letter—”

“Maybe that was the way of it,” I said.

Chapter 5

I Become a Secretary

I TURNED THE letter over to Snelgrove, as he was the proper custodian of it and rose to go.

“I’m dining with a friend,” I said, more thinking aloud than because I wanted him to know it, “and if I could ask him about it, he’d help us a lot.”

“Why can’t you?” he inquired, not greatly interested.

“Oh, because I can’t. But he’d give us points, I can tell you.”

“One of your big American detectives?”

“Not a professional, but an acute thinker, a clearheaded reasoner.”

“What’s his name?”

“Clevedon.”

“Never heard of him. Well, we’ll muddle through somehow, I expect. And anyway, the most interested party has requested us not to investigate.”

“Yes. Do you propose to accede to his wishes as expressed in that letter?”

Snelgrove smiled.

“When the orders of the party of the first part coincide with the inclinations of the party of the second part, what do you think?”

“I think murder is murder. I think if he had written a dozen forbidding letters you still ought to find the murderer and avenge the crime.”

“Well, it’s up to the Department.” Snelgrove sighed a little. “I thought myself it was going to be a fine case, but it’s too many for me. And we’ve no spur. If some people, relatives or friends, were anxious to have the murderer apprehended, we’d go ahead. But lacking that, and with definite orders from the deceased to quit operations, I doubt if we’ll carry it much further.”

“There’ll be an inquest?”

“I don’t know. The way things stand, probably not. Or maybe, yes. I don’t know. You want to get away?”

“I don’t know when. My plans depend on the plans of another.”

“Like enough you can leave your deposition in writing if you wish. I’ve heard it all, and I’ll take it down and we can have it sworn to and witnessed and then you can hop it as soon as you like.”

“Thanks, I may be glad of that. I say, wasn’t it funny for the murderer to carry around a comb and brush so he could fix the chap’s hair all neat and tidy?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Lots of men carry a comb with them.”

“Was his hair pomaded? Oiled?”

“No, dry and fluffy like. Dandruff on his collar.”

“Can I see the—the body?”

“I expect so. Down at the morgue, they’ll show it to you, I’ve no doubt. Why? Got a notion?”

“None of any importance. But I’d like to give it the once over before I leave town, and I’ve no idea when I’ll go.”

“I’ll give you a written order, then you’ll have no difficulty. If you learn anything you’ll let me know, won’t you?”

“I certainly will.”

I left the now friendly Snelgrove and made my way toward the morgue.

The body of the dead man was not a prepossessing sight, but neither was it repulsive. Save for his injured eye, he looked much as the corpse of one who has died a natural death.

I studied the face, for no particular reason except that I wanted to impress it on my memory. For some time, after we were away from this place and the ban was lifted, I meant to talk the matter over with Clevedon, and find out what he would have said, had I been allowed to talk to him now.

And, too, I realized that perhaps it was just as well. If for any good and sufficient reason, Warren Glynn had forbidden all investigation of his death, the eager questionings of two interfering Americans might have been ill-timed and productive of trouble.

But I meant to have a good look at the body of Warren Glynn.

However, I learned nothing that I did not already know.

The wounded eye was an unpleasant sight, but I studied it carefully. Yet it showed me nothing save that he was shot through that eye.

The hair, as I had been told, was dry and fluffy, but neatly parted. Apparently the doctors or whoever took care of him, had been careful to preserve all such details as nearly as possible as they had been in life.

What was bothering me about the hair was that I had seen in Glynn's washroom a half-used bottle of hair oil, and I looked for a trace of it on his hair.

But there was none, and I assumed that it was some tonic preparation that he applied at intervals.

Then I scrutinized what Snelgrove had said was a proof that he wore glasses.

But if there had been a visible mark or crease over the nose at first, it was not there now, for death—or the undertaker—had smoothed all lines from the dead countenance.

I gazed at my countryman a moment longer, and then went away, carrying that pathetic picture in my memory's files.

Next I called for a moment at the office of the doctor who had Clevedon in charge.

I asked him, begged him, indeed, to let me discuss the Glynn case with his patient that evening. I promised to use no emphatic language or raise any questions that would tend to stir up unduly the wrath of my friend, or work too strongly upon his imagination.

"You don't seem to get me," Doctor Pinckney said, a little peevishly. "You think I'm asking you to spare Mr. Clevedon's feelings, as I might guard a child against flying into a fit of temper. It isn't that. It's that I've learned from a wide experience that a man sitting about in enforced idleness is very likely to let his mind run riot. Moreover, his thoughts are over-emphasized, even distorted, and given a bizarre and absorbing subject to mull over he is going to get so excited and nervous that it is bound to react on his physical condition. But there's no use repeating all this, I told you it before. Now, I'll say no more, but if you take up this subject with Clevedon tonight and discuss and argue it, you do it in flat disobedience of my orders."

"Oh, well," I said, pettish now, in my turn, "if you feel like that about it, of course I won't mention it to him at all. But you must admit it's hard lines for me, interested in these matters, to be up against a case like this Glynn affair, and to have a brilliant detective mind at my elbow, and not be allowed to enjoy their juxtaposition."

Doctor Pinckney eyed me, seeming for the first time to understand the situation.

"I suppose," he said, "it's as if I had a perfect problem of a case, and was not allowed to operate—"

"Yes," I cried, "just that. Now if you'll agree—"

"I'll agree to nothing," he retorted. "You go to dinner with Mr. Clevedon and confine your talk to Shakespeare and the musical glasses, or else you break the engagement and go off and dine elsewhere. The excitement you show when you just mention the matter to me, tells me what you would be when all wrought up with your deductions and inferences and clues, as you hammer at Clevedon. He has a marvellous mind and an energetic, never idle brain. His father was like that. A most able thinker and logician. A fine scholar, too. The Clevedons all are bookish. Well, young man, I'm sorry for your disappointment, but I can't help you any. Good-afternoon." Thus summarily dismissed, I went my way.

Reaching the hotel, I found a small group of people waiting for me. The members of our party seemed to look upon me as their lawful prey, and fairly pounced at me as they shouted a volley of questions.

“What did the inspector say?”

“Are the police going to give up the case?”

“Did the detective think Mr. Glynn wrote the letter himself?”

“Say, do you know that Miss Hooper knows the Glynn family?”

Though the remarks were voiced in a sort of babel, the last speech caught my attention, and I turned to the speaker.

“Miss Hooper knows the Glynnns! Where is Miss Hooper? I’d like to talk to her.”

“She’s gone out,” Katherine Brownlee informed me. “Talk to me, till she gets back.”

There was always something restful and attractive about this girl, and I sat on the porch rail, and looked at her.

“I really must go and dress for dinner,” she said, glancing at her watch, “but I’ll chat a minute first. Look here, Mr. Oakley, are you deserting us?”

“Whatever do you mean?” I parried, wondering who had let the cat out of the bag.

The crowd had dispersed, as it was nearing dinner time, and we were alone in our corner of the porch.

“Oh, nothing,” she smiled, “but when we are all getting ready to move on tomorrow morning, when we are all looking at our itineraries and studying guide books, all asking questions as to when luggage must be ready and that, it is a bit queer to see you walking about, uninterested in such matters. It may be that you are all packed and ready, but to me it looks as if you meant to stay behind.”

“Miss Brownlee, you are a most astute young woman,” I said, in sincere admiration. “You have a detective instinct, I fear.”

“So have you,” she retorted, quickly. “Don’t think I haven’t seen you mulling over this murder case.”

“Where?” I demanded.

“Wherever you may happen to be. If you’re sitting here with a newspaper, you’re not reading, you’re—what do you call it?—deducing. If you go on a motor ride with us, you’re far away, in your thoughts, and we have to speak to you three times before we can make you hear.”

“I’m truly sorry,” I smiled at her. “Have I been rude?”

“Not rude, but disappointing. You’re our star tripper, and we don’t want to lose you. Are we going to?”

There was little use in dissembling. After all, I had told Clevedon I would go with him, and though there had been no formal contract, either verbal or written, I had no reason to suppose there would be. One doesn’t have a contract for a secretaryship, and, so far as I was concerned, the matter was settled.

I had fixed up things with the manager of the party, had received certain rebates and made certain concessions, and now, as this clever girl had surmised, I was out of the party entirely, though I had not published the fact.

“Yes, Miss Brownlee,” I said, “I have made other plans that necessitate my giving up the rest of this trip. But this is in no way connected with the tragedy of Mr. Glynn’s death. Did you say Miss Hooper knows Glynn’s people?”

“Here she comes now,” Miss Brownlee announced, as she saw a girl hurrying toward us. “I must run now. I’ll see you in the morning to say good-by, Mr. Oakley.”

“Oh, yes,” I told her, and then turned to catch Miss Hooper’s attention.

And none too quickly. She was one of those will-o’-the-wisp girls who are difficult to corral.

“Just a minute, Miss Hooper,” I begged, as she tried to pass me. “Just a word, we may never meet again!”

But even this dire prognostication had no effect on her.

“Can’t stop,” she cried, gaily, “I’ve a dinner engagement and I’m late now. See you tomorrow.”

I caught at her hand.

“Tell me,” I urged, “do you know Warren Glynn’s people in New Jersey?”

“Yes and no,” she replied, with a distinctly teasing smile.

I knew her for a gay little piece, and I doubted if she could give me even a scrap of worth-while information, but I hated to lose the chance.

“Will you meet me early tomorrow morning?” I still held her hand. “Breakfast with me?”

“Yes, I will. At seven thirty! There, that’s a date! Now let me go.”

I let her go, and though I had gained my point, I felt small hopes of any definite result. If the girl had known anything much about Glynn she would have told it before. Yet, would she?

An hour later I strolled over to the Grand Hotel to dine with Clevedon.

He was in high spirits, having persuaded the overcautious doctor to relieve him of the sling, although a small splint was still in use.

Then, he had called in a valet, who had so ripped a coat sleeve that it could be used by him, and later could be restored to its original entirety.

“I’m not yet quite ready to brave the curious glances of the crowd in the dining-room,” he said, “so we’ll dine up here in my sitting-room, if you don’t mind.”

“I like it better,” I assured him, taking a comfortable seat by the broad window that looked out on the near-by gardens and distant woods.

“Is it settled, then?” I asked, in my direct way. “I am to travel with you, go home with you, live with you—”

“Come, live with me, and be my love,” Clevedon sang out merrily.

“Wait a minute with your ill-timed levity,” I frowned at him, “I have a methodical mind, and I want this definitely settled. I’m to be your secretary and librarian, and an accepted member of your household?”

“All of those things, and anything else you ask, to the half of my kingdom.”

“How about the other half?”

“I want that myself—need it in my business.”

“What is your business? It has just dawned upon me that I know very little about you.”

“I’ll tell you everything I can, there’s little to relate. Really, Oakley, I’m a simple sort of person, after all. And my life is an open book. Born and raised in New England, of New England stock, I never had a chance to be real wild until I came away on this trip. And, somehow, I haven’t kicked over the traces much over here.”

“Been to Paris?”

“Yes, but you can get all that from my diary. Oh, it won’t bore you. It isn’t a Pepys or an Evelyn diary. Just a sort of check list of what I’ve seen and so don’t have to see again. And, since we’re talking business, or you are, I’ll say that I consider you engaged in those several capacities you listed, and you’re to travel with me, the rest of our stay over here, at my expense, as a friend. Your arduous secretarial duties won’t begin until we are back at Clevedon House.”

“Are there a lot of people in your home?”

“No; only mother and I. Sometimes an old aunt or a stray cousin, sometimes not. But we shall change all that. Beside yourself I hope soon to add another to our family circle. I’m going to take unto myself a wife.”

“Is she willing?”

“She has said so. I trust she hasn’t changed her mind since I’ve been gone. But I’ll tell you all these things later on, ad libitum and probably ad nauseam. Just now I want you to tell me all about these new developments in the Glynn matter.”

“How do you know there are any?”

“Oh, the birds of the air carry these things around. What’s the queer yarn about a letter from the dead man, written after he died?”

“Oh, no, not written after he died!”

“I feared that was exaggerated.” Clevedon sighed. “It would have been fine if it had really been written after death. We’d have the spiritists after us then!”

“It was written—” then I bethought myself.

“Look here, Clevedon,” I said, earnestly, “I’ve promised that fossil doctor not to talk of this Glynn case with you at all. Now, I’ve got to keep that promise.”

“It isn’t a case, at all. There’s no lawyer or judge or jury, and apparently there’s going to be none. You can’t call a situation like that a case.”

“You don’t fool me one bit,” I told him. “You’re trying to draw me into an argument, and I won’t be drawn. Now—and, by the way, I thought I was dining here.”

“You are. I’ll ring for the food. Yes, I was trying to draw you, and I’ll do it, too. After dinner, when you’re comfortably muddled with old English ale, I’ll discreetly lead the conversation around to—”

“If you’re going to do that, I’m going home now,” I said, half laughing and half annoyed at his persistency. “You see, I’m just crazy to talk the thing over with you, but the old hen Pinckney said I shouldn’t and I agreed not to.”

“Oh, well, let it go, then. You’re all right sticking to your promise, even to a doddering old coot like that. But, well, I say—he didn’t say I wasn’t to talk about it, did he? You didn’t promise for me?”

“No,” I returned, half laughing at his eagerness. He had a boyish way of coaxing, that had a charm of its own. And yet I didn’t altogether like him in this mood. I preferred his quiet, dignified manner.

“Are you moody?” I asked, while the waiters deftly laid the small table for our dinner.

“No, I’m Sankey,” he returned, “want to hear me sing?”

I laughed outright at this, and said, “Surely those celebrated revivalists were before your time.”

“Yes,” he said, “I learned about them in those Foolish Question Books.”

“Did you fall for those quizzes?” I asked in surprise. “Had to. Everybody did. Now, come to dinner, and remember your promise not to talk about the Glynn puzzle. Would you call it a cryptogram?”

I laid down my fork.

“If you’re going to do such things—”

“You may have to cancel our contract? Well, I won’t do it again. Or, at least, not so bad as that. I may hunt for a cryptic solution, mayn’t I?”

“You mayn’t hunt for any solution,” I said, sternly. “You will now talk about the weather or your trip or your home and mother, or anything except Warren Glynn and his untimely taking off.”

“All right,” his voice suddenly dropped to a serious note. “I’ll be good. But just tell me one thing, who wrote that letter?”

“Why, Glynn did.”

“And that porter fellow kept it all this time? Nonsense! I think it’s a hoax.”

“They say it’s positively written in Glynn’s handwriting. And it reads logically enough.”

“But it seems like some conspiracy or desperate deed. That Glynn chap was the last one to mix in that sort of thing. He was a gay, light-hearted, transparent sort of feller.”

“I don’t care what sort he was, you’ll get no opinions from me concerning him.”

So Clevedon left off trying, I think he was testing my strength of will anyway, and he began to tell me of his home in Massachusetts.

It was in the Pittsfield section of the state, not far from Lenox and Stockbridge and other attractive towns. I love New England, and I especially love Massachusetts, so I was grateful anew that fortune had so greatly favored me.

“We have an old Colonial house,” he went on, “the sort with a Parthenon colonnade.”

“The only sort worth having,” I murmured, not at all fatuously praising, but joyously anticipating.

“Yes, except it makes the upper bedrooms dark. Well, the old house is a beauty in its way. Mildly historic, slightly famous, but big and clean and comfortable all over. It has ells and additions, but they were added judiciously, and the effect of the house is unharmed. It isn’t up on an eminence nor is it down in a hollow, but just about level with the surrounding country.”

“Sounds perfect,” I said. “I’m a nut on architecture, especially colonial houses. Will your mother mind if I prowl all over it?”

“No, indeed. Mother is a lovely old lady—”

“Old?” I said, looking at him.

“She’s old before her time,” he sighed. “I’m twenty-eight. She’s not much over fifty, but she looks nearly seventy.”

“Sorrow?” I said gravely.

“No; ill health. She’s always been frail, and after my father’s death, she seemed to think she had nothing to live for.”

“We must try to cheer her up,” I offered. “Two husky young bloods in a house ought to be a little ray of sunshine, somehow.”

“I hope you can do something in that line, Oakley. It would be a godsend. I try, but I’m a blunderbuss at that sort of thing. Mother cares for me, of course, but I never seem to do or say quite the right thing.”

I nodded my head, quite subconsciously. I don’t know why I should have felt that John Clevedon wouldn’t say the right thing to his mother, even with the best intentions, but it was borne in upon me.

Not that it mattered, it was none of my business, but the man was strange after all.

“Now, as to my fiancée,” he went on, quite as if he was making an inventory of his household and family, “she’s a peach. She’s salt of the earth, and a girl of a thousand and all that.”

He turned a little red, and I gathered that his innermost thoughts were not often brought forward even as much as this.

“Don’t try to describe her,” I bantered. “I know she is queen rose of the rosebud garland of girls.”

“All that and then some. Her name is Vera—Vera Liddell. We shall be married soon after my return, and if you like the whole outfit, I hope you’ll stay on just the same, and take care of the library and the desk.”

“Desk?”

“Well, that means my secretarial work. I don’t know how soon I can write letters myself, but until I can, I shall depend on you. And by the time I get around to it myself, probably I’ll be so used to you that we’ll let it stay at that.”

“Miss Liddell a neighbor?”

“Not quite that. Their place is some thirty miles away. She’s one of a large family of girls. You may find one to your liking.”

“I’ll like them all, but the job of being your librarian will, I hope leave me no time for philandering.”

He looked up quickly.

“No,” I laughed, answering his questioning glance, “I’m not nursing a broken heart. Indeed, if I were, there are enough substitutes being offered me to give me wide range of choice.”

“Meaning?”

“The fair ones in our conducted party. Two or three of them are pretty sure they can bag me before we get back to the Stars and Stripes. They don’t know I’m deserting.”

“None of them?”

“Only one. And there’s a girl breakfasting with me tomorrow morning. She knows the Glynnns.”

“What?”

“I don’t wonder you exclaim. And I beg your pardon, I truly meant not to introduce the forbidden subject. But yes, I’m told she knows Glynn’s family in New Jersey. So, I’m going to do a little judicious pumping. You see, Clevedon, I’m in honor bound not to chatter with you about this, but I’m not bound to keep out of it all, myself. By the way, when do we leave here?”

“Why, I want to go as soon as I can get off. When can you be ready?”

“Oh, any time. I mean as soon as you like. I’ve only tourist luggage. I must brace up my wardrobe before I start for your ancestral acres.”

“Oh, yes. Well, I say, Oakley, if you’re sure you don’t mind, I’d like to get along pretty soon. How about day after tomorrow?”

“Suits me all right,” I said, carelessly. “Tomorrow, if you wish. I just want a word with that Hooper minx, and then I’m yours to command.”

“What Hooper minx?”

“The girl I’m breakfasting with. The one who knows the Glynnns.”

“Oh, yes, I forgot. Is her name Hooper?”

“Yes, Isabel Hooper.”

And after that, a sort of weariness came over Clevedon. I wondered if after all the doctor was right, and the man ought to be kept quiet. Anyway, I went home early, and he made no objections to my departure.

Chapter 6

The Hooper Minx

AT THE HOTEL, when I reached it, I saw many of our party grouped here and there, writing last minute postcards, or looking up information as to the next stopping place.

I felt a little homesick, for we had been together several weeks, and naturally I had made friends among them. They were really a pleasant lot of people and I was sorry to think I would travel with them no further.

But I did not regret my new alliance, and I felt sure that to be secretary and librarian to a man like Clevedon was a step upward for me.

And, too, it would mean my living in New England, which I longed to do. So, I spoke to two or three acquaintances, and paused at the hotel desk on my way to my room.

“Yes, sir,” the clerk was saying, “if I’d had that letter in charge, I’d handed it over to the authorities pretty quick, soon’s I heard the man was dead.”

“I think,” somebody else observed, “that the directions of a dead man are even more sacred than those of the living. You’d have had no right to give it up until the date you were told to do so.”

“Right or no right, I should have handed it over to the police. They are in charge, if a man is killed, and they ought to have all possible assistance.”

“This Glynn evidently expected trouble,” commented another bystander.

“Is it certain Glynn wrote that letter?” I asked. “I heard someone say it was more than likely a hoax.”

“Hoax!” the clerk sniffed contemptuously. “Why, the handwriting experts passed on it, and they say it is beyond all doubt the writing of Warren Glynn.”

“How do they know?” I persisted.

“Oh, he left quite a lot of letters and stuff in his desk. Of course, the letters were from other people, but there were lists and notes and various memoranda in his own hand. And of course, the hotel had his

signature in the register, and anyway, they had enough of his own penmanship to bank on. Oh, it was his writing, all right. And there's no sense in talking about a hoax. A hoax is when the tragedy doesn't happen, this time it did happen."

"I don't mean a jesting hoax," I pursued, "nor a practical joke. I mean, if it was a carefully planned murder, which it must have been, the murderer could have faked that note to make it look like the dead man's orders, when really it was to give the murderer time to make his getaway. Handwriting experts are not always infallible."

"That would go, if it was a case of merely his signature, or a few lines. But a long letter like that, all pen written, would take a deal of forging to get past the experts."

"I agree to that," I said, "and granting that the letter was written by Warren Glynn, and given to the hotel porter with explicit directions, I think the porter did right to carry out those directions to the letter."

"All right, I don't say nay. Only, if he had produced the letter sooner, the murderer might have been caught."

"Might have been," I agreed, "though I don't quite see how."

"Only that the police machinery would have been started sooner," I said.

"But the police were right on the job, from the first discovery. The letter couldn't really help them any."

This was probably true, for after all, the letter gave no hint as to the identity of the criminal. In fact, if followed up, it would have retarded the search, forbidding as it did, any investigation.

"Well, it's a strange muddle," I said, "and I, for one, can't see any sort of solution."

I went on up to my room, and sitting down by the open window, I smoked a pipe while I thought it over. But the more I thought about it, the more muddled I grew, so I gave it up, and turned my thoughts to pleasanter subjects.

Next morning, I was on hand to keep the tryst with Miss Hooper.

She appeared, smiling, and looking as freshly sweet as the English morning itself.

"I haven't an earthly thing to tell you," she said, smiling gayly, "but it seemed so pleasant to have this tête-à-tête breakfast that I pretended I had."

"But you know the Glynn family," I said, at once, fearing that some interruption might occur that would bar our conference.

"Oh, well, I used to know them, when I lived in New Jersey, but that was years ago."

"How many years ago?"

"Oh, about ten or twelve. They lived on High Street, in Newark, and we lived just around the corner. But I didn't know Warren. I played with his sisters, much younger than he. He was just a big boy, who paid no attention to us little girls."

“But I thought he had no relatives?”

“The sisters, there were two of them, both died in a scarlet fever epidemic. And after that we moved away from Newark, and I never saw or heard of Warren Glynn again, until I saw him on the steamer. I shouldn’t have known him then, only I saw his name in the passenger list and hunted him up.”

“Did you talk to him on the steamer?”

She made a wry face.

“I tried to, but he was very upstage, and I called myself off. I do hate the sort of snobbery that makes an independent tourist look down on one of a party!”

“I do, too,” I agreed, “but it has always been so, and always will. They say the prejudice is passing, but it isn’t.”

“Well, you see, I don’t really know much about the Glynnns, so let’s talk about something else.”

“Did you see Glynn in Europe at all, after leaving the steamer? I mean, before we reached Welbury?”

“Only once. In Exeter, I think it was, or was it Ely? Anyway, I saw him in one or the other of those cathedrals. I know it began with an E.”

“Did he see you? Did you speak?”

“Yes, he saw me—the old snob! I smiled at him, but he only bowed coldly and passed on. No, we didn’t speak.” I laughed at the disgusted look on the round, pretty face, and said, most sincerely:

“You didn’t need him, surely, with all the beaus you have on your string!”

“No, I didn’t, and it’s too bad for me to knock a man who is dead, and who came by his death in such a horrible manner. But he must have been mixed up in some wrong-doing, or nobody would have been out for his scalp.”

“Do try to think whether you saw him at Exeter or Ely,” I begged, and she wrinkled her pretty brows.

“Oh, I know!” she cried, “it was in Canterbury Cathedral. I remember now, because he was down in the crypt when we saw him. You know how the crypts are there—”

“But you said it was a cathedral that began with an E.”

“Oh, well, I slipped up on that. I’m sure now, it was Canterbury. The big one, you know, the nicest of all, I think.”

“Yes,” I agreed, “Canterbury is a nice cathedral!”

“Oh, isn’t it! And such a lovely verger—the one that took us around was. He seemed to know Mr. Glynn, at least, he nodded to him.”

I sighed. If I had been on the case, if, indeed, it had been a case, I could interview the “lovely verger” of the Canterbury Cathedral, and perhaps get a line on Glynn.

But my duties lay elsewhere, and I must put aside all thoughts of detective work, or even any further inquiry or investigation of the Glynn affair, fascinating though it was.

“Well, then, Miss Hooper,” I said, “you’ve told me all you know of Warren Glynn, as a factor in your past life, and an incident in this present trip?”

“Yes, I have. If I tell you any more, I’ll have to make it up.”

“I’ve no doubt it would be interesting, but it isn’t necessary,” I told her. “It’s a strange affair, but I fancy we’ll never know any more about it than we know this minute.”

“No, I suppose not. What will become of his things, Mr. Oakley?”

“Why, I don’t know. I suppose they will be sent home to his people.”

“But he hasn’t any people.”

“There must be some. Second cousins or something like that. The police will look after all that.”

“I wish I could have his perfumery.”

“His what?”

“Perfumery. He had a lot of it. His stateroom was near ours on the boat, and he used to come out of it, scented up like a Queen of Sheba. But such lovely perfumes! Oh, I could die thinking of them!”

I had to laugh at the ecstatic expression on her face, as she leaned back and closed her eyes in rapt remembrance of the odors.

“A man who uses perfume—” I began.

“Yes, yes, I know. But these were just the faintest, most elusive fragrances—oh, I wish he had willed the lot to me!”

“How do you know he had a lot?”

“We girls coaxed the stewardess to give us a peek into his room.”

“You’re a bad lot,” I told her. “I don’t want to hear any more about such naughty doings. Nor any more about a sheik who uses perfumery!”

She laughed, and then I suddenly remembered the scent bottle I had seen on the washstand in Glynn’s room at The Lanthorn.

Well, that merely corroborated Miss Hooper’s story of his exotic tastes. It meant nothing at all in an evidential way.

“He had no handkerchief on him when he was killed,” I said, thinking aloud. “That is, none was found. Presumably the murderer carried it off with him.”

“Why would he do that?”

“Various reasons. Most probable, that he used it to wipe his hands on and it showed fingerprints.”

“Oh, how horrible!” she shuddered.

“Well, you kept up the subject,” I taxed her. “Now, let’s talk of brighter things.”

We did, and Isabel Hooper proved herself a pleasant and entertaining companion.

Breakfast over, she ran off to get ready for the start of the party, and I gave one final sigh for my surrendered ticket, and then turned my thoughts to my newly planned future.

I went to see Snelgrove, and learned that no word had yet been received from Glynn’s people or friends in America.

I also wrote and signed my deposition regarding the finding of the body in the sarcophagus, and gave directions as to further communication with me.

I gave another sigh as I realized that I was forever passing out of all connection with what promised to be a most remarkable case. That is, if they made a case: of it.

I rather thought it would sink into oblivion, with the many other unsolved mysteries on this old earth of ours.

Then I went to see Clevedon.

I felt that I was already in his service, and I ought to report every morning, and learn his plans or his wishes.

He sensed this, and reminded me that I was as yet, merely his friend and guest, and was in no way under orders.

“But since you’re here, Oakley,” he said, “I’ll tell you of my plans. I want to jog up to London today. I feel I can have better medical attention there.”

“Finger worse?” I asked, solicitously.

“Not that, but it may become so. I mean, suppose some sort of infection should set in. And, beside, I’m fed up with this place. Outside the cathedral, there’s nothing to see. So, let’s go to London and visit the queen.”

“All right, I’m game.”

“If you’re not ready, I’ll go along this afternoon, and you can follow.”

“Not so, but far otherwise. I can be of some little assistance regarding tickets and such, and I’m with you. I told you I could be ready at a moment’s notice. The shopping I want to do can be much better done in London.”

“Right-o. Then we go today. I want a valet—that is, I don’t want one, but I see I’ll have to have one. He can be better procured in London. Also a typewriter, which I think I can learn to manipulate with my remaining digits.”

“Shall I wire ahead for reservations and rooms?”

“I’ve done that. Somehow,” he smiled, “I took it for granted you’d go along.”

“You don’t need a helper of any sort,” I growled at him. “You’re your own valet and secretary and next thing I know you’ll be cataloguing your own library.”

“Maybe,” he nodded his head. “And that reminds me, there are some old books in London we must freeze onto. I’ve torn out some pages from the dealer’s catalogues, and we’ll hound them to their lair.”

“That goes with me. And maybe I know one or two little old bookstalls that may amuse you. Oh, we’ll have a great time!”

For the first time, I realized that it was really pleasant to be travelling about with John Clevedon, and I duly welcomed the sensation.

“What about the inquest on the Glynn man?” he asked.

“I’m not sure there’ll be one.”

“Why not? How can they omit that?”

“For the simple reason that there are no witnesses to be questioned,” I returned, seriously. “I seem to be the only human being who knows anything about that murder, and all I know is now written down in black and white, signed, sealed and duly deposited where it belongs. They don’t seem to suspect me of the crime, which is a wonder, as they’ve no one else to link up with it in any way. I say, Clevedon, I suppose this ban on discussion will be lifted, once you’re out from under the iron rule of Doctor Pinckney.”

“Yes, of course. Once we’re in the train, we can have a wild confab and go into the matter thoroughly.”

“Yes, and then you’ll go into a raging fever, or senile dementia.”

“Or delirium tremens, or something. No, Oakley, I shan’t take it as seriously as all that. But we’ll have a hobnob over it, while the details are fresh in our minds.”

“Where’d you get any details in your mind, I’d like to know?” I exclaimed; “I haven’t babbled about it to you.”

“No; but it has seeped into mine ears through such channels as the newspapers, the waiters, the hallboys; even the chambermaid contributed her quota to the general fund of information. All sensational, and most of it contradictory, but it shows the little old town is alive to the crime and means to avenge it.”

“The townspeople will do it then, not the police,” I informed him.

“Maybe. And maybe it won’t be done at all, but the citizens are certainly more or less wrought up.”

“Small wonder. You see, the details are so striking. Just for instance, why did the killer comb his dead victim’s hair and retie his necktie for him, after he was dead?”

“Did he do those things?”

“So Snelgrove informs me.”

“How does Snelgrove know this kindly service was performed after death?”

“He’s rather clever about that. Says the tie is tied over a spot of blood on the shirt. Therefore, it was tied, or retied after the killing.”

“Maybe, but not certainly. The tie may have shifted.”

“Then Snelgrove thinks the very tidy slayer combed Glynn’s hair all nice and pretty, because it was mussed up in the row that Snelgrove is sure they had.”

“Snelgrove is a visionary. His deductions are flabby. His evidence doesn’t jell. Wow! I wish we could go into this thing, heart and soul, you and I, Oakley! We’d show them where they get off! That comb business now—I don’t believe it for a minute! Even if they did put up a fight, which I’ve heard nothing of heretofore, it needn’t muss up a decently brushed head. And if it had, a busy murderer isn’t going to stop to give it a marcel wave, or whatever he did.”

“But he wasn’t busy, that’s the beauty of it. He seemed to have all the time he wanted. He fixed the body nice and straight—”

“Oh, I’ve heard all that. Let’s drop the subject, Oakley. I feel those nervous spasms coming on! I shouldn’t like Doctor Pinckney to come in and catechize me in one of them!”

I laughed, for never had I seen Clevedon look more cool and calm. But there was no use discussing the case anyway, since we were about to go away forever from its locale.

I turned to the more prosaic details of travel and transport, and I learned to my satisfaction that we were to go to London and remain a few days or a week.

Then to Paris for a fortnight, and then back to America, reaching Clevedon’s home early in September.

This all seemed quite as it should be, and I said I would go back to the hotel and pack.

“Can’t I help you pack?” I asked, “or do any errands for you?”

“No, thank you, but you can advise me. Shall I continue to shave—I mean let my valet shave me, when, as, and if I get him, or shall I grow a beard?”

I looked at him, wondering how he would look with a short, pointed beard.

Rather distinguished, I thought.

But I said, “I don’t know. A little whiskers is a dangerous thing. Why don’t you give it a trial—let it grow, and then, if we agree it doesn’t harmonize with your classic features, off with it.”

“That’s an idea. But I doubt I’d like the thing. Well, we’ll try it. I so hate to have anybody do anything for me that I’ve been accustomed to do for myself.”

“Yes, I know. Here, I’ll shave you—”

I picked up from the table his new safety razor, which, indeed, was the reason for our conversation, and went toward him.

“Drop that oyster and leave the dock!” he cried, with a gesture of make-believe menace.

I stared at him as he made that speech.

He returned my look, and quickly changed the subject.

But I couldn’t get it out of my mind.

“Drop that oyster and leave the dock,” was certainly what he had said.

Once away from him, I put it down in my note book, verbatim et literatim, just as he had said it.

Then I dismissed the matter from my mind and went blithely to work packing up. It was no arduous task, and I was ready long ahead of time.

I went to pay a short farewell call on Snelgrove, for the simple reason that he was the only one in town I knew well enough to call on. I missed our Tripp and Hastings crowd more than I had expected to, and I was just a little lonesome.

“We’ve had a cable from the friend of Glynn’s,” Snelgrove told me. “It seems he really has no relatives, nearer than distant cousins. They wash their hands of him—I begin to think, Mr. Oakley, that Glynn was a bit wild—and they say to bury him here, duly and properly, and if he hasn’t enough in his estate here to pay the bills, they will help out. Anyway, they don’t want the remains shipped home, they are quite certain about that.”

“Fine family feeling they show!” I commented. “Well, then, I suppose you’ll do just that, especially as Glynn’s own letter bade you bury him without further notice.”

“I suppose so, but I don’t like it.”

“No, and I don’t like it. I know he wrote a mighty queer letter, and it is, in a way, a sort of last will and testament. But, all the same, I can’t help feeling that poor chap didn’t have a fair deal.”

“A more mysterious case I never did see, sir. Nor more impossible. I wouldn’t have believed it if it had been told me for a yarn.”

“Nor I. Well, I’m leaving tonight, Snelgrove. Now, mind, you’re to let me know if anything happens. Not if they bury him, and consider the incident closed. But, I mean if anything turns up like a clue to his murderer, or a hint as to motive, or fresh evidence or new clues. Will you do this, Snelgrove?”

Aided and abetted by more material inducement, I secured his promise, and then I went away, leaving forever behind me the scene of the strange case of Warren Glynn and the mysterious murder in the crypt.

Once more I went over to the old cathedral. Once more I went down the steep narrow stairs to the crypt, and gazed again on the six coffins, of old and crumbling stone, all of them now empty.

I hunted about for a clue, but found nothing, and with a sigh for my lost or rather, frustrated opportunities, I went to meet John Clevedon and take up my new life.

Chapter 7

The Fragrance Of Bitter Almonds

AS I EXPECTED, John Clevedon established himself in a most comfortable nest in London.

His pleasant apartment at the Ritz overlooked both Piccadilly and Green Park and we each had a spacious bedroom and bath, with a sitting-room which we shared.

The first thing Clevedon did was to consult an eminent Harley Street surgeon, who promptly did away with the cumbersome splint and bandages and sent him forth with a neat and inconspicuous dressing on the injured hand.

"I knew old Pinckney was overdoing it," Clevedon said, with a good-natured grin. "But I hadn't the heart to chide him. He seemed to enjoy it so much."

"Yes, he did," I agreed. "It's a wonder he didn't have you in bed with two trained nurses."

"Well, this Johnny says there's no danger of infection, or any further trouble. Says it won't be a thing of beauty, but still, he thinks it won't be too unpleasant to look at. Oh, well, I'm lucky to get off as well as I have."

I began to realize the real optimism of Clevedon's nature. Whenever he could better or improve, he immediately did so, but if a matter was outside his jurisdiction, he let it cheerfully alone, and made the best of it.

We went next to engage a valet for him. He preferred to go to the bureau and pick and choose for himself. And he asked me to go, saying he relied greatly on my taste and judgment, especially in the matter of valets.

So we went, and finally completed the arduous task by selecting a bright-eyed young American.

"The one thing I don't want," Clevedon had said, on our way there, "is an imperturbable chap. In story books, butlers and valets are always imperturbable, and incapable of being surprised. I hate that type. I want somebody alive and alert, somebody who is a little bit more than a wooden image."

By a stroke of good fortune there was an American lad among the available material who seemed to be just about what Clevedon desired.

He was quick-witted and responsive, and his credentials were all that could be asked for. A succession of adverse circumstances had brought him to earn his living in the only way open to him, and he had looked after the wardrobes of high-ranked Englishmen, entirely to their satisfaction.

But he wanted a berth with some American, homeward bound, and Clevedon just fitted his hopes.

"It may be only temporary," Clevedon told him, "for, once I get full use of my hand again, I shall probably hate to have you around."

"Well, anyway, you'll get me back to New York?" asked the young man, whose name was Pell.

"Yes, I'll surely do that. Where is your home town?"

“Seattle, Washington. But I haven’t been there for years. The East for me.”

“Like New England?”

“I don’t care, if it isn’t too far from New York City.” A few more questions were asked and answered, and Pell agreed to come the next day to take up his duties.

“Nice boy,” said Clevedon, as we left the place. “That’s the sort I want. I don’t want the ones you read about in English story magazines.”

“You’re more democratic than I thought you would be,” I said, thoughtfully.

“How did you happen to think anything about it?”

“I was strongly attracted to you on board the steamer,” I confessed frankly. “But don’t lay that to your personal charms. As a matter of fact, I picked you up for a detective.”

“Well, I am.”

“What, a real one?”

“Oh, bless us, no. Just—well, just an amateur, like yourself. I’d like to be the real thing, but it wouldn’t do. The last scion of the house of Clevedon must be of more dignity and sterling worth than is usually connoted by the term detective.”

“But there have been gentleman detectives.”

“I know. And it isn’t the gentlemanly part of it I’m thinking of. But in Massachusetts, we of the old stock aren’t detectives. It isn’t done, that’s all.”

“But you can be an amateur?”

“Oh, yes, to my heart’s content. I foresee a lot of fun ahead for us, thrashing out the cases that wiser and greater detectives fall down on.”

“And now Doctor Pinckney is out of the running, and your new doctor has no fears for your sanity, I suppose we can talk over the Glynn case.”

“Yes, we can, and we will. But I admit freely, it has small interest for me now. We’re too far removed from the scene and I know too little of the actual conditions to solve the peculiar problems that the case presents.”

“That’s so,” I returned. “When we get back to America and get settled down, I shall take a run out to Newark, New Jersey and see what I can find out.”

“Yes, do. That will give us a fresh start on it all. But I shall be getting married soon and I won’t be able to give you much time. I thought, Oakley, we’d get the library in order first, I mean, give it a good going over and straightening out, and then, you can begin on the cataloguing and work at it at your leisure while I’m off on my wedding trip.”

“That suits me. You’ll be married in October?”

"I think that's Vera's plan. But, you see," he looked a little worried, "I haven't written her yet about my sawed-off finger. She may turn me down when she hears about that."

"Nonsense, girls are not so silly as that. But oughtn't you to tell her?"

"Yes. And I don't know whether to try to typewrite a letter, or dictate it to you."

"Dictate it to me," I responded, promptly. "Then, if you want to say some sweet nothings that you don't want me to hear, you can type a postscript. But don't send her a typed letter—at first, anyway. She might throw you over for such a thing as that, quicker than for a missing joint of your forefinger."

"Yes, I suppose so," he said, but he looked anxious and upset.

I couldn't blame him. I didn't know his Vera, but most girls I did know could be very much put out at the idea of a crippled hand. There is a feeling of horror at mutilation, however slight, that is hard to overcome.

I pretended to make light of it, but I couldn't help feeling it all depended on the depth and strength of Vera's love for her fiancé whether or not she would accept his hand that was not a whole hand.

We bought a typewriter, a small, portable affair, and Clevedon's spirits seemed to rise as he found he could easily learn to work it without the use of his injured finger at all.

However, he accepted my advice as to the first letter to Vera, and that evening he asked me to write a short letter to her for him.

I confess to a degree of curiosity as to his attitude toward the girl, and poised pen over paper in expectancy.

I was a little disappointed, for this was the result of the dictated letter.

My dear Vera:—If this letter doesn't sound quite like me, put it down to the fact that I am not writing it, but I am dictating it. I have had an accident to my right hand, rather a serious one. In fact I have lost the end of the forefinger nearly to the first joint. I know this will be a shock to you, but don't take it too hard. The doctor says that when it is entirely healed, the finger will be shorter than the others but not badly disfigured or at all repellent looking. I'm telling you this frankly, so you can think it over and—but you wouldn't throw me over for that, would you? I doubt if I can get an answer to this letter before I start for home. For, owing to my accident I am going home as soon as I can. It is not easy to get passage at this season, everything is crowded, and, too, I am bringing with me a secretary, who is also a librarian, and a valet.

The secretary chap, I know you will like. He has the fierce name of Mottram Oakley, but he is nicer than that. He is writing this for me, so I can't say much about him. The valet is one Pell, an American and a treasure. Now Vera, dear, you know I can't send you a real love letter when I have to dictate it to a person named Mottram Oakley! Can I now? So read between the lines for all the love and affection that is in my heart for you, and I'll tell it to you when I am with you again. I'll try to scribble a left-handed postscript, but I doubt if you can read it.

Always your own, JOHN

The letter left me a little cold, but, I asked myself, what had I expected? Surely a man wasn't going to let himself go in wild love transports, when said transports had to be relayed through the medium of a secretary.

I offered Clevedon a pad and pencil, and he made a brave effort to use his left hand. But he was not at all ambidextrous, and the result was an almost illegible scrawl.

“Oh, well, put it in,” he said, making a wry face as he looked at it. “It may amuse her, and at any rate it will prove to her that I’m really crippled.”

“I don’t think she could doubt that,” I said. “You’d hardly tell her such a thing if it were not true.”

The letter was despatched to Miss Vera Liddell, New Wingate, Massachusetts, and that episode was closed.

Yet I thought a lot about the screed. Not so much for what it did say as for what it didn’t. Why, Clevedon hadn’t said a word about his mother, or sent her any greeting. But then, the two women didn’t live in the same place.

Well, then, he ought to write to his mother.

I suggested this, tentatively, and he turned on me angrily.

“When I want letters written, Oakley, I’ll tell you. You needn’t tell me.”

But this was more than I proposed to stand.

“Hold on, there, Clevedon,” I said, not angry but a little stern, “we’d better settle things as we go along. I suggested that letter in a spirit of friendly helpfulness. And you’ll take my suggestions in that spirit, or we’ll quit right here. I’ll stand any amount of hard work, any amount of chaffing or even just and legitimate faultfinding and reproof. But an unwarranted and unjust speech such as you made then, I won’t stand, and you can take it or leave it.”

Clevedon’s face changed instantly. He smiled in the most winning way, and said, contritely:

“I’m sorry, Oakley. I was pettish, and I beg your pardon. It shan’t happen again, and I’m glad you spoke out just as you did. Really, I’m not ill-tempered, but this old finger is aching like the dickens, and I expect it makes my temper a bit uncertain. Forgive me, Mottram—”

He burst into laughter at the sound of my name.

“It’s a good name,” he said, still laughing, “a fine name, but so terribly dressy! I shall call you Mott, may I?”

“Of course,” I cried, deeply regretting my own outburst. “Call me what you like—John.”

So peace was restored, and I felt that after all it was well that it had all happened as it had, for it cleared the air for the future.

And then the new valet arrived, and Clevedon devoted all time and attention to sizing him up.

Pell was eminently satisfactory at first glance. Good-looking in a quiet way, medium height and weight; correct demeanor and a wise look in his eyes which, I agreed with Clevedon, was far more attractive than the impassive face of the conventional English manservant.

He caught on at once to any special instructions and no others were needed. He was experienced and deft at taking care of rooms, clothes, or people, and Clevedon and I both realized that we had a real treasure.

For he was to be my valet quite as much as John's. It was thoroughly understood that he was to wait on the two of us, equally and without favoritism.

I protested, saying I had always been my own man, but Clevedon merely said that so had he, and, at any rate while we were abroad, the man was to be equally shared.

Whereupon I gave myself up to the luxury of being waited on, and I thoroughly enjoyed it.

There has always been a touch of the Sybarite in my make-up, and though I can look after my toilet things and hang up my clothes with the best of them, I had a happy feeling of relief at having all such things done for me.

We gave ourselves over to a week of pleasure in London.

In our case this didn't mean night clubs and diversions of that sort.

Though a New Englander, Clevedon was no prig, and though a New Yorker, I was not entirely blasé, yet our tastes were similar, and neither of us cared for the tawdry or blaring stage.

We saw some good plays, heard some good music, looked at some good pictures, and then devoted our time to browsing in the rare book shops and motoring through the town and the adjacent country.

"I wish I had a catalogue of my library with me," Clevedon said, one day, as he examined a first edition of Gray's *Elegy*, with a view to buying it.

"Is it catalogued?" I asked, in surprise.

"Not completely. Your occupation isn't gone, Othello. But I have a sort of check list, and my confounded memory is so short, I can't remember what things I have and what I haven't."

"Well, you surely know whether you have a *First Elegy* or not," I said amazed at such talk.

"I know I haven't, and I'll take this one," he told the smiling bookseller and he paid the rather stupendous price, without a murmur.

We had already made arrangements with the bank and with the travel agencies that Clevedon's checks were to be honored if signed by me, and so, I was necessarily aware of the price he paid for everything.

He was not extravagant, except, perhaps in the matter of rare books. And that, he explained to me, was not really extravagance, for he could always resell the volumes, and often at a higher price than he had paid.

So he piled up his books, and then he turned his attention to presents for his mother and for his bride to be.

"I shall take mother old silver," he said. "She loves it, and it looks well in the house. But for Vera I want the newest tricks in trinkets. The latest fads and the most foolish vanities—all the things a girl of today adores."

"Better wait till we get to Paris, then," I advised him.

I advised him whenever I felt like it, for I was bound he shouldn't think I was afraid to do so. If he didn't care to take my advice, he needn't but I proposed to speak what was in my mind, without fear.

And it turned out all right. Usually, he agreed with my ideas, but if not, he just said so, and did as he liked.

Truly I had scotched that snake that had threatened our peace.

After several days of shopping and sight-seeing, John elected to move on to Paris, and I agreed.

The invaluable Pell packed for us, and secured tickets and accommodations and we travelled like conquering heroes.

Paris was charming. We knew nobody there, but it didn't matter. We spent a few frisky evenings, we found a few items to buy among the "Rares and Antiques," and then we began to think of the ocean trip ahead of us.

But one morning, about three days before we were to sail, I was in my bathroom occupied with my morning ablutions.

I am not at all given to perfumery or scented soap or anything of the sort, but I am peculiarly sensitive to odors.

I never forget a fragrance nor am I ever at a loss to recognize one and know exactly what it is.

And so it came about that this morning as I was shaving before my mirror, I became half conscious of a delicate odor, not unpleasant, but inexplicable.

I sniffed again, and then said to myself, "That is peach, and nothing else."

But peach is a strange odor to note in September. There are no peach blossoms on the trees, and only late specimens of the fruit itself.

"Bitter almonds," I mused, as the conviction grew upon me. "Where in the world can it be?"

I sniffed carefully at all my toilet appointments, laid out by Pell in most orderly manner.

At last, I struck it. It was in the tube of tooth paste.

"Has friend Pell been getting a new brand of tooth paste for me without instructions?" I asked myself. "He gets a rake-off, I suppose."

But I hated to have my belongings chosen for me, I preferred my own taste, and especially I wanted my toilet goods unscented.

I smelled again at the tube. It was too strong for a scent, it was—why, it was prussic acid! It was somebody's amiable intention to poison me! Or was this too absurd?

I brushed my teeth without the use of the paste tube, and finishing dressing I joined Clevedon at the breakfast table delightfully set out in our sitting-room.

"Too bad," he said, looking from the window, "to leave Paris, when the city is looking so lovely."

"I'm ready to go," I responded, dropping into my chair opposite him.

"Why, what's the matter? You look perturbed."

"I am perturbed," I said. "Your precious valet has tried to poison me."

"Poison you! Don't be—but, just what do you mean?"

He looked serious enough, and I told him about the tube of tooth paste.

"I don't know whether to believe the thing is poisoned or not," he said, after listening carefully to my account. "First, let's get Pell."

"First, let's have breakfast?" I demurred. "If it's a poisoning case, I know it will take all my appetite away. And if not, there's no hurry."

"Good! Begin on your melon, then."

We had a delightful breakfast, and had lighted our pipes for a smoke, when Pell appeared.

"Ah, here you are," said Clevedon. "Now, Pell, what do you know about Mr. Oakley's tooth paste?"

"Nothing unusual, sir. Isn't it in place?"

"Go and look at it."

Pell did so and returned.

"He has a different tube from the one that he had there yesterday. You like it better, Mr. Oakley?"

"No, I like it worse," I said, "far worse. You see, Pell, it's poisoned."

"Poisoned! Oh, no, sir, it can't be."

"Well, it smells so, and I propose to find out. You let it alone, Pell."

"Yes, sir."

"Now, Clevedon," I said, "here we have a neat little murder mystery. Who wants to poison me, unless Pell does? You don't, do you?"

"No, I don't. I've just acquired you, and I like you very much. But I like Pell, too, and I hate to fire him. But we'll have to, if you're sure he fixed up the stuff."

"Of course, I'm not sure, but I can't think who else would."

"Nor I. But I can believe somebody else did rather than that chap. Why, Mott, unless you know of some reason why he'd have it in for you, there's no motive whatever."

"No motive whatever." I echoed. "And I can't think of any reason for Pell's doing me in. He's rather—er—devoted to me, I've thought."

“Yes, I think so too. Well, if you think it’s a sleuthing case, I’m with you, but to tell the truth, it strikes a little too near home to suit me. I’d rather get out of this place—today.”

“Leave this hotel—today? Why, we’re sailing on Saturday.”

“I know it. But there can be a lot of murdering done between now and Saturday.”

“Then you think it was attempted murder? You know, if I had used that stuff, I’d be as dead as a door nail by now.”

“Long before now. If it’s prussic acid, as you think, you’d have been dead in a few minutes. But maybe it isn’t anything so deadly. Maybe it’s only a mild bitter almond essence.”

“Like they use when they make angel cake?”

“Yes, how did you know that?”

“Oh, I was brought up on angel cake—when we had company.” I smiled at the reminiscence. “But I never heard of that flavoring or vanilla either, being used in a tooth paste.”

“Nor I. Let’s take the tube somewhere and have it examined—thoroughly tested, and then if it is poison, out we go, and if not, we stay here till we sail.”

“All right,” I agreed.

“Leave the tube there, Pell will wrap it up,” Clevedon said, and I went and got my hat and stick and gloves, and returned, ready to go.

I ought to have let our new valet get these things for me, but it was not easy for me to overcome my lifelong habits, and I frequently forgot.

We started off, hilariously gay, in spite of my recent narrow escape from violent death, or so I chose to believe.

“If it is poison,” Clevedon said seriously, as we walked along to the offices of an expert chemist, “then my theory is that it was intended for somebody else, and was put in your bathroom by mistake.”

“If that’s the case, I would rather go to some other hotel, where they give out their poisons to the guests for whom they are intended.”

“You’re a plucky one, Mott,” Clevedon said. “I’m glad you can take it lightly, or at least, seem to. Me, I’m shaking in my shoes for fear it was meant for me. Or, if not, for fear the next one of these poisonous attempts will get me—by mistake.”

“I think we’ll move, anyway. Pell packs up so easily, it will be no trouble to us. And I’ll sleep better to know you’re not being murdered, to say nothing of my own safety. I had all the murder I wanted in Welbury. I’m ready now to go home while I’m safe and sound.”

“Well, we’ll see,” and Clevedon led me into the office he wanted to visit.

The wise-looking and gray-haired old chemist was gravely solicitous about our errand.

He sniffed and tasted, and then, asked us to wait a few minutes.

With the tube, he retired to an inner room, and after a short time, came back, beaming.

“Perfectly all right,” he said. “A flavor of the bitter almond, yes. But a killing dose of prussic acid? No, no! Take your paste, use it freely. It will do you no harm whatever.”

“Well, that makes it more curious than ever,” declared Clevedon, as we walked away.

Chapter 8

Clevedon House

THE FEW DAYS we had left in Paris passed rapidly.

We didn’t bother to change our hotel, as John laughed at the idea of my having been in any danger from the substituted tooth paste.

“But how do you explain the incident?” I asked him. “You’re by way of being a detective; come now, Sherlock, who put that stuff in my bathroom and took away the regular tube I had been using?”

“I don’t know, Mott,” he said, becoming serious. “But there must be some simple explanation. Maybe the chambermaid cleaned up the place, and—”

“Well, what? She wouldn’t be carting round tubes of tooth paste, unless—could it have been an advertising dodge?”

“I think that’s it! I had in mind the maid cleaning a lot of bathrooms, and mixing up some of the toilet articles when straightening up, but your idea is better. I do believe it was a clever advertisement. And, anyhow, since it was harmless stuff, why think about it at all any more? And for heaven’s sake, put poor Pell out of your mind. He thinks you’re made of gold, he likes you a heap better than he does me. So, don’t suspect the poor devil of an attempt on your precious life.”

“No, I won’t,” I promised him, and on the face of it, it was ridiculous to suspect Pell of wrongdoing.

The chap was perfect. Almost too perfect, Clevedon said. Too good to be true. Not only were our things kept in the most immaculate order, but the man was always at hand when wanted and never intrusively present when not desired.

He looked after everything, like an experienced courier, and he attended to our most trifling wishes with scrupulous care.

Clevedon watched him closely, though careful not to let him know it, and declared afterward to me that the young man was sincere and simple in his character and conscientious in his work.

As for Pell, himself, he paid no attention to us outside his definite duties.

He was cheerful, pleasant, but spoke no word that did not refer directly or indirectly to his orders.

In his leisure hours, he went out walking or spent his time reading.

“What does he read?” John asked, one day, in a sudden fit of curiosity.

“He’s a boy after my own heart,” I said, smiling. “He reads the daily paper, and after that, he reads, what do you think? Detective stories!”

“My lord!” he exclaimed, “another detective in our midst! Well, then, Mott, get him to hunt down the fiend who tried to end your blameless existence. It’s too hard a nut for me to crack.”

“Who said I had led a blameless life?” I flung at him. “Do you think I’m a mollicoddle?”

“No, but neither do I think you are a Dick Turpin or a Bluebeard.”

“No, I’m not blugfusty,” I admitted, “but if I had my lot to choose over again, I’d be a—”

“A what? What would you like to be, of all things?”

“A roistering devil,” I returned, “whatever that is.”

“That rather connotes a liking for the fair sex,” he laughed.

“I don’t see why. Not that I object to them on the side, but I’d like to live an adventurous life, desperate dangers, hairbreadth escapes, and all that.”

“In a last-century setting, I hope. The world today is not adapted to picturesque swashbuckling. Now, at Clevedon House, you’ll have to be satisfied with teas and garden parties and week-ends and golf and tennis and dancing. Dost like the picture?”

“Oh, it’s all one can expect, I suppose. And my dreams are only dreams. I’d probably be scared to death if I attempted to hold up a stage or post coach.”

“You probably would. I fancy Pell would make a better fist at it than you would. Let’s ask him.”

The valet was just entering, with some pleasant concoctions in glasses for us, and Clevedon said:

“Pell, how would you like to be a highway robber?”

“It doesn’t appeal to me, sir,” was the quiet reply, with no expression of interest on the passive countenance.

“What would you like to be? Hang it, man, have you no ambitions?”

“I’d like to be a detective, sir,” Pell said, looking at us with earnest eyes.

“Good heavens! I thought so. Well, you’re a chap of set purpose, Pell, I’ve noticed that. If you want to be a detective, you’ll very likely be one. But to be a real good detective you should have been a criminal first.”

“Yes, sir, I have.”

“What! Well, don’t tell us about it. I’d rather not hear of your life of crime. I want to keep you by me until I get home, at any rate, and then if the police want you—are you wanted over there?”

“Oh, no, sir. Not in America.”

“Get out, Pell. And keep your black past to yourself!” Clevedon was laughing as he dismissed the man, and I could see that he didn’t believe the valet’s statements.

“He’s stringing us, Mott,” he said, after Pell had gone, “he wants us to believe he’s a bold, bad man, and probably the worst he ever did was to steal a postage stamp from his mother.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Oh, he isn’t the make-up for a criminal. Nor for a detective, either. He’s ambitious, but inefficient, ineffective and invertebrate, in that line.”

I knew Clevedon’s talent for sizing up people, and I was quite ready to believe that he was right about our valet.

To me, the man was an enigma. But then, many people were that to me, and I didn’t care to solve them, as a rule.

If my tooth paste had really been poisoned, and if I had suspected Pell of the deed, I should have been interested in his criminal career, but as it was, I was satisfied of his innocence and ignorance, so long as Clevedon was.

The more I knew of John Clevedon the better I liked him. He was so well balanced and so wise and sane in his judgments of people and things that I came to depend on his opinions unquestioned.

He was most kind to me, though chaffing me mercilessly now and then, or setting me straight when I was in error regarding some bit of bookish lore.

We visited several French libraries, and bought a few French books, also noting others for which I was to write if we wanted them. Already Clevedon said “we” in speaking of the library affairs.

I was more than glad of the position in which I found myself, and resolved to do all in my power to make the library at Clevedon House all that it ought to be in every way.

Although his injured finger was doing well, it would be a long time before he could use it at all, and I grew more and more his confidential secretary and wrote all his letters for him, both business and friendly ones.

The typewriter irked him, and though he used it occasionally, he preferred to dictate to me.

The day before we sailed, he came in from an errand in high spirits.

“No more glasses!” he cried, throwing his hat in the air like a schoolboy. “I’ve been to the greatest oculist in Paris, and he says after the treatment I’ve had for the last three months, I can discard my present glasses and not replace them! Isn’t it fine? Not that I minded them so much, but I’m glad to be rid of them. They were a most infernal nuisance. Rejoice with me, old man, in my freedom from them!”

I rejoiced, duly, though I had had no idea he detested them as he did.

He wanted to write home to his mother that he had discarded the things, but when I informed him that he would be home himself as soon as a letter could get there, he laughed and gave over.

“That last pair I bought in Canterbury,” he said reminiscently.

“I didn’t know you visited Canterbury,” I said, “it isn’t in your diary.”

“Oh, yes, it is, you overlooked it. Why, it was there that the verger told me the difference between a Kentishman and a Man of Kent.”

“What is the difference?” I asked, interestedly.

“One is born one side of the river, and the other on the other side,” he said.

“What nonsense!”

“No nonsense at all. Anyway, that’s what the verger told me.”

“What river?”

“I don’t know. The Stour, I suppose. That’s the only river in Canterbury. The men of Kent owe their name to something William the Norman said or did or gave or granted. We’ll look it all up when we get home. Oh, we’ll become very scholarly as we pore over our library.”

“But you’ll be getting married.”

“Yes, but I shall bring Vera to live at Clevedon House. That’s the plan.”

“And your mother will like that?”

“Oh, yes, she and Vera are chums. And the house is enormous. Room for everybody. You can have a whole suite to yourself, as many rooms as you want.”

“Fine! But a bedroom and a study will do me. Sunny if possible—”

“Oh, Clevedon House is all sun and light and air and flowers and gardens and has everything a real country home ought to have. I go down to New York for a few months in the winter, but all plans will now depend on my wife’s wishes.”

Our trip back to America was without incident of any note.

Both of us good sailors, Clevedon and I enjoyed the quiet, peaceful days spent in deck chairs, reading, chatting desultorily, or doing nothing at all.

I made the acquaintance of a few people, danced a little with some nice girls, and played a little bridge.

Clevedon played cards with the men a few times, but for the most part eschewed society.

Pell, when off duty, hung over the rail.

“For heaven’s sake, Pell,” Clevedon would say to him, “why do you hang over that rail so continually? Some day, you’ll fall in.”

“No, sir,” Pell looked at him gravely. “I won’t fall in. I think better that way, looking down into the water.”

“Oh, you do. And what do you think about?”

“About everything that I know.”

“Clear out,” Clevedon cried, as was his habit when Pell bored him. Never was he cross or unpleasant of speech, and Pell seemed to understand that his dismissal was good-natured and chaffing.

We docked early in the morning on the last Friday in September.

A glorious day, and we watched the skyscrapers of Manhattan with the due reverence expected from returning tourists.

Then we warped into the dock, and the ubiquitous Pell looked after our luggage and piloted us through the Customs.

There was no trouble there, for we brought in very little dutiable stuff, our old books being free by reason of their age.

A smart-looking chauffeur sought us out, and announced that he was Scott, the head chauffeur at Clevedon House, and that the car was waiting.

“You’re new, I take it,” John Clevedon said pleasantly.

“Yes, sir. Been driving for Mrs. Clevedon about six weeks, sir.”

“All right, Scott, this is Pell, my valet. Now you two, get us home as soon as you can.”

Clevedon had a nice way with servants; and in a short time, we were all set, and threading our way through the city traffic.

Then on, up through Westchester, and through the lovely country that leads to the Berkshire regions.

We were both quiet, busy with our thoughts at returning again to our native land. Neither of us was sentimental, but a man can’t come back to the Stars and Stripes without a thrill of some sort.

“We won’t stop anywhere for luncheon,” Clevedon decreed. “We’ll be home by two o’clock, if you can wait that long for food.”

I agreed readily, and very soon after the hour we drove in at the great front entrance to Clevedon House.

I shall never forget that first impression made by the stunning landscape spread out before me.

The house, as Clevedon had said, on a level with the surrounding country, was in a great park of trees and gardens that in no way interfered with a wide sweep of vision that included near-by fields and valleys and distant hills.

The house was of the purest Colonial type and its white paint and green blinds were glistening in the afternoon sun.

A small terrace in front of the beautiful old-fashioned doorway, was surrounded by a low white fence, and the few steps up to the door were flanked by box trees in white urns.

Clevedon sprang out and ran smilingly up the steps. In the open doorway appeared a most charming lady.

Neither old nor young, she seemed, but of a middle-aged loveliness that was enhanced rather than marred by her excessive fragility.

Her face was pale, her hair, slightly grayed, was carefully arranged, her dress was modish, even smart; a sports suit of Nile-green silken stuff, short enough to display slender ankles with sheer silk stockings and high-heeled, patent leather slippers.

Clevedon gathered her in his arms, and I heard his affectionate “Mother, dear!” as he embraced her.

Then he introduced me, and directed Pell to bring the bags.

“My same old rooms, I suppose?” he said, and as she nodded, he was off, up the stairs, calling me, over his shoulder, to follow.

“We’ll be down in ten minutes, mother,” he shouted down to her. “Good of you to wait luncheon for us.”

Pell, having been directed, showed me to my rooms, and I was delighted with their size and charm.

But egged on by the efficient valet, I found I had no time then to look about me, so I hastened to freshen myself up and go downstairs again.

Mrs. Clevedon awaited us in the great hall, that served as lounge and living-room as well, though I could see other rooms opening on all sides.

A stately butler, one of the impassive type that John derided, brought in cocktails, and Mrs. Clevedon accepted one with us.

Then to the dining-room, and we sat down to a luncheon that was entirely worthy of its beautiful setting.

The old sideboards and tables and cabinets were all of mahogany of the best and most worthy periods, and the table was laid with corresponding treasures of old silver, glass, and china.

“The old Clevedon estate is a celebrated one, I’m sure,” I said to my hostess.

She smiled and replied, “I wish I could leave you in your pleasant misconception, but as a matter of fact, this isn’t a Clevedon estate at all, in the sense of heredity. My husband bought it, soon after we were married, and it was furnished completely, as you see it now.”

“You were most fortunate to secure such a gem.” I said, glad to note that she showed no embarrassment, and that I had not made an awkward mistake in saying what I did. “And having had it all your married life makes it a Clevedon estate, after all. We don’t rate these things quite as our English cousins do.”

“No,” she said, and though her manner was gracious and serene as ever, she seemed to be preoccupied.

Perhaps it was a sort of reaction at her son’s return, for she gazed at him with a wistful expression that I couldn’t quite interpret.

John didn't seem to notice it, and he smiled at his mother whenever he spoke to her, with a look of admiration and affection that any mother might be proud to receive.

"You must tell me all about your trip, dear," she said to him, "but not today. Not now."

"No, mother, we'll let it wait a few days. I kept a brief diary, just for your benefit, and any places you're interested in, I can describe to you."

"We'll get Vera over and make an evening of it," she suggested. "You are a lot changed, John, dear."

"It's leaving off my glasses," he said, joyously happy at the thought. "Oh, mother, I'm so glad to be rid of the things! And then, on account of my accident, I have grown a beard, but if you or Vera don't like it, I'll have it off again."

"I don't dislike it," his mother said, eying him critically. "I think it really is becoming to you, only, it makes you look different, you know."

"Yes, I know it does. How is Vera?"

"Fine—and crazy to see you. Shall you go over there today?"

"Yes, I think so. I'll run over this afternoon. Are the cars the same? Do you know it seems as if I'd been away for years!"

"It seems that way to me, too, son. Yes, the cars are about the same. I had to get a new one for the servants' use. And all the servants are new, except one or two of the housemaids. I had to replace them. They grew too dictatorial without a man here. I could train new ones to my service better. Now, you're home, you can take up the reins of government."

"I will, to the extent of being advisory board, or last court of appeal. But you'd better continue as Queen Regent—at least, until Vera comes on the scene. I hope my man, Pell, will get along with the staff. He's a superior sort, but very adaptable. If he doesn't fit in, I'll fire him. You see, I have to have somebody on account of my—er—infirmity."

A spasm of pain crossed Mrs. Clevedon's face, and she closed her eyes for a moment.

"Forgive me, Mother," John said, contritely. "I won't mention it again. I know how such things distress you."

"It's all right, dear. I am foolishly sensitive. And, John—Vera is, too. Be careful how you tell her about it."

"I will." He spoke a little shortly. "But, my heavens, Mother, I couldn't help it! Anyone would think it was my fault—"

"No, no, my boy. Don't talk like that. But you know women; some women are upset by a physical deformity of any sort."

"Then let them say so. I consider myself lucky to get off without an amputated hand or arm. The tip of a finger isn't a circumstance to what it might have been! If Vera doesn't want me, thus deformed, she can say so, and I'll know what to do."

I had never seen Clevedon so stirred up, and I didn't blame him much.

His mother was a fragile, fussy personality, and she was excusable, but I did hope that his fiancée would be made of sterner stuff.

I did my part toward changing the subject, and by telling some funny stories of my adventures before I met John, I succeeded in diverting the lady's mind.

After luncheon, Mrs. Clevedon disappeared to her own apartments, where, I learned, she commanded the services of a maid and also a nurse.

These details I gathered from Pell, who had no business to tell me, but did tell me.

I was sitting in my own sitting-room, fairly lapping up the comfort and joy of my most desirable quarters, when John came in.

"I'm awfully upset, Mott, at the way Mother feels about my injured finger. She's such an exquisite little piece of property, and so supersensitive to a blemish of any sort, that it makes me downright uncomfortable."

"I know, John, I see how it is. But it's a thing that can't be helped or remedied in any way, so you'll have to make the best of it. After a time she'll get used to it, and forget all about it. It's the sudden sight of it, and your homecoming and all, that has shaken her nerves. She's not a well woman, that's plain; though her indisposition may be largely a matter of nerves or temperament, it is there, all the same. I think, if you coax her up and jolly her along she will soon get over her feelings about your finger. I'm surprised at it, anyway, for she looks so sensible and sane."

"She is. I never knew her to act like this before. But I think, as you do, the excitement of seeing me again, and her surprise at my changed appearance upset her a bit, and she'll get over it. I shan't hurry her, but go along slowly and let her get used to me as I am now."

"That's best, I'm sure. How is Pell surviving the meeting with your other servants?"

"Oh, Pell has his own way of doing things, you know. He's taking a high hand. He chums with the butler, is deeply respectful to the housekeeper, and jollies the maids. The rest he lets severely alone."

"Bully for him. How did you learn all this?"

"He told me himself; and Griffin, the butler, corroborated it. Now, Oakley, I'm going over to see Vera. I shall drive myself and if she wants me to, I'll probably stay over there to dinner. But if she's fussy,—as Mother hinted she might be, I'll come home as soon as possible." Clevedon's lips set themselves in a straight line, which, I had learned, meant that he was very deeply in earnest.

I was sorry for him, but I knew it was a case in which I could be of no help. A matter he had to swing for himself.

So I only said, "Good luck, old man. I hope for the best; it's none too good for you."

He smiled and started away, turning back to say: "Will you dine with Mother, if I'm not here?"

"If she wishes it," I said. "Once for all, John, in such matters as that, I don't care at all. I'm perfectly content to dine by myself, or have a tray brought up to this delightful sitting-room. Yet, if Mrs. Clevedon cares for my company, I shall be glad to do my best to entertain and interest her at dinner."

He gave me a grave look, and said, "You're a good sort, Oakley," and then he went away.

As that was his highest word of praise, I rather wondered what I'd done to deserve it. Surely a willingness to dine with his mother was not a great concession.

I wandered about my domain, putting things away and arranging some books. The bedroom and dressing-room and bath were both tasteful and luxurious, but even more I revelled in the sitting-room.

It was a large room, with windows on two sides, overlooking the gardens and giving a wonderful view of the distant hills. It was most comfortably furnished; and one chintz-covered couch in particular looking exceedingly tempting, I dropped down upon it and fell into a light sleep.

Chapter 9

The Crime In The Rose Arbor

I WAS AWAKENED by a light touch on my shoulder and opened my eyes to see Pell looking at me.

His face, always alert and vivid of expression, was now contorted with excitement and he stared at me with a gaze that was almost wild.

"Wake up, Mr. Oakley," he whispered, "wake up, quickly!"

I was wide awake on the instant, and sat up, and then stood up, to hear what it was all about.

"There's been a murder in the garden, sir," he said, speaking thickly in the stress of his emotion. "One of the maids has been found dead in the arbor at the end of the rose walk."

Now I didn't want any more murders. I had had quite enough of that sort of thing in Welbury, and I said, with some annoyance:

"Well, Pell, it isn't in my contract to look after my employer's murders."

"Don't talk like that, sir," he begged, and I had the grace to feel ashamed of myself. "You see, Mr. Clevedon is out and Griffin and I hated to tell Mrs. Clevedon about it, for it's sure to upset her. So we thought we'd tell you first and see what is to be done."

"Oh, well, I suppose I must take it on. No, don't tell Mrs. Clevedon at once. Who found the girl?"

"One of the under gardeners, sir."

"Some love affair, I suppose. Well, Pell, I think I'll go out to the rose arbor, and then we'll see what to do next."

"How about taking the nurse along, sir?"

"You said the girl is dead."

“No doubt about that.”

“Then the nurse can be of no help, and she’d better stay by Mrs. Clevedon.”

We went downstairs, and through the great hall, and out at the rear door.

The hall went straight through the house, and a beautiful vista met my eyes as I stepped out onto the back terrace.

I groaned to think that this peaceful, pastoral scene must soon be invaded by policemen and detectives and perhaps crowds of curiosity mongers.

Pell led me down the long rose walk, where some autumn varieties were still in flower, and we paused at the arbor at the end of the path.

It was quite a large arbor, with climbing vines all over the outside, and inside a few bits of furniture.

An iron table stood in the centre, and a few iron chairs about.

Across one end was slung a hammock, and in this lay the body of the dead girl.

A very good-looking girl she was, apparently a Swede, to judge from her fair hair and blue eyes and the general cast of her features.

“Who is she?” I asked, and Griffin, the butler, answered me.

“She is Hilda, Mrs. Clevedon’s personal maid. It is her afternoon out, that’s why she is dressed up.”

The poor girl evidently was “dressed up,” for her pink frock, lace trimmed, looked quite new, her yellow hair was tightly frizzed and her hat, on the floor beside her, was a rose-decked affair with big ribbon bows.

Her staring eyes were wide open, yet her face wore a smile, as if she had been killed in a moment of happiness.

I felt sick at heart. First, for this poor girl cut down in her youthful prime, and next, that this unfortunate occurrence should take place just at John Clevedon’s homecoming.

For though an affair of the servants’ realm, it meant more or less unpleasant publicity for the family.

“Who do you suppose did it, Griffin?” I asked of the butler, who though still calm and impassive of demeanor was quite evidently agitated in his mind.

“Her beau, of course. She was always quarrelling with him. He has a fierce temper and she tormented him beyond all sense. I’m not saying she deserved what she got, but I do say that she brought it on herself.”

“Mrs. Clevedon will be fearfully shocked,” I said, “we must get hold of her nurse and let her break the news.”

“Mrs. Clevedon won’t be looking for Hilda till sundown,” Griffin said, thoughtfully. “Maybe there’s no call to tell her just at once. Must we send for Mr. Clevedon, sir?”

I considered. It was too bad to summon John back from his call on Vera, if indeed, he had yet reached there. But, as head of the house, he must be notified.

Pell volunteered some advice.

“Mr. Oakley,” he said, “why don’t you call the family doctor and then let him call the police. And let him call Mr. Clevedon if he wants to.”

This was sound judgment and I wondered I hadn’t thought of it myself.

“You’re right, Pell. I’m rather upset by this thing, and I don’t quite like to take the helm. Your ideas are excellent. Griffin, will you call the doctor?”

“But Hilda is dead, sir.”

“I know it, but it is the proper thing to do. There must be examinations and investigations, you know, and the first step is always to call a doctor.”

“Very good, sir,” Griffin agreed. “I’ll attend to it at once.”

He went toward the house, and I turned to Pell with a look of distress.

“Isn’t it a pity this thing must happen just now?” I said. “Mr. Clevedon would have had a happy homecoming and a welcome from the whole community. And now this tragedy will cloud the whole occasion.”

“Maybe not, sir. Maybe it will be hushed up quickly. As they are so sure of the murderer, all they have to do is to catch him.”

“We might cast about for clues, Pell,” I said, my detective instinct rising in my breast.

“Yes, sir,” he returned, whereupon we both hunted the arbor through.

But there was nothing indicative of any other human being beside the quiet figure in the hammock.

I scanned the ground, beneath her, but there were no footprints visible. I even scraped up a little of the dirt from the floor, and put it away in an envelope in my pocket, for one never can tell what the dust will reveal.

Pell watched me with a respectful if slightly amused glance.

He admitted, frankly, that he saw no clue or sign of a clue.

“She was shot through the heart,” he said, succinctly, “and the murderer went away, taking his gun with him.”

“Yes,” I agreed, “there’s no doubt about that. Now, you stay here, Pell, and don’t let anybody touch anything. I’ll go back to the house, for someone must receive the doctor properly.”

I went to my room, brushed my hair, a bit tousled after my nap, and then for some reason it was borne in upon me that I must telephone to Clevedon.

I felt I was taking too much on myself to go ahead as I was doing. Neither Pell nor I had any right to usurp authority to that extent, nor had I a right to tell Mrs. Clevedon of the tragedy. That was her son's prerogative.

Not wanting to use the telephone in the hall, I strolled into Clevedon's own room where I knew there was an extension.

His sitting-room showed a telephone on a small stand and I went toward it slowly, still a little uncertain what to do.

A bit of string on the floor caught my eye, and I picked it up mechanically, as I would remove any bit of disorder.

But the string seemed peculiar. It was white cord, fine but strong, and it was twisted into a perfect spiral. Perhaps two inches long, it was as if it had been wound round a lead pencil and still retained the shape.

I was about to throw it in the waste basket, when the door bell rang.

Feeling sure it was the doctor, I decided to let my telephoning to Clevedon wait until after an interview with the medical man, and be guided by his advice.

I ran downstairs, and met Griffin coming to call me.

I joined the doctor in a small reception room, and introduced myself.

"My name is Oakley," I told him, "and I am the confidential secretary of Mr. Clevedon. We came home from Europe together, and landed only this morning.

He has gone over to New Wingate, to see his fiancée, Miss Liddell. I have no real reason to assume any authority in his place, but I want to do anything I can that may be of help to the family or household."

Doctor Golden looked at me and nodded approval of my attitude.

He was a stout, middle-aged man, good-looking and with an air of kindness.

"Yes, yes," he said, "get Clevedon home at once. He has all his life to visit Vera Liddell, but this is a serious matter. Here is the Liddell number," he scribbled on a paper, "you attend to that, and I'll have a look at the poor girl, then I'll tell Mrs. Clevedon about it. I dread the effect on her."

I called up the Liddell house and found that John had just arrived there.

Getting him to the telephone, I advised him that he must return home as soon as possible. I told him a serious accident had occurred, but that it had nothing to do with his mother or her nurse or myself. I felt those were the ones he would think of first.

I told him it was not possible to be more explicit over the telephone, but I must urge that he come home as soon as he could manage it.

He was not at all pleased and insisted on knowing what had happened.

I had to say it was really serious and really something not to be talked of over the wire, before he consented to come.

Then I went out to the garden and down the path to the rose arbor.

Doctor Golden met me with his brief report.

"There was no struggle," he said. "Apparently the girl lay in the hammock with no thought of harm from the person who was with her. That somebody must have been with her is proved by the absence of any weapon. Otherwise, I might think of it as a suicide."

"The weapon may have been removed by some outsider, after her death." I told him. "It might have been suicide."

"You're a very astute young man," he said, looking at me with more interest. "How did you come to think of that?"

"It seems to me obvious," I returned. "Shall you call the police?"

"Yes, and at once. Then, Mr. Oakley, I'll leave you to receive them, if I'm not ready to leave Mrs. Clevedon. I don't know how she'll take this. You see, Hilda was her personal maid, and had been with her for some time. Mrs. Clevedon really depended on Hilda more than on the nurse, Miss Plum. Martha Plum is a fine nurse, but she is morose and depressing as a companion. Hilda was bright and sunny and Mrs. Clevedon really loved her. If it was that skunk, Larson, who shot her, I hope he gets what he deserves. A nice, kindly, good girl, snuffed out like that! It's outrageous!"

Doctor Golden went off for his session with Mrs. Clevedon, and I didn't envy him his errand. Though I knew the lady so slightly, I had already realized that she was a little difficult of temperament, and yet, I supposed her regular physician must know how to handle her best.

I scrutinized anew the pathetic figure in the hammock. Save for those staring eyes, she might have been asleep, so composed was her position and appearance.

Her clothing was tawdry in the extreme. New, apparently, but cheap and of bright, crude coloring. Her blonde hair was bobbed, and so crinkly were its curls that they stood out after the manner of a Circassian beauty. I picked up her hat to lay it on the table, when Pell said, quietly, "Better not touch anything, sir."

"Why, Pell," I said, "don't you know that's a fallacy, that nothing must be touched until the coroner comes?"

"Yes, sir, I know that. But it's pretty firmly grounded in most people's minds, and anyway, if no good can be done by moving things about, why touch them?"

This was sound reasoning, and I laid the hat carefully back where I had found it.

And then the sheriff came.

Bustling, of course, pompous, of course. He was everything a sheriff should be.

With him was the county detective, a shrewd-looking chap named Potter, and also Coroner Timmons.

These two, with Sheriff Marsh, went busily to work.

To be sure their work consisted mainly in asking questions of one another, and in expressing pity for the pretty Hilda and vengeance against her villainous lover.

They seemed to know all about her and her affairs, and opined that Larson was tired of her flirtatious ways and had given way to a fit of bad temper.

I asked that my deposition might be taken down and that I might be allowed to return to the house.

The sheriff looked at me suspiciously as if my request had been a hint that I had some guilty knowledge of the matter, and then both Pell and myself were put through a grilling fire of questions.

It didn't seem to matter that we had been in the house but a few hours, and that we scarcely knew the servants by name as yet, the feeling clung to those three inquisitors that we knew more than we were willing to tell, and the knowledge must be wormed out of us.

Were it not that the lover of the dead girl was so positively believed by all to be the criminal, I think either Pell or myself might have been suspected of the crime.

At last we were excused, but told not to leave the premises, and we went back to the house, to wait for the return of Clevedon.

I wondered how the doctor was making out with his nervous patient, but I had no right nor reason to make inquiries, so I ensconced myself in a pleasant corner of a side verandah, and awaited developments.

I thought things over, and wondered if I now had a case on which I could exercise my detective talents—if any. I feared the matter was too simple, too easily solved, to intrigue John Clevedon with its problem, and I felt sure, too, that the sorrow and regret at the tragedy in his home would offset any thought of sleuthing at the thing.

Moreover, he would have his mother to consider. While she might take it calmly, I feared it would throw her into a nervous state which might result in real illness.

But I concluded, it was not my business at all, unless I was asked to assist, and from the cocksureness of the police people who were attending to it, I didn't think my help would be required.

Though common humanity made me feel sorry for the poor girl, yet I secretly hoped that the whole affair would be hurried through with and made little of. And surely that would be John Clevedon's wish. He must hate the idea of inquests and all that in his home, just as he had returned to his life here.

A figure appeared before me, and I knew before a word was spoken that it was that of Mrs. Clevedon's nurse.

Martha Plum was one of the most unprepossessing women I have ever seen.

Not ill-favored, she had rather a fine face, and keen, even shrewd gray eyes, but her whole expression was hard and ungentle.

I felt sure that she would disagree with any statement I might make or any opinion I might hold. She looked like one born to contradict, and the straight line of her thin, pale lips denoted bad temper, and not complete control over it.

But these were the most fleeting of thoughts roused by my first sight of her.

Her white linen outfit was immaculate, of course, but its stiff, shining surface seemed to accentuate rather than soften her defiant effect.

“Mr. Oakley?” she said, pausing before me as I rose.

“Yes,” I said. “How is Mrs. Clevedon?”

“Very bad,” she answered, biting her words off short. “The doctor is with her now. She flies into hysterics and then drops, exhausted, into a prostration, only to rouse herself and grow excited all over again.”

“Of course, she will miss the maid to whom she is so accustomed.”

“Oh, yes, but she can get another maid. Hilda was by no means perfect. I am sorry for the poor thing’s sad end, but she can be easily replaced so far as Mrs. Clevedon’s comfort is concerned. Indeed, she doesn’t really need a maid, I can look after her.”

“Aha,” I thought to myself, “jealous of the pretty Hilda!”

But I said aloud, “I’m sure it would be too much for you to do everything for such an exacting patient as I feel sure Mrs. Clevedon is.”

“She is exacting, but she will be better without that foolish Hilda about.”

“Why do you call her foolish?”

“She is—she was. She thought only of dress and make-up. She spent all her spare time in the beauty parlors.”

“Swedes, as a rule, have lovely complexions of their own.”

“Oh, her skin was good enough. But she was everlastingly trying all sorts of new—”

“Miss Plum,” I said, straightforwardly, “I don’t believe you came down here to talk about Hilda’s complexion. Now, what did you come for? Tell me, and then go back to Mrs. Clevedon. Do you know anything about the death of that girl?”

“Yes. Listen. Our windows—Mrs. Clevedon’s suite—look out on the rose walk. I was passing the window today, and I saw a man go away from the arbor and out at the side gate. It was Larson. Now, I don’t want to get mixed up in this thing, for it might mean my having to neglect Mrs. Clevedon if I had to be a witness, or that—and I want you to say that you saw the man.”

“That I saw him!”

“Yes. Your word will carry weight, and it is perfectly true, I did see him and you can just as well say that you did.”

“Miss Plum, have you no idea of the meaning of evidence or testimony? Don’t you know it must be the truth?”

“You’re not on oath at a coroner’s inquest—”

“An oath isn’t necessary to make a man tell the truth. But I am willing to believe you are so upset with this affair that you scarcely know what you are saying. And I don’t wonder. Now, you forget what you asked me to do, and I’ll forget it also. But don’t ask anybody else to lie for you. He might do it, and then you would find yourself in very deep waters.”

“Oh, you take it too seriously. I might have known you would refuse—”

“Yes, you might have known it!” I exclaimed. “I never heard of anything so utterly awful. Now, you take my advice, Miss Plum—”

“I never take advice,” she interrupted, her gray eyes turning darker with passion. “I am sorry I presumed on your kindness and tolerance. But you may yet regret your refusal to help me. People don’t often refuse to help Martha Plum!”

With these somewhat cryptic words she walked rapidly away. I was tempted to laugh at the whole episode, yet the nurse’s attitude had been in no way melodramatic. She was earnest, insistent, even angry, but it was all sincere. Whatever prompted her to try to make me bend to her will was some very real emotion or purpose.

And, as I thought it over, I could see her point of view. She saw the man with Hilda, she recognized him, and she wanted it put on record without implicating herself in the case at all. And, I had no doubt, her reasons for wanting to keep out of it, were as she had said, because she was afraid she might be taken away from Mrs. Clevedon’s side just when she was needed most. Now that Hilda was gone there would be necessity for Miss Plum’s continual attention, at least, until another maid could be engaged.—

So I forgave the strange whim that prompted her request, and resolved that if the wretched Larson were not brought to book, I would prevail on Miss Martha Plum to tell what she knew.

Doctor Golden came down soon after and paused to talk to me.

“Mrs. Clevedon will get along all right,” he said, “after she recovers from the shock. She is in a nervous state, and she is worse the past few weeks. I daresay she knew something about Hilda, perhaps to the girl’s discredit—but anyway, she was not so greatly surprised as I expected. She is alive to the horror of it all, she dreads the publicity and unpleasantness that must result from the affair, and more than all, she laments the loss of her very useful maid. But after a few weeks, if she gets a satisfactory maid, and the matter is hushed up, she will be all right again.”

“I care more for John Clevedon’s peace of mind than for his mother’s,” I said, musingly. “It isn’t pleasant to have a murder committed in one’s house, just as one is about to bring home a bride.”

“No, it is not,” the doctor concurred. “But both John and Vera are sensible people and I think, once the immediate excitement is over, they will forget it and become absorbed in their own affairs.”

“What a strange person Nurse Plum is,” I said, for I already felt on confidential terms with this man.

“Yes, perhaps she is. But she’s a marvellous nurse—capable, dependable, and most efficient. Do you know her?”

“Oh, no. She paused to speak to me a minute just now, that’s all.”

“Paused to speak to you! What about?”

I deeply regretted my reference to the episode, and strove to turn it off.

“Oh, I suppose she thought we were drawn together by the tragedy. Members of the same household would feel that way—”

“But what did she talk about?”

“Naturally, about the death of Hilda. I said Mrs. Clevedon would miss her maid, but Miss Plum seemed to think she could fill both positions herself.”

“Yes, that’s her failing. She wants to be the whole show, always, and she was jealous of Hilda, we all knew that.”

“Why?”

“Because Hilda was young and pretty and a favorite with everybody. Miss Plum is a soured old maid and has nothing in her life but her profession, of which she is a shining ornament. And, too, she was envious of Mrs. Clevedon’s affection for Hilda. Always Mrs. Clevedon would prefer Hilda’s taste or opinion in matters of dress or such things, and Miss Plum resented it. I’ve known them all so long, I understand all these things.”

“I wish Clevedon would come home while you’re here, doctor,” I said. “I hate to tell him of the tragedy at his doorstep.”

“I’ll wait for him, if he isn’t too late. But he’ll accept it calmly, as he does everything. That’s a bad finger of his, by the way.”

“What! No danger now, is there?”

“I hope not, but you never can tell. Infections are insidious things.”

Chapter 10

Poor Hilda

DOCTOR GOLDEN COULDN’T wait for Clevedon’s arrival. His other duties called him, and he went away a short time before John came home.

“What’s the trouble, Mott?” he asked as I met him on the front porch.

He looked in good spirits, and I judged that Vera had not been too much upset over his maimed finger.

“Real trouble, John,” I said. And knowing that he preferred outspokenness, I told the plain truth.

“Your mother’s maid, Hilda, has been shot—killed.”

“Hilda? Is that the name of mother’s maid? And she has been killed? What an awful thing.”

The words were not perfunctory, but I could see he had not yet quite disengaged his mind from memories of the afternoon spent with Vera.

He looked and acted deeply concerned, but there was a subconscious effect of elation that I knew was due to the visit he had just made.

I felt I must jar him out of this attitude and make him realize the situation.

“Yes,” I said, “she was your mother’s maid, and Mrs. Clevedon was devoted to her.”

“Yes, yes. Of course. Poor Mother, I must go to her at once.”

“Very well, but don’t stay long away. The police are here, and they want to see you.”

“The devil they do! I say, Mott, is it a real, regular murder case?”

“Of course it is. And a fine chance to do some of your clever detective work.”

He shuddered.

“I don’t want any detective work. And, of course, I don’t know anything about the girl. She wasn’t here when I went to Europe. But, perhaps I’d better see the police people before I go up to see Mother. Where are they?”

Pell materialized, as he always did when needed, and said the sheriff was waiting in the reception room.

So we went there, and Marsh rose to greet us.

Clevedon was courteous but a little distant in his manner. I saw at once this was because the sheriff was inclined to be chatty and a little familiar.

“Now, now, Mr. Clevedon, this is too bad,” Marsh said, volubly; “think of that girl going and getting herself murdered the very day you come home after your nice tour.”

“Who is the girl, Mr. Marsh? What is her name?”

“Hilda—Hilda Jansen. She was here when you went away, Griffin says.”

“Oh, was she? I don’t remember her. But that doesn’t matter, of course my responsibility is the same. As head of the house, I am ready to do whatever is right. But you must advise me, Mr. Sheriff. Will there be an inquest? Do you suspect anybody of the crime? Where is the poor girl?”

“The coroner made his examinations, sir, and then ordered the body to be taken to her room.”

“To the girl’s room? Very well. Now, must the inquest be held here?”

“Yes, I suppose so. You don’t object?”

“Oh, no, do whatever is right and proper. But, I say, Marsh, get it all over as soon as you can, won’t you? I don’t want to seem heartless, and I’m terribly sorry for the sad death of the girl, but I—well, I want to have some company here, a house party, perhaps, to announce my wedding day. And you can imagine how disconcerting this unfortunate occurrence is.”

“Yes, sir, I see it, as you say. But law is law, and we must go through the formalities for a servant just the same as we would for a member of your family.”

“Oh, certainly. And, too, as my mother was fond of this girl, she will be greatly upset over it all. Now, who killed her?”

“We think it was a man, Larson, his name is, who was her sweetheart.”

“Why would her sweetheart kill her?”

“That we don’t know, but probably because she jilted him or made him angry in some way. Those things must be found out at the inquest.”

“I see. Well, go ahead in your own way. Do you want to get the household together and question them? The servants, I mean.”

“We’ll attend to all that, Mr. Clevedon. I shall have to ask for the run of the house. We must hunt for clues, you know, although there’s small chance of finding any.”

“Why not? The girl lived here, and if she was my mother’s maid, she was pretty much all over the house, I suppose. Why can’t you find clues?”

“I only thought that though she was in the house, yet the circumstances of her death point to some outside agency. We don’t think any of the house servants killed her.”

“No, probably not. But Griffin and the under servants will know about that. Griffin seems a smart chap. He wasn’t here when I went away,—most of them weren’t. My mother made many changes in the service.”

“Yes, sir. Well, as you only arrived this afternoon, there’s no chance of your knowing anything about the girl’s love affairs. But Mrs. Clevedon may know a great deal. May we see her now?”

“Oh, must you? You’ve no idea how ill she is. Could you talk to her nurse, or—could you tell me what you want to ask her, and let me do the questioning?”

“I’m afraid not, sir. But I’ll see her alone, or with her nurse, and I’ll make the interview as short and unexciting as possible. And I’ll be very gentle and try not to disturb her too much. And if she grows nervous or hysterical, I’ll give it up until tomorrow.”

“All right, Marsh, I’m sure you’re doing the best you can for us. I’ll go up first and see how she is, shall I?” The sheriff nodded and Clevedon went off upstairs. He was gone some time, but came back with the word that Marsh might have a short interview.

“I told her about Hilda’s death as gently as I could,” John said; “naturally she was very much shocked, and almost fainted away. But Miss Plum revived her, and then I told her she must try to see you now, as it would be no easier for her tomorrow. She agreed to that, and she will receive you at once. But, do be as expeditious as you can, and don’t harrow up her feelings any more than is absolutely necessary. Do you mind if I go along?”

“Not a bit. And your secretary, too, if he likes. You see, Mrs. Clevedon’s testimony may be important, and I’d like witnesses.”

So we went up to Mrs. Clevedon's apartments.

We were received in a beautiful little sitting-room, done up in yellow and white. The walls were hung with yellow brocaded silk, and the furniture was upholstered in yellow satin.

The yellow window curtains were of thinnest silk, which swayed in and out at the impulse of the summer breeze, and here and there were big bowls of yellow roses. The room was like a golden nest, and Sheriff Marsh looked a little awed at the idea of invading this exquisitely feminine spot.

Mrs. Clevedon received him graciously, and if she was nervous or upset, she did not show it.

"You want to ask me about my maid, Hilda," she helped him out, as the sheriff hesitated. "I will answer your questions, if I can."

"Yes, ma'am. How long had Hilda been with you?"

"About three months. She came just before my son left for Europe."

"Are you sure, Mother?" asked John. "I don't remember seeing her."

"Perhaps you didn't see her. You've little occasion to see my maids. But, yes, that was when she came to me."

"She was satisfactory? You liked her?" Marsh inquired.

"Very much indeed," Mrs. Clevedon assured him. "She was the best maid I ever had. Capable, willing, and very clever at her duties."

"Yes, ma'am. Now, what do you know of her love affairs?"

"Quite a lot," Mrs. Clevedon gave a sad little smile. "She was inclined to tell me of her flirtations, and she was a belle among her set. Indeed, so many wooers she had, that it is not surprising that tragedy resulted. For she was a wilful little piece and led her admirers a dance!"

"But you never thought of any such result as this thing that has happened?"

"Oh, no, indeed. I only mean that I can see how it came about if Hilda drove some man to desperation, which must be just what she did do. Oh, the poor misguided child!"

Mrs. Clevedon began to grow emotional, and Marsh hurried along with his more important queries.

"Was there anyone in your household, any servant, who might have been enough in love with Hilda to take this revenge out of jealousy?"

"Oh, I don't think so. Of course, I don't know. There are young men in my service who may have been her adorers. The second man, Bates, is susceptible, I should say, and as to the outside servants, the under gardeners and chauffeurs—I've no idea. When I say Hilda told me of her affairs, she spoke only in a general way, not using names, and I rather assumed that the men she had to do with were outside my household. But I do not know. I think I have told you all I know about the matter. I am very tired—if I might rest now—"

“Yes, certainly—to be sure. Just one more word. Have you any idea what Hilda’s plans for this afternoon were?”

“No, I haven’t. It is her afternoon out, she always has Fridays, but as my son was expected home, I didn’t talk with Hilda at all about her own affairs. She attended to me properly, and then went off at twelve o’clock, as is her custom. Further than that I know nothing about her movements, whatever.”

“I see. She was very much dressed up. By that, I mean she had on what seemed to be new clothes, and the housekeeper told me the girl was attired more elaborately than usual.”

“As to that, I know nothing,” Mrs. Clevedon averred. “I have never seen Hilda except in her uniforms, and I’ve no idea how she dresses when off duty.”

“She had on clothes fit for a garden party,” I put in, thinking aloud, rather than giving evidence. “Lace-trimmed frock, beflowered hat and her hair frizzed like a ducky’s wool.”

“Ducky!” exclaimed Mrs. Clevedon, “Hilda is a Swede. Her hair is like pale gold.”

“I know it,” I said; “but the crinkle of it is as tight as a ducky’s wool.”

“Are you sure the dead girl is Hilda?” Mrs. Clevedon cried excitedly. “For when she left me this noon, her hair was slightly wavy, but not the tight curls you speak of.”

“Yes, it’s Hilda,” Miss Plum affirmed, biting off her words in her snapping way. “I saw her, and her hair is tightly curled. I should say she had it done at the hairdresser’s.”

“Very likely,” the mistress assented. “She was everlastingly getting herself fixed up at the beauty parlors. And she was so much prettier when she was not made up. Well, Mr. Marsh, I can tell you no more, and I will be grateful if I may now be left alone.”

We all took this for dismissal, and went downstairs again.

“Now, you see, Marsh,” John said, “my mother knows nothing that can help you in your investigation, and I hope you won’t have to trouble her again. Bring your inquiries to me, and if I can’t answer them, I’ll say so frankly. But I’m sure my mother can’t.”

“All right, Mr. Clevedon. I daresay we’ll run down that fellow Larson and get a confession out of him tonight. In that case there need be no inquest. Otherwise, we’ll hold it tomorrow, and I shall have to ask the use of one of your large rooms for the purpose.”

“By all means. Select the room you want, or leave it to Griffin; he knows all about the household matters. Do try to realize that having just landed here, I’m not at all up on these things, and there seem to have been a lot of changes.”

“I see, Mr. Clevedon. And I’ll bother you and your mother as little as possible. If all goes well, it will be over in a day or two. There can be a quiet little funeral—by the way, has the girl any people? Parents?”

“I’ve no idea, Marsh. Such data you must get from Griffin. My mother says the girl was here before I went away. But if so, I don’t remember her; of course I seldom see my mother’s maids. Perhaps I’d better take a look at her, I might recollect her face.”

So we went to Hilda’s room, where on the bed, her eyes now closed, the dead girl lay.

Save for the whiteness of her cheeks and lips, she looked as if alive. Her hair was tightly curled and I drew Clevedon's attention to it.

"Yes," he said, "a very tight curl, evidently done by a hairdresser. No, Marsh, I don't recall her at all. If I saw her before I went away, I didn't notice her. She is a stranger to me. But I can understand my mother's tales of her flirtations. As you see, she is pretty, in her silly, vapid way, and I've no doubt she played havoc with the young men all about here. But Griffin will tell you all that, or the other women servants will. Now, do it up properly, sheriff, but, for heaven's sake, make all the haste you can. It's most annoying just at this time, to have a thing like this crop up! I can't have Vera over here until the matter is entirely finished with."

This last was to me, and I nodded in agreement.

"It won't take more than a day or two, will it?" I asked of Marsh.

"Can't tell, Mr. Oakley. Inquests are curious things. Might go off slick as anything, and again, it might have adjournments that would carry it over a week or two more."

"Well, do the best you can—you won't lose by that."

My last words, spoken in a low tone, were received with an indignant shrug of the sheriff's shoulders, but I caught a gleam in his eye that made me think perhaps I had not given my hint in vain.

"Now," he said, "I'm going to give Hilda's room the once over. Want to stand by, you two?"

I thought Clevedon would resent this casual, familiar speech, but he only said, "Not I, please. I've a lot on my mind, and a number of things to attend to at once. I must telephone Miss Liddell, and tell her a little of what has happened. I promised her I'd do this. But how much shall I tell, Mr. Marsh?"

"Well, sir, it ain't the thing to babble about on the telephone. If I was you, I'd write the lady a note, and get it over to her some way. Or else, telephone sorter blind like."

"It's hard to telephone 'blind like' when it's a case of murder. I think I'll write a note, as you suggest, and send it over by one of the chauffeurs."

"Dunno about that, unless you take the head chuffer. That secondary one, a chap named Ross, was terribly sweet on Hilda, and I don't like to let him outa my sight till I put him through a grilling."

"I can't send Scott way over there, and we might need him ourselves." Clevedon looked thoughtful. "Guess I'll telephone 'blind like' after all, and tell Miss Liddell I'll be over tomorrow to explain it all."

So he went away to wrestle with his own problems, and I stayed with Marsh in Hilda's room.

It was really idle curiosity that made me want to poke about among the girl's belongings, for I had no thought that her murderer would prove other than the already suspected Larson, or some other of her rejected swains.

Poor girl, her beauty and her gay dress had served their ends of fascination only too well, and here was the tragic result.

Marsh found nothing of interest. There were no notes or letters that might have proved enlightening. There were no papers of any sort and I doubted if the girl was able to read and write with any degree of fluency.

Her dresser was tidy, the plain, cheap toilet accessories laid neatly in place. This, I realized, was probably second nature to a lady's maid.

A curling iron was on a small table, and also a few small boxes of powder, rouge, and enamel.

There were lipsticks and manicure implements and one could see at a glance that the maid had a perfect passion for all the accoutrements of personal beautifying.

In the closet, her dresses hung neatly from padded hangers, and her shoes were set in a tidy row.

Without doubt Mrs. Clevedon would miss the services of so estimable a maid as Hilda must certainly be.

I went back to look at the dead face, raising the handkerchief that had been laid over it.

The countenance was the broad, vapid type of Swedish peasant, modified by the education picked up here and there in the world of American ladies and their servants.

"Poor Hilda," I said, "whatever she did in the way of flirting, I'm sure it wasn't bad enough to deserve such a punishment."

"I'm sure of that, too," Marsh said, emphatically. "That's why I doubt if it was Larson, after all. Much more likely to have been that Italian chap who plays a saxophone at the moving-picture house."

"Yes, it seems far more like the deed of a desperate Italian than a slow-witted Swede."

"Well, Larson ain't so slow-witted. But I'll say that Gallio fellow is a lot higher tempered and awful quick to get mad. But he'd use a knife—"

"Where was she shot?"

"Right through the heart. Pistol held close to her. The brute, like as not, making love to her, and then shooting her at the same time!"

"That's more like your Italian than your Swede. But haven't you any more knowledge of those two chaps? Where were they?"

"Dunno yet. Potter is out on a still hunt. And it may have been somebody else, anyway. Hilda had oodles of beaus. She was a real belle, and she knew it. She kept 'em all guessing. Poor thing, she went a little too far this time."

I was busily thinking of what Miss Plum had told me. She said she saw Larson going away from the arbor and out at the side gate.

I had no intention of repeating this to Marsh, but I was thinking it out for myself. Perhaps Larson had been there and had gone out the gate, but had not fired the shot that killed Hilda.

As she was known to have so many lovers, two of them might have been there—might have quarrelled—and then, it suddenly struck me, perhaps Miss Plum had made up the whole story. Why, I didn't know, but I cordially disliked Miss Plum, and I also distrusted her.

Well, anyway, I would not mention that matter to Marsh, and I turned back to glance once more about the room.

“I can’t glean so much as a wisp of straw, can you?” he said, discouragedly.

“No, I don’t see a single scrap of evidence or anything one could possibly call a clue. And yet, I daresay the clues are sticking out everywhere, only we don’t recognize them as such.”

“Well, I can’t see any. No notes about. Her pocket-book, and her money seemingly untouched.”

“Of course, we can’t think the motive was robbery,” I told him. “Whatever happened, I’m sure the key lies in Hilda’s coquetry and her playing fast and loose with her lovers.”

“Yes, that’s most likely. Then there’s the weapon. Must have been a pistol of some sort, but they won’t know what make and all, until they get the bullet. The post mortem will be early tomorrow morning.”

“Would the Larson man have a revolver?”

“Oh, yes, ’most everybody has around here. And if they haven’t they can beg, borrow, or steal one. The shooting club, is near by and of course that clubhouse is an arsenal. A fellow who wanted a gun could snake one outa there as easy as pie.”

“What did he do with it afterward?”

“Snuck it back again. Or, maybe pitched it into the pond, down back of the garden. Easy enough to dispose of the weapon.”

“Queer nobody in this house saw Hilda going to the arbor, or saw anyone else meeting her there.”

“You don’t know yet what anybody saw. We’ll dig all that up tomorrow morning at the inquest.”

“I hope the inquest will be soon over. I’m awfully sorry for Mr. Clevedon, coming home to fall into a hornet’s nest like this!”

“Yep. I’m sorry, too. But we have to go ahead and do our duty, even if the girl is only a servant.”

“Of course. I know that. But you can hustle it, you know, or draw it out to all sorts of lengths.”

“Gotta hear the evidence—”

“But there isn’t any evidence.”

“Some may turn up. Anyway, we gotta make a stab at it.”

I tried a little further to make Marsh agree to keep the inquest down to its least possible degree of time and scope, but he doggedly insisted he must do his duty, and at last I saw he was in earnest and gave up the struggle.

I went in search of Clevedon, and found him in one of his favorite haunts, a small side porch, that commanded a wonderful view of the setting sun.

"It's all right about Vera," he told me, jubilantly. "I mean about my finger. She isn't like Mother, squirming at the thought of it. She's too sensible for that."

"I'm glad, old chap," I said, heartily. "But now you have to bother her with another annoyance, this Hilda business."

"Yes—isn't it the darndest? But, this will blow over after a time. My finger will never blow over."

"Then it's good she's reconciled to your defective hand. Now, we've a chance to get in some fine detective work, haven't we?"

"Oakley, whatever put it into your head that I'm of a detective bent?"

"Only because you were everlastingly stalking about the steamer, going over, with a detective story under your arm. Then, you'd huddle down in some corner and devour the books as if they were law and gospel."

"Yes, I do like to read them, but I doubt I have any of the flair for crime they tell of, myself."

"Well, I think you have. And now you've no Doctor Pinckney to warn you off, we're going to take up this case of Hilda's and find out who killed that poor girl."

"We're going to do nothing of the sort. Oh, don't think I'm heartless, I have the deepest sympathy for the pretty little maid, and also for my mother, who has lost a friend as well as a servant. But I'm going to let the law look after the administration of justice. I've Vera to consider, and we've planned a lot of gayety and social doings for the near future. I'm sorry about Hilda, but I can't espouse her cause to the inconvenience of my future wife."

"No," I said, slowly, "I see you can't."

Chapter 11

An Inquest

AND JOHN CLEVEDON persisted in his attitude of disclaiming all responsibility in the affair of the dead girl. Not that he had a definite responsibility concerning the murder, but as head of his house he was naturally looked to for orders or advice.

But all such demands he shifted to the shoulders of the butler, or of Pell, who, himself of a detective bent, was nothing loath to take charge.

Clevedon agreed to be on hand when really wanted or needed, and was willing to answer any questions of the authorities, but minor arrangements he said he could not bother about.

He seemed to me a little callous and hard-hearted regarding the fate of the poor girl, but I realized that he was jubilantly excited at his reunion with his fiancée and also that he had many matters of importance regarding his estate to look after.

His mother, too, was a care. She was taking the death of Hilda very hard, and, unwilling to stay in her own apartments, she persisted in talking it over with John and she nagged at him continually. He was remarkably patient with her, but I wondered if some time she might not go too far, and receive a reprimand from her son.

They were a most affectionate pair, but were of totally different temperaments. Clevedon wanted to toss everything off with a quick decision, while his mother loved to mull over a question and discuss it in every possible light.

She elected to dine with us that night, and I thought she would drive her son crazy.

“John, dear,” she said, “are you sure Vera doesn’t mind your missing finger?”

“It isn’t missing, Mother, only a small bit of it. And she said she didn’t mind, so, what more can I do?”

“Oh, nothing, dear, nothing. But I wondered if she would ever change her mind, and realize that it is a deformity.”

“Now, Mother, please let up on that subject. I’m tired of hearing about it.”

“Oh, well, if you mean to reprove me.”

“Not reprove you, but merely ask for a more cheerful topic of conversation.”

“How can you be cheerful with that poor dead girl lying under your roof! John, will they hang that Larson man?”

“I don’t know, Mother. If he is the guilty one, surely he ought to pay the penalty.”

“Yes, of course, but it seems awful, doesn’t it?”

“It is awful. But let’s drop that subject, too. No good can come of our discussing it so much.”

“Oh, John, you won’t let me talk about anything!”

“Yes, I will, dear. Tell me about yourself and anything you did while I was away. Did you get my letters regularly?”

And so Clevedon went on, tactfully keeping his mother interested, but avoiding unpleasant topics.

It was the same during the evening. Mrs. Clevedon was fretful and easily took offense when none was meant. Her son did his best to entertain and interest her, but I knew he was relieved when at last she went away to her own rooms.

“Now, Mott,” he said, when we were alone, “I don’t think I possess the detective talent you give me credit for. But I believe you have some, and our worthy Pell has, too. You tell me what you’ve deduced regarding this shocking episode in the garden.”

Glad of an opportunity to confer with him, I told him what I thought of the case.

“I think there’s no doubt,” I began, “that she was killed by a jealous lover. I can see no other motive. It wasn’t robbery, of course, and as she was safely within the garden walls, it could not have been a highway ruffian. Nor would a stranger have taken such desperate measures for any reason I can imagine. So, what’s left but the revengeful swain?”

"It must be so," Clevedon agreed, "unless there is something in the girl's past that we know nothing about. But the police are looking into that. Griffin tells me that he has known the girl all her life, practically, and she was always a good, well-behaved young woman, though a little spoiled by the attentions of her many suitors. She seems to have been a coquette by nature, and she played fast and loose with the beaux until she went a step too far. The deed of violence points to the Italian lover rather than the Swede, but I think an Italian would use a knife or dagger instead of shooting her. As to the Swede, it isn't in keeping to use a weapon at all. He ought to have strangled her with his hands, but in real life the criminals don't always stick to tradition."

"Why did a Swedish girl have an Italian lover at all?"

"Oh, I daresay they're all American born. I know that saxophone player, he's the night-club type. I don't suppose he cared what Hilda's nationality was, he admired her beauty and charm. And it may have been neither of those men. According to Griffin, she had nearly all the young men of her class in the neighborhood at her heels, and he hinted that she had a few gentlemen on her string, too."

"That may be it, then," I exclaimed. "Perhaps she aimed too high and the game she bagged suddenly woke up to the danger of his position and did away with her."

"Yes, that's possible. If they get any evidence of such a thing, they'll run down their suspect. Well, you must see, Oakley, that I can't take any active part in the hunt. I've too much to look after and aside from common humanity, I've no personal interest in the girl. Mother can get another maid, and while it is all a pity, maybe the girl is better off dead than facing a tumultuous life of trouble and perhaps shame."

"A cold-blooded way to look at it?" I asked, giving him a reproachful look.

"Perhaps," he said, seriously, "but I mean it. A girl of that sort is bound to come to grief sooner or later, and I'm sure she is saved much heartbreak and probably a hard life and a hopeless old age."

"My heavens, John, but you're pessimistic!"

"Only because I see clearly. You know what I say is true, but a very natural human sentiment keeps you from acknowledging it."

"Perhaps you're right. Now as to the inquest. Of course you'll attend?"

"Of course I'll be at home. I'll attend the opening, and then, if I find I can do nothing, I'll leave you and Pell as my representatives and slip away to my study to do some work. You can come for me when I'm wanted." So John Clevedon had his way, and next morning at eleven o'clock, when the inquest was begun, he was in attendance and was called upon as soon as was possible.

The first witness was, of course, the young under gardener, who had found the body of Hilda Jansen.

He added no whit to the facts already known, and he told in a straightforward way of finding the dead girl in the hammock in the rose arbor.

"How did you happen to go to the rose arbor?" asked the coroner.

"It was my day for it," the witness replied. "Always on Fridays I do that part of the garden, trim the grass edges, cut off the withered blossoms, tie up the loose trailers. So, I went there to look after things, and there I saw Hilda in the hammock, I thought at first she was asleep, then I saw her staring eyes and I knew she was dead."

“What did you do, then?”

“I reported right away to Jeffries, the head gardener, and he went and told Mr. Griffin. Then Jeffries told me to go home, as I wasn’t fit to work.”

“Why weren’t you fit to work?”

“I was that put about, sir. My! To see the poor thing there alone and all dead! Well, I ran away home as fast as my legs could carry me.”

No suspicion seemed to attach itself to this young fellow. Indeed, had he been the criminal, he wouldn’t have reported the affair so promptly.

The doctor testified next as to the nature of the shot that killed its victim.

“It was a Smith and Wesson thirty-eight special revolver that did it,” he declared. “She was shot at close range, and presumably by someone she knew or was not afraid of, for her expression was smiling and her countenance showed no sign of fright or terror. Shot through the heart she died instantly and without any convulsive movement.”

“At what time would you say the shooting occurred?”

“It is not possible to say exactly, but it must have been late in the afternoon.”

“Yesterday was her afternoon off, so we may presume that she had made an appointment with some friend to meet her in the arbor. This is only theory, but it is plausible in the light of later events. Had she been waylaid, she would not have been lying so composedly in the hammock, and smiling when she was killed.”

“It is plausible and most probable,” Doctor Golden returned. “Death by violence almost always leaves signs of fear or horror on the face of the victim if he realizes his danger before the death blow is struck.”

“We then, must look for a criminal known to the victim and not feared by her,” the coroner said pompously, as if voicing an astonishingly new theory.

He then called John Clevedon, who promptly responded. The questions were mostly as to his ownership of the estate, his recent absence from home, and his return from abroad the day before.

“You knew this Hilda Jansen?” Coroner Timmons asked.

“No,” Clevedon replied. “I don’t remember seeing her. My mother tells me, and the butler’s records corroborate it, that she was here a short time before I sailed for Europe. But I didn’t see her, or, if I did I don’t remember it. It is not surprising, for she was my mother’s personal maid, and I would not be likely to see her, as I would a house servant.”

“You didn’t see her yesterday, before she went out on her fatal errand?”

“No. I only arrived in time for late luncheon, and I saw only the servants who attended in the dining-room or were in the halls.”

“You were not at home when the discovery of the tragedy was made?”

“No; directly after luncheon I went over to call on Miss Liddell, in East Wingate. I was there when a telephone message informed me of what had happened.”

“Who sent the message?”

“My secretary, Mr. Oakley.”

“And he told you of the tragedy over the telephone?”

“Not definitely, no. He said a serious accident had occurred and I must come home at once.”

“And you came?”

“And I came. I was told the details of the affair, but I knew nothing whatever that could throw any light on the mystery of the girl’s death.”

“I think that is all I need ask you, Mr. Clevedon. Please remain on the premises, but you need not stay here, unless you choose.”

“I’m glad to be excused,” John said. “I have much business to attend to, and I am expecting my lawyer here shortly. But I will be at your call whenever you want me. Just send to my study for me. My absence from this inquest is not due to any lack of interest in the sad affair, but as you can readily understand, having just returned after so long an absence, there are many matters that call for my immediate attention.”

Timmons had no objections to John’s departure, and he turned his attention at once back to the matter in hand.

The servants were all interrogated, but not one of them could throw a ray of light on the mystery. Their duties, whether in the house or outside on the grounds, had not led them into any position where they could see the arbor, nor would they necessarily have looked out at it if they had. Two or three others had their afternoon off on Fridays, but they had left the house before Hilda did.

Griffin, who was supposed to know the movements of all the servants at all times, was of no help.

“I saw her at twelve o’clock,” he testified. “She came to me and said she was going off duty. As it was her day and the right hour, I just said, ‘Go on, Hilda. Have a good time,’ and she went off.”

“Did she leave the house then?”

“Oh, no, she then had on her uniform. She had her lunch and then she must have gone to her room to dress. I mean, that is what she naturally would do, and what she must have done, since she changed her uniform for her fancy gown. I didn’t see her leave the house, in fact I never gave her another thought all the afternoon. Mr. Clevedon came home, and I was busy with looking after lunch, and the time went by until Bates came to me with the news of Hilda’s death.”

“Is Bates the gardener?”

“No, sir, he is the second man—in the house.”

“I see. Well, we’ll hear from Bates right now.”

I remembered hearing of some second something who was sweet on Hilda. But as I recollected it, it was the second chauffeur.

However, I began to think that most of the men servants were “sweet on her,” and there was no doubt that the pretty Swede had been a heart-breaker.

Bates was so overcome with grief and embarrassment at being questioned that it was difficult to make him talk coherently.

But the gist of his testimony, after all, was that he knew nothing at all about it. He had been on duty, under Griffin’s watchful eye, from eleven o’clock in the morning until nearly four in the afternoon, and during that time he had not seen Hilda, save for a glimpse of her at her luncheon, and he had not once looked out of any window toward the rose arbor.

And so it went on, through the interminable list of servants.

Timmons skipped not even the humblest scullery maid or errand boy, for any one might have seen Hilda, or might have seen some man who could have been the criminal.

But there were no results, and Timmons concluded the household staff by calling for Miss Plum, the nurse.

She appeared, stiff and crackling of white linen and smug and disdainful of countenance.

My dislike for the woman rose by leaps and bounds, although I had no real reason for it.

But her absurd request that I should say I saw Larson in the arbor with Hilda was so reprehensible that I awaited with deepest interest whatever evidence she might herself divulge.

“Your name?” asked the coroner.

“Martha Plum.”

“Your position here?”

“I am a trained nurse, and I am here to care for Mrs. Clevedon.”

“What is Mrs. Clevedon’s ailment?”

“She has arthritis and she is suffering from a general nervous breakdown.”

“You knew the maid, Hilda?”

“Of course; she was Mrs. Clevedon’s personal maid.”

“What do you know of her general character?”

“Only that she was a good, decent sort of girl, and I know of nothing to her detriment.”

“She had many admirers?”

"I know nothing about that. She was pretty and gay, but always attended properly and faithfully to her duties."

"When did you see her last?"

"She left Mrs. Clevedon's apartments at noon. She always did that on Fridays, as she had the afternoon off."

"Did she seem to you in any way excited or different from usual?"

"No, I noticed nothing peculiar about her."

"And you did not see her again?"

Miss Plum hesitated a moment and then she said, "Not to speak to. But I saw her a few hours later, going into the rose arbor."

"Oh, you did! Was she alone?"

"She went in alone, but she was immediately joined by a man."

"Do you know who the man was?"

"Yes, it was her friend named Larson."

This caused a decided sensation. It was direct evidence against the Swede, and I was relieved that Miss Plum had concluded to tell the truth.

"Are you sure of this statement, Miss Plum?" the coroner asked, gravely.

"Why, yes. As sure as I can be. The man looked like Larson, and though his back was toward me, I recognized his figure. I thought little of it, merely assuming that Hilda had the appointment with him and that they were going somewhere to spend the afternoon together."

"You saw him go into the arbor?"

"Yes, and that's all I saw. I didn't look out that way again for, as I said, I thought nothing of it, and I wasn't interested. Also, I was busy with Mrs. Clevedon."

"Was she ill?"

"No more than usual, but the excitement of her son's return reacted on her nerves, and I had to quiet her."

"I see. Then that is all you can tell us about the affair in the arbor?"

"That is all."

And then, to my surprise a strange man was brought in, and it proved to be Larson himself.

"Your name?"

“Jan Larson.”

“You knew the dead girl, Hilda Jansen?”

“I was her beau.”

The man spoke quietly, and seemed both awed and sorrowful. I rather took to him, and wondered if such a mild-looking chap could really be a murderer.

“Where were you yesterday afternoon?”

“I was at my work.”

“What is your work?”

“I am an assistant in Greene’s Garage.”

“And you were at work all the afternoon?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You didn’t see Hilda Jansen yesterday at all?”

“No, sir.”

“Can you prove this?”

“He has proved it,” the detective Potter stated. “I have been over to Greene’s Garage, and Mr. Greene declared that Larson was there all the afternoon, from one o’clock on.”

“Any others say so, too?”

“Yes, all the workmen who were there corroborated Greene’s statement.”

“Then we cannot suspect Larson of the crime. You may go, Larson.”

Quietly the man went away, and I was impressed by the deep sadness of his face. I couldn’t share John Clevedon’s opinion that the poor girl was better dead than alive. I wished she might have lived, and married this fine-looking chap.

Also, I pondered, Miss Plum must have been mistaken as to the identity of the man she saw go into the arbor. If indeed, she saw a man there at all. I had little faith in that woman’s veracity, after her proposition to me.

But another witness was being examined. He, too, had been produced from somewhere by the detective, and it appeared, he was the Italian lover of the girl.

His name was Tony Gallio and, though quite evidently of Italian descent, he looked and talked like an American.

He, too, had an alibi. He, too, had been at his work all the afternoon of the day before. He, also, was vouched for by his employer and his fellow workmen.

And so, the coroner's inquiries brought out these facts, and Gallio's innocence was proved.

There seemed to be no more suspects.

The second chauffeur, Ross, who was said to be in love with Hilda, had driven John Clevedon over to Miss Liddell's, and waited there and drove him home again, so, of course, no further alibi was needed for him.

"At what time did you start for East Wingate?" Timmons asked him.

"About four o'clock."

"Did you see Hilda yesterday afternoon, before you took Mr. Clevedon out?"

"No, not at all."

"Where were you?"

"In the garage, attending to the big car that had been used to bring Mr. Clevedon up from New York."

"You can prove this?"

"Oh, yes. Scott was there all the time. He will tell you I speak the truth."

Scott, being called did corroborate Ross's story, and that ended the case against Ross.

There seemed to be little else to do. Some of the witnesses were recalled and questioned further, but no important point was brought out, and no suspicion was cast on anyone.

It seemed certain that Hilda had gone to the arbor to meet some man. It was probably a man who resembled Larson sufficiently to make Miss Plum think it was he. But the identity of this man was shrouded in mystery.

It might have been any of the numerous admirers of the girl who were known to the other servants or it might have been some new acquaintance that none of them knew, and for whose benefit Hilda had donned her new frock and hat.

And so, there was nothing for the jury to do but to bring in an open verdict, and the coroner dismissed the audience.

I went in search of Clevedon, to tell him the result of the inquest, and found him in his study. This was an attractive little room, and though dignified by the name of study, it was more like an office. The furniture was of fine quality, but it consisted of desks and chairs and filing cabinets usually found in well-fitted offices.

Clevedon was busy with his papers and accounts, but looked up at me with a glance of inquiry.

"Larson?" he said, expectantly.

“No,” I replied, and told him of the alibis of Larson and Gallio.

“Well, that seems pretty positive,” he said. “I suppose it was some other of her sheiks, then. They say she was a charmer.”

“Yes; it must have been a lover of hers, for no one else could have a motive.”

“True enough. I suppose you’re crazy to investigate further and run the man down?”

“I’d like to,” I admitted. “But I daresay you’d rather have the matter drop.”

“Yes,” Clevedon said. “All things considered, I would. If the police want to keep at it, let them. But as a household, I think we have done all that is necessary.”

Chapter 12

An Old Silver Skewer

AND SO, THE whole dreadful subject of the death of Hilda was taboo at Clevedon House.

I mulled over it and wondered at the strange nature of the master of the house, who could let a murder under his roof go unavenged.

But as I thought it over more, I came to the conclusion that he was right, at any rate, from his own point of view.

The girl was as much a stranger to him as if she had not lived in his home. All that was possible had been done in the search for the murderer, and the police declared that they would continue to work on the case. What, therefore, could John Clevedon do that couldn’t be better done by the authorities?

Also, he had his mother to consider. I could see that it would be far better for her peace of mind to have the matter dropped entirely. For, if it was still a subject of conversation, Mrs. Clevedon would grow more nervous and ill than she was now.

The nurse gave this as her opinion, and both Clevedon and I recognized its truth.

Then, too, John wanted to devote all his spare time to Miss Liddell, who naturally expected much attention from him.

But above and beyond all these considerations there was the bare fact that there was nothing to do in the way of searching.

“Suppose,” Clevedon said to me, “that I was determined to discover who killed the girl. What could I do first? I can think of nothing that would point a way to look, or a trail to follow. I, personally, know nothing whatever of her life or her friends or enemies. I could engage a private detective, but that would antagonize the police, and probably reach no conclusions that they cannot arrive at. If you can advise me, Oakley, I wish you would do so, for I want to do the right thing by my people.”

“No, John,” I said, “I really can’t think of anything you could do to further the ends of justice. Suppose we speak to Pell about it. He has a lot of good sense, and he is in touch with the servants and may have heard something.”

“Very well, let’s see if he can suggest anything.”

He rang the bell, and the valet came to us, in the little study.

“Pell,” Clevedon said, “have you heard anything in the servants’ hall, or elsewhere, that gives you any line on this murder business?”

“No, Mr. Clevedon, I haven’t,” the man replied. “The whole crowd are absolutely in the dark concerning it. I’m perfectly certain the murderer was not one of your own people, and I don’t know, of course, any outside acquaintances the poor girl had.”

“You can think of no direction in which to look? You’ve no suspicion of any one who might be implicated?”

“No, sir. But, since you ask me, I’ll say this much. I don’t believe the man who killed Hilda was a servant or a common workingman. I believe he was a gentleman.”

“Why do you think this?”

“Only the look of the thing. A man of her own sort would have strangled her or perhaps have used a club. He wouldn’t shoot her.”

“I don’t quite see why,” and Clevedon looked puzzled.

“Only that shooting seems to be a gentleman’s way of killing. A stab might have meant her Italian lover, or strangulation might have meant a strong and furiously angry beast of a man. But to shoot, with a service revolver, seems to me like a gentleman might do, and—they tell me, the girl was mixed up with one or two gentlemen who live neighboring to here.”

“Good Lord, Pell, this is the worst news yet. If some one of my neighbors, perhaps one of my fellow clubmen is responsible for this, I don’t want to dig into it!”

“You’d rather let him go scot free!” I exclaimed.

“Well, I’d rather the police would handle it. I’ve been away so long, and I’ve no idea of what neighbors she may have been mixed up with, and I don’t want to know. I can’t believe, unless there is some conclusive evidence, that any one of the men around this neighborhood was so intimate with a servant that he reached the point of murder! Maybe it is so, but I’d rather not start an investigation along such lines. If you feel sure, Pell, you go to the police and tell them of your suspicions or beliefs. Then, they can use their own judgment in the matter.”

“Very well, sir. The police have by no means shut down on the case. Mr. Marsh said that the ‘person or persons unknown’ might not always remain unknown. And from the look on his face, I think he has suspicions of somebody a peg higher up in the world than the Larsons and Gallios.”

“Have they found out about Hilda’s people, her relatives, I mean?”

“Yes, sir. Her uncle is coming to take the body away with him. He lived in Boston, or near it.”

“Well, then Pell, you keep tab on all that goes on. Do anything you can to help, but don’t take a definite initiative, without consulting me or Mr. Oakley. If any name of a neighbor or any gentleman that I know is mentioned in connection with the matter, let me know at once. I am ready and willing to do my part, but I

don't want to instigate a search that might make great trouble and embarrassment for an innocent man. I suppose there is no doubt that Hilda did have admirers among the gentlemen hereabouts, for such stories are not started without some foundation."

"No, sir. And if I hear anything definite, I will let you know at once, sir."

Pell went away, his impassive face as inscrutable as ever.

He was a perfect valet, and as he got along well with the other servants, Griffin had accepted him cordially, and his advent on the staff caused scarcely a ripple.

But it proved difficult to get a maid who suited Mrs. Clevedon.

One after another was tried, only to be promptly dismissed as incompetent or otherwise unavailable.

A fortnight went by, and still the lady was unsuited.

Clevedon refused to be drawn into this dilemma.

"Now, Mother," he would say, "I've an awful lot of things to look after, and the matter of your personal maid you must attend to yourself. Miss Plum can help you, and Griffin or other of the house servants can help you, but I can't. I know nothing of ladies' maids, and when Vera and I are married, I shall tell her she must engage her own, without asking me anything about it."

"But I have to have advice, John," the lady argued, looking as if the whole world were against her.

"Then ask Oakley here," Clevedon smiled as he passed the case over to me. "He's a good one at advising. He has lots of sense and judgment. You tackle him, Mother, when you're uncertain about an applicant's qualities."

Of course, I smiled and expressed my gladness to help Mrs. Clevedon in any possible way, but as I knew even less of ladies' maids than John did, I hoped I wouldn't be called on.

"And do get one soon, Mother," Clevedon went on, "for I want to have Vera over here for a week-end. And her little sister, Mimi, wants to come, too. So we'll invite them as soon as you're ready."

"Oh, that doesn't matter," Mrs. Clevedon assured him. "Miss Plum can look after me all right, only I want a maid, too. But it won't matter if I don't get one until after Vera's visit. Ask her as soon as you like. The housekeeper will see to it that there are maids enough for the girls, even if they don't bring their own."

"They probably will," John said. "Then, I'll ask them to come over next Friday for a visit."

"Do. And we must do all we can to entertain them. Shall you have a ball?"

"Not a ball, but probably one or two small dances. We must see what they want. Mimi is a little glutton for gayety and she'll clamor for fancy-dress parties and midnight revels, and Lord knows what. Vera is a bit more sedate, but she, too, likes a good time. Oh, yes, there'll be high revelry, I can tell you."

John laughed out in his enjoyment of the anticipation, and I was glad to see him happy again. His hurt finger had nearly healed over, and though shorter than the others, it was not noticeable, with his hand closed.

Had it not been for the shock and sorrow caused by the sad fate of the maid, he would, I felt sure, be quite his old self again by now.

But the impending visit of the Liddell girls seemed to revivify him, and he immediately went off to his study and called Griffin in conference.

Left alone with Mrs. Clevedon, I tried to find out why she was so difficult to suit with a ladies' maid.

"I'm not a fussy sort," she affirmed, "you mustn't think it. But I want a maid just like Hilda, and I can't seem to get one. The ones that come are either clumsy and awkward, or else they are domineering and dictatorial. But I shall just keep on trying, and after a time, I'm sure I shall strike the right one."

"Yes, I'm sure you will," I encouraged her. "Can Miss Plum do for you in the meantime?"

"Oh, yes, and I have Norah, a nice little parlormaid, who helps now and then."

I had myself had a simple bringing up, and this multiplicity of servants bewildered me. But I knew the Clevedons were used to it and, indeed, I was rapidly accustoming myself to being waited upon. It is an easy lesson to learn, I found, and I willingly accepted such services as were considered my due.

"You'll enjoy the visit of the young ladies," I said, by way of making conversation.

"Oh, they won't have anything to do with me," she returned, a little pettishly. "They'll scarcely know I'm here. Old folks don't count, nowadays."

"There, there, Mrs. Clevedon," I thought she needed a jolt, "you mustn't talk like that. The modern younger generation is maligned, I think. But, anyway, they usually give what they get. If you are sweet and lovely to them, they will be so to you. And, if you greet them with a chip on your shoulder, they will not take to you kindly at all. But you know them, don't you?"

"Oh, yes, in a way. But I've not seen either of them since John went to Europe."

"Did you invite them over?"

"Once. But they couldn't come, so I didn't ask them again."

"Well, you take my advice and be lovely and kind to them. It will be a whole lot better for all concerned."

"Aren't you a little impertinent?"

"No, I don't mean to be. But John lets me advise him, so I presume to advise you."

I smiled at her, for I suddenly perceived that perhaps to jolly her a bit would please her, and I was right.

"I'm sure you mean well, so I won't be offended. Yes, Mr. Oakley, I will try to be kind and gracious to the girls, even though one of them means to rob me of my boy."

"But surely that pleases you. You wouldn't want John to be a grumpy, misanthropic old bachelor, would you now?"

"No, of course not. Yet a mother always feels envious of the girl who wins away her son's affections."

“What is she like, Miss Liddell?”

“Oh, she’s a darling. You’ve seen her pictures about, of course. There’s one on the table.”

We were sitting in Mrs. Clevedon’s own charming boudoir. I was received here occasionally, for the lady of the house had done me the honor to look on me as a friend, not as an employe of the household, and I was duly grateful.

I picked up the lovely picture and gazed at it. It was a painted miniature of one of the sweetest faces I had ever seen.

Something of the Greuze type, with fair hair and roseleaf complexion, Vera Liddell’s face was spiritual of expression, while the blue eyes showed a twinkle of humor.

“She is lovely!” I exclaimed. “I’ve seen other pictures of her, but this is the sweetest. Is she really as pretty as that?”

“Yes, I think so. And John adores her. They are a very happy pair.”

“What an odd thing this is,” I observed, idly, as I picked up from the table a long, silver blade, obviously used for a paper cutter, but quite evidently not made for that.

“That’s an old English skewer,” Mrs. Clevedon told me, with interest in her voice. “You know I love old silver. John brought it home to me. Just think, they used silver skewers in their great joints of roast beef. See the hallmark, it is a very old piece, and I adore it.”

“Rather long and heavy for a paper cutter.”

“Yes, I don’t really use it, but I like it as a curio.”

It was merely a plain silver blade, sharp pointed, but not sharp edged, with a ring fashioned at the end of it by which it could be drawn out of the roast meat. Its beauty lay in its plain simplicity and the hallmark proved its age and genuineness.

“They’re hard to find now,” Mrs. Clevedon told me. “They’re mostly all bought up, you see. I told John before he went away how much I wanted one, and he got it for me in England.”

I duly admired it, and then I asked:

“What about the other Miss Liddell, the younger sister? Is she as beautiful as Miss Vera?”

“Aha,” Mrs. Clevedon laughed, “so you’re already interested in her, are you, my gay young blade? Well, no, Mimi isn’t as lovely as Vera, not half. She is a witch child; a black-haired, dark-skinned little tomboy, who hasn’t found herself as yet. That is, she was like that the last time I saw her; and I don’t believe she has changed much. I’ve no picture of her, but she is just a flapper.”

“Sounds rather attractive, though,” I said, “I like flappers.”

“Well, I don’t,” and the sound of a voice was followed into the room, by the speaker, Nurse Plum.

“The name is a curse! Flapper! Why call anybody a name like that?”

Clearly the nurse was in one of her belligerent moods. I saw at once that argument was not advisable, placation was my rôle.

“Oh, it’s only a bit of slang,” I said. “Queer, how such words get into the language and stick. You tell me, Miss Plum about Mimi Liddell. Is she a nice child?”

“Nice child?” the nurse almost screamed. “No, she’s not! She’s the worst little vixen I ever knew!”

“You know her well, then?”

“Yes, I nursed her through an attack of measles, and a more froward patient I never had!”

“Oh, well, one must expect that in a youngster with the measles.”

“Of course,” Mrs. Clevedon broke in, anxious to shut off the tide of Miss Plum’s vehemence. “And Mimi isn’t a bad sort, really. Full of mischief, burning with curiosity about everything, and avidly eager for fun and frolic, that’s the worst one can say about Mimi.”

“And enough, too,” grunted the nurse, under her breath. “Now, Mr. Oakley when do you propose to get at the books? Here you’ve dawdled away nearly a month since your arrival, and not a stroke of work done yet! What sort of librarian do you call yourself, I’d like to know!”

I had become accustomed to Miss Plum’s sharp tongue, and I no longer minded her sarcasms.

And by a strange stroke of fortune, it had turned out that she too, was interested in old and rare books, and had sufficient knowledge of them to be of help to me in my catalogue work.

I was ready to begin on the cataloguing, but Clevedon had held me back with the secretarial work he had me do.

He decided he could never learn to work a typewriter himself, so he dictated all his correspondence to me. And this, with his financial accounts and household bills and payrolls meant a lot of work for one of us, and as a rule it fell to me. For John was often out, either over at the Liddell home, or at parties nearer by, or at his club, and so as the work had to be done or pile up, I kept the desk cleared.

But this left no time, so far, for the library. However, this did not bother Clevedon at all. He said the library could wait, and even if it wasn’t touched until after the wedding, he didn’t care.

Miss Plum was impatient, partly because she longed to get at the books for the enjoyment of them, and partly because Clevedon had agreed to let her help me a certain number of hours each day, and receive extra remuneration therefor.

Mrs. Clevedon was better now, and didn’t need a nurse’s care continuously, so Miss Plum wanted to get busy on the books.

She had a book with her when she came into the room.

“Look,” she cried, as she showed it to me. “Here is a first edition of Gray’s Elegy. Isn’t it fine?”

“Yes,” I said. “I was with Mr. Clevedon when he bought it.”

She looked blank for a minute, and then said:

“You must be thinking of some other book. This has been in his library for two years. I brought it up here just now, because I want to verify a quotation, and I couldn’t seem to find an ordinary copy of the Elegy.”

“Let me see it. Yes, Miss Plum, this is the book that Clevedon bought in London. I was with him, and he had to pause to remember whether or not he already had one.”

“What nonsense!” she retorted, “that book has been in the library ever since I have been here, and long before, because, as you see, here’s the date it was bought, on a slip inside. It came from the Porter sale.”

I took the book and looked at it carefully.

As the nurse said, it held a slip with date and price, and quite evidently she must be right. In that case, then, Clevedon had bought another first edition of this same work in London.

“He forgot he had one, I suppose,” I said, handing the volume back to her.

“People don’t forget first editions of such rarity,” she snapped, and I said no more. It was a queer incident, but it was none of my business. Maybe John wanted another copy to sell or to give to a friend.

But I seemed to remember his saying he had no duplicate of that book at home.

Well, I would ask him when the right time came.

Then Miss Plum shooed me away, for Mrs. Clevedon was expecting a new maid on trial, that night, and they must prepare for her.

“I know she’ll be no good,” Mrs. Clevedon wailed. “They don’t have good ones any more.”

“Perhaps she will,” I encouraged her. “Maybe she’ll be as good as Hilda.”

“No, she’ll just be another failure.”

“Oh, well, let’s hope for the best,” and I scurried out of the door Miss Plum was holding open for me.

Pell had told me that, behind her back, the servants called her Ugly Plum. I was not altogether surprised, for now and then, she certainly could put on as ugly an expression as one might wish to see.

And she did so now as she urged me out of the room.

I gathered that she was angry about the new maid, or something, I didn’t know what. Nor did I care. The vagaries of Mrs. Clevedon and her satellites were too many for me, and I kept out of such matters all I could.

It was only when John asked me to look after something for his mother that I came in contact with her at all.

I went straight down to the library, where, on some unused shelves were all the books we had brought from abroad. There were not many, perhaps fifty or sixty. And among them was the first edition of Gray’s Elegy, which Clevedon had bought in London.

I went up to his study, which was on the second floor adjoining his bedroom and asked him about it.

“Did I have a copy?” he said, smiling. “Do you know I thought I did, and then I thought the book I had in mind was ‘The Cottar’s Saturday Night.’ I always get those two mixed up. Well, never mind, we can put it into an auction sometime, and get twice what we paid for it.”

“I think, if you don’t mind,” I said, “I’ll begin on the library work, while Miss Liddell is here. You won’t do much work yourself, and I’ll look after the bills and correspondence, and have time left for some library work.”

“Do just as you like about it, Mott. You’re a cormorant for work. Of course I want you handy by, if I’ve social notes to write, or especial matters to attend to. But outside that, your time is your own. Why don’t you take a good rest before you really settle down to work?”

“Oh, I’d rather take the work slowly, and take my resting spells now and then.”

“All right, take it that way, then. Just as you please. But I can’t be bothered with it. You and Miss Plum go at it, and spend as much or as little time on it as you like.

I believe Mother is expecting a new maid tonight. Pray heaven she suits, and then Miss Plum will have less to do.”

“The nurse doesn’t look overworked.”

“No. One reason is she gets so much sleep. You see, whether Mother has a maid or not, Miss Plum will not attend her at night. She goes to her own room at ten o’clock, and nothing short of an earthquake would bring her out until morning.”

“Doesn’t Mrs. Clevedon need her at night?” I asked in surprise.

“Of course, she ought to have someone. When she has a maid, she sleeps in the dressing-room, and that makes it all right. But when she hasn’t a maid, Mother is alone. I’ve begged her to let one of the housemaids sleep in the dressing-room, but she won’t. She vows she doesn’t need anybody, and I don’t know that she does. Only I would feel easier about her to know someone is in attendance.”

“Yes, but if there were any real necessity, I’m sure Miss Plum would fix it up somehow.”

“Yes, of course, Ugly Plum is a first-class nurse.”

“Hush, she’ll hear you!” I warned him. “At any rate, I hope the new maid will prove good enough to be kept while your house party is on.”

“Yes, indeed, so do I. The affair is growing bigger. Beside the two Liddell girls, we now have six other guests coming.”

“Fine! How did you ask them? I didn’t write those notes for you.”

“No, I did it all up by telephone. They’re some people Vera wanted asked. A married pair and a young man who are staying at their house. I fancy he’s a flame of Mimi’s. Then, a couple of chaps I know, and one of them is bringing his sister. So, we’ll have a houseful. And while we’ll have one or two real parties, they’ll entertain themselves mostly. They like that best.”

“All right,” I said. “Call on me for anything I can do that you want done.”

Chapter 13

Beautiful Vera Liddeee

AND THEN THE day came when the Liddell sisters arrived.

Of course, the other guests came too, but I didn’t notice them. Nor did I especially notice the younger Liddell girl, Miss Mimi.

For Vera took all my attention and all my regard.

The moment I saw her I fell over head and ears in love with her. It mattered not that she was John Clevedon’s affianced bride; it mattered not that I had never seen her before; it mattered not that she paid little or no attention to me; she was the one and only woman I had ever seen that I could love.

And I loved her immediately and irretrievably.

Of course, I knew it was hopeless. I knew she was deeply in love with Clevedon and he with her. I knew they were to be married very soon, indeed, as soon as she would set the day.

But I knew, too, that the rest of my life I should love her and her only.

It wasn’t solely because of her beauty, though that was of the pure, fair type that I most admire. It was also because of her wondrous charm, her magnetism, her exquisite grace and gentle ways.

I concluded that her pictures had not done her justice.

She was far more beautiful than they represented her. That, of course, was because a portrait could not reproduce the ever-changing expression on her lovely face. The light from her eyes, the smile that curved her lips, all were so overflowing with the joy of living that I couldn’t refrain from gazing at her.

I caught Clevedon’s eye fixed on me with a good-natured smile.

He was not annoyed at my very evident adoration, but he was greatly amused and, I thought, somewhat flattered by it.

“I don’t want to have to send you away, Mott,” he said, but I knew from his tone that he was chaffing, and that he was enjoying my embarrassment.

“I never saw anything like it,” I said, under my breath, and then I resolutely turned away from the distracting picture.

Clevedon was introducing me to the visitors, but I absorbed only a jumble of names and found myself bowing to this one and that one as I was presented.

Mimi Liddell gave me a comprehensive glance.

“I’ll take you,” she said, after a moment’s consideration. “Understand, Mr. Oakley, you belong to me for the duration of my stay here. Don’t you step off with anybody else.”

“How could I—after seeing you?” I said, not having entirely lost my wits.

She was a real flapper, but of the finer variety.

Her bobbed hair was browner than her sister’s golden curls, and though she was liberally bedaubed with paint and powder, it was put on with a certain degree of artistry that made it less objectionable than it usually seemed to me.

“I’ll tell you who all the people are,” she said, chummily. “Oh, yes, I know you know their names, but you don’t know their games. Vera and I are the nicest of the lot—”

“Don’t waste time on the obvious,” I put in, and was rewarded with a quick smile. I rather liked the little Liddell.

“That young couple over there are Ernest and Elaine Shaw. They’ve only been married a couple of months, and they’re all eaten up with love. The young man behind them is my own especial beau, Dicky Dunn. But you’re to cut him out, because I love to see him get jealous. Then the two that look alike are brother and sister, Sam and Sally Saunders. No, they’re not twins, though they look it. And the solemn, austere, grave and reverend seigneur is Thomas Tremaine, a wise judge, or lawyer or something. And that’s all. Nice bunch, isn’t it?”

“If you think so, I do,” I returned, determined not to let this snip get ahead of me on the uptake. “The Liddells are the outstanding figures, and the rest mere background.”

“Yes,” she said, complacently, “that’s as it should be. Do you think Vera’s prettier than I am?”

“About a hundred times,” I said earnestly. “Isn’t she unbelievable!”

“Why, you rude person!” she exclaimed, “I think we’re going to be the greatest pals. Come over here, Dicky Dunn, I want you to know this man.”

Dunn sauntered over to us, a nice, clean-cut boy, evidently accustomed to obeying the decrees of Mimi.

We were all in the great hall, having tea before the guests went to their rooms.

Mimi, in her gay sports suit, was here, there and everywhere, all over the place, but the rest sat in groups taking their tea.

Vera, all in white, lounged gracefully in a big chair, and asked John if she might go up to see his mother.

“She’s coming down, I think,” he replied. “If not I’ll take you up to her room.”

And just then, Mrs. Clevedon appeared.

She looked almost regal, being robed in an elaborate tea gown of orchid velvet, with long lace sleeves.

She made her way to a large chair, which John held for her, and as she seated herself, Vera came across the room, and pushing up a low ottoman, took a seat by her side.

“I’ll tell you who the people are, dear,” the girl said, as one after another the guests were presented. “These are our turtle doves, a pretty pair!”

The newly married Shaws accepted the title, and Mrs. Clevedon greeted them with pretty speeches.

“These two Saunders are neighbors of ours,” Vera went on, “and they’re really very wise and good people, though you’d never dream it to look at them.”

“Mrs. Clevedon would,” Sam Saunders objected. “I’m sure she knows a good thing when she sees it.”

“And the two remainders,” Vera said, “are Dicky Dunn and Mr. Thomas Tremaine. One is prominent in the higher circles of society, and the other is a wastrel and a ne’er-do-well. You can guess which is which.”

“I’m the wastrel,” said Judge Tremaine, laughing as he held out his hand to his hostess.

And then the laughter and chat became gayer, and I was not needed to help along the conversation, so I sat back in a corner and contented myself with feasting my eyes on the lovely girl who had just come into my horizon.

I tried to analyze my feelings and learn why I felt toward her as I had never felt before in my life.

But I could find no answer, save the fact of her rare beauty and wondrous ways. She had a birdlike fashion of turning her head swiftly from one to another as she talked, and I noticed that everyone toward whom she looked immediately gave attention.

Yet she was sublimely unconscious of any preeminence, she had no trace of pride or vainglory in her very evident popularity.

I wondered if it would ever fall to my lot to talk to her alone. Perhaps I might sit next her at table sometimes. If not, I half thought I’d ask John to let me do so.

But in my mind was no whit of disloyalty or treason to my employer. I knew Vera Liddell was his fiancée, and I had no quarrel with that fact. I loved her from afar, as the moth, the star. And I had no intention of telling her or anyone else of this love. It came of itself, as the sunshine or the rain may come. It could not be helped, it could not be conquered, but it should never make me unhappy. On the contrary, it was the most beautiful and enjoyable thing that had ever come into my life, and I proposed to cherish it, secretly and forever.

In no way did it embarrass me. I was not tongue-tied or shy before her. Rather were my wits quickened, to listen to her, to divine her wishes even before she spoke.

Yet I made one mistake.

I saw her shiver, saw it distinctly, as if she were suddenly chilly. And the day had turned cold, and I thought a fire would be grateful.

So I casually drifted past her, where she sat, and said, “You feel the change in the temperature? Shall we not have the fire touched off?”

She gave me a quick, frightened look.

Though I pondered over it most of the night, I couldn’t understand what that look of fright meant. For the expression in those great, deep blue eyes, showed fear and nothing else.

But she only said, “Oh, thank you, no, Mr. Oakley. We’ll go to our rooms directly. John, will you summon my maid?”

They all dispersed then, and I went to the study for a few moments to look over the mail.

Clevedon came in, and rallied me on being bowled over by Vera.

“Oh, yes,” I said, “I may as well own right up. I have never seen such beauty in all my life. I most heartily congratulate you, old man. She is a marvel.”

He looked at me steadily for a moment, and then grasped my hand.

“You’re a good sort, Mott” he said, reverting to his favorite phrase. “And I’m glad you admit your infatuation. You can’t hide it, you know.”

“Good heavens, John, does it stick out like that! I don’t mind your knowing, but I don’t want to wear my heart on my sleeve.”

“Then you’ll have to mend your ways, or learn diplomacy or something.” He laughed heartily. “I’m not blaming you, my boy, I don’t see how anyone can help loving her—”

“Good Lord, man, I don’t love her! I wouldn’t presume—I worship her as an humble peasant worships his queen. And my one thought is fealty to her and to you. Anything I can do for either of you will be a joy to me, and don’t you get any wrong ideas into your silly old head!”

“No, I shan’t. I understand, Mott, if I didn’t, you’d go out of here so quick you wouldn’t know what hit you. I trust you, because I know you. I always told you I was a good judge of character, and I know you through and through. So, go right on worshipping and adoring my Vera, and I am so sure of your honor and integrity that I shall not even watch you.”

“Of course not,” I said, “don’t be foolish.”

And that was all we said on the subject.

He took up Mimi next. Seemed to think that because I admired Vera I must like her sister.

“She seems a nice kid,” I agreed, “but I shan’t really be in your house party, John. Call on me if you need a fourth for bridge or an extra dancing man, but I don’t want to run around with the bunch.”

“All right,” he said, “do whatever you like. You’ve made yourself indispensable to me, but after your duties are done, your time is your own, as you know.”

So, I went my own way. I met the gay group at the table, unless they were out at some club or party, and once or twice I sat next to Vera.

But our chat amounted to little save the commonplaces of existence, and as she chanced both times to have an entertaining neighbor on her other hand, I felt I must efface myself more or less.

Yet this didn’t bother me. The sight of her face, the sound of her voice even for a moment would make me happy for a whole day.

John, though in no way watching, saw and understood. The guests, so far as I could observe, saw nothing of it. They paid little heed to me, though always polite and gracious.

As to Vera herself, I couldn't make out.

She showed, of course, no especial interest in me or in my doings. And yet she was disturbed over something. She was restless, she who was made for calm; she was nervous, she whose gracious composure was the delight of all who knew her.

She was—I couldn't believe it at first, but I had to admit it finally, she was frightened.

When I discovered that, I set myself to work to learn what was causing her fear.

But I could find nothing, absolutely nothing.

A rich girl, engaged to a rich man. A deeply emotional nature, plighted to a man she loved and a man who loved her. An outlook of a sunshiny life without so much as a crumpled roseleaf to mar its serenity.

Her prospective mother-in-law loved her, and she would as a bride soon be a wonderful chatelaine for the beautiful home of the Clevedons.

No, I could find no indication of a flaw in the future happiness of Vera Liddell, and surely nothing that could frighten or trouble her.

Yet, she was anxious or worried about something.

Most of the gay party would not notice it. John gave no evidence of noticing it. Nor did his mother, nor Mimi, nor anyone under the roof of Clevedon House, save only myself. I tried to reason that I was over solicitous, that I imagined trouble where there was none, but I couldn't get away from my forebodings.

Saturday and Sunday passed. The days were filled with pleasant gayety, and the guests hastened from one amusement to another.

Mrs. Clevedon's new maid was still with her, though Nurse Plum confided to me that she wouldn't last long. She was, it seemed, too curious and had prying ways.

It was Mimi who announced her departure.

"Well, Berenice has hopped off," the flapper said, as on Monday morning some of us were grouped on the verandah.

"Who is Berenice?" Elaine Shaw asked.

"Mrs. Clevedon's maid," Mimi returned. "She was too snoopy, so Mrs. Clevedon had to fire her."

"Mimi, dear, don't gossip," Vera said, with a languid reproach.

"But it's true. It seems Berenice was poking about in the box under the bed, you know, those big boxy things that roll in and out on casters. And in that box Mrs. Clevedon keeps some of her choicest things, fans and scarves and parasols or whatever. And I suppose Berenice wanted to see the pretty things—

anyway Mrs. Clevedon caught her at it, so now there's no more Berenice. Anybody know of a good lady's maid who wants a place?"

Nobody did, and I sighed as I foresaw another round of advertising and receiving applicants.

"I'm going to maid her, till she gets somebody," Mimi announced. "That is, as long as I'm here. Nurse Plum hates me, and that makes it all the more exciting. But I love to fix people's hair and make up their complexions for them, and then maybe I can snoop out a scarf or a parasol."

As Mrs. Clevedon was present and listening to this tirade, she smiled and shook her head at Mimi.

Then she said, "You'll get a pretty parasol and scarf, too, if you'll look after me just a little, for a few days. Nurse Plum has somebody in view for me, but she can't come until Thursday. And I'll be glad to have a maid of Plum's selection, then she can't find fault with her."

"All right, ducky lady," Mimi sang out. "I'll be your henchman for the present and I'll lead Miss Marthy a dance! She'll be sorry she didn't let me die of my measles!"

"Oh, Mimi, do behave," said Vera, laughing, not so much at the words as at the antics of the girl.

"And, now," Mimi went on, "I'm going down to the village to get a permanent. I didn't have time before I left home. Who wants to go with me?"

"I do," said Dicky Dunn, promptly.

"You don't count. Anyone else?"

"I do," I said. "That is, I'd like to go to the village, and I've some errands to do while you get curled up."

"All right, and then we'll meet again, and you can give me some ice cream sodas and then we'll come home."

We started off, just Mimi and Dunn and myself, leaving the others to a game of golf.

I left Mimi at the hairdresser's, and Dunn said he'd hang around the shop, so I went off about my business.

Two hours later, which was the time I was ordered to report, I collected Mimi and her swain, and we went for the prescribed sodas.

Mimi drank an astonishing number of them, for she said it was hot, dry work getting a permanent.

Her brown hair stood out wildly on all sides, and I wondered afresh why girls thought such curls pretty or attractive.

I remembered this was the sort of curls the unfortunate Hilda had, these wisps, like tiny corkscrews.

Mimi saw me studying it and laughed.

"It always looks horrid the first day," she said. "And I didn't have it set, I can do it better myself. Just you wait till you see it after I've put it into shape!"

"I'm sure it's beautiful," I told her hastily and mendaciously.

She had no hat on, and looking into the mirror that faced her as she sat at the soda counter, she began picking at her newly made curls, and frowning at her own reflection.

Two or three bits of string fell from her head or neck into her lap, and she gathered them up, laughing.

"The most primitive place, that barber's," she exclaimed. "You should have seen them struggling with the cords!"

"What are the cords for?" I asked, idly, taking the scraps she thrust at me because she wanted to get rid of them.

"Oh, they're part of the performance," she said. "You should have gone in with me. Every man ought to see a permanent wave put in once in his life! He'd never wish he was a woman after that!"

"Do they tie the curls?" I asked, stuffing her rubbish in my pocket, for the tea room where we were was immaculate.

"Yes, of course. Then they roast you in an electric heater. Oh, it's indescribable! The first time I had it done, I yelled like a house afire. But now I'm used to it."

"But why have it at all?" I persisted. "Why not soft natural curls like your sister's?"

Mimi withered me with a glance of deepest scorn.

"Natural your grandmother!" she said. "That's a permanent of Vera's, only it's been properly set."

I gave up, then. If Vera's curls were artificial, why then I preferred artificial curls to any other kind, and that was that.

We went on home, and it was not till I reached my own room that I remembered the scraps Mimi had given me, and I emptied my pocket into the waste basket.

At luncheon that day, the conversation turned on old times.

Mrs. Clevedon was interested and told funny anecdotes of John's capers as a small child.

The others laughed politely, though the stories were not so very amusing, but Clevedon himself seemed to me annoyed.

One or two of his mother's questions, he pretended not to hear, though I was certain he did hear them.

I thought he was silly and self-conscious to mind the little yarns his mother spun about his nursery days, which were harmless if vapid.

At last she repeated a question, more loudly.

"John, dear," she said, "what was the name of the dog that rescued you when you fell into the lake?"

"Carlo," he said, smiling at her.

“Nonsense, we never had a dog named Carlo.”

“Oh, yes we did, Mother dear. Don’t you remember?

A big Newfoundland—”

“But I mean the one who pulled you out of the lake by your little kilted skirt. You wore dresses then.”

“Oh, that dog. Yes, what was his name now?”

“You can’t have forgotten! His picture hangs in your room—”

“Oh, yes, old Nero, wasn’t it?”

“No, it wasn’t Nero. I don’t see how you can forget it.”

“But you’ve forgotten it—”

“Yes, but I’m growing forgetful.”

“So am I. Anyway, I can’t recall that dog’s name. Let it go, it will come to me later, and then I’ll tell you.”

Mrs. Clevedon said no more about it, but all through the rest of the meal, she was distraught and seemed to be trying to remember the dog’s name.

John looked at her regretfully now and then, and I was sorry for him. He always hated to have his mother annoyed, and I knew if he could remember the dog’s name he would tell her at once.

But after lunch, other matters cropped up and I think she forgot the incident. Yet when I went up to the study, I found John looking at the back of the framed picture of a dog.

“I hate to have Mother bothered,” he said, as I entered, “but for the life of me, I can’t think of that dog’s name. I thought it might be written on the back, but it isn’t. And I’ve no way to find out. Not a servant here now was here when I was in the nursery! How does she expect a kid of three or four years to remember the name of his dog?”

“Forget it, John,” I said, “I mean, forget the incident, as you’ve forgotten the dog. She’ll never think of it again—”

“Oh, won’t she? She’ll never let up on it till she gets the dog’s name in full. She’s funny that way.”

“People grow like that as they get older,” I said. “Take my advice and don’t let the thing bother you. If she asks you again, tell her you don’t know it, and let it go at that.”

“I’ll try it on. And maybe the fool dog’s name will come to me. I think now it was Prince or Duke—some such name as that.”

“I say, Clevedon, do you know Vera’s curls are not natural curls?”

He stared at me as if I had taken leave of my senses.

“What do you mean?”

“What I say. They are made with hot irons, and I’m so surprised.”

“Oakley, you’ll be the death of me yet!” Sitting down, Clevedon went off into peals of laughter. “What if they are made with hot irons? Of course, they are. I doubt if any girl has natural curls these days. They use hot irons from babyhood up, and the natural curl is burned out of the hair. But what’s it to you?”

“Not a thing—only it surprised me. You see, Vera’s curls look natural. Mimi’s don’t.”

“Oh, Mimi. She’s a youngster, and she doesn’t know how to fix herself up prettily, as Vera does.”

“No, she sure doesn’t,” I agreed.

Chapter 14

As To Permanent Waving

IT WAS SELDOM I saw any of the servants at Clevedon House, except those who belonged in the living-rooms when on duty.

But that evening, directly after dinner, I ran up to my bedroom to get a piece of carved jade that I had promised to show Vera. I had sat next her at dinner and we had a pleasant conversation about my trip abroad and what I had collected over there.

She was very sweet and gracious, and it was kind of her, for she had made many trips to Europe and my simple little excursion could not have interested her deeply. Yet it was a fine piece of jade that I possessed, and I was glad to exhibit it.

As I went into my bedroom I saw a housemaid there, turning down the bed for the night.

I paid no attention to her, but she was of a loquacious sort, and she spoke to me at once.

“Hello, Mr. Oakley,” she said, with a broad smile, “They’s a stitch dropped in your pyjimmies. Don’t you want I should mend it for you?”

“Why, yes, if you will be so good,” I returned, scarcely thinking of what I was saying. Pell kept my things in order, and if a button was loose or whatever the defect in the garment was, he would surely remedy it. But I answered the girl as I did, because I was absorbed in my search for the jade and I paid no heed to her.

“Whatcha lookin’ for? Can I help you find it?”

She came to my side, and I’m afraid I gave her a scowling glance, as I said:

“Get about your business. What are you doing? Are you one of the house chambermaids?”

“I’m a nextry they got in, ‘count o’ so much comp’ny. But I’m doin’ up your room all right. I’m goin’ to shine up the barth and I’ll set out your slipperjacks for your little tootsie-wootsies.”

I couldn't help laughing at the girl, she had such a round, moon-like face, and she was so evidently enjoying herself. I realized that she was a villager that had been brought in for the extra service needed, and that she had fallen to my lot in order that the guests might have the more properly trained maids.

"All right, Rosie," I said looking at her pink cheeks, "you fix everything all nice and proper for me. No, you can't help me in what I'm looking for—oh, here it is, I've found it."

I took the jade from its wrappings, and tossed the papers into the waste basket. They fell outside and Rosie, as I called her, not knowing her name, quickly picked them up.

She was about to throw them in the basket, when she exclaimed:

"My goodness, Mr. Oakley, sir, have you had a permanent?"

I turned to look at her. What could she mean by such a speech?

"Why, here's some permanent strings in your waste basket, sir."

She knelt down, and picked out two or three spirally curled cords, perhaps an inch long.

I looked at them, wondering what they were and where they had come from.

I was not specially interested except at a fleeting thought that somebody else had been using my room, for surely I never put them there.

"Yep," the girl went on, "somebody's had a perm. Of course it wasn't you, your hair's too short, but some girl just had one. Don't you know about it?"

Of course, I did. It came to me, all at once. Mimi had had a permanent that very morning, before she met me for the soda orgy.

"What are they, Rosie?" I asked. "Explain them to me."

"Why, when you get a perm, a permanent wave, you know, they ties your hair around little steel needles like. And then, when it's all over, they snips the cords, and they drops about everywhere. 'Course, they brushes you off, but lots of 'em cling, if you have fuzzy clothes on. So, I say, these is permanent strings. Now, how'd they get here?"

The ridiculous maid stood before me, her hands outspread and her big pale gray eyes fixed on my face.

I was about to tell her it was none of her business how they got there, but I suddenly thought that might rouse her curiosity and lead her to gossip about me. It was probably wiser to be frank.

So I said, "It's all right. I was down in the village this morning with one of the young ladies. She went to get a permanent wave, and on her return she did drop several of these curly strings about. We were in a tea room, so she gathered them up and handed them to me to dispose of. I stuck them in my pocket and never thought of them again, till I got home. Then I threw them away. Why don't the hair-dressing people brush their customers off?"

"They do, sir. Only some few of the little squirmers just cling on. Specially onto a fuzzy dress. Didn't she have on a fuzzy dress, or sweater?"

“Yes,” I said, recalling that Mimi had worn a sports suit of Angora wool, of just the right material to hold these clinging strings.

“Now, if you’re quite convinced, Rosie, that everything is all right, I’ll ask you to excuse me—”

“My name ain’t Rosie,” she said, ignoring my raillery.

“It is to me,” I said and gave her a smile as well as a more material token of my good will toward her.

I was so elated over my chance to talk with Vera, and so in hopes that she would accord me yet a little more of her attention when I showed her the jade that I included Rosie in my general ebullition of gladness.

Then I hurried downstairs again, and found Vera waiting for me in the library.

She was alone, and though surprised at this, I was very pleased.

“Where’s John?” I asked, as I sat down beside her on a big divan.

“He’s gone to his mother’s room. He thinks he remembers the name of the dog. Queer, how he forgot it—”

“No, I don’t think so,” I said. “Often, one forgets a thing like that, especially a name, and then after a day or two, it comes back to the memory. You know, though, Freud says such a lapse of memory only happens when the name in question is connected with some unpleasant memory or subconscious reminiscence.”

“Freud is too positive,” she said, with a little shake of her head.

“I think so, too,” I rejoined. “In this case, the dog was a favorite of John’s, not likely to be of any unpleasant memory, yet he has forgotten the name.”

“I know. Of course, there may have been unpleasant episodes connected with that dog also, but I don’t believe Freud’s theories are entirely correct.”

“No, nor I. Now, look at my treasure. Isn’t that a good bit of workmanship?”

She took the jade in her hands, and was exceedingly appreciative of its beauty.

We talked for some minutes about Oriental genius and its accomplishments and then, apropos of nothing, she said:

“Mr. Oakley, did you know John before he had the accident to his finger?”

“Only slightly,” I told her. “We crossed on the same steamer, and I saw him now and then on the boat, but I had only one conversation with him, and that was the day we landed.”

“You didn’t travel together after that?”

“Not at first. I next saw him in Welbury, several weeks later. It was there that his accident with the electric fan occurred.”

“How did you happen to meet there—you two?”

I hesitated for a moment, for I wasn't sure whether John had told her anything about the crime in the cathedral, and it was that that had led me to seek him out.

“I found out he was staying in the town, and I went to call on him,” I replied. “He received me cordially, and we struck up a real friendship almost at once.”

“He had hurt his finger then?”

“That very day. It happened early in the morning. By good fortune a doctor in town knew John, or, rather, knew his father and his people. So, he took great interest in his patient; sometimes, I thought, too great an interest.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Oh, nothing,” I said, realizing I had again led up to the Welbury mystery. “Only I wanted to talk to John and discuss lots of things, but the doctor was afraid any serious conversation would bring on a feverish condition. So Clevedon had to be kept quiet.”

“And then you became his secretary, then and there?”

“Yes. He had to have somebody to write for him, and look after his business affairs. The hotel servants could care for him, but he needed a right-hand man. So, he took me. You remember I wrote to you for him several times?”

“Yes, I remember,” she smiled. “The letters didn't sound at all like his own.”

“Didn't they? But that is easily explained. No chap could say the same when dictating to a secretary as he would if writing himself.”

“No, of course not. Here he comes, now. Well, John, dear, did you have the dog's name right?”

“No, but Mother remembered it. It was George. Silly name for a dog, small wonder I forgot it!”

“Yes, indeed. I've been telling Mr. Oakley how queer your letters sounded, when you first began to dictate them.”

“I'm sure they did, Vera. Old Mott, here, did his best, but I couldn't let myself go in an affectionate way, with his hand doing the writing, now, could I?”

“Of course not. But you can make up for all that now, can't you?”

She gave him a dazzling smile, and rising, she put her arm through his, and they walked away toward the terrace.

I watched them, as they went through the hall, and marked the lovely face turned to his own. To say I was envious would be putting it very mildly. I was not jealous, I had no right nor reason to be, but envious I surely was. They had gone off without a word to me, but that was nothing to cavil at. Why should they excuse themselves? Vera had been waiting for John to return from his mother's room, and when he came, I ceased to exist for her.

I sighed, but I had common sense. I knew I loved her, should never love anybody else, but I knew too it was a hopeless love.

They were to be married the following month, that much had been settled. And that wedding would come off, unless death intervened. No other catastrophe could interfere.

I toyed with the idea of killing John Clevedon, but concluded it was too difficult a matter to carry through successfully.

I can't think my thoughts were serious at all, but I was thinking about how the deed could be done, when Tremaine came along.

"What are you in a brown study about?" he asked. "What deep subject is occupying your mind behind that ominous frown?"

"Murder!" I said, willing to mystify him.

"Good Lord! Picked out your victim?"

"Yes, oh, yes."

"Does he know it?"

"I didn't say it was a he."

"Surely you wouldn't do in a lady! But, come on, we want a good fourth at bridge and if you don't come we'll have to use that Dicky bird."

So I went and we played most of the evening.

Later, we had an informal supper, and we were all gay.

Mimi disappeared for a time and then returned.

"I've seen your mother in bed, John," she announced, with an air of grave responsibility. "I'm her maid for two days and then Ugly Plum has some protégée of hers coming. I adore to be maid for your mother, she is so sweet and good to me. See, she gave me this bracelet!"

Mimi held up a slender arm, wearing a truly beautiful bracelet of beaten gold. Though evidently a relic of Mrs. Clevedon's younger days, it was quite in keeping with the type of jewelry worn now, and Mimi gazed at it with deepest satisfaction.

"Don't be a greedy, dear," Vera said, her eyes resting lovingly on her little sister.

"No, Vee, I'm not. Mrs. Clevedon just insisted I should have it."

"It's all right," John said, smiling. "Mother has quantities of such gimcracks. Take all she offers you, Mimi."

"Yes, I shall. And looking after her is fun. She's so dear and quaint about her clothes and things."

“Are you to sleep in her dressing-room?” Vera asked.

“No, she won’t let me. But I’m to look in, when I go to bed, and see that she’s sleeping all right.”

And then Mimi devoted herself to taking part in the feast that was under way. And afterward there was dancing, and it was nearly two o’clock before we sought our beds.

I was in a fever of excitement thinking about Vera and how beautiful she was. I had no fear of myself, I mean, no fear that I should ever let her know, or let Clevedon know how I adored her. I was not the sort to covet my neighbor’s wife. I was happy in being under the same roof, in breathing the same air that she did.

But I did tell myself that if things got much worse, that is, if I found I couldn’t live without giving my secret away, then I must leave Clevedon House.

There was no question about that. I would tell John the truth, and go away where I would never see either of them again.

So I went to sleep, my mind filled with dreams of my darling, and my resolves stern and strong to say or do nothing that could ever be construed as disloyalty to my friend and employer.

Having a clear conscience, no matter how my poor heart might be torn, I slept soundly, and was awakened the next morning by a knocking on my door.

I glanced at my watch, saw it was not yet eight o’clock, and wondered what could be the matter.

“Come in,” I called out, for I never locked my bedroom door at night.

Pell entered with a grave face, and closed the door behind him.

“Mr. Oakley,” he said, “a strange thing has happened.”

“Out with it, man,” I said, “don’t beat about the bush.”

“Well, sir, Mrs. Clevedon has disappeared.”

“Disappeared?” I said, a little stupidly, but I could think of nothing to say save to repeat the astonishing word.

“Yes, sir. She can’t be found.”

“Can’t be found?” And then I realized I was babbling like a parrot.

“Look here, Pell,” I said, sitting up in bed, “tell me all there is to tell.”

“Which is nothing at all, sir, except what I said. Mrs. Clevedon is not in her room. She has been searched for all over the house, but there is no trace of her.”

“Kidnapped? Impossible!”

“There seems to be no explanation, sir,” Pell vouchsafed. “Will you get up now, sir?”

“Of course,” and I sprang out of bed. “What is Mr. Clevedon doing?”

“Oh, he’s nearly distracted, sir. He helped hunt the house, but what use is that? Mrs. Clevedon never left her own apartments at night.”

“She must have done so, Pell, if she isn’t in them. Perhaps she had a stroke—I don’t mean paralytic, but mental—and she wandered away, not knowing what she was doing.”

“Maybe so, Mr. Oakley. Anyways, sir, you get dressed and go down to help Mr. Clevedon.”

“Of course,” I cried, and I accepted more of Pell’s help than I usually allowed him to give me.

Then I ran downstairs and found Clevedon in the hall. He sat on a big Davenport, the picture of utter despair.

“Oh, Mott,” he called out as I came in sight, “have you heard?”

“Yes, yes,” I said, “but don’t look so upset. She can’t be far away. I think she had a seizure of some sort that affected her brain, and she got up and wandered off somewhere, unconscious of what she was about.”

“Oh, do you think that? I hope you’re right. I keep thinking somebody came in and attacked her—”

“Then, she’d be there now. It’s too absurd to think she was kidnapped, and if somebody wished to harm her, she’d—she’d be there.”

“Yes, yes, I suppose so. But theorizing does no good, Mott. What can we do to find her? To save her—oh, Mother, Mother!”

He broke down for a moment, but quickly recovered himself, saying, “Forgive me, old man, but I’m all broken up.”

“No wonder,” I returned, “but we must do a lot of searching before we give up hope.”

I wanted to get more particulars, but I disliked to ask John anything about the harrowing details.

“Where’s the nurse?” I asked of Griffin, who was in and out all the time.

“She was in Mrs. Clevedon’s room, last I know,” the butler said. “She discovered the lady was gone—”

But I was already half-way upstairs as he spoke.

Thoughts came surging to my mind.

Here was a detective case, to be sure. And certainly John Clevedon would put his mind to work on this. He couldn’t take time from his own affairs to look into the death of a maidservant, but the disappearance of his own mother surely would lead him to do all he could in the detective line.

Yet, what could we do, but to search for the lady? And, no doubt, half the staff of servants, or more, were even now looking through the grounds, as others were searching the house.

I reached Mrs. Clevedon's rooms, to find Nurse Plum standing in the doorway of the little private hall that led to the apartment.

"I'm glad you've come," she whispered, and motioned me inside.

"Now, tell me everything," I ordered, not wanting her to waste time in useless lament.

"I came to the door as usual, this morning at quarter of eight," she said. "I always go down to the pantry at seven thirty, and Griffin fixes me a tray with Mrs. Clevedon's early tea on it. Then, I bring it in to her, and while she is taking it, I go down and have my own breakfast. After that, the routine of the day begins. I went down as usual, this morning, and Griffin fixed the tray and gave it to me. I came up here with it, and went into the bedroom, the doors are never locked, and Mrs. Clevedon was not in her bed. I looked in the bathroom, and in her dressing-room, and then I went into the sitting-room, but she was nowhere to be seen. That's positively all I know about it. After I had hunted everywhere in these rooms, I went back downstairs and told Griffin. He came up and took a look around, then he went and told Mr. Clevedon."

"Has Mr. Clevedon been up here?"

"Oh, yes, he came at once, as soon as he had partly dressed. But what could he do? He was dazed, or, at least, he could think of no explanation of her absence. Then he said, 'What do you think, Nurse Plum?' and I said I could only think that the poor lady had got up in the night and wandered away."

"Her bed has been slept in," I said, looking at the thrown-back covers.

"Oh, yes, she went to bed and to sleep all right—"

"How do you know she went to sleep?"

"Well, the pillows look like it, and, too, I put her to bed myself as usual, and when I left her at half past ten, she was just beginning to doze off."

"Was she different last night from usual—in any way?"

"Not different, exactly, but she was excited and nervous. I thought nothing of it, as she has been more or less like that ever since the company came. She can't stand excitement, and yet she never was willing to keep out of whatever was going on."

"Could she get out of doors?"

"Oh, yes, she could get out in a number of ways. But I can't think she did go out. It's so unlike her."

"Then you think she's in the house still?"

"Well—unless she was taken out—"

"Dead?" I said, so suddenly that Miss Plum jumped.

"How abrupt you are! Well, yes, I can't keep the idea of tragedy out of my mind. Remember poor Hilda."

"Oh," I said, catching her idea, "some brute skulking about with a homicidal mania—"

“Oh, I don’t know! I didn’t mean that! Don’t quote me as—”

“I shan’t quote you at all, Miss Plum. But we must all tell all we know and do all we can to help Mr. Clevedon through with this terrible thing. What did Mrs. Clevedon wear when she disappeared? I mean did she put on shoes—”

Miss Plum hastened to look.

“I never thought of that!” she said. “No, here are her bedroom slippers just where I placed them for her last night. And here is her dressing gown, she must have gone, wherever she did go, clad merely in her nightdress.”

“Unless she dressed entirely, in street clothes,” I suggested. “If she was seized with some sudden dementia she could dress herself and wander off, you know.”

“I suppose so,” Miss Plum agreed, and she hunted in several clothes closets and wardrobes.

“I don’t miss any costumes,” she said, at last. “Nor any shoes or hat. I can’t think she could dress herself entirely without leaving some signs. See, her comb and brush are untouched. I always arrange her toilet table the last thing at night. She is annoyed if it isn’t in perfect order each morning. She couldn’t have done up her hair, without disarranging the things more or less.”

“It would seem so,” I agreed, looking at the straight row of toilet implements and accessories, quite evidently just as the nurse’s hand had left them.

“I think, Miss Plum,” I said, at last, “this whole apartment would better be locked up. I don’t know what may eventuate, but if it should be necessary to call in the police, it is wiser to have the rooms untouched.”

Miss Plum turned a shade paler, but made no objection as I gently pushed her out of the door into the hall, and locking it, I put the key in my pocket.

“Now, do you go and get your breakfast,” I said to her. “There will be busy hours for you ahead, if any of the visiting ladies go into hysterics or have fainting fits.” She gave me a curious look, which I could not read, but she went off at once and disappeared down a corridor that led to the servants’ quarters.

Slowly I went downstairs myself, and found groups here and there all over the house. I sought out John Clevedon, who was in the library with Vera and Mimi Liddell.

Chapter 15

The Missing Lady

“OH, MR. OAKLEY,” Mimi cried, jumping up and seizing me by the arm, “you can find her, can’t you? You’ll know just what to do, I’m sure. And I’ll help you, I’ll—”

“Be quiet, Mimi,” Vera said to her. “Don’t be so forward, dear. If you can do anything to help, John will tell you so.”

“What do you think best be done, John?” I asked him, ignoring Mimi. “Of course, the grounds have been searched?”

“Yes,” he replied turning his haggard face toward me. “They’re still hunting out there, I believe. But, Oakley, she couldn’t go far. She was too weak, too fragile to stand a long tramp. And if she had fallen by the way, she would have been found before this. I’d go out and join the search, but there are any number of the servants hunting about everywhere, and Tremaine and Dicky have taken it in charge, and they are directing the men.”

“No, John,” I advised, “you stay here. You could do nothing outside, more than the men are doing, and you’d better be here, anyway. Miss Plum tells me she notes no missing garments—not even shoes or a wrap. I can’t think Mrs. Clevedon went out of doors wearing only her nightdress. Even if she didn’t know what she was doing, she would throw on a wrap, unconsciously.”

“Of course, she would,” Vera said. It was the first word I had heard her say, and I was shocked at the hollow sound of her voice. She seemed not only frightened, but stunned, dazed by fear. Her eyes were staring at John, and though she tried to control herself, I felt she might go to pieces at any minute.

“Have you had your breakfast?” I asked her, and she shook her head.

“Come on, all of you,” I said, rising. “We must eat, if only to fortify ourselves for the day, whatever it may bring forth. And any news will reach us in the diningroom as well as here.”

Herding the group ahead of me, I made them all go to the breakfast room, where Griffin awaited any who might come.

Mrs. Shaw and Miss Saunders were there, all the men being out on the grounds of the estate, directing the search for some trace of Mrs. Clevedon.

Mrs. Shaw was an amiable little person, and so overcome by the tragedy in which she found herself enmeshed, that she said almost nothing.

Sally Saunders, on the other hand, was babbling wildly.

“Oh, John, John,” she cried, as Clevedon appeared, “where do you think she can be? What can have happened to your mother? That dear sweet lady! Who could have harmed her—”

“We don’t know yet that anybody harmed her, Sally,” Clevedon replied, gently. “I can’t help thinking Mother wandered away in a sudden aberration of mind. Such strokes come suddenly, you know, and unexpectedly.”

“But, John,” Vera said, still speaking in that strange, hollow voice, so unlike her own, “If she took no wrap, put on no shoes, she can’t have gone out of doors. She would have been seen and brought home by this time. It seems to me she must still be in the house. I think, with you, she lost her mind, suddenly, and then she wandered about the house. Perhaps up in some attic or—”

“The house has been searched, dear,” John said, patiently, “but I’ll have a further hunt made. Griffin, see to it that someone goes all over the house. Send Bates, or go yourself, but have a reliable, determined sort of man.”

“Yes, sir, I’ll see to it at once.”

Griffin went off, and we all knew he would attend to the matter properly and at once.

“Do try to eat something, dear,” John said, as Vera toyed with her coffee spoon. “For my sake.”

“Yes, John,” and she gave him a wan smile.

“Now, we’re doing something!” Sally Saunders exclaimed with a look of relief on her face, as she helped herself to more waffles. “If you have competent searchers in the house and outside, too, they must find the dear lady. She can’t have vanished off the face of the earth.”

“Who saw her last?” asked Mrs. Shaw, who was addicted to detective stories.

“Why, I suppose the nurse did,” John replied, looking uncertain. “You see, Mother has no maid for the moment. One is coming on Thursday, I believe, but just now—”

“Just now, I’m maiding her,” Mimi spoke up, her mouth full of buttered muffin. “And, I daresay,” she paused to swallow, and nearly choked, but picked up the thread of her story again, “I daresay I was the last one to see her last night.”

“What time was that?” Mrs. Shaw had all the earmarks of a fiction detective.

I looked at the demure little lady in amazement. I had given her no thought save to realize that she was a bride, or near bride, and was so in love with her brand-new husband that she thought of little else. And here she was questioning a witness!

“Well,” Mimi answered, “I knew Nurse Plum put her to bed at about half past ten, so I thought she was all right for a while. Then, you know, we had supper about midnight, and I thought I’d run up and take a look at her before I went to the dining-room. So I did, and she was awake, and lively as a cricket. She gave me that beautiful bracelet. I tucked her up and kissed her good-night, and went downstairs again. Then, when I went to bed, ’long about two o’clock, I guess, I stepped in her room, softly, and she was sound asleep, looking as peaceful as anything. And that’s all I know about it. I went straight to my own room and to bed and to sleep.”

Little Mrs. Shaw nodded her head in a wise way, and I began to think that she didn’t really know anything, after all, but was repeating, parrotlike, the sort of queries the fictional detectives always put.

Clevedon gave me an almost imperceptible smile, as much as to say that Mrs. Shaw didn’t amount to anything, and I returned a faint nod.

After a time the men of the house party returned, and Tremaine gave it out that there was absolutely no trace of Mrs. Clevedon’s presence anywhere about, and in his opinion we’d better call in the police.

“I’m ready to do whatever is right and best,” John said. “Sit down, Tremaine, and you other fellows, and have some food. We have a search on in the house. If that brings out nothing, then I think, too, we must call the police. I hate to see those chaps here again, but it is the only thing to do.”

John was calmer now, and I attributed it to the fact that at least nothing terrible had been discovered. I well knew his disposition to hope for the best, and, though he didn’t say so, I was sure he still thought Mrs. Clevedon’s absence could be explained in some commonplace way.

I hoped that, too, and I tried to picture her hiding mischievously, in some unused attic, to tease her son.

But that didn’t at all fit in with my acquaintance thus far with the dignified lady, and I waited, in eager impatience for the result of the renewed house search.

But when at last, Griffin brought word of the matter, it was only to say that a thorough and exhaustive search of the whole house had revealed nothing.

“You’re sure they looked everywhere?” John asked him.

“Yes, sir. I put Bates on the job, and he had several men with him, and two or three of the maids to go into the ladies’ rooms. But there was no sign of Mrs. Clevedon’s having been in any of the rooms but her own.”

“Then I don’t know what to do,” Clevedon said, in utter despair. “Advise me, Oakley.”

I was a bit flattered that he referred to me rather than to his own chums and I answered, straightforwardly; “I think, old man, you’d better telephone the police. If they can discover your mother’s whereabouts, we must not delay for an instant, letting them get a start. And if they can’t find her, there is, after all, no harm done.”

“That’s right,” Tremain agreed. “Want me to call ’em, Clevedon?”

“Yes,” John said, “I wish you would. Oh, Vera, darling, I’m so sorry this trouble had to come to spoil your visit. I can’t think—I won’t think there is any real tragedy, I think—I hope we will find her, with or without police assistance. But if they can hurry up matters let’s have them. Finish your breakfast first, Tom.”

“I’ve had all I want,” and Tremain rose from the table and went to the hall booth to telephone.

“Seems ’sif I can’t stand it,” Clevedon groaned. “That awful scene with the maid—and now Mother gone.”

I gave a start. Mistress and maid! Could there be any connection?

But I said nothing about it. I didn’t want to stir up John with idle questions, and Tremain, the only one in whom I felt confidence of real wisdom and judgment was not there.

Young Shaw, the bridegroom, was a normal, proper sort, but a man of no ingenuity or imagination, while Sammy Saunders, the brother of Sally, was just such a gay young blade as Dicky Dunn, and the pair of them were not worth talking to, when it came to a matter of deep thinking.

So I said nothing of what was in my mind, and soon Tremain returned, saying the police were already on their way over.

Clevedon became suddenly very much more composed, and took the situation strongly in hand.

“I don’t know what the police will do,” he said, “but I fancy they will want to interview all of us. I’m sorry, but I shall have to ask you all to answer their questions if they want you to.”

One and all, of course, agreed to do this, and the ladies repaired to their rooms to put on more formal dress, for they had assembled en négligé.

“What do you really think, Oakley?” Clevedon said, looking at me with such a piteous face that I was fain to cheer him all I could.

“Oh, John, I don’t know what to think. But your mother must be safe somewhere, for if she were not, we would have found some trace of her.”

I was going to say, “some trace of her body,” but stopped just in time, as I saw John whiten at the thought of foul play.

“There’s always the kidnapping theory,” Tremaine said. “I know it sounds absurd to think of a grown person being abducted, but it may be that someone has it in for Clevedon, and that the killing of that girl and the disappearance of Mrs. Clevedon are the work of the same malignant mind.”

“But I haven’t any enemies,” Clevedon asserted, “at least, none that I know of, who would want to crucify me so wickedly. And, too, Tremaine, if you should be right, I mean if Mother is kidnapped, I shall be glad to pay the ransom, whatever it is, if I can get her back. Oh, to think she may be in the clutches of some ruffian—”

“Nonsense!” sang out Sam Saunders. “Nobody would be rough to a gentle little lady like that. No, Clevedon, your mother hasn’t been abducted. She’s had a temporary clouding of her intellect, and she’s wandered off, and somehow has so far eluded the search party. Buck up, old chap, we’ll find her yet, and bring her home in triumph.”

This was mere balderdash, and we all knew it, but it was meant well, for Sam was a good-natured, optimistic sort and always looked on the bright side.

Soon the police came and I felt a sinking of my spirits to see again the sheriff, Marsh, and the county detective, Potter.

Thank God, there was no coroner, and so far as we knew, no reason for his appearance.

The sheriff was very grave and his pomposity was still in evidence. He looked at us all with a stern and accusing glance, as if to say he suspected each and every one of us of wrongdoing, and he was the man to show us up.

He reeled off a string of questions as to the principal facts and Tremaine and I answered them, for we wanted to spare Clevedon all we could.

At last he was acquainted with the general state of the case, and he declared he would have to collect the whole household, guests, servants, and all, while he made a more thorough inquiry.

So we assembled in the great hall.

John and I, with the men of the house party, sat in front, and back of us hovered Griffin and Pell, both determined to be near us whatever happened. Then came the ladies, in a group by themselves, and accompanied by Nurse Plum, and a few of the visiting ladies.

Behind, were the other servants of the house and of the outdoor staff.

Bates with two or three assistants was allowed to stay outside the hall to look after the place generally, and attend to callers or errands.

The sheriff was clearly nonplussed. He wanted to ask questions, but he sensed the situation at once, and knew his questions must go unanswered.

If he had any suspicion of the possible guilt of any one present, he did not show it, and the detective, Potter, was equally non-committal.

“This isn’t really an inquiry,” Marsh began, and his sternness seemed to soften a little as he looked at the weeping women and the grave-faced men. “It is rather an endeavor to get some clues or some hints as to which way to look for the missing lady. As I did not know her at all, I will ask something of her habits. Did she ever leave her room at night, and wander about the house?”

He looked around as if the most likely person would give him answer.

Noticing this, Clevedon nodded his head at Miss Plum, who took the hint.

“No,” the nurse replied. “I have been with Mrs. Clevedon about four months and she never left her rooms at night, to my knowledge.”

“She was perfectly clear, as to her mind?”

“Yes, so far as I could tell. She has never said or done anything that seemed the least bit queer. Even if weak or tired, she was always perfectly clear-headed.”

“Yet, a sudden stroke or seizure might derange her mind, I suppose?”

“Yes, of course,” Nurse Plum agreed. “And, indeed, that must have been what happened, at least, I can think of nothing else.”

“Probably that was it,” said the sheriff, musingly. “I can’t suggest any other theory, as yet. But, in such a case, I can’t see how she would get far enough from home to remain undetected by the searchers. Was she strong enough for a long walk?”

“Not normally,” the nurse said. “She was frail, and seldom walked at all. But dementia sometimes lends artificial strength.”

“Yes, so I’ve heard. She may have managed to reach the house of a neighbor, and may have urged them not to communicate with you.”

“They would tell us, in any case,” Miss Plum exclaimed to this. “If she forbade them to let us know, she would be out of her head, and if that were the case, they would disregard her wishes.”

“Yes, just what I was about to say myself,” the sheriff observed, suavely. “Now, if you please, I’ll ask a few general questions of each of you here present.” His questions were almost entirely as to when and where each had last seen Mrs. Clevedon.

John told of his going to his mother’s room soon after dinner, to tell her about the name of a dog she had been trying to remember.

“She remembered it, John,” Mimi interrupted, “it was you who forgot it.”

“That’s right,” and John smiled at her. “Well, anyway, I thought I had it, and I went to tell her so. That was about ten o’clock. It seems I didn’t have the dog’s name right after all.”

“What was the name of the dog?” asked the sheriff, a little amused.

“It was George.”

“Funny name for a dog.”

“Yes, that’s why I forgot it, I suppose. But Mother said we got the dog on Washington’s birthday, and so we named it George. Well, we had a laugh over it and I stayed a little longer talking to her, and then the nurse came to put her to bed, and I came downstairs again. That was the last time I saw her.”

His pained eyes looked at the sheriff, as if begging him to help if he could.

Nurse Plum corroborated John’s story, and said she then put Mrs. Clevedon to bed, as usual, and left the room at half past ten, as was her custom.

“Was Mrs. Clevedon then asleep?”

“Oh, no. She seldom goes to sleep before two or three o’clock. She is a very poor sleeper in the earlier hours. She has a book always, and reads a little off and on.”

“That was the last you saw of the lady, then?”

“The very last. I said good-night, and left her exactly as I always do.”

Mimi came next, with her tale of going to Mrs. Clevedon’s room at midnight, when the lady was awake, and they had a chat, and she gave the girl a bracelet.

“You saw her again?”

“Yes, but she was asleep. I looked into her bedroom on my way to bed, and I saw her by the dim night light. She was sleeping peacefully, and she was snoring a little.

I noticed she was lying on her back, but as I didn’t want to waken her, I left her as she was. I didn’t know but it was her habit to sleep lying that way.”

“And you didn’t see her again?”

“No. I thought, as I went to bed, I’d wake up about daybreak, and go to look at her again. But I didn’t waken until I was called at half past eight.”

“Why did you think it necessary to go to look at her again?”

Mimi stared a little.

“Only because I was, in a way, in charge of her. And I feared if she lay on her back too long, she might have a nightmare or something like that. But I slept soundly, and when I was awakened, they told me Mrs. Clevedon was—gone.”

No one, then, seemed to have seen the lady after Mimi’s last glimpse of her, sleeping, at two o’clock or thereabouts.

Everybody else was questioned, but according to the testimony, no other person, guest or servant, had seen or heard Mrs. Clevedon later than that.

No one had heard a step in the halls or on the stairs. No one had heard a door open or close, or a window raised or lowered.

So far as the evidence went, the whole night passed in peaceful stillness and if Mrs. Clevedon left the house of her own accord, or if she was carried away, no one heard or saw her go.

“It is a very strange affair,” Marsh commented. “Mysterious disappearances are not rare, they happen frequently, but usually there is some way in which to look for some person to suspect. Coming, as it does, on the heels of that other unsolvable mystery, the murder of the girl, Hilda, I can’t help feeling the cases are in some way connected. You can think of no enemy, Mr. Clevedon, who may have wished harm to you or your family?”

“No,” John told him, quietly. “I can think of no such person, and I am sure there is no such person. As you know, I have been away for several months, and I left no enemies behind me when I went, nor have I made any since my return.”

“And you made none while you were away? You didn’t incur the wrath of any one abroad? Any foreigner, or any evil-disposed man?”

John flashed me a glance of slight amusement.

“No,” he said, “I made no acquaintances over there, except casual tourists, here and there. Save for Mr. Oakley, of course. I brought him home with me, as I did also my valet, Pell. But neither of these are evil-disposed men.”

But Marsh did not smile. I thought, as I looked at him, that he was making a note in his mind to run down Pell and me, in hope of finding a criminal.

Pell did not take it so easily, and I saw an ominous frown gather between his eyes. I had never quite understood Pell, but I always believed him to be of a class above the station he now occupied.

But he fulfilled his duties to perfection, and, if he had more brains than he pretended to, he never exhibited their workings before us.

His turn came later, with the other servants; mine came sooner, with the guests; but neither of us, nor any other person interrogated that morning, could give the slightest clue to the inexplicable disappearance of Mrs. Clevedon.

All had seen her at dinner time. She had seemed just as usual, no sign of any perturbation or nervous weariness.

After dinner, she had soon gone to her own apartments. This was not unusual, for she tired easily and she took little part in the young people’s pleasures.

Then, only the nurse and Mimi Liddell and John Clevedon were known to have seen the lady.

There was no explanation, therefore, save that she had wandered off by herself or had been taken off by somebody else. What other theory was possible?

“We must make a search of the house,” Marsh stated.

Half a dozen voices joined in telling him that exhaustive search had been made, not only of the house, but of the whole estate. And that, indoors or out, there was no sign of Mrs. Clevedon's presence at any time.

"I know you've looked," Marsh said, with an air of tolerance, "but what kind of sheriff would I be to take hearsay evidence in a case like this? I must have my own people make a search, and it must be done at once."

"You want to go into Mrs. Clevedon's apartments?" I asked.

"Of course. We want to go over the whole house."

"Then here's the key to her hall door," I said, taking it from my pocket.

"You locked it?" he exclaimed, a little surprised.

"Yes," I said, "I thought you'd rather see it untouched, as the lady left it."

"Right, sir, we certainly would. Potter, take this key and go ahead with your search. I'll join you presently. I suppose no other rooms in the house are locked?"

"None that I know of," I said, and nobody else said anything.

Yet the whole atmosphere seemed suddenly to have grown tense, as if something had happened or was about to happen.

The sheriff asked a few more general questions, asked that one or two servants might be detailed to show him the way about, and then further requested that none of us leave the house until his return from a search of the rooms.

What he expected to find, that we had overlooked, I could form no notion. I myself had looked in Mrs. Clevedon's rooms, in her cupboards, wardrobes and clothes closets, and I knew she was not in hiding there.

Others had made thorough search of the whole house, and yet, here we sat, trembling at the thought of what the police might find.

John sat beside Vera, her hand clasped in his own, and both of them were looking down in seeming despair.

What did they know? What did they fear?

But everybody appeared to be imbued with the same spirit of dread. Even the irrepressible Dicky and his chum, Sam, were fairly trembling with nervousness.

Tremaine sat, stern and quiet, his arms folded and his eyes closed.

Most of the women were crying, and the servants were wriggling with awkwardness and embarrassment.

Then Potter came slowly downstairs, reaching the bottom step before Marsh had started up to join him.

"I have found Mrs. Clevedon," Potter said.

Chapter 16

Found!

“WHERE IS SHE? Let me go to her!” John cried, springing from his seat beside Vera.

“No, no, wait a moment, Mr. Clevedon,” and Potter looked at him sympathetically. “I want Sheriff Marsh to come with me first.”

Marsh jumped up and the two men hastened up the stairs.

We all sat dumbly wondering what had happened, but feeling sure it was tragedy and of a very serious nature.

It seemed as if those two men would never return, and yet no one spoke. No one could bring himself to voice his fears, or to utter any words of hope or cheer.

At last, Marsh came slowly down the stairs.

He looked round on the waiting group, and then said, slowly:

“I think nothing can be gained by trying to delay the news I have for you. I think it best to tell frankly and at once the true state of the case. We have discovered the body of Mrs. Clevedon. She has been—killed—willfully and brutally murdered.”

Involuntarily, my eyes turned to Clevedon and Vera, and I am afraid I was more concerned for her than for him.

Of course, I realized at once what a blow it was to John, and all that, but my heart went out to that lovely, gentle girl, and I dreaded to have her in the atmosphere of horror that must necessarily ensue.

Then I brought myself up with a round turn. Vera had plenty of people to care for her; I had no right or reason to assume any responsibility regarding her. My duty was to my employer, and my duty was plain.

I turned to Clevedon, and said:

“Don’t go upstairs, at least, not yet. I will go up and I will represent you.”

He gave me an understanding glance, but he said:

“Thank you, Oakley, but I must go. I must know what has happened. Miss Plum, please look after Miss Liddell.”

The nurse came to Vera’s side, and John, with a quick, firm step joined the sheriff and followed him up the stairs.

I went after them, without waiting for an invitation, and Pell followed me.

“Keep the others back,” I said to Griffin, over my shoulder, but Tremaine had already started and would not go back.

So we went upstairs, and Potter met us in the hall, and conducted us to Mrs. Clevedon's suite.

He took us to the bedroom, and strange thoughts flashed through my mind. These rooms had been searched and then locked up. How could the lady, dead or alive, be here?

And then I saw.

I was so overcome that I didn't even glance at John or at anyone else.

The large box that was kept under the bed had been dragged out and opened.

And in it, lying straight and still, was the body of Mrs. Clevedon.

And she was clad only in her lace-trimmed nightdress, and in her breast had been plunged a dagger, that had brought death to her.

A silver dagger, it looked like, and in a moment, I realized that it was the great silver skewer that John had brought to her from England.

Her eyes were closed, and there was no sign of blood or anything save her waxy pallor, to show she was not merely sleeping.

I drew a step nearer, fascinated by the strange sight.

The box was used as a treasure chest, and in it she had kept many of her choicest belongings. I had seen it before. One day she had it rolled out—it was on casters—to get something from it to show me, some old piece of tapestry, I think it was.

And now, the body lay on a mass of gay-colored fabrics, Oriental silk scarves, embroidered shawls, and spangled veils.

Aside from the horror of it, it was a beautiful sight, for death had added an ethereal beauty to the patrician features, and the masses of exquisite fabrics formed a picturesque background.

But the round ring which was the handle of the antique silver skewer showed among the laces of the silk nightdress with a sinister note that struck a chill to my heart.

"Who had done it?" rang in my brain to the exclusion of all present considerations.

Then I pulled myself together. John was staring, as if hypnotized by the scene before him.

The two policemen stood back, not wanting to intrude on the son's grief. Tremaine, too, kept in the background, while Pell and I, on opposite sides of the dead woman, stared into one another's eyes.

What we saw, I don't know, but we mutually dropped our eyes and looked elsewhere.

At last John spoke. He was composed, as he always was in an emergency.

"Some evil fate pursues me," he said, with a solemn gaze at us all. "I don't know who killed my mother, but it must have been for some very grave reason. It doesn't look like the work of a madman, yet I can think of no sane motive. As God is my witness, I have no enemy, that I know of, who would have done

this thing. I see no possible explanation, I can conceive of no theory that would explain it. But it shall be avenged. Perhaps I was too indifferent in the matter of the maid's death, but my mother—"

He broke down utterly, and turned from us and went away to his own rooms.

"Leave him alone for a bit," I begged. "Give him a few moments to himself. He will come out of it, brave and strong to take up his burden."

"That's right," agreed Potter. "Let the poor man be, till he can pull himself together. We've got our work cut out for us, Marsh."

"I'll say so. Mr. Oakley, I suppose you represent Mr. Clevedon in any matter of decision?"

"I suppose I do," I answered, uncertainly. "At any rate, I'll do all I can, and I, too, think he will soon come back to take the helm. Meantime, I will do what I can. I suppose the first thing is to acquaint the guests with the facts. Then, send them home—"

"No, no," the sheriff contradicted me, "not send them home until after the coroner's inquest."

"Good Lord!" I groaned, "another session of that sort?"

"Yes, indeed," Marsh told me. "And a very important one. The murder of a lady like Mrs. Clevedon is a different matter from the killing of a housemaid."

"Who could have done it, Marsh?" I asked. "Never mind clues or evidence, but by and large, what theory would cover it?"

"Can't say yet, but it looks like somebody in the house."

"But that's nonsense. Nobody in the house would want to do it. Not one of the servants but adored Mrs. Clevedon, if they knew her. And the outside men or kitchen underlings would have no reason to kill her."

"Well, there's a lot of guests—" Marsh suggested.

"Yes, and they must be questioned," Tremaine put in. "We demand thorough investigation. Suspicion will rest on any or all of us until this thing is cleared up."

"I'll go downstairs, and see what I can do with the crowd," I said. "There will be a terrible scene."

"I'll go with you," Potter said, and I well knew he wanted to note the reactions of individuals to the shocking news. "Also, I'll send for the doctor, I mean the family physician, and the coroner."

"Are both necessary?" I asked.

"It's customary," he said bluntly, and I held my peace.

Downstairs, I let Potter tell the news of the tragedy.

I meant to do it myself, but thought better of it. My brain was whirling. There were so many things I wanted to do, all at once. What detective instinct I possessed was awakened to life, and I thought of a thousand ways to look for clues.

Then I saw Vera, and to my surprise, there seemed to be a look of appeal in her beautiful eyes.

As John was not there, I went straight to her, for was it not my duty to take Clevedon's place wherever I could?

"You tell me," she whispered, and I sat down beside her.

"It's pretty awful," I warned her. "Somebody stabbed Mrs. Clevedon and concealed her body in that large flat box that is kept beneath her bed."

"Oh," Mimi screamed, overhearing me. "Why, she keeps her best things in that box. She pulled it out last night to get out that bracelet for me. The box rolls easily on its casters, she's always pulling it in and out. Who killed her?"

"We don't know," I said, "and Mimi, dear, don't show so much excitement. Try to act like a grown-up and not like a troublesome child."

As it happened I gave just the right advice. It stung her pride a little and she calmed down at once, saying, "Good for you, Mott! That's just the dope I need. Now, you buck up, Vera."

The strange little girl walked away, evidently bent on learning something from Detective Potter's talk, and I turned to Vera.

"She was stabbed with that big old silver skewer that John brought home to her. It lay on her table, you know, so it must have been caught up by the murderer, and that proves an unpremeditated crime. I should say a burglar entered the house, and finding Mrs. Clevedon awake, and perhaps about to give an alarm, he snatched up that skewer and killed her."

"But that wouldn't explain putting the body in the bed-box," she mused.

"No, unless the killer was a homicidal maniac, with strange vagaries."

"It must have been something of that sort," she agreed. "Poor John—where is he?"

"He was overcome with grief and shock, and he went to his room, to be alone for a few minutes. He'll doubtless appear shortly."

"Yes—I wonder if I ought to go to him—"

"No," I advised. "He'll be better by himself for a little. If he doesn't come to you soon, you might go to seek him."

She seemed quite contented to follow my advice, and I marvelled at her calm. Then I realized that she was partially dazed, and her mind was not working alertly. She followed the line of least resistance, and when I advised her to stay quietly where she was, she was glad to do so.

Mimi, on the other hand, was very wide-awake and alert. Remembering my warning, she was making no commotion, but was hovering near the detective and listening to all that was said by everybody.

And they seemed to be all talking at once. Save for Tremaine and Mrs. Shaw, and the two Liddell girls, everybody present was asking questions or voicing opinions until I began to think the detective would order them to be quiet.

But from his close attention to what they were saying, I realized he was taking it all in, hoping to glean some information that would be helpful to him.

And then, the doctor came.

I hadn't seen Doctor Golden since he had been there on a similar errand for the ill-fated Hilda, and I couldn't help contrasting the difference in his attitude on that occasion and this.

But it was not surprising that there should be a different procedure in the case of a servant and the lady of the house.

Without heeding us, the doctor went straight to the room where the body lay, still in its strange bed.

He was gone but a short time, and returned with the brief report that Mrs. Clevedon had been stabbed to death with the silver skewer, used as a dagger. That she had been dead about eight hours, as nearly as he could judge. This would place the hour of her death at three o'clock in the morning, or thereabouts, an hour or so after Mimi saw her sleeping soundly.

Doctor Golden seemed to be in great haste, and having made his report, he hurried away, pleading a stress of duties.

However, he had done all he could, and we waited for the coroner to follow.

The Shaws and the Saunderses were already planning to go home. They were not unsympathetic or unfeeling, but they could be of no use, and they greatly desired to get away from this house of tragedy.

But Potter gave them distinctly to understand that they could not leave until after the inquest, and they had to make the best of it.

Moreover, he declared the inquest could not be held until the coroner set the time, and he had no idea when that would be.

Then Clevedon came down to us. As he stepped slowly down the stairs, he seemed to have grown years older. His feet moved draggily, and his face was drawn and lined as if with age.

But he tried to smile as he came across the room to Vera, and he sat down beside her, in the chair I vacated for him.

He took her hand and looked into her eyes.

But whether it was his strange, distracted face that frightened her, or whether she was just distraught from nervousness, she shrank back a little and then as he looked hurt and pained, she leaned forward and put her arms about his neck. It was the briefest of embraces, but it heartened him up wonderfully.

"Darling!" I heard him whisper, as she sank back into the cushions of her chair, and he clasped her hand firmly in his own and kept it there.

"Of course you understand, Mr. Clevedon," Potter was saying, "that the routine necessary in these cases must be carried out. There must be an inquest, and you and your friends, as well as your household, will be called on to give evidence."

“Of course, Mr. Potter,” John replied, his natural dignity and poise almost entirely restored; “and I beg of you to do whatever may be necessary, no matter how heart-rending your processes may seem to us, most nearly interested. For, as the hardest hit of all, I desire that every effort be made to find the wretch who did this fearful thing. My mother’s death shall be avenged, if any clue can be found to the murderer. Those things are in your province, but I stand ready to help, and I’m sure my friends will back me.”

A murmur of assent was heard through the group and Tremaine said, “We are all more willing than able to help. I think the best detective aid should be engaged at once. This is no disparagement to your own work, Mr. Potter, but I think the importance of this case demands that you should have the best help obtainable.”

“I heartily agree to that,” John said. “Will you see to it, Mr. Potter?”

“I don’t mean police assistance,” Tremaine corrected him. “I mean a private detective, one who will give his whole time and talents to the matter. For I’m not sure it has struck the rest of you, but there is a sinister influence at work here, and we cannot feel sure that it has reached its final crime.”

A hush followed this speech, as everyone began to think out what Tremaine meant.

Clevedon himself looked appalled.

“You mean,” he said, aghast at the thought, “that the same influence is responsible for the murder of the maid, Hilda, and my mother, too? You mean that the same man may yet kill another of my dear ones—”

He broke off, overcome by emotion, but with his eyes fixed on Vera as if to assure her of his care for her.

“It may be so,” Tremaine said, “we can’t say so for certain, but we must admit the possibility. At any rate, whether the murderer is found or not, we know he is an unspeakable fiend. We know he is no ordinary burglar or midnight robber. The bizarre circumstances of Mrs. Clevedon’s death preclude the thought of a mere marauder. The man is either demented or a cold-blooded, determined brother of Satan. Who else could kill a helpless fragile woman, and then arrange her dead body in such fashion?”

“Are we sure that Mrs. Clevedon was killed before she was put into the box?”

This speech was somewhat timidly voiced by little Mrs. Shaw, who was apparently thinking deeply about the matter.

“Doctor Golden thought so,” Potter said, “and I see no reason to assume otherwise. How could an intruder persuade her to enter the box alive?”

“We are reasoning without sufficient data,” Tremaine interrupted. “It is futile to conjecture these things. Let us await the inquest, and then engage a clever detective and let him do the rest.”

“A fig for your clever detectives,” Sally Saunders broke out, in her dictatorial way. “They always do a lot of spectacular deducing and get no results.”

Potter gave her a grateful look, but no one else paid any attention to her.

Mimi jumped up from her seat, and came and whispered to me. She ordered that I should meet her at the back hall door in five minutes.

Then she went and whispered to Potter, who smiled, and the girl ran upstairs.

Half expecting to be stopped on my way, I went to the back hall door, and waited for Mimi.

She came at once, bringing my hat.

“Put it on,” she said, and I obediently did so.

Then a motor car came to the door, driven by Scott, the head chauffeur.

“Get in,” she said, peremptorily, and I got in.

I thought of asking her where we were bound and why, but I remembered she had whispered to Potter and he had smiled, so I assumed it was all right. And as John was there to watch over Vera, I was quite willing to be off motoring with Vera’s sister.

In fact I was glad of a chance to get my thoughts in some semblance of order, for my mind was a chaos of fears and apprehensions.

To my delight, Mimi did not chatter. She seemed to have some weighty matter on her own mind, and so we rode for several miles in silence.

Apparently she had given Scott his orders, for he drove as if he knew where he was going, and we went at a rattling good pace.

“Who killed Mrs. Clevedon?” Mimi said, at last, in a low, tense voice.

“I haven’t the faintest idea,” I returned, “have you?”

“I? No—oh, no. I can’t imagine anyone doing it. But it was done, so somebody did do it, and I’m going to find out who.”

“Going to find out ’way off here?” I asked, idly, for I had no notion of what the girl was up to.

“Yes, I hope so. Here we are, Scott, this is the house.”

We turned into a pleasant-looking driveway, and approached a good-sized country house, white with green shutters.

“You stay here,” Mimi ordained, as she sprang from the car without assistance. “I don’t think I’ll be long.”

She went up on the porch, rang the bell, and in a few moments disappeared inside.

“She’s a great little lady!” said Scott, admiringly, and seemingly unable to keep from voicing his opinion.

“Yes,” I said, in a tone that precluded further comment, and we sat and waited.

It was perhaps twenty minutes or a half hour when Mimi returned, and she was accompanied by a tall, rather fine-looking man attired in a dark gray suit, and wearing a soft hat of dark gray.

“This,” Mimi said to me, as the man handed her into the car, and then got in himself, “is Mr. Fleming Stone. He is a famous detective and he is going back with us to solve the mystery of the two deaths at

Clevedon House.” It seemed to me that Mimi had suddenly grown up. She made this announcement with a calm air and a serious face that would have done credit to a Portia.

Mr. Stone acknowledged the introduction with a smile. “Mr. Oakley, I assume,” he said, for Mimi had omitted all mention of my name. “Yes, this young lady has persuaded me, against my better judgment, to go with you over to Clevedon House.”

“How did she do it?” I said, honestly curious.

“By her charm and personality,” he replied, quite evidently telling the truth. “And, I may as well admit the case sounded wonderfully intriguing. I have never heard of such a strange manner of disposing of the body.”

“It was clever,” I burst forth. I had been most anxious to talk this thing over with somebody who knew something, and I could not bear to wait for the time when I could get John Clevedon alone for the purpose. “It was very clever, for you see the concealing of the body delayed the finding of it so long that the murderer had ample time to get away.”

“When was the crime committed?” Stone said, thoughtfully.

“About three o’clock this morning,” I replied.

“Then surely the murderer had time to disappear if he had left her lying on her bed.”

This was true, and I looked at Stone inquiringly.

I saw a cultured, wise-looking face, crowned with iron-gray hair which showed at the sides beneath his hat.

Deep-set gray eyes that would, I felt sure, let nothing escape their scrutiny, a sensitive, kindly mouth that gave a hint of sternness upon occasion.

Immaculate attire and perfect grooming made up the rest of the impression I received at my first interview with the great detective.

“You know your own business, Mr. Stone,” I said, after a short pause, “but are you taking up this case entirely on the authority of Miss Liddell, here?”

“I’m afraid that is the correct statement,” he replied, with a funny little smile. “But I shall not continue to work on it unless I find it is agreeable to Mr. Clevedon that I should do so.”

“Oh, it will be,” cried Mimi, confidently. “John said he wanted the best detective talent he could get. So you see, Mott, I remembered at once that Mr. Stone was over here visiting Dicky Dunn’s uncle, and I just flew over to bag him before he could get away.”

“Mimi, you are a caution!” I exclaimed, appalled at this high-handed performance. “What will John say?”

“John will be glad,” she said, lapsing again into her rôle of dignity, that somehow well became her.

“Don’t feel alarmed, Mr. Oakley,” Stone said, “I assure you that I shall not stay if Mr. Clevedon has the least objection. But I hope he will be glad to have my help.”

“Oh, he’s sure to be,” I hastily returned, “it’s only that as we look on Miss Mimi as a child, I am surprised to see her take such an initiative.”

“It’s fortunate she did,” he said, gravely. “As you know, everything depends on getting to the scene of a crime while it is yet fresh. And the fact that the inquest has not yet been held is a wonderful help. One can gather so much from an inquest.”

“We didn’t learn a thing from the inquest on the maid who was killed recently over there,” I said, thoughtfully.

“I daresay there was not quite the same interest felt as there is in Mrs. Clevedon’s death.”

“No, Mr. Stone, there wasn’t. And I sincerely hope that with your help we shall succeed better this time.”

Chapter 17

Fleming Stone Arrives

TO SAY THAT John Clevedon was surprised when we entered with Fleming Stone would be putting it very mildly.

Mimi took the job of informing him, and she introduced Mr. Stone with her most grown-up airs and graces.

“We are fortunate, John,” she said, after she had made her introductions, “in securing Mr. Stone’s services. He was visiting Dicky’s uncle, and was out for a holiday. But, you know in the detective stories, when they are out for a holiday, they always fall into an important case.”

Stone looked at Mimi with a quizzical expression. Probably he had never seen a girl just like that before. And Mimi was unusual. As a mark of respect to the dead, she had changed her gay-colored sports suit for a plain little white frock, and though she was excited and enthusiastic, she preserved a certain decorum which made her seem almost grown-up.

Clevedon, as he first learned who the newcomer was, turned on him with a strange look.

But it passed in a moment, and he immediately resumed his habitual calm and his kindly, courteous countenance.

“It is indeed fortunate, Mr. Stone,” he echoed Mimi, “and I shall be glad indeed if you will take up this matter. I am almost prostrated myself, with grief and horror at the awful situation. I know detective work must be done, and if I seemed distraught at first, set it down to my surprise at seeing you and my amazement that little Miss Liddell should get you here so soon. You are, of course, my choice of all detectives, and I am most glad to retain your services, to begin at once, if you are willing.”

Fleming Stone was quite ready to meet half-way such a cordial greeting as this, and expressed his willingness to begin his work at once.

“I only stipulate,” he said, “that I be allowed full access to all parts of the house and grounds and that I may interrogate the servants as well as the family and guests whenever I choose.”

“That, of course,” John told him. “I will ask Griffin to give you the best available rooms, and you may send for your luggage whenever you wish. Bates will look after you. Of course, I am at your service at all times, but I hope you will spare me all you can. Mr. Oakley, here, will help you, I know.”

“I understand, Mr. Clevedon, and rest assured I shall do all in my power to relieve you of any harrowing details.”

We learned that the inquest would be held the next day, at eleven o’clock in the morning, and Fleming Stone at once declared that he must get to work, as he wanted to learn all he could about the case before that.

What he expected to learn more than we already knew, I couldn’t imagine, but I knew nothing of the ways of great detectives, and concluded to watch him quietly.

First of all, he went upstairs to look at the scene of the death.

He beckoned to me, and I followed him.

“There is much to be learned,” he said to me, very gravely. “This is no simple case.”

Had he been a man of less renown I should have thought he was saying this in order to make his own work seem of more value, but Fleming Stone needed no praise or encomium from himself. He received that from others wherever he went or whatever case he undertook.

I was glad he was interested in this one, for I felt that Mrs. Clevedon’s death ought to be avenged and her murderer brought to punishment.

The room was in charge of a policeman, who, of course, allowed us to enter.

The body was still untouched, save as the doctors had examined it.

Fleming Stone stood, looking reverently down into the face of death.

“I have never seen such a strange case,” he said, speaking in a low, awed whisper. “She was killed while asleep in her bed, and then her body was lifted down into this box. Why?”

“How do you know she was killed before she was put into the box?” I asked, with deep interest.

“Because, the situation is too absurd otherwise. Why would she get out of bed and get into the box, while alive? Why would anyone ask her to? And, too, the stroke of the dagger is free, I mean it was wielded by a hand that was untrammelled by the side of the box. Had she been struck while in the box, the direction of the blade would be straight down, not oblique, as it is.”

“Yes,” I said, “I see that, now you tell me.”

And then, like a picture in my memory, I suddenly saw another death scene, a dead man, stretched at full length in a stone coffin in a cathedral.

There was no connection between the two cases, but the calm straight position of the victims were similar, and the box in which Mrs. Clevedon lay was not unlike a coffin.

“Did you ever hear of the man who was killed in a cathedral in Welbury, England?” I asked.

“No,” Stone said, “I never did.”

But he was absorbed in his study of the room and the furnishings and I didn’t pursue the subject.

He looked attentively at the objects in the box, such of them as showed from beneath the body.

At one end it was a mere jumble of rich silks and tissues, seemingly flung in carelessly or in haste. On these her head rested, and under the body were more fabrics and also fans, beads and various objects, all apparently of value and of rare beauty.

“This box was always beneath the bed?” Stone asked of me, and I replied that I understood it was kept there, and that Mrs. Clevedon spent hours looking over her treasures and rearranging them.

“Will you call the nurse,” Stone said, still with that preoccupied air, as if deeply puzzled.

Miss Plum appeared and Stone asked her many questions about Mrs. Clevedon’s manner the past few days.

“No,” the nurse told him, “no, she was no different from usual. She showed no fears or apprehensions of coming disaster. She was greatly pleased at the prospect of her son’s marriage and frequently had the box dragged out, in order to select more gifts for her new daughter-in-law. She adored her son and while he was away she longed for his homecoming, and was happy when he returned. They never had a word of dissension, and I’m sure neither of them had an enemy in the world.”

“Then this must be the work of a burglar,” Stone said, but he spoke so perfunctorily that I doubted if he was voicing his real thoughts.

“And the dagger?” he pursued. “It belonged here?”

“Yes,” said Miss Plum. “Mr. John brought it from England for his mother. She had a passion for old silver, and this skewer seemed to her a gem. She kept it here on the table, to use as a paper cutter, but she never used it. It was too long to be real handy. But she liked to look at it, and told me that she meant to have her monogram engraved on it. Poor soul, she little thought what use it would be put to.”

Stone looked at the silver handle, with its ring on the end, and sighed to think what a convenient weapon it had proved for the murderer’s use.

He looked round at the doors and windows, and going to one window, he looked out.

“The intruder must have come in at the door,” he said, to me. “There’s no sign of a window entrance, and the suite is self-contained save for the door into the hall.”

“Yes,” I said, “and the doors all over the house are never locked at night. The outside doors are, but often the servants are careless about them, and I daresay the French windows could be easily manipulated.”

“Yes, up around here few people lock up carefully at night. Some day New England will wake up to the fact that it is not entirely immune from crime.”

“I want a long talk with you, Mr. Oakley,” Stone said, at last. “Not just now, but say, this afternoon. Suppose we go for a walk together—a stroll through the woods.”

I agreed to this, and as he seemed to have finished his examination of the room, we went downstairs again. John Clevedon met us with a questioning glance.

“Did you learn anything, Mr. Stone?” he said, quietly.

“No, nothing more than you already know. I am assuming that the police people have done the regulation hunting for footprints, fingermarks and all that?”

“I suppose so,” John said, wearily. “I don’t want to shirk any of my duty, Mr. Stone, but with you here, and the police, too, I feel I can shift the burden of details to your shoulders.”

“You certainly can, Mr. Clevedon. Please leave all responsibility to us. Mr. Oakley will advise with me and questions no one else can answer will be put to you.” Clevedon looked relieved, and I well understood his feelings. Of a deeply sensitive nature, I knew he wanted everything possible done to discover the murderer of his mother, but he couldn’t bear the thought of attending himself to the details of the search.

Mimi came running to us as soon as she heard Stone’s voice.

“Do you know all about it, now, Mr. Stone?” she cried.

“No,” he said, with a kindly smile at the child. “We don’t work quite as quickly as that, my dear. But give me time, and I think—I hope I can help the ends of justice.”

Mrs. Shaw came hovering, for with her conviction of her own talent for detective work, she probably felt capable of teaching Fleming Stone a few tricks of his own trade.

Stone responded politely to her advances, and as her husband followed her and the two Saunderses joined the group, the detective soon had quite an audience ready to listen to him and to talk as well.

Clevedon stood by, listening, and Mimi was one of the chief advisers.

Vera Liddell smiled at her young sister, who was now on her knees in front of Stone, drinking in every word he said.

“She’s such a darling,” Vera said to me, as I went toward her, “I hate to tell her she mustn’t do things. Besides, if Mr. Stone wants to, he can easily snub her to silence.”

“Oh, he doesn’t mind,” I assured her. “And I think Stone wants to get all the information he can, from any angle.”

“Come out on the terrace, for a little walk,” she said, “it’s warm in here.”

We went out, and sat down in a porch swing at the other end of the long terrace.

“Mr. Oakley,” she said, a bit earnestly, “did you know John before he hurt his finger?”

“Good Lord!” I thought, “then that disfigurement does bother her after all!”

Aloud, I said:

“As I think I told you, I only talked with him once before. That was on the steamer, just before we landed. When I next met him, three months or so later, it was the very day that the accident happened. He hurt his hand early that morning and I saw him that evening, at his hotel.”

She looked at me in the strangest way a moment, then she said:

“An accident like that couldn’t change a man all through, could it?”

“No, of course not,” I said, smiling at her. “Why—is our John changed?”

“Oh, no,—not changed, exactly, yet he is different.”

“Different from what?”

“From what he was before he went away.”

“That must be attributed to his long absence from home and his association with foreign scenes and people. Is he nicer or not so nice?”

I wondered what she could be getting at. Surely John was not growing tired of her! My heart leapt at the possibility, and I strove to control any thought of disloyalty to my friend.

“He’s nicer in some ways and not so nice in others,” she said, after a moment’s thought. “I just wanted to ask you if such a change could be the result of the shock of the accident?”

“Oh, no. And don’t take that accident too seriously. It’s nothing, after all. He’s getting over it splendidly, and the wound is scarcely noticeable.”

“I don’t mind the appearance of his finger, it isn’t that at all. But he is changed in his character, he shows traits that he didn’t possess before he went away.”

“That’s the influence of foreign travel,” I repeated. “Unless you can tell me something definite, I can’t advise you more than that.”

I persisted in treating the matter lightly, though I saw that Vera was in earnest.

“I can’t be more definite,” she said, and her look of distress was piteous. “The case isn’t definite. But every now and then John says something or does something, totally unlike himself.”

“Such as what?” I asked.

“It sounds silly,” she said, half laughing now, “but his English is incorrect at times. He never used to make an error, and he chided me if I did. Now he mixes up his shalls and wills, and yesterday he split an infinitive.”

I laughed outright.

“That must be the English influence!” I exclaimed. “Travel plays the dickens with a man’s grammar. Look here, Vera, isn’t John a Bostonian?”

“Yes,” she said, “why?”

"This," I replied. "One day, when I first knew him, he used a bit of slang. Now, even a Bostonian is permitted slang on occasion, but John said, 'Drop that oyster, and leave the dock.' Do you see anything strange in that?"

"No," she said, looking puzzled. "He often uses a bit of slang."

"Yes, but he said 'dock.' A Bostonian would say, 'Drop that oyster and leave the wharf.' I'm sure of that."

"I suppose he would, though I shouldn't have noticed that."

"And probably I shouldn't have noticed his split infinitive. Well, is that all you have against him, Vera?" I was calling her by her name, because I couldn't help it. She looked so sweet and so troubled, and she seemed to depend on me to help her. But what could I do? I couldn't call John Clevedon out to fight a duel because he had split an infinitive. Nor because he had used the locution "dock," when all his Plymouth Rock ancestors and their descendants said "wharf."

"Tell me something else," I urged. "Something more important."

"I think his memory has failed a little," she said. "We used to have several catchwords—you know how engaged people do—and he has forgotten most of them."

"Forgotten them!"

"Yes. When we were first engaged, we planned to be married in a year. He used to sing out, 'Vera, Vera, In a year-a!' and we'd laugh together for very joy. It was a silly thing, I know, but he ought to remember it! And two or three times I've sung at him, 'Vera, Vera,—' expecting him to finish it, and he just looks utterly blank. I don't care, you understand, he's sweet and dear as ever, only I can't understand it. So I want to know if the accident, or anything that happened abroad could have affected his memory."

"Something may have done so," I said, musingly. "You know he forgot the dog's name."

"Yes; he has forgotten many names and dates and places. I don't care, but I want to know if it's just a careless forgetfulness, or if he has some affection of the memory."

"I wouldn't worry about it," I said, with a carelessness that I didn't really feel. "It works both ways. Sometimes John remembers things that didn't happen. He told me one day of his visit to Canterbury Cathedral, and, according to his diary, he never went to Canterbury at all!"

"Oh, well, he probably mixed it up with some other cathedral. They're much alike and there are so many of them. Don't tell John I mentioned this. He has enough trouble on his mind, poor dear."

"Yes, he has," I agreed. "I am glad Mimi dragged Fleming Stone over here, but it was certainly a highhanded piece of business."

"Indeed it was. Had I known what she was up to, I shouldn't have let her do it, but perhaps it's all for the best."

"It surely is. Vera, whoever killed Mrs. Clevedon, I believe it was the same fiend in human shape as killed Hilda."

"Oh, do you? Why?"

“Only because neither of them could have been killed for the ordinary reasons. I mean, when people are murdered, it’s for greed or revenge. Those motives are not possible in these cases, and there can be no reason for the two deaths except the assumption that they were the work of a maniac, a homicidal maniac. It’s absurd to suppose that an enemy of John’s did either of them. John has no real enemies. No, the terrible creature who killed those two women is around this locality somewhere, and unless he is caught, another tragedy will follow. I think it is merely coincidence that these two crimes were both in this household. He will strike elsewhere next time, I am sure.”

“You frighten me,” Vera shuddered. “I hate to think of such possibilities.”

“I don’t want to frighten you unnecessarily. But I do want you to use due and proper precaution. I shall insist to John that the house must be more carefully locked up, and I want you to promise that you and Mimi will lock your room doors at night.”

“Yes, I will. I’m sure we want no more tragedies around here! Here comes Mr. Stone. My goodness, it’s nearly lunch time! I must go and make myself ready.”

She ran away, and Stone took the seat beside me.

“I’ve gleaned a lot from those chattering magpies in there,” he said, contentedly. “I begin to hope we will win out. Oakley, who benefited or will benefit by Mrs. Clevedon’s death?”

“Why, no one that I know of,” I responded. “She had no money of her own, or if she did, it was only a small sum. John took care of her, and he gave her everything she wanted. He was most indulgent, but after all Mrs. Clevedon’s wants were few. She liked pretty things, but she went out seldom, and had no call for elaborate clothing. The treasures and belongings she so cherished are mostly relics saved from bygone years. Only last night she gave Mimi a bracelet, but it was one she had had a long time. She told the girl so. No, Mr. Stone, Mrs. Clevedon had no money to be murdered for. If she left a will, it was only to dispose of those trinkets and treasures that she has hoarded so long. Not that Mrs. Clevedon was simple in her tastes. She had the best of everything that she wanted to use or to wear. She had her own car and her own servants, and a first-class trained nurse. John begrudged her nothing. He was always trying to think of something he could get to please her, and he brought her beautiful presents when he returned from abroad.”

“Then that bars out murder for future gain. And as nothing is missing, we must also bar out murder for robbery. There was no trouble between her and her son?”

“Not of any sort. They were the most devoted mother and son I have ever seen. Also, she loved Vera and was ready to welcome her as a daughter. That leaves, doesn’t it, only homicidal mania or dementia of some sort?”

“It comes pretty near doing that,” Stone said. “You saw the maid, Hilda, after she was dead?”

“Oh, yes. She was killed outside, on the grounds. It happened in an arbor at the end of the rose walk. She was in a hammock.”

“In a hammock!” he exclaimed. “What sort of hammock? You mean a swing?”

“No, an old-fashioned hammock. Netted, you know, the girl lay in it as if asleep—”

“Just as Mrs. Clevedon lay in her box?”

“Yes. And,” I was struck with a sudden remembrance, “just as the man in the cathedral lay in his stone coffin.”

“Who was he?”

“It’s a long story, I’ll tell it to you some other time, if you like. But I happened to remember it, because he, too, was calmly and composedly lying as if asleep.”

“It’s a good way to leave them,” remarked Stone, a little cold-bloodedly, I thought, and then we went in to luncheon.

That afternoon I went for a walk with Stone, as he had asked me to do.

Acting on a sudden impulse, I took with me what I proudly called to myself, my “clues.”

I was not sure I would show them to Fleming Stone, as I feared he would laugh at them.

We started out in silence, but he soon began to talk.

“I think, Oakley,” he said, pleasantly, “you know more about this whole terrible matter than anyone else.”

“What!” I cried, recoiling as if from an accusation.

“There, there, I don’t mean you have guilty knowledge, or any information that you are suppressing. But the affair goes back to a long time ago, and I want your help in untangling some of its snarls.”

I was flattered now and eagerly declared my willingness to do anything I could.

My part seemed to be mostly talking. Fleming Stone asked me to tell him the whole story of the crime in the cathedral, which I had mentioned.

So I told him everything about it, and he listened with deepest attention. We found a pleasant green nook in the woodland, and we sat on a fallen log while we talked.

He was absorbed in my narrative and interrupted me only to put some pertinent question now and then, or to ask repetition of some point.

The description of the body in the old stone coffin intrigued him greatly and he inquired minutely as to every phase of its appearance and effect.

After I had finished, he exclaimed, with a look of awe on his face:

“Three murders, each with the victim in a long, bedlike receptacle. Each with the victim lying composed and decent. Can you doubt for a moment they were all the work of the same hand? The man whom Mr. Tremaine calls, with reason, the brother of Satan?”

Chapter 18

The Brother Of Satan

I WAS ASTOUNDED at Stone's speech and appalled at the look of rage that swept over his face. Surely, it boded ill for that wicked man, should he ever be caught.

So interested was the detective, I made bold to show him my precious clues, braving his ridicule of them.

"There is a similarity in two of the cases, anyway," I said. "Both the man in the cathedral and the maid, Hilda, were shot by the same sort of powder."

"What?" he cried, "how do you know?"

I drew from my pocket two small papers folded like physicians' powder packets. "This," I said, opening one, "contains some powder grains I gathered up from the floor of the crypt, when I discovered that crime, and this," opening the other, "is a lot of powder and dirt together that I scooped up from the ground beneath the hammock where Hilda lay dead."

Fleming Stone stared at me.

"You're a wonder!" he exclaimed. "And you've kept this quiet all this time?"

"I didn't keep it quiet, as you call it, purposely," I said, a little huffed, "but I saw no use of showing the powder grains. They seemed to know what make and size of weapon was used, and how could I help?"

"Don't you know, Oakley, that in order for there to be powder grains in evidence at all, the firing was done by a man who handloads? Don't you know that his reason for this would doubtless be that he could thus use reduced loads and the sound would be much less, while at close range the shot would be fatal?"

"No, Mr. Stone," I confessed, "no, I don't know enough about shooting to know all that."

"Well, I do, and moreover, I recognize these powder grains. They are both De la Rue Rifle Powder No. 1, a powder that is prescribed for reduced loads in the instruction book on handloading. This powder is not used by manufacturers and so the unburned grains prove that the shots were fired by a man who handloads. Both sets of grains are of this powder. It is one of the oldest powders and is not suited to reduced loads for pistols. Smokeless powders are designed to burn properly with a certain charge. If that charge is exceeded the weapon may burst, if much less is used the grains will not all burn. Rifle powders burn at higher pressures than pistol and shotgun powders. If the murderer had used shotgun powder no grains would have been left unburned. He never thought of this, and it will prove his undoing. I can't imagine how you came to collect these grains, when you didn't know all they might signify."

"I did it because I have always thought tiny clues meant a lot in detective work, even though I couldn't myself make the application. Now, here is something else. See this curled bit of string?"

Stone took the spirally twisted cord I offered him, and then burst out laughing.

"Don't you know what this is?" he asked, still chuckling.

"I haven't an idea."

"It's a piece of cord that some girl has had used when she received what they call a permanent wave."

"Oh, so it is!" I cried. "I remember, Rosie found some in my waste basket and they came from Mimi's 'permanent.'"

“Well, any connection with, the murders?”

“No, that is, not Mimi’s strings. But this one, I found on John Clevedon’s rug, I mean in his sitting-room, the day Hilda was killed. Also, she had had a permanent that very day.”

“Oh!” Stone looked up quickly. “How do you know she had the curl put in that day?”

“Because when she left Mrs. Clevedon at noon, she had no curl in her hair. When her body was found, some hours later, she had a tight, kinky curl, which is what they call a permanent.”

“And when did you find this string in Clevedon’s room?”

“Directly after I had seen the dead girl. I went into Clevedon’s rooms to telephone to him—he was over at Miss Liddell’s—and that string lay on the floor. I picked it up mechanically, thinking nothing of it, and stuck it in my pocket merely to get it out of the way. I forgot it entirely, until much later when I ran across it, and I saved it, just on a chance. But it means nothing.”

“It means only this. That probably Hilda was in that room, after she had her hair curled and before she was killed. You see, the better hairdressers are careful to brush away these bits of string when their job is finished, but an inferior artist like the one in your village here is liable to leave a few sticking to the lady’s clothes.”

“Yes, I know, Mimi had a lot of them clinging to her angora sweater.”

“Yes. Now, we must conclude that Hilda went to Clevedon’s sitting-room. Would she do so in the ordinary course of her duties?”

“I think not, as she was Mrs. Clevedon’s personal maid. She might have gone there with a message from the mother. But that’s not likely, as it was her afternoon off, and she was out for enjoyment.”

“Then, she went there on some simple errand—she wasn’t mixed up with Clevedon, was she?”

“Oh, Lord, no. He isn’t that sort, and besides, he had only reached home that very day, and he said he didn’t know the girl at all. His mother said Hilda was with her before John went to Europe, but he said he didn’t remember ever seeing her.”

“Well, that seems to let John out.”

“He never was in. But, I say, Mr. Stone, Vera, Miss Liddell, says John has lapses of memory. She says he forgets little loverlike bywords they used to have, and he forgot his dog’s name.”

“Have you ever noticed these memory lapses?”

“A few times. He bought a very expensive edition of Gray’s *Elegy*, in London. It is a first edition, and greatly desired by collectors. But when we got home I found he already had one. He said, when he bought it, he couldn’t remember whether he already had it or not. Now a collector doesn’t normally forget an item like that.”

“I should say not. But even if Mr. Clevedon’s memory is a little defective, it is not enough to call a serious matter. Was he interested in the strange story of the murder in the cathedral?”

"He would have been, but he wasn't allowed," I said, and then I told Stone of the accident to John's finger which occurred the morning after the murder, and how the doctor forbade his patient's getting stirred up or excited over anything.

Stone wanted to know, too, all the details of the rooms I visited that had been the home of the dead man. Wanted to know everything I saw there, and was so persistent in his questioning that the shadows began to lengthen before we rose to go back to Clevedon House.

"Was there ever any attempt to kill you?" Stone asked casually as we strolled along.

"What made you think so?" I asked, in surprise. And then I told him of the tube of tooth paste that smelled like prussic acid, and related our taking it to be tested, with only innocent results.

"Are you sure," Stone said, "that the tube you took to the chemist was the one you found in the bathroom?"

"Why, yes," I said, blankly, "unless somebody changed it while I was getting my hat. But who could? Nobody was there but Clevedon himself, and Pell."

"Ah, Pell. Is he true blue?"

"I'm sure he is, Mr. Stone. I had some doubts of him, I confess, but I now believe he is honest and sincere in all his dealings."

"Did Clevedon ever say or do anything that seemed to you inexplicable?"

"A few things. But as Vera says about her grievances against him, they are so trivial it seems not worth while to mention them. For instance, she thinks his letters were different after he began to dictate them to me instead of writing them himself, because of his wounded finger. But I tell her that is only natural. No man can write to his sweetheart through a third party as he would write himself."

"True enough."

"As to my experiences, I only noticed that one day he told me of an episode that happened to him in Canterbury Cathedral, and his diary proves that he didn't go to Canterbury. I never spoke to him about it, for he doubtless confused Canterbury with some large cathedral that he did visit. But the funniest thing was his using the expression, 'Drop that oyster and leave the dock!' Not that it was slang, though he seldom uses slang, but that he said 'dock' instead of 'wharf.'"

"How could he, being a New Englander?" Stone said, smiling, as he saw the point.

"Yes, that's what struck me. Well, there you are. You certainly don't suspect John Clevedon of these murders—including his own mother!" My face turned pale with horror, I knew, for I was aghast.

"No, Oakley, no," Fleming Stone reassured me. "The same brother of Satan committed all three of the crimes we have just been discussing, but the murderer was not John Clevedon. Mark this point, Oakley, for future reference. When three murders are committed with such strong similarity of conditions, it is wise to investigate carefully as to whether or not they were the work of the same hand. I am positive that it was the same fiendish hand that brought death to the man in the crypt, the maid, Hilda, and the mother of John Clevedon."

"But John was in no way guilty?" I cried, wanting a further denial.

“No, John Clevedon had no hand in any of the three murders. The innocence of John Clevedon is positive and above all suspicion.”

I drew a sigh of relief, for while I had never put the thought into words, even to myself, there had been moments when I feared to think about certain phases of the mystery.

When we reached the house it was time to dress for dinner, and I went at once to my room. I felt strangely light of heart, and realized that I had had grim forebodings which Fleming Stone's words had caused to disappear.

The evening passed quietly, and John, though sad, strove to assume what cheerfulness he could out of consideration for his guests.

Stone asked Vera to go for a short walk with him, saying she needed some fresh air. She seemed glad to go, and they remained outside for a long time.

When they returned, we all went upstairs.

As I said good-night, Vera gave me a strange smile.

It was sad, yet it was very sweet, and if I read it aright, it seemed to ask for help and support.

I wondered what Stone had been saying to her, yet I accepted her message as I felt it was meant and I clasped her hand, and whispered, “Always here when you want me,” as I bade good-night.

I slept soundly that night, for I was so relieved and gratified at Stone's full exculpation of John Clevedon, that my vague fears were set at rest.

And the next morning I went downstairs wondering what the blundering coroner and his jury would decide. They couldn't fasten anything on Clevedon with that splendid detective back of him.

Vera and Miss Saunders were breakfasting in their rooms, so Mrs. Shaw and Mimi made up the feminine element.

Mimi was greatly excited and scarcely able to keep her tongue still at all.

But Stone made her sit with him, declaring he had adopted her, and she must not talk without his permission.

The conversation was perfunctory. Everybody seemed to be expecting some tragic exposures at the inquest, though nobody had any definite ideas about it.

Tremaine, usually in evidence with his wise and really logical observation said almost nothing at all, and Clevedon was unusually silent.

The madcaps, Dicky Dunn and Sam Saunders, were positively depressed in their appearance and behavior, and, I realized, I would have been so too, but for Stone's cheering words of the night before.

After breakfast we drifted apart, but all were duly assembled in the great hall when the inquest was opened.

The pompous Timmons was even more aware of his own importance than he had been at the inquest on poor Hilda. For he felt that the mistress of Clevedon House was a prominent figure in society and required more pomp and circumstance in his demeanor.

He went through the usual routine. He interrogated the doctor, the nurse, the servants, the guests, and finally John Clevedon himself.

But from no one of these did he get one iota of important information or any hint or suggestion as to who the murderer of Mrs. Clevedon might be.

I think he did not expect to. I think Timmons preferred that his jury should again bring in the open verdict that would relieve him of all responsibility in the matter, yet leave him with a knowledge of having performed his whole duty.

No one questioned had heard any sound in the house that night. No one had heard a footstep in the hall, or had seen a passing shadow. No one had a whit of evidence or the merest trace of a clue to offer. For all they told, they might have been deaf and dumb, every one of them.

Yet there was no reason to doubt their honesty. There was no one who would not have gladly told something had there been anything to tell. The servants all slept in a wing far distant from Mrs. Clevedon's rooms. The guests were shut in their rooms, and had heard nothing. I, myself, had not heard anything, and John Clevedon declared he had not. So, the murderer had come and gone, undiscovered and unsuspected.

There was nothing for it, it seemed, but the 'person or persons unknown' solution.

But after the inquiry was over, Fleming Stone rose to his feet.

"I would like, Mr. Coroner," he said, "to be sworn as a witness. I have information and evidence which, I feel sure, will make known the identity of the murderer." Timmons wasn't any too pleased at this interruption, for, in the first place he had that absurd jealousy of Stone which the small always feel for the great, and, too, he feared having a lot of clues and evidence handed to him, which he feared he might not be able properly to handle.

But he had no choice in the matter, and soon Fleming Stone was launched on the statement which, he had declared, would identify the murderer.

"I want to say at the outset," he began, "that John Clevedon is in no way responsible for or implicated in the death of his mother. And I make this statement, because the evidence I must call for may seem to reflect on that gentleman. Mr. Pell, will you answer a few queries?" With a strained, white face, Pell nodded his acquiescence, and Stone said, abruptly:

"You are Mr. Clevedon's valet?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever had occasion to notice anything strange or inexplicable about Mr. Clevedon?"

"Yes," Pell said, in a low voice.

"Such as what?"

“He has different tastes at different times. Some days, he will want certain clothes or toilet articles, and then, all at once, he will order those thrown away and demand others.”

“Toilet articles?”

“Yes, sir. Only yesterday he told me to get him a bottle of brilliantine and this morning he told me to throw it away. And last week, he bought himself a vial of fine French perfumery, and yesterday, he poured it all down the washbowl.”

Clevedon looked at the valet in amazement, but seemed to attach no importance to the things he was telling. As for me, I could only wonder.

“Any other strange things happen? Bigger things?”

“Not since we have been home. But there was trouble about the acceptance of his passport when we sailed from France.”

I looked at him in surprise. This was the first I had heard of this and I wondered if Pell was romancing.

“I’ll tell about that,” said Clevedon, coolly. “It was a question soon settled. My appearance on my return trip was quite different from what it was when I went over. This was because on account of the accident to my finger, I had grown a beard. I found I couldn’t shave myself, and I hate to have anyone else do it, so I let my beard grow, thus making my passport photograph scarcely recognizable. Also, I had begun to use brilliantine or pomatum on my hair, because with my left hand I could not brush it smoothly enough to suit me. This too changed my appearance. And as the offices of a foreign oculist had enabled me to discard the glasses I had worn for years, my picture, as I say, caused question. But on my explanation, as I have just given it to you, the authorities made no further objection.”

“After you paid them well,” muttered Pell, and Clevedon catching the words smiled and said. “Yes, I rewarded them, because I was truly grateful to them.”

“Thank you, Pell,” Stone said. “Now, Miss Plum, will you answer a few questions?”

The nurse looked up suddenly, startled at the summons. An obstinate look came over her face, and as she flashed a glance at Clevedon, I was seized with a strange and amazing conviction. She was in love with John! Nothing else would explain that look she gave him, a look of devotion, accompanied by a stubborn determination. Had she concluded to lie her heart out for him, she would have looked like that!

“Miss Plum,” Stone said, and his stern gaze at her, and his menacing voice would have made a strong man quake in his shoes, “do you remember the day Hilda died?”

“Yes,” she returned in a whisper, and her eyes were fixed on his face.

“You looked from the window at about the time of her death. Don’t attempt to deny it,” he added, quickly, with an even more terrifying glare from his deep gray eyes.

“Yes,” she said, again.

“And as you looked, you saw a man come out of the arbor, and go out by the side gate. It is useless, Miss Plum, for you to speak anything but the truth. Who was that man?”

She nearly fainted, but not quite. Stone showed no pity for her, and gave her no respite.

“Answer me,” he said, not loudly, but so sternly that she writhed in agony.

“Answer me, at once, Martha Plum, and tell the truth, as God is your witness.”—

The solemn words fell on her ears, and with a groan of agony, she clasped her hands together and faintly breathed a name.

“Speak louder,” ordered Stone. “Who was the man?”

“John Clevedon,” she repeated, and then fainted away.

“Give her some sal volatile, or something,” Stone said to Pell. “She’ll come round in a few moments. She’s not the kind to faint.”

“May I ask what you mean by this mummer?” Clevedon said, his face angry, but his voice calm and cold.

“You may ask,” Stone said, “and I will tell you. You were the man who went into the rose arbor and shot the maid, Hilda. You used a thirty-eight special Smith and Wesson, and you handloaded, because it would make less sound. But you reckoned without the danger of dropping grains of unburned powder to the floor, which is what occurred with your small charge.”

“I can’t understand your charges, Mr. Stone, nor your words. I think you must be crazy,” Clevedon said, speaking quietly, but with a strange gleam in his eye.

“Oh, no, I am not crazy,” Stone said, with a half smile. “And I am stating facts. You also shot a man in the crypt of the Cathedral at Welbury, and on that occasion, too, you left behind grains of the very same powder.”

Now, Clevedon stared at him, as one might at a ghost or other unbelievable apparition.

“And as a final act of your fiendish soul, you stabbed to death the dear lady who now lies awaiting burial, the third victim of your murderous instinct, the third sacrifice to your greed and avarice, you fiend in human form, you Brother of Satan!”

John Clevedon seemed to dematerialize before our eyes. Even as I watched him, he changed from the well set-up, fine-looking gentleman I had known to a cringing, sneaking cur, whose eyes turned shifty and cruel, whose lips curled back from his teeth in a snarling grin like that of an enraged tiger.

“Who are you?” he fairly shouted. “What do you know? Who has told you?”

He had started to make a lunge toward Fleming Stone, but was restrained by two burly policemen who had materialized from somewhere and who grasped his arm.

“But,” I said, unable to resist it. “Mr. Stone, you told me John Clevedon was innocent of all wrongdoing—”

“And so he was,” Stone returned, quietly, “but that man is not John Clevedon.”

Vera gave a little moan, and buried her face in her hands. Mimi screamed from sheer excitement, but stopped at once when Fleming Stone gently bade her do so. Pell sat silent, but nodding his head like a mandarin, and Griffin was nodding too.

As for me, I was thinking so rapidly that I couldn't think coherently. Memories, quandaries, uncertainties, all seemed to clear themselves up only to be lost again in a whirl of further mysteries.

"Who is he, then?" somebody asked, and as Stone opened his mouth to speak, the man I had thought was Clevedon shouted out:

"I'll tell you who I am. I am Warren Glynn, John Clevedon's illegitimate brother. I am older than he was, all these things should have been mine by right, but since they were not mine by right, I determined to make them mine by wrong. I looked almost exactly like the real John, for we had the same father. But he was born in wedlock, while my mother was a poor servant maid. But she was pretty and caught the attention of the fine gentleman, Mr. Clevedon, with the result that I was born nameless and homeless. I grew up somehow, and my one end and aim in life was to kill John Clevedon and usurp his place, which was my place. I succeeded, and all was going well, when this spy came on deck." He gave a venomous look at Stone, who returned it with a glance of calm curiosity. The great detective had seen many criminals, but his face clearly showed that this was a new type to him.

"You killed John Clevedon?" the coroner asked, only just now recovering from his daze sufficiently to speak.

"Yes, and by the cleverest of devices. I, Warren Glynn, asked Clevedon to meet me in the cathedral crypt and he did so, willingly enough. I had my camera, and telling him I wanted to make some weird pictures I persuaded him to get into an old stone coffin and let me photograph him there.

"He wasn't crazy about the scheme, but he did it, and once in the coffin, I wasted no time making him a proper occupant of such a receptacle. It pleased my sense of humor to put a man in his coffin and then kill him."

The man gave a laugh that was almost maniacal, though it was plain to be seen his mind was in no way deranged.

"Omit comment, and tell us the plain story," Stone commanded him, and with a scowl, he continued.

"I had to laugh to see or hear of the futile efforts of the police to discover the murderer. Well, then, I had enough to do, managing my changed identity. You see, I went to the cathedral that night as Warren Glynn, but I came away as John Clevedon, leaving, apparently, a dead Warren Glynn behind me. I left my own coat, hat, stick, gloves, newspaper, guide book, camera, and all the contents of my pockets, carrying Clevedon's away with me. I did not change our clothes, except the necktie, as he had a quieter taste than mine. Then I simply went back to Clevedon's hotel as John Clevedon, and John Clevedon I have been ever since. There were grave difficulties, of course. The chiefest was that I could not successfully forge John's signature, so I had to put my right hand out of commission. Yes, I thrust my finger into the electric fan purposely, and nearly overdid it. It was a mere chance that the doctor was an old friend of my father's. Of course, he took it for granted that I was the legitimate son."

"Go on," Stone said, inexorably, as Glynn stopped. "Why did you kill Hilda?"

"Because she recognized that I was not really John, and threatened to tell on me. She said John had made love to her before he went away, and when I spoke casually to her, she saw at once I was not John. She came to my room and told me this, just as I was starting to go to see Miss Liddell. What could I do? Success within my grasp, I wouldn't let it be snatched from me by this silly girl. I told her to go to the rose arbor, and I would follow her. I did."

“And killed her,” said Stone, “after arranging her in a hammock as you arranged your first victim in a coffin. And as,” he went on, “you arranged your third victim in a long narrow box. It was the similarity of those details that first aroused suspicion of you in my mind.”

“I had to, she knew me and threatened to tell,” Glynn said, and then he gave way to a blast of profanity that was so terrible that one of his keepers put a hand over the blasphemous mouth.

“Take him away,” Stone said, “you can finish his examination and look after his punishment at your leisure. But arrest him at once and relieve us of his damnable presence!”

It was not often that Fleming Stone let profanity come from his lips, but he seemed to think this case justified it.

Warren Glynn was led away and put in jail, from which he only emerged to pay the penalty of his terrible crimes.

We who were left behind were exhausted and excited both, at the stupendous truths we had listened to, and one and all begged Stone to explain the working of his brain that had led up to his conclusions.

“It was no magic,” he said, smiling at the group. “In fact it was just reading the evidence aright. I felt somehow that since there was no such motive as money or revenge evident, it was probably a case of the victims being killed to insure their silence. Then the question was, silence regarding what? And it soon dawned upon me that the secret that man wanted to keep was the secret of his own identity. Mr. Oakley’s remark that he had used the expression ‘dock,’ when any Massachusetts-born person would say ‘wharf,’ gave me a start in the right direction. Then, I saw at once if he were not John Clevedon, but was personating John Clevedon, there must be a resemblance so close that it could be only a brother or half brother. I went to the old doctor of the family, and learned after much insistence that there was an illegitimate child born and brought up in New Jersey. After that it was clear sailing, especially as in New Jersey they call a wharf a dock. I learned from Pell, who always had his suspicions, and Oakley, who never had any, all I wanted to know. And, too, a talk with Miss Vera Liddell last night proved to me that she had already realized that the man she called John Clevedon was not couldn’t be, the man she had loved and had been engaged to. The impostor was very clever, he carried off his game well, but circumstances went against him, and he resorted to one death after another to clear his path to glory and riches. I wish he might have been side-tracked sooner, before he committed crimes against good and innocent people.”

“Then he did try to kill me with the poisoned tooth paste?” I exclaimed.

“Of course he did. Pell realized that, and has been on the watch ever since. Had Glynn gone on in his mad career, he would have killed you and Pell too, before he finished. He was that awful thing, a wicked genius. He was a master criminal, and a true brother of Satan.”

I could stand no more. I rose, with a look of dumb appeal to Vera, who nodded assent, and rose; we went out on the terrace.

“You knew, then?” I said.

“Yes, almost from the first. Oh, Mottram, how I bless you for saving me from him!”

My ugly name had never before sounded sweet to me, but now it was as if an angel had voiced it, and I felt rechristened.

“Vera,” I said, solemnly, “I shall save you from all evil all your life.”

“Yes,” she said, “that is as it should be.”

And those simple words were all the troth plight we had or needed.

THE END

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