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The Tapestry Room Murder

by
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Chapter 1 Who Did This Thing?

THE room was black dark. The sort of darkness that is described as Cimmerian, Stygian, Egyptian, but is called by most of us, pitch-dark.

Though invisible by reason of the darkness, it was a beautiful room, filled with interesting and valuable pictures, tapestries, curios.

Nor were the people in the room visible to one another. Only could be heard the breathing of its occupants, calm, ordinary breathing, as of untroubled breasts and care-free minds.

Scents there were. Darkness could not conceal those.

Faint, elusive perfume of cyclamen; heavy, haunting fragrance of jasmine. A suggestion of tobacco. Another pungent familiar odor—indescribable but unmistakable—the clean, homely smell of mothballs. And over all, circling in invisible spirals, the oppressive yet poignant fumes of burning incense.

And then, with a sudden flash the place was illumined.

Not glaringly; save for a pair of shaded lamps, the lighting was indirect.

The room revealed itself as a man's library or sanctum, four-square, each side a deep arched alcove, lined with bookshelves.

The arches framed mural paintings of beauty and worth. The shelves held books of all sorts; antique tomes and rare bindings neighbored by the latest novels and mystery stories.

The thick rugs were Oriental gems and the few pieces of furniture were masterpieces of celebrated designers.

On a small sofa, the sort known as a love-seat, sat a man; on either side of him was a girl.

The man was not sitting upright. He had slumped a little, and his head had fallen forward till his chin rested on his chest.

One girl, a vivid, scarlet-clad little figure, perched on the arm of the love-seat at his left. The other, a tall, serene, Moon-goddess type, stood, frozen with fear on his right a few steps from the couch.

A low moan that rose to a shriek came from one of these girls, as she paled, swayed, and fell to the floor.

The occasion was a small party in honor of the birthday of Gaylord Homer, the host.

Twin Towers, his small but charming home, was in Westchester, in the exclusive and highly restricted community of New Warwick. It was not a new place, but one of respectable age and tested and tried desirability.

So Gaylord Homer bought himself a place there, and now proposed to take unto himself a wife. He had decided upon his choice, and though he had not yet brought the lady to see the matter in the same light that he did, he had every hope of yet achieving that expectation.

The lady's name was Diana Kittredge, and though that might seem formidable of itself, Gaylord Homer was not afraid of mere words and he was determined that this party of his should be the Rubicon which, when crossed, would change that surname to his own.

As to her Christian name she was mostly called Di, and also, Sky-eyes, a nickname not especially euphonious but wondrously descriptive.

Homer, himself, was a delightful chap, whose outstanding traits were geniality and capability.

Also, he was loyal to his friends, generous to his enemies and kind to his dependents. And if you think that writes him down a milksop, you're dead wrong.

He had a bull-dog tenacity of purpose, and if he wanted a thing he got it by sheer persistence and perseverance.

That was the way he expected to win his Diana, and the fact that she had not yet said yes to his pleas discouraged him not a bit.

He loved her with the sort of love, he sometimes assured himself, that the wingéd angels of heaven had coveted Miss Annabel Lee.

In fact, he thought Miss Lee's affair rather picayunish beside the surges of affection that swamped his own heart when he thought about Sky-eyes, and he resolved anew that this paragon of girls was for him and he must get the matter settled.

Hence the birthday party, which was to last over the week-end, and which he strongly hoped would develop into an announcement party before it closed.

It was Friday now, the party had materialized and dinner was in progress.

Diana, the azure-eyed divinity, sat at the right of the host. Her soft, fair hair, parted in the middle, waved over her ears in a curling riot, but was short at the back. Her exquisite face had a translucent effect, as if her soul was shining through, and her gentle, regular features were as serenely beautiful as those of the Mona Lisa.

Perhaps her greatest charm was her mouth and teeth, and the smiles which they helped to make proved the undoing of many a man who watched, fascinated for their return.

In an exquisite, though severely plain gown of silver tissue, Diana was a veritable Moon-goddess, and Gaylord Homer, glancing at her now and again, concluded she was perfect.

Save for one thing. She would scarcely look at or speak to him.

Never rude or noticeably neglectful, an unobservant guest might have thought Miss Kittredge was all a host could desire in the matter of cordiality. But Homer saw the effort she made when she voluntarily addressed him, the veiled indifference in her larkspur-blue eyes.

He fully sensed that she had no intention of saying yes to his pleadings, but that only made him the more determined and the more sure of ultimate success.

Truly, the human genus is a strange proposition.

Now on the other side of Homer sat a girl who was positively eaten up with her love of him. With all the strength of her exotic nature she adored this man.

Marita Moore, whose father was an undistinguished, average American citizen, had had foremothers of Spanish descent, and all their amorous impulses, all their tricks of temperament, had merged and flourished in this youngest scion of the hot-blooded line.

Marita, who looked the part, was small and lithe and sinuous. She was dark and her air was both domineering and defiant.

Her long, black eyes were now sleepy and langorous, now provocative and daring. Her short frock was red—the red of the hibiscus, of the cleft pomegranate—and in her black hair, though it was short, she had managed to thrust a high gold comb, that gave the final touch to her Castilian effects.

Her little hand continually clutched at the sleeve of Gaylord Homer's coat. She almost seemed as if trying to take him by force.

In a way, it was absurd.

Marita loved the man as he loved Diana. He scorned Marita, as Diana scorned him. Marita was determined to win him, as he was determined to win Diana. And he was as determined that he would never marry Marita as Diana was determined she would never marry him.

A triangle, indeed. An infernal triangle. Whatever happened, one heart must be broken, if not two—or three.

Three strong wills in a mortal clash. One, at least, must give way.

Then, there was another element.

The other side of Diana sat Ted Bingham, a chum of Homer's. He, too, adored Sky-eyes, and he thought, he hoped, she cared for him. But who could tell what she meant when those red lips and those mother-of-pearl teeth smiled at him?

And what had he to offer, a poor young sculptor, with nothing but faith in his own work? While Gay Homer had everything—everything a goddess could ask for on this earth.

With a suppressed sigh, he turned to his other neighbor, Mrs. Bobbie Abbott, a rollicking young married woman, the scapegrace of the party, and, incidentally, its chaperon. One of the most frivolous, vain and rattle-pated of her set, she still had a fine sense of relative values and a good bit of perception.

She saw how things were going and in a low tone, advised Ted not to give up the ship as yet.

The rest, round the table, were Rollin Dare, opinionated, but likable, Polly Opdyke, a flapper neighbor, and Cale Harrison, the confidential secretary of the host.

That was the party of Gaylord Homer's birthday dinner, and as they were all fairly well acquainted, conversation was hilarious and repartee untrammelled.

"Why not give up the ship?" Bingham growled, in an undertone to Bobbie. "No girl could stand out against Gaylord's arguments. He is fine, himself, and he lays at her feet all a woman can ask for. Wealth, position, power, and a love that is mad adoration, How can Diana resist all that?"

"Now, now, lamb, don't take it thataway. What's it to her, if she cares for somebody else—you, for instance. And she does—that is, I think she does," she hastily amended, for Ted seemed about to burst into song.

"You must get ahead of him some way," the wiseacre went on. "I, too, can't see how Di can hold out against that charmer. He's mad about her. Oh, if he'd only turn to the little vamp in red! She's determined to snatch him from Di's very grasp."

"Di isn't grasping him—look at her."

"No, but that may be her clever way of egging him on."

"She's no egger."

"Well, good Lord, Teddy, what do you want me to do? I try my best to pet you up, and you only growl at me. If I can help, I will."

"You can't, nobody can. When Gaylord gets that queer little set look in his eyes, I know he means to fight to a finish."

"Fighting won't get him Diana Kittredge."

"It may. He may keep at it till she gives in from sheer exhaustion. And, Bobbie, she mustn't marry him! No, that isn't just jealousy, there's another reason."

"What is it?" the alert mind sensed gossip.

"Never mind, now."

"Oh I hate those blind hints. They never mean anything, anyway. Well, I must babble a bit to this incubus on my other side. But look at the secretary person. He, I happen to know, is consumed with a burning passion for the firebrand in red."

"No! I can't imagine Cale Harrison being consumed with anything for anything. He is the timidest bunny I know! He wouldn't dare raise his eyes to Marita's mascara-dipped lashes!"

“Oh, wouldn’t he? I know he has that, Friday afternoon, speaking pieces air, but secretly he feels himself superior to Gaylord himself.”

“Superior!”

“Yes. He scorns Gay’s money and leisure, just as he scorns your sculpting. You know these inferiority complex people are really exhibitionists, their humility is just part of their pose.”

“But Harrison is really a mush of apology, he’s always afraid of being in the way or something.”

“Yeah, that’s the way it takes him. But look at him, he’s watching Marita vamp Gaylord, and it’s picking out his stitches. See him squirm!”

“Yes, he looks as if he was just wishing he had the nerve to pick up Marita and run away with her.”

“He has nerve enough but he’s a creature of habit. He has behaved himself so long he wouldn’t know how to set about doing anything desperate or even unconventional. Now I must love my neighbor as myself, on the other side.”

Bobbie turned to Rollin Dare who drew a long breath of relief.

“Well, I thought you hadn’t any bringing up at all! So you remembered I was here.”

“I haven’t had another thought since we sat down! Been jus’ a waitin’ for you!”

“All right, all right. But if you flirt with Teddy Bingham I’ll tell your husband on you. Anyway, you waited too long. Gaylord’s going to chase us out now. You stay by me.”

Homer was a law unto himself in his own house. He had coffee at the table, and then the whole party, men and women, rose together and adjourned to the lounge or wherever they chose.

But it was Gaylord Homer’s invariable custom, for a reason of his own, to go always, from his dinner table to a small room next the dining-room, which was called the Tapestry Room, by reason of some bits of choice and valuable tapestry which adorned its walls.

The house was built with what Bobbie Abbott called the front door on the side.

This was literally true.

The house was of that old-fashioned type whose large front room is a living-room or lounge. The back room is a dining-room, with a breakfast-room annex, and these two ends are connected by a long hall and another room.

Perhaps a plan would be advisable here.

From the pleasant candle lighted dining-room, they went to the hall, and from there, dispersed as they chose.

Rollin Dare, having corralled the elusive Mrs. Abbott, held on to her arm, and piloted her to the lounge and to a pleasant divan in a corner, where he provided her with a cigarette and then sat beside her.

Ted Bingham followed the pair, but Gaylord Homer paused at the curtained entrance to the Tapestry Room.

“Come in here with me, Di,” he said, his low, delightful voice taking all sense of command from his words.

“No,” she began, but he took her hand and led her over the threshold.

She couldn’t draw back without seeming too ungracious, and reluctantly she went along with him.

Marita, bounded to his other side, and clasped her two fluttering hands round his arm.

Seeing this, Diana tried to leave the group, but Gaylord held her fast.

“No, no, my lady,” he cried, laughing low. “You can’t get away! You can, Marita.”

“But I won’t,” she said, obstinately, her lovely face leaning near his own. “I want to come, too.”

So the trio went together into the room.

A perfect room, four-sided, in each side an alcove of bookshelves. Here and there pictures and draperies, including the rare tapestries that gave the room its name.

Through the draped portières they came from the hall, and Marita gayly drew Homer down on a small couch, one of those short sofas called a loveseat, and then perched herself on the arm of it.

Diana still stood at Gaylord’s other side.

He was looking at her, though Marita was striving to gain his attention.

Ted Bingham, who had gone into the lounge, came to the door between the lounge and the Tapestry Room, and looked in to note the situation.

Polly Opdyke, childishly curious, drew near Ted, to see what he was looking at.

Ted glanced at a clock.

All knew what would happen next.

The village of New Warwick, during the day and evening was supplied with electricity for lighting and power from a five hundred horse-power dynamo, driven by a Diesel engine. But after ten o’clock, most of the town retired and the street lights and those of residences that used electric light were supplied from a fifty horse-power generator and engine.

So each night when the larger engine was shut down, the engineer disconnected the lighting circuits from the main bus and transferred them to the bus supplied by the small generator, after which the voltage was raised and the light burned at normal brightness.

It should have been the work of a minute or two, but owing to the slowness of Old Tom, the engineer, the operation often consumed two or three minutes and sometimes even more.

Hence a few moments of complete darkness occurred every night shortly after ten o'clock, and so accustomed were the citizens of New Warwick and vicinity that it raised no comment and seldom interrupted their occupations.

Talk went on without cessation, readers merely held their books or papers ready for the light which would soon return.

Bridge players held their cards and chatted a moment, then resumed their play.

But, whether from a nervous fear of burglars, or for what reason, Homer never said, he always spent those dark moments in the Tapestry Room.

The assumption was that he wanted to be on the spot if some evilly inclined intruder should attempt to walk off with some of his treasures. For the room was full of curios and rarities that represented a large sum in value and were too, in many cases, unique and irreplaceable.

All of the guests knew of the dark time, as it was always called, and though it often came as a surprise to those not noting the hour, yet they immediately bethought themselves, and waited for the flash of returning light.

And so, as Gaylord Homer sat on the miniature sofa, with Marita on the arm of it, and with Diana standing, haughty and inaccessible at his other side, the lights went out.

There was a little squeal from Polly in the lounge.

Polly always squealed when the lights went off, though living next door, as she did, her home invariably had the same experience.

Bobbie Abbott, still devotedly attended by Rollin Dare, was curled up on her divan, her cigarette just about consumed.

She put it out and dropped the stub in an ash tray, saying she liked it all dark better.

As Dare's arm stole round her shoulder, she wriggled a bit, not knowing how long the darkness would last.

It seemed a long time though, to the others, and it was nearly three minutes. Astonishing how much longer three minutes is in the dark than in the light. But at last the lights flashed on, and Bobbie straightened up, quickly and calmly returned the curious glance Polly Opdyke shot at her.

And then a scream came—a short, sharp, frightened scream, that came from the Tapestry Room.

It was followed by a soft thud, as if someone had fallen.

Bingham, standing near the entrance to the Tapestry Room, from the lounge dashed through the archway and stood gazing.

He seemed so stunned for a moment, he made no sound at all, then, hastening forward, he helped Marita, who had fallen, to her feet.

But the girl could not stand, and Ted placed her gently in a chair and then turned to the slumped down figure of the love-seat.

Gaylord Homer sat, huddled, his chin resting on his chest, his arms sprawling, and his shoulders beginning to give way.

Near him, Diana was backing away, farther and farther away, with a dreadful look of fear on her beautiful face.

Marita, from the chair where Ted had landed her, had roused and was staring at the scene.

She began to scream but thought better of it and clapped her hands over her mouth.

Then Rollin Dare came bursting into the room, and stepping toward that awful figure that was so strangely still and huddled, he called out "Help!" As he came nearer, he caught the gleam of metal and saw that Gaylord Homer had been stabbed in the back, stabbed with a jeweled dagger, a weapon familiar to them all; a weapon that had long lain on the curio cabinet near by, that was one of Homer's choicest and most valuable treasures.

Dare touched the dagger, was about to withdraw it, when Bobbie Abbott, who had followed Dare, cried out:

"Oh don't Rollin! Don't touch it! Get a doctor, quick!"

This bit of sound common sense brought reaction from Dare, and he said, "Where is one? Is anybody here a doctor?"

"Dad's a doctor, shall I fetch him?"

It was Polly Opdyke who spoke in a frightened voice but determined to help.

"Yes, child, run!" cried Dare, as he tried gently to raise Homer's head.

And then Cale Harrison suddenly appeared.

"What's this?" he cried, harshly. "What's the matter?"

"Gaylord's been stabbed," said Ted Bingham, himself trembling with horror.

"Stabbed! Heavens!" Harrison's exclamation was lusty enough, but next moment he almost collapsed, himself, and leaned against the jamb of the doorway for support.

In an incredibly short time, Dr. Opdyke appeared and took charge of the situation.

A moment's examination brought the decision.

"He is dead," Dr. Opdyke said, solemnly. "Who did this thing?"

Chapter 2

Who Was in the Room?

JUST to look at her you would know her name must be Abbie Perkins.

It couldn't have been anything else. Tightly drawn as to hair, skin, and clothing, she stood, motionless, in the curtained doorway between the Tapestry Room and the hall.

A wiry little figure of a woman, the coiled knot at the back of her head so taut that it seemed the reason for the prominence of her round brown eyes. Thin, angular, flat, she seemed cut out of tin.

She had about as much of the quality recently dubbed sex appeal as an icepick, and this fact she knew so well and resented so fiercely that she was jealous and envious of every woman who had what she lacked. That subtle, elusive lure, much written about of late, but no more a decisive factor in a woman's fate now than in the most ancient of days.

The law of compensation gave her common sense, efficiency, housewifely skill and an uncanny intuition that was almost clairvoyance.

Any or all of these things she would joyfully have bartered for a half ounce of charm. Yet a real sense of humor saved her from misanthropy or sulks and Abbie Perkins was a success in her own field.

She was housekeeper for Gaylord Homer, and it was her generalship that kept things running smoothly, for a home without a mistress is not an easy proposition.

Always an inveterate talker, she stood now silenced and aghast at the scene before her.

"What is it?" she breathed, clasping her bony hands together and staring at the tragic figure on the little sofa.

"Be quiet, Abbie," said Dr. Opdyke, warningly; "Mr. Homer is hurt."

"He is dead," she said, in a sharp tone. "What can I do?"

The doctor flung her a grateful glance.

"That's the way to talk," he said. "You can do nothing here, Abbie, but you can help a lot by looking after the servants. Don't let them get excited or hysterical. Where is Wood?"

"Here I am sir," and the butler appeared from the dining-room door.

"Stay in the hall, Wood. Let no one pass in or out until the police can get here to take matters in charge."

"Police!"

It was Bobbie Abbott who spoke, but the dread and horror in her voice found its echo in the hearts of all present.

No one had spoken since the doctor's awful question. And now, the mention of police brought home to all of them the sudden realization that here was murder and it must be dealt with by the law.

"Yes, of course," the doctor snapped out. "Who is in charge here?"

He looked about. As he well knew it was Gaylord Homer's house, Gaylord Homer lived there alone, and now Gaylord Homer sat, helpless and still before their eyes.

There was no one in charge, if not Homer.

Abbie Perkins had gone to look after the frightened servants. Wood stood at attention in the hall, but these were not the ones to take charge.

Then the doctor's eye lighted on the secretary, Cale Harrison.

"You must take charge for the moment, Harrison," Dr. Opdyke declared. "As confidential secretary it is your place to do so, at least, until we can get his relatives here. Where are his people?"

"He hasn't any, except a distant cousin."

"Well, never mind that now, anyway. The thing to do first is to call the police."

It was hard on the doctor, for in all his experience he had never been in a situation like this before, and though an able physician, he had but small power to meet this emergency.

He looked about him at the crowd of young people, he looked at the white scared face of Diana Kittredge, the drawn, tear-stained countenance of Marita Moore, the blank faces of the men, and he was glad indeed when his wife came across the hall and stood at his side.

Acting on his orders Wood had denied her admittance, but Emily Opdyke had insistently pursued her way, unheeding him.

"What has happened?" she whispered. "Who did it?"

"We don't know," her husband returned. "Look after Polly and do anything you can for the others."

There was someone in charge now, at least so far as the women were concerned. Mrs. Opdyke was tactful and kindly by nature, and always ready in an emergency.

She made all the women go with her into the lounge, she ordered coffee brought to them there, and found cigarettes for them. Marita she made lie on a couch and bathed her brow with violet water. The girl was almost in hysterics, but Mrs. Opdyke's ministrations calmed and soothed her.

Diana refused all such nursing and sat in a big armchair, looking inscrutable and a little defiant.

Bobbie Abbott was regaining her composure and wondering why she hadn't had sense enough to do the very things Mrs. Opdyke was doing.

Polly, reassured now by the presence of both parents, was alert and quite ready to chatter with Bobbie about the tragedy.

But Mrs. Opdyke banned that at once and forbade Polly to speak at all.

The doctor and Cale Harrison were in the Tapestry Room with the dead man, but the other two men had drifted out to the hall.

These two, Dare and Bingham, were silent.

Though in no way enemies, they were not congenial spirits, and neither cared to discuss the case with the other.

Ted Bingham was nervous and walked about lighting a cigarette and then throwing it aside, sitting down a moment, then suddenly jumping up, going out to the dining-room for a glass of water, and then coming back without it.

Rollin Dare watched him, his own big frame comfortably ensconced in a high-backed hall chair.

“Do sit down, Bingham,” he said, at last. “Or at least stand still. You make me jumpy.”

“Who isn’t jumpy? Do you realize what has happened?”

“Of course I do. But we can’t do anything. Why roll around so?”

Bingham vouchsafed no answer but turned off and entered the Tapestry Room.

Here Dr. Opdyke and Cale Harrison were holding a desultory conversation.

“It’s unthinkable,” the doctor was saying.

“Yes,” Harrison agreed.

He was one of those men who would agree to almost anything. It was this trait that had endeared him to Gaylord Homer.

“Come in, Bingham,” Dr. Opdyke said, looking up. “What do you make of it all? Mr. Harrison says there was no one in this room but Gaylord and two girls.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Ted Bingham returned. “Where were all the others?”

“Where were you?”

“Me? Why—I was standing in that doorway, between this room and the lounge.”

“You were there when the lights went out?”

“Why, yes—I think so. Yes I was.”

“And you stayed there through the dark time?”

“Sure. But—are you questioning me?”

“Not at all. I’ll leave all that to the police.”

“You’d better. Excuse me, I don’t mean to advise, but I know that an official investigation is the one that counts. He—he couldn’t have done it himself?”

“Hardly.” The doctor gave a grim smile. “The dagger was driven in by a strong, quick stroke. It entered between the seventh and eighth ribs, and death was probably painless and almost instantaneous.”

"I see. The murderer then had a knowledge of anatomy."

"Well, that wouldn't be really necessary. Anybody with the will to kill would strike about like that. The dagger blade is horizontal, you see."

"Don't ask me to look at it—I can't!" Ted walked away from the tragic sight and fingered some books that lay on a table.

"Perhaps it would be better if you didn't touch anything, Mr. Bingham," murmured Harrison, in his deprecatory way.

"Don't tell me what to do!" Bingham flung back at him, and leaving the room he went to where the girls were.

He sat down beside Diana, who paid no attention to him. She seemed like one in a trance, her blue eyes looked glassy, and her pale face showed all too clearly the remaining dabs of rouge.

From her couch Marita was eying Diana attentively. Her face showed all her worst characteristics, hate, rage, jealousy—all gleamed from her great dark eyes and were shown in the straight line of her red lips.

Yet no one spoke. Perhaps it was because of the restraining presence of Mrs. Opdyke, perhaps the girls were all too overcome with the shock of the tragedy, but Bingham found himself in a silence that was more embarrassing than their first excitement had been.

At last the police arrived. There was the village constable, and a detective sergeant in plain clothes.

The latter took charge of affairs. No longer need Dr. Opdyke wonder who was at the head of things. Sergeant Cram was. He took hold with a force and decision that left no room or place for any one else.

He strode into the Tapestry Room, followed by the far less self-assertive constable. He walked once round the love-seat, viewing the body from all angles.

Then he said, rapping the words out; "Who did it?"

As no reply was forthcoming, Dr. Opdyke said, quietly. "We don't know that, sergeant. It is yet to be discovered."

"Who was in the room with him?"

It had come. The vital question, the significant query.

The question that had but one answer, that led to but one result.

"I—I wasn't here," the doctor begged the question. "I was called in after Mr. Homer was dead. I live next door."

"Well, who was here? Who are you, sir?"

It was Cale he turned to, and the secretary replied at once.

"I am Harrison, the confidential secretary of Mr. Homer."

“Where were you when Mr. Homer was killed?”

“I was upstairs. I went up to the study directly we left the dinner table, and only a few moments later, I heard a commotion down here and I heard a woman scream. I ran down and found Mr. Homer stabbed to death.”

“How did you know he was dead?”

“I—I didn’t—then, but when he was so still—and didn’t move and all——”

“Did anybody say he was dead—before the doctor came, I mean?”

“I don’t know—I really don’t know exactly what did happen or what anybody said. I was sort of—sort of dazed, you know.”

“You’re sort of dazed yet. Pull yourself together, you’ll have a lot of talking to do. Now, tell me, someone, who was in this room with Mr. Homer when he was killed?”

“Mr. Bingham was in that doorway,” offered Dare, pointing to the arched door where Ted had stood.

“Hold on! Did this stabbing occur when the lights went off? The dark time?”

“Yes,” Cale said, “I thought you knew that.”

“I didn’t. I knew nothing about it. How do you know?”

“Only because just after the lights came on again, I heard a shriek and a commotion down here.”

“Well, that fixes the time, doesn’t it, Gorman?” He turned to his fellow policeman for the first time since his entrance.

“Yes, no question about that. You’d better talk to somebody who wasn’t next door or upstairs when the thing happened.”

His dry tone seemed to nettle the sergeant a little, but he agreed.

“Call that man Bingham,” he directed.

In his cautious way, Harrison stepped to the door of the lounge and summoned Ted.

Unwillingly he came, his face as black as a thunder cloud, his lips twitching and his whole aspect belligerent.

“What do you want?” he said, not rudely, but with a decided lack of cordiality.

“You,” said Cram, tersely. “Murder has been committed here, and we want to get the detailed particulars at once.”

“Sorry, but I can’t tell you anything.”

“You can tell me where you were at the time.”

“Oh that. Yes, I was standing in that doorway.”

“Why were you there?”

Ted stared at him, and then said quietly: “For no especial reason. We had all just come in from the dining-room, and we scattered through the house. I paused in the doorway to see where others were going to settle down.”

“And Mr. Homer came into this room directly he left the dining-room?”

“Yes—I think so. I wasn’t noticing, you understand.”

“Did you leave the dining-room after Mr. Homer?”

“Yes, right behind him.”

“Then you couldn’t help seeing where he went. He came right in here?”

“Guess he did.”

“Who was with him?”

There it was, the awful question! But Ted Bingham had no intention of answering it.

“I don’t remember,” he said, mendaciously. “We all crowded through the hall together. Gaylord turned into this room, and a lot of us went on to the lounge. I think Harrison went upstairs.”

“He did. He went up to Mr. Homer’s study to do some work.”

“Oh, was that it? Well, I can only speak for myself. I don’t know about the others.”

“But Mr. Bingham, when you stood in that doorway, just before the lights went out, you surely saw who was in this room with Mr. Homer.”

“No,” Ted looked his inquisitor squarely in the eye, “I was looking the other way.”

“Oh, toward the lounge. Well, then, who was in the lounge?”

“Most of the crowd. Mrs. Abbott, Miss Opdyke—I don’t think I can enumerate them, really.”

“Never mind, I’ll learn all this from the others.”

With that Sergeant Cram went into the lounge, leaving the constable and the doctor alone with the dead man.

Bingham and the secretary he herded before him, seeming desirous for their presence.

The lounge was a large and imposing room. Of noble proportions and with a lofty ceiling it was a fit setting for the treasures of furniture and ornament therein gathered.

Paneled in polished gumwood, the walls gave back reflections of the soft light of a myriad candles, and the darker recesses and alcoves added to the picturesqueness of the scene.

Unheeding the aesthetic effect, Cram looked about for a light-switch and found one. A flood of light followed, and brought into bold relief the faces that had willingly sought the more welcome dusk.

“Ah, that’s better,” said Cram, as he turned on another switch. “Now, if you please, I want a straightforward and coherent story of what happened here tonight.”

Though he had expressed his wishes clearly enough, nobody seemed inclined to grant them.

The silence grew oppressive, and at last Cram said:

“The fact that it is so hard to elicit testimony is a bit suspicious in itself. I find I must interrogate you individually.”

There was a slight rustle of indignation at this, but Cram paid no attention to it, and addressed Rollin Dare.

“I have already had a few words with Mr. Harrison and Mr. Bingham,” he said, in a grave but not unkindly voice, “and now, Mr. Dare, I will ask you to tell me all you can as to the actual happenings when the lights went off.”

“Me,” exclaimed Dare. “I don’t know anything about it.”

“Where were you?”

“Over in that far corner of the lounge, over by the big Oriental urn.”

“Who was with you?”

Dare paused a moment, and then said, firmly, “Mrs. Abbott was with me.”

“You verify that, Mrs. Abbott?” asked Cram, turning to her.

“Yes, of course. We were sitting on the divan there, smoking.”

“All the time the lights were off?”

“Yes, all the time,” said Dare.

“And please describe what happened when the lights came on again.”

Rollin Dare had no thought in his mind but to tell the exact truth as far as he knew it. A straightforward sort, he almost always spoke the truth.

He was a short, stocky man, physically, with a round, pleasant face and mirror-like black hair. He was always positive, though also given to changing his mind. His worst trait was that he was a bit of a sponge, often coming down on his friends for entertainment, favors, and even financial aid now and then.

Yet his gay good nature, and his readiness to help at any time kept him a favorite and caused his faults to be forgotten.

He was not a far-sighted chap, and now, put to it for a description of a scene, he thought only of being exact about it.

“Why, let me see,” he said, thinking back. “We sat there on the divan, Mrs. Abbott and I, and it was dark, and I was thinking as soon as the lights came on I would ask Homer to let us have a dance. Then the lights did come on, just as they always do, you know, and I reached out for a cigarette and gave one to Mrs. Abbott. I was just lighting hers for her, when there came a scream, a girl’s scream from the Tapestry Room.”

“How did you know it was from that room?”

“Why—er—I dunno as I did know at the time—not for sure. But it sounded from that direction, and when we jumped up and went that way—everybody was going that way, why, we could see that was where the scream came from.”

“Yes, and how could you see that?”

“Why, Marita—Miss Moore, you know—had fallen to the floor, and I guess she was the one who had screamed. Though I’m not sure of that.”

“Was it you who screamed, Miss Moore?” Cram whirled round toward her.

“Yes, it was,” Marita said, in a low voice, but speaking steadily.

“Why did you scream?”

“Because, when the lights came on, I saw—I saw Gaylord, with a—a dagger sticking in his back.”

“And you screamed from fright?”

Marita’s great eyes gave one glance round the room, and then came to rest on the countenance of the detective.

“Yes,” she said, slowly, “yes, from fright, and terror and grief.”

“You didn’t know then that Mr. Homer was dead.”

“I surmised it. The way he looked, the way he was huddled down, the way that terrible dagger stuck out—oh, oh,—hush! Don’t ask me any more!”

Marita gave way to an unrestrained sobbing, and Mrs. Opdyke went quickly to her side, hoping to calm her.

Cram turned at once to Diana, and said, with a sort of intuition. “Were you in that room, too, the Tapestry Room?”

The girl had been looking pale and distressed, but this question seemed to break down her final barriers. She collapsed, her head drooped forward in her hands, and she seemed unable to speak.

“Let her alone,” stormed Ted Bingham. “Don’t you see she is ill—she is almost distracted.”

"I am sorry," Cram said, "but this inquiry must go on. It is imperative. Perhaps Miss Kittredge will answer this one question. Were you in that room with Mr. Homer when the lights went off?"

Diana nodded an assent, and the detective mercifully let her alone.

He turned to Bingham.

"Mr. Bingham," he said, "I must ask you to answer me carefully. When you stood in the doorway, and the electric lights went dark, were you standing there alone?"

"I was," Ted replied.

"When the lights came on again, were you still standing there alone?"

"Yes, I was."

"Who was then in the Tapestry Room with Mr. Homer?"

For a moment Ted hesitated, and then the eye of his inquisitor being firmly fixed on him, he said, slowly:

"Miss Moore was in there and Miss Kittredge, too."

"Then you must have turned round, Mr. Bingham. You have already told me that you were facing the lounge and couldn't see into the other room."

"Yes—I—I suppose I did turn around."

"And you saw the two ladies there, when the light returned. What were they doing?"

"Nothing, that I noticed. Miss Moore had fallen to the floor, and naturally I hastened to help her up."

"You had heard Miss Moore scream?"

"Yes."

"You were then not surprised to find she had fallen?"

"I heard her fall—I mean I heard a sound as if someone had fallen. I think that was when I turned that way."

"But Miss Moore didn't scream until after the lights came on."

"Didn't she? I'm a bit confused. The shock of it all has dazed my memory a bit. I've told you all I know."

Chapter 3

It Had to Be One of Them!

THE arrival of the coroner called the detective away from the lounge and he was closeted for a time, with Coroner Hale and Dr. Opdyke in the Tapestry Room.

The silent constable sat in the hall, where he was glowered at by Wood, and by any of the servants who chanced to pass.

Few did, however, for Abbie Perkins had rounded up the staff and given them orders to remain in the kitchen department unless by her express directions.

Wood, the butler, of course, was not under Abbie's law, and he drifted about like a lost sheep.

Relieved of the presence of the terrifying detective, the groups of the lounge began to chatter a little.

"Bumptious old bounder," remarked Dare. "I suppose the police people have to put on that God-almighty attitude to hold up their end. But if he'd just ask his necessary questions in a decent, straightforward way, he'd get better results."

"I can't see that he was rude or unmannerly," said Harrison, in his low, timid voice. "It's his business to get at the truth of the matter."

"Well, the truth of the matter doesn't concern any of us. We didn't stab old Gaylord. We ought to be deferred to as guests who are shocked and grieved at the disaster. Instead of which he seems positively suspicious of us."

"Oh, no, Rollin," cried Bobbie Abbott. "You can't think he suspects any of us being implicated in the—the affair! Oh, I wish Roger was here! I wish I hadn't come! I wish——"

She broke down and sobbed so alarmingly that Mrs. Opdyke left her post by the side of Marita and went over to the new demand on her ministrations.

Abbie Perkins stalked into the room. She paused just inside the threshold, and stood, hands on hips, surveying the group.

"I been a-lissenin' at the doctors," she said, unblushingly, "and I heard the coroner one say as he'd have the inquest tomorrow and everybody must stay over for it. 'Course most o' you folks planned to stay two-three days anyhow. Mis' Opdyke, what about you? And Polly? I want for to set out the bedrooms."

"Oh, I think we'll be allowed to go home, Abbie. Only next door, you know."

"Yes'm, I know. But that coroner one, he said everybody."

"He'll let us know soon, I think," and Emily Opdyke turned back to the now hysterical Bobbie.

"Brace up, Bobs," said Ted Bingham, coming toward her and speaking gently. "There's nothing to be afraid of. It's a ghastly thing to happen, but it's up to all of us to put up a brave front and carry on as best we can. Once the inquest is over, you can go home. Somebody will come to fetch you, eh?"

"Yes, Ted, somebody will come for me. Roger expects to be away a week, but I'll send for Jimmy or Dad."

Bingham passed on and came to anchor next to Diana.

He sat down beside her without a word. By no word or look did she acknowledge his presence, but glancing at her sidewise he saw or imagined he saw a slight look of relief on her face.

Pale as a waxen image, silent as a marble statue, Diana sat looking off into space, her sky-blue eyes vacant and devoid of all expression. A sudden tremor shook her whole frame, and Bingham dared to put out his hand and clasp hers. She gave him an answering pressure, so slight he could scarce notice it, but unmistakable.

“Do you want to leave the room—with me?” he whispered. “Go outside for a stroll?”

“I daren’t,” she murmured back. “That terrible man will return and he’ll want to bully me.”

“Nobody shall bully you, Diana, not while I’m here.”

“You can’t do anything to help, Ted. Or, yes, you do help, just by your presence. Stand by, won’t you?”

“You bet!” he responded emphatically, and then the men came in from the Tapestry Room.

Coroner Hale addressed the waiting crowd.

“Mr. Homer has been murdered,” he said, quietly. “He has been stabbed in the back with a jeweled dagger, one of his own belongings, I am told. The blade reached his heart and death was practically instantaneous. The probability is that the victim made no sound and almost no movement after that attack. Did anyone near him hear any sound from him?”

There was no response to this, and the coroner proceeded.

Hale was a tall, spare man, with sharp features and darting black eyes. He was evidently informed as to the known facts of the tragedy, and he looked piercingly at Diana and also at Marita as he talked.

Getting no reply to his question, he went on in curt, incisive sentences.

“Mr. Homer was sitting at the time, sitting on a small sofa. The lights went off, as they do every night, and in the few moments of darkness someone procured the dagger from the small table where, I am told, it is accustomed to lie and, in the darkness or semi-darkness, drove the blade into the victim. I must now make some pointed inquiries. Who was in the room with Mr. Homer when the electric lights went out?”

The silence that followed this question was for a full minute unbroken.

Hale looked from one to another, noting the expressions on the various faces. Sergeant Cram also scrutinized the faces of the party. Diana still preserved her icy calm, and Marita’s face was hidden in her hands.

“I may as well state,” Coroner Hale said, not unkindly, “that it will in no way help anyone to try to hide or evade the truth. It is, of course, known who was in that room, but for your own sake, I ask you to speak out and tell any facts bearing on the case.”

“I was in the room,” Diana said, then, “I was standing near the sofa on which Mr. Homer was sitting. But I know no facts bearing on the case.”

She spoke with perfect calm and a quiet dignity that commanded the respect of all present.

“I was in the room, too!” Marita exclaimed. Her voice was jerky, her manner excited, indeed, she gave the effect of speaking because Diana had spoken, “I was near the sofa, too, at Mr. Homer’s other side.”

“And can you tell me anything more?” asked Hale.

“No; what is there to tell? We three were there, the lights went out. When the lights came on again, we saw Gaylord——”

“Were you standing, Miss Moore?”

“N—no. I was—sitting on the arm of the sofa.”

“Talking to Mr. Homer?”

“I—I don’t know. I mean I don’t know whether I was talking or not, when the lights went off.”

“You were not,” Diana said; “Mr. Homer was talking to me.”

“Oh, he was,” put in Hale. “What was he talking about?”

“He was asking me if I would rather dance or go for a stroll in the garden.”

“And you replied?”

“I hadn’t replied at all. Just then the darkness came. We are accustomed to it, we often don’t notice it, but tonight, for some reason, it made us all silent.”

“In the silence, then, you could of course hear if another person entered the room. Did you hear any such sound—any sound?”

Diana hesitated. Her calm face gave no hint of what was passing in her mind save that her lips quivered a little.

At last she replied, with a murmured “No” so low-voiced that it could scarcely be heard at all.

Hale turned quickly to Marita.

“Did you, Miss Moore?” he said.

“I?—Me?—Why, no—no, indeed, I heard nothing.”

“Yet in a silence, a two minute or more silence, a man was stabbed, killed, and you two, only a few inches from him, heard no sound?”

Marita, who was lying on a couch, nestled in a dozen pillows, sprang to an upright attitude.

“I didn’t say I heard no sound,” she exclaimed. “There were lots of sounds, I heard a clock ticking, I heard low laughter and chatter from the lounge, I heard Mr. Harrison walk across the hall, I heard the parrot squawk in the dining-room, I heard—well, there were many confused sounds.”

“But did you hear any sound that you would judge made by Mr. Homer?”

“No,” and Marita turned white and shivered.

“Did you, Miss Kittredge?”

“No,” said Diana, as pale as Marita, but keeping her poise.

“Did either of you,” Hale was very grave now, “did either of you hear any sound that might have been made by some intruder, by someone who came into the room for the purpose of crime?”

“I didn’t,” answered Marita, for Hale looked toward her. “But by that I mean I didn’t knowingly hear any such sound. There may have been such, however, for as I said, there were various vague and unidentifiable sounds.”

Hale looked at her in slight surprise. From a decidedly hysterical attitude she had roused herself to coherent talking and to definite description.

“You heard no such indications, Miss Kittredge?”

“I did not. But I heard nothing. That is, I do not remember hearing the clock tick or the parrot cry out.”

“What were you thinking about? Having no intimation of the impending tragedy, what was occupying your thoughts at the dark time?”

A look of desperate fear came into the blue eyes.

It was evident that now Diana had all she could do to keep her poise, to retain her calm.

But she struggled bravely with herself, and at last stammered out:

“I cannot tell you what I was thinking about, for I do not remember. Merely the trivial thoughts of the day.”

“How far were you from Mr. Homer at that time?”

“How far? Why, I don’t know. Perhaps a yard or so.”

“Oh, no, Diana,” Marita broke in, “you were not more than a foot from the couch Gaylord sat on. And you were coming toward it, you were about to sit down beside him.”

“No, Marita, no, I was not. I meant to leave the room.”

“Why?” asked Hale.

“For no especial reason,” Diana returned, naughtily now. “I merely thought I would go into the lounge.”

“And then dark came. You expected the dark?”

“Oh, yes. It always occurred about ten o’clock. But I never know the exact time.”

“You did tonight,” Marita said, “because I had just told you it was five past ten. Don’t you remember?”

“Yes, I believe you had,” Diana said, wearily. “I can’t see that it matters.”

“Mr. Bingham,” Hale turned to Ted, “will you tell me exactly, as to the attitudes of the two ladies in the room with Mr. Homer. You were in the deep alcoved doorway that leads from that room to this.”

“Attitudes?” said Bingham. “I don’t understand.”

“Yes, attitudes. Miss Moore, I am told, was sitting on the arm of the sofa. Was she at Mr. Homer’s right or left side?”

“Why—let me see—the left, I think.”

“Yes, I was on his left,” Marita cried out. “Why not ask me?”

“Were you touching him?”

“When the dark came I had my hand on his shoulder, but as the light went out I took my hand away, and——”

“And jumped up from where you were sitting.”

“Yes—I believe I did.”

“And—I’m speaking to you, Mr. Bingham,—Miss Kittredge was on the right of Mr. Homer?”

“Yes, she was,” Ted asserted. “About four or five feet away.”

“But you had your back to them all, how do you know?”

This was from Sergeant Cram, and Ted thought to himself with what pleasure he could wring the detective’s neck.

“I know, because I saw Miss Kittredge when the lights came on again.”

“And at that time, Miss Moore had fallen to the floor?”

“Yes,” said Ted, curtly.

“It is not my duty,” Hale went on, in his harsh, rasping tones, “to investigate the possibilities of this case, as to the identity of the murderer. That belongs in the jurisdiction of my colleague, Mr. Cram. It is for me to determine the method of the death, and that has been done. I shall have an inquest tomorrow afternoon, and it is necessary that you all remain here until after that time. Dr. and Mrs. Opdyke and their daughter will be permitted to go to their home, next door. The rest of you must remain until excused. The situation is a bit difficult, in that there seems to be no real head of the house. In his position of confidential secretary Mr. Harrison is, in a way, in authority. Who, Mr. Harrison, is Mr. Homer’s heir or his next of kin?”

“His next of kin, I think, is a second cousin, who lives in New York City. But as to his heir, I happen to know that Mr. Homer made a new will within the past week, and while I do not know its contents, I do know it is the only will he ever made, for he told me so.”

“That is of interest, and must be looked into. Who is Mr. Homer’s lawyer?”

“Mr. Crawford. Edgar Crawford of New York City. But he didn’t draw up the will.”

“And who is the cousin in the city? What is his name?”

“Moffatt. His first name is either Alfred or Albert, I’m not sure which.”

“Can you find out? Mr. Moffatt should be notified at once of his cousin’s death.”

“Yes, I can get his address from Mr. Homer’s address book.”

“Get it now, then. I think it only right to tell him the news tonight.”

“It is nearly midnight.”

“Yes. Get me the address, please.”

Harrison obeyed, and quickly finding the address and telephone number, Hale passed the book over to Sergeant Cram and asked him to call up Mr. Moffatt.

“Call in the butler and housekeeper,” Hale then directed, and Wood and Abbie Perkins appeared.

Hale addressed the butler first.

“Did you see any stranger or idler about the place today?” he asked.

“No, sir,” Wood replied. “No one at all who didn’t belong here.”

“Have you noticed any unusual behavior on the part of Mr. Homer the last few days?”

“No, sir. Except that he was a bit excited like, getting up this party. He looked forward to it, I can tell you.”

“Why?”

“Well, it was his birthday party; that is, Sunday would be his birthday and there was to be extra doin’s. And besides——”

“Well, man, go on.”

“Besides, he always liked company and he looked forward to a good time.”

“That is not what you started to say. Why did you change your mind?”

“I didn’t change my mind, sir. I know nothing more of the matter than I’ve told you.”

“Neither he doesn’t,” broke in Abbie Perkins. “Wood is as honest as the day is long, and if he knew anything else he’d tell it.”

“What do you know? Anything else?”

“No, that I don’t. Only I can’t help seein’ what’s right under my nose, can I?”

“Well, what was right under your nose?”

“Oh, only that Mr. Homer hoped and prayed that when this party was over and done with, a certain lady would be his fiancée, that’s all.”

Mrs. Perkins bridled and smiled a little, evidently so full of her exclusive knowledge of her master’s affairs that she felt a great superiority.

“Yes, and who was the certain lady?”

But in the meantime, Abbie Perkins had received such a black look from Ted Bingham, that she collapsed like a burst balloon.

He added a most negative shake of his head and was altogether so forbidding of aspect that she dared not go on.

“I—I don’t know, sir,” she said, quickly calling out her reserves of diplomacy, “I don’t know who the lady was, but Mr. Homer had just sort of intimated, you see, that there was somebody.”

“I think you do know the lady’s name.”

“No, sir, cross my heart, I don’t! But what does it matter now? And the poor man dead and all!”

Just then Cram returned, saying he had talked with Mr. Moffatt.

“What did he say?” asked Hale.

“He was in bed, asleep, and it took me a few minutes to get him awake enough to understand what I was talking about. Then he seemed shocked of course, and asked what we wanted of him. I told him he ought to come up here, and he said he would come tomorrow, then added, that if necessary, he would come tonight. He began to get onto the true inwardness of the matter at last.”

“You told him it was murder?”

“Of course, and while he was properly astounded he really showed little deep feeling. He said, again, ‘Want I should come up there tonight?’ But I said tomorrow would do, for he couldn’t get here under an hour or more, and I take it we’re about through for tonight.”

“Yes, I think so. Better call an undertaker and have the body taken upstairs tonight. If Moffatt is the heir, I’d like to have him here as soon as possible, but no use delaying things for his arrival. And your work, Cram, can be in no way assisted by keeping the dead man down here.”

“No, there’s no doubt about the method and the cause of death. I’ll take charge of the dagger, it’s a valuable piece of property, I’m told.”

“Yes,” Dr. Opdyke told them, “it is a rare and valuable curio. It is a gold and jeweled weapon that was said to be used in the play of Othello, when given by Booth and Barrett. A fine piece of workmanship, aside from its associations.”

“Where was it kept?”

“I don’t know, where was it, Abbie?”

“Always on the small table in the Tapestry Room. The table behind where Mr. Homer was sitting when—when——”

Her feelings overcame her, and she ran from the room.

“Let her go,” said Hale, “we can’t do anything more tonight. Ladies and gentlemen,” he nodded at the crowd, “you are all dismissed for the night. Of course you are not under arrest or even detained, but you must stay in this house or grounds until you are given permission to leave. A dastardly crime has been committed, and the perpetrator must be brought to justice. Anyone who can do so must testify to any facts they know of. To withhold such testimony makes you an accessory and as liable to punishment as the principal.”

The coroner left the room and could be heard in the Tapestry Room, talking in low tones with the undertaker who had recently come in.

“Come out for a breath of air,” Ted Bingham begged of Diana.

But she only looked at him with cold eyes and said she must go to her room at once.

Harrison cast longing eyes at Marita, but dared not cross the room to speak to her. Timid always, he was more embarrassed than ever now with the cloud of tragedy and crime hanging over the house, with the police giving furtive glances now and again toward the beautiful and defiant looking girl he adored.

He tried hard, did Harrison, to go to her side, but his weak will and weaker muscles refused to act for him.

Rollin Dare was not so timid. He went up to Marita, where she still reclined among her pillows and said, cheerily:

“Come on, Rita, come for a sprint through the gardens. It will make you feel a whole lot better.”

But after a moment of hesitation, Marita said no, she wanted to go to her room.

“But,” she added, with her own gay smile, “I’ll go with you tomorrow morning. I’ll be better then.”

“All right,” Dare returned, “good-night, then. Come along, Bobbie I’ve got to get some fresh air, and I hate to walk alone.”

Bobbie Abbott consented, and catching up a light wrap, went with him out to the garden.

Dare was not surprised, though it scared Bobbie, to find the whole place patrolled by policemen.

“Don’t be afraid,” he whispered to her, as he pleasantly greeted the guards. “Good-night, officer, we’re just walking around a bit.”

But at last they managed to find an arbor out of earshot of the patrolmen, and Bobbie burst forth:

“Oh, Rollin, tell me, do! Was it Marita?”

“No, of course not! Hush, don’t say such things! Keep quiet, Bobbie.”

“Then it must have been Diana! It had to be one of them! You know it had to!”

“We don’t know anything of the sort. And if we do, we mustn’t breathe it.”

“Why not? The truth has got to come out. Oh, Rollin, which one did it?”

“Listen here, Bobbie. I tell you you mustn’t talk like that. Don’t you see what a dreadful thing you’re doing to accuse either of those girls?”

“But it had to be one of them. They were in there alone with Gaylord.”

“No matter if they were, you must not mention their names as possible suspects. If you do, you may get into deep trouble yourself.”

“Why? How? What do you mean?”

But Dare refused to tell what he meant and forbade her to continue the subject.

Chapter 4

Make Your Own Will

WHEN Sergeant Cram arrived at Twin Towers the next morning, he was met by Bingham, who asked him to join him in a conference in the study on the second floor, where Homer’s business matters were always attended to.

“You’ve had breakfast?” asked the detective, as they went up the stairs.

“Oh, yes, I was up early.” He ushered Cram into a pleasant room, where Cale Harrison sat at his desk.

Another and more elaborate desk was obviously the dead man’s, and at this Bingham sat down, after offering Cram a near-by chair.

“I have decided,” Bingham said, “to take the helm myself. I don’t mean in any officious or presumptuous way, but I feel somebody should take charge and as Gaylord Homer’s near friend and chum, I think I am the one to do so. For the moment, at least. When it transpires that there is an executor or an inheritor, I will turn over to him a full report of all I have done and all the responsibilities I have incurred. But in the absence of such an authority, I feel myself justified in keeping an eye on developments as they occur.”

Cram looked at the speaker a little dubiously, but said nothing.

“The lawyer, Mr. Crawford, will come here this morning, and he may give us such information as will excuse me from any further duty. But until that occurs I propose to take charge.”

“I can see no objection to your plan, Mr. Bingham. I assume Mr. Harrison also agrees to it?”

“Yes—oh, yes,” said Cale Harrison, earnestly. “I am merely a secretary, and I would wish for someone to whom I may report. I shall continue to do my work as usual, until I receive other orders from someone in a position to give them.”

“This is the office of the late Mr. Homer?” asked Cram, looking about the room.

It was directly above the Tapestry Room on the first floor, and though equipped with office furniture, with desks and filing cabinets and a good-sized safe, the pieces were all evidently made to order of choice woods and were of fine workmanship. Also there were valuable pictures and lamps, and the desk fittings were of the finest variety. Those on Homer's desk were of carved jade, while Harrison's were of beautiful bronze work.

"Yes, it is the office," answered Harrison, "though always called the study. But all business matters are looked after here. Mr. Homer was methodical and systematic in his business. You will find his papers and accounts in perfect order, I am sure."

"Doubtless, oh, yes, doubtless," said Cram. "Of course, the papers must be gone through, but it will be well to wait for the lawyer's arrival."

"I think so," agreed Bingham. "Now, Mr. Cram, what we want to talk over, Harrison and I, is the—er—the crime itself. Are you willing to say what you think as to—as to the identity of the criminal?"

"You put a difficult question, Mr. Bingham."

"But you saw the whole affair, that is, as much as anybody could see, what do you think?"

"I have a very decided opinion, and it is that the murderer is someone who came in from outside, and who——"

"There is an old proverb, Mr. Bingham, about the wish being father to the thought. May I suggest, that you strongly hope that the murderer did come in from outside, and that is the ground for your opinion?"

The color flew to Ted's cheeks and brow, and the sympathetic Harrison also looked embarrassed and distressed.

"I have other grounds," Ted said, struggling to retain his composure, "I know perfectly well that no one in our party of friends here could have done such a thing. I know the servants are beyond suspicion. Therefore the doctrine of elimination points beyond doubt to an outsider."

"Elimination is a fine thing," Cram returned, "but your knowledge and belief is not sufficient to eliminate the people in the house."

"You don't mean you suspect any of us!" exclaimed Harrison, in his scared way. "You can't, it's impossible!"

"Mr. Harrison, that has yet to be determined. I am quite ready to admit we have a deep problem before us, but it cannot be solved by surmise or suspicion, nor yet by belief and faith. We must have evidence and testimony. They must be sifted and proved. Reliable and trustworthy witnesses must be heard and their stories listened to with care. It is too soon to point the finger of suspicion at anybody. Even if circumstances seem adverse, there may be extenuating conditions, there may be misleading facts. So, I cannot hazard an opinion at present as to the identity of the criminal, but at the inquest this afternoon, there may be facts brought forward and evidence given that will be significant if not decisive. Now, since we are here, I will put a question or two myself. Mr. Harrison, you mentioned a will of Mr. Homer's but you said it was not drawn up by his lawyer. Will you tell me further of that?"

"Why—it was this way. Although conventional and of normal habits in most ways, Mr. Homer sometimes broke loose and became a law unto himself. In the matter of a will he did so. He had never made a will,

but when he did conclude he wanted one he made it himself. He bought a book entitled, 'Make Your Own Will,' and he read it thoroughly and then made his own will."

"Where is that will?"

"I don't know, but I think it is in the book. You see, the book had a pocket in the back cover, and that pocket held a blank will. I mean a will with the preliminary matter already printed, and then various blanks for any legacies the testator desired to record. Mr. Homer showed me the book and the blank will when he bought it, and since then I have often seen him poring over the book."

"In this room?"

"Sometimes. But more often as he sat down in the Tapestry Room. He always sat there after dinner for a time, and he kept the will book down there."

"On the bookshelves?"

"Usually on the table, or carting it round in his pocket."

"The will must of course be found. Do you know the gist of its contents?"

"I'd rather not say."

"All right, it doesn't matter. The book will, of course, turn up."

"Oh, yes. It will be found among his things somewhere."

"Mr. Homer was a rich man?"

"I—really, sir, I couldn't say. Mr. Crawford will tell you all such details. I'm only a secretary, you see, and I hesitate to make statements."

Cram thought to himself that Harrison hesitated to do almost anything at all, but he asked him no further questions at the time.

"I can tell you that," broke in Bingham. "I see no harm in saying that Gaylord Homer was a rich man. He inherited a pile from his father, and he has judiciously invested it until it has about doubled itself. I know this from what he has told me himself. Never a braggart, he has often expressed a satisfaction that he had the wherewithal to gratify his tastes for books and art objects."

"And do you know who was to be the beneficiary under his will?"

"I do not. I didn't know he had made a will, until Harrison told of it. I often said to Gaylord that he ought to make one, but he only laughed and said he was good for many years yet."

"Then he had no apprehensions, no fears of any enemy coming in to do him harm?"

"Not that I know of. Yet who can tell about his friends? Homer was not one to babble, and for all I know he may have had a dozen enemies who wanted to kill him."

“You’re a bit transparent, Mr. Bingham.” Cram smiled a little. “You don’t want any of your friends in the house suspected, so you invent these enemies.”

“Not quite fair, Mr. Cram,” said Harrison, his voice steady enough, but his fingers twitching nervously. “Of course, none of us wants suspicion to rest on anyone in the household, if there is an enemy outside who may have done this thing.”

“That’s natural enough,” said Cram, quietly, “but I’m going downstairs now, and before I go, I want to advise you two men not to talk the matter over too much with the others. It’s wiser to keep your own counsel for the present.”

“Old fossil!” exclaimed Ted, as the detective disappeared downstairs. “He’s mid-Victorian! I’d like to get an up-and-coming detective who could ferret out some unknown enemy of Gaylord’s who sneaked in and killed him.”

“So should I,” and Harrison glanced furtively at Bingham. “But, you must realize, Mr. Bingham, there was no way an outsider could get in.”

“Why not?”

“Because we were all in the hall or lounge or Tapestry Room when the lights went out. No outsider could have come in a dark house and made his way to the Tapestry Room in the dark and committed the murder in the dark and got out again, in the dark, without being heard or seen by some of us.”

“I know it doesn’t seem likely, but, hang it all, Cale, it must have happened, for you know as well as I do that neither of those girls stabbed Gaylord!”

“Yes,” Harrison sighed, “I know it, but can we make the police believe it?”

“We must,” and Ted banged his hand down on the desk before him. “I’m going down and dog the footsteps of that Cram person. I shan’t let him put his rotten stuff over!”

Cale Harrison watched the other man as he swung out of the door and down the stairs.

The secretary was a personable man, fair-haired, blue-eyed and of good complexion. He was neither a prig nor a sissy, yet he lacked a firmness of speech which gave him the effect of lacking firmness of character. This was not the truth. Cale Harrison had a strong will and a quick, sane power of judgment. But his environment as a child had made him shy in manner and over-modest as to his own attainments.

Gaylord Homer had noticed this, and in his good-natured way had tried to uproot it.

“You haven’t a vice,” he had once said to Cale. “Now I don’t want you to cultivate wickedness, but take it from me, a chap too goody-goody can’t get along in these hectic days.”

The remark had settled into Cale’s mind, and he had thought it over many times. Although in some ways he had scorned Gaylord Homer, in other ways he had greatly admired him. For Harrison was a close observer, and he had long since come to the conclusion that a small portion of vice, of some wild sort, ought to be his.

Also, not being entirely above human curiosity, he was impatient to know what legacy his employer had left to him in that home-made will of his.

For a substantial sum had been promised, and Gaylord had worked hard over the precious document.

On an impulse, Harrison began to look through the drawers of Homer's desk in an attempt to find the important will book and will.

Engrossed in this pursuit, he was startled at the entrance of Lawyer Crawford and Detective Sergeant Cram.

"Oh, oh," Harrison said, "beg pardon come in, be seated."

There was no reason for this embarrassment, for the secretary always had free access to his employer's papers.

As always, his shyness brought about an air of bravado, of superciliousness, and he covered his confusion by an overdone carelessness.

"Oh, here you are," he said, dropping the papers he held. "How are you, Mr. Crawford?"

Crawford responded duly and paid little attention to Harrison's nervousness. For he knew the secretary well, but to Cram this flustered manner was peculiar, even suspicious.

"I was looking for Mr. Homer's will," Cale went on, "I don't know where it is."

"He never made any," said Crawford, promptly.

And then Harrison had to tell him of the will book and the will that Gaylord Homer had drawn up for himself.

"Ridiculous!" the lawyer exclaimed. "There's no sense in such a thing! Why shouldn't I have drawn his will, as I attended to all his other legal business?"

"I don't know, Mr. Crawford," Harrison said, looking helplessly at him; "only I do know that is what Mr. Homer did, and the will must be around somewhere."

"What were the terms of the will?" stormed the lawyer.

"I—I don't know—exactly."

"You know a lot about it, Harrison, and it is your duty to tell," Cram informed him.

"Is it, Mr. Crawford?" asked the vacillating secretary.

"Yes, I think so. Though of course the will must be found. Who was the principal beneficiary?"

"A—a lady."

"Who?"

"Miss—Miss Kittredge."

The detective made a half articulate noise in his throat, which, however, was more intelligible than the “Ah,” of Lawyer Crawford.

While the three men in the study set up a determined search for the will, the lady who, as Harrison said, was the chief beneficiary, was taking part in what for lack of a more descriptive term may be called a scene.

Diana, with Marita and Bobbie Abbott, sat in the lounge, and though the conversation had at first been conventional and courteous, it was now becoming more and more personal.

Bobbie had brought about the climax when she said, “Of course neither of you girls could have done such a thing, but who did kill Gaylord?”

Marita’s temper, always inflammable, burst into flame at this, and she exclaimed:

“That’s the same as saying that either Diana or I must have done it! And I hereby declare that I didn’t do it.”

Though possessing plenty of self-control, Diana let it go to the winds at this speech.

“I must certainly declare also that I didn’t do it!” Diana said, in a cold cutting voice that somehow seemed to carry more weight than Marita’s hasty speech.

“Of course you did, Di,” Marita cried; “I didn’t, and there was no one else.”

“I think my statement must be believed before yours,” Diana said, slowly. “I am in the habit of speaking the truth.”

Her eloquent pause was more scathing than any denunciation could have been.

Marita flew into a fearful rage, and so wildly did she gesticulate and so madly pour forth her words that she was like a whirling dervish.

Frightened, Bobbie tried to catch Marita, to calm her, but the angry girl flew at Diana and attempted to strike her, screaming out anathemas in Spanish that were understandable only from their accompanying gestures.

Diana coolly grasped the outstretched hands, and said, contemptuously, “Don’t be a fool, Marita. Stop this nonsense!”

The clear, incisive tone, more than the words, checked Marita’s ebullition of wrath, and she cowered a little, though casting venomous glances at Diana.

“If you didn’t kill Gaylord,” Diana went on, “you’ll make everybody think you did by such actions. Now, behave yourself.”

This stirred up Marita afresh, and she was about to begin a new tirade, when Wood appeared at the doorway with a stranger.

“This is Mr. Moffatt, ladies,” Wood said, urbanely. “I will call Mr. Harris.”

The butler went upstairs, and Diana took charge of the situation.

"I am Miss Kittredge," she said, with a touch of hauteur in her calm tones. "This is Mrs. Abbott and Miss Moore. I suppose you are Mr. Moffatt, the cousin of Gaylord Homer?"

"Yes," he said, in a low, pleasant voice. "I was told of the—er—trouble last night, and I came as soon as I could this morning. May I—would you tell me some of the particulars? Was Gaylord still calm and perfectly composed?"

Diana answered him.

"Yes," she said, "Gaylord was killed, stabbed to death. The police are in charge here and will, I dare say, see you at once."

The visitor looked dazed, not only at the news given him, but, it was plain to be seen, at the manner of this beautiful but strange girl.

Marita was huddled on the couch, her face turned away from them, and her shoulders heaving with deep sobs and occasional moans.

Bobbie, still scared over the fuss between the two girls, was also interested in the stranger. It wouldn't be Bobbie Abbott, if she were not interested in any man who came within her ken.

And this man looked attractive. His tall, gaunt form and lean, rugged face gave somewhat the effect of a modern Forty-niner, though his apparel was modish and his manner courteous and suave.

So Bobbie had to get into the game.

"The inquest will be this afternoon," she vouchsafed, adding, "but I suppose you knew that."

"No, I didn't know it before Moffatt said. Will it be held here?"

"Why, yes, I suppose so," Bobbie spoke uncertainly, but neither of the others volunteered any help.

And then the three men from upstairs came down, and Harrison stepped forward and greeted the visitor.

In his nervous, embarrassed way, he introduced the lawyer and the detective, and then, to his great relief, he was ignored and Mr. Moffatt became the center of attention.

"You are a cousin of the late Gaylord Homer?" Cram asked him.

"A second cousin," was the reply. "Our fathers were cousins."

"You were intimate friends?"

"No," Moffatt said, settling back in his chair, "not intimate friends, but always friendly. I came here to see Gaylord once or twice a year, but our tastes varied widely and while we were not uncongenial, we had little in common. Also," he smiled a little, "I am a proud man, and I was unwilling to seem as if I was sponging on my cousin for entertainment or hospitality."

"I see," said Cram, nodding his head. "And when did you see Mr. Homer last?"

“About two or three weeks ago, I was up here and staid over night. We had a pleasant visit, rather more so than usual, and Gaylord asked me to come again in the summer time, in July, he said. I promised to do so.”

“You live in New York?”

“Yes, in rooms in Thirty-eighth street. I have lived there for years.”

“Can you help us in any way? You see, Mr. Homer was stabbed by an unknown foe. Can you think of any enemy he had who would do such a thing?”

“No, I can’t. You see, I knew very few of Gaylord’s acquaintances and he knew few of mine. But he must have had a fierce enemy to do such a thing as that!”

“Indeed, yes. Do you know of other relatives he had?”

“I think I am the only one of his kin. I have heard him say so many times.”

“And do you know anything about his intended disposition of his property?”

“Not a thing. Some years ago, he said he would leave me a small bequest. But I never counted on it, partly because it is my habit never to count on anything until I get it, and partly because Gaylord was younger than I and would probably outlive me. Moreover, I am not in need. While not wealthy, my wants are simple and I can supply them myself. But I am overcome at the tragedy of his death. I want to do anything I can to help. I mean in tracking down the wretch who killed him and bringing him to justice. Please command me, Mr. Cram, and I will do anything I can to aid you.”

“Are you not in business?”

“Oh, yes, I am a real estate agent. But my time is my own, and I repeat, if I can help, I will willingly do so.”

“You know the Tapestry Room?”

“Surely. I’ve been here frequently, you know.”

“It was there Mr. Homer was sitting when he was stabbed.”

“Sitting there? Alone?”

“There were guests all about the house. It was what we call the dark time. You know what I mean?”

“Oh, yes, I remember now, when I was here last, the lights went off soon after dinner and then flashed on suddenly after a few moments.”

“Exactly. It was during those few moments that the tragedy occurred.”

Moffatt pondered this.

“Then,” he said, “do you mean he was struck down in the darkness? Or were there candles or something like that?”

“No, there were no candles lighted. The blow must have been dealt in the dark.”

Again Moffatt seemed to think deeply.

“That would seem to indicate that someone in the house did it.”

“It would seem so,” agreed Cram. “Do you remember a very handsome dagger Mr. Homer had, a treasure, really?”

“A dagger? No, I don’t think I remember it. Where was it kept?”

“Where, Mr. Harrison?”

“It always lay on the mosaic table in the Tapestry Room. It must have been there when you were here last, Mr. Moffatt.”

“Doubtless it was, but I’ve no recollection of it. That’s what I meant when I said my cousin and I had not the same tastes. I never cared for those curios and bits of bric-a-brac that he so loved. I am an outdoorsy man, and I love all outdoor sports. Gaylord loved his books and his collections.”

“Well,” Cram went on, feeling that this cousin was entitled to the facts of the affair, “the dagger lay on the table and was picked up and used by the murderer.”

Moffatt gave a little gasp and then apologized.

“Forgive me,” he said, “I suppose, sergeant, these things are every day matters to you, but to me it is a shock. Have you any idea of the identity of the man?”

“The inquest will be held this afternoon. I assume you will attend it.”

“Yes, of course. Can I be put up for the night, or shall I go back to the city?”

“As you like, Mr. Moffatt. There are rooms enough, perhaps you would better stay.”

“Then I assume Mrs. Perkins will make me comfortable. I came unprepared, but I will telephone for my man to bring me a bag.”

Chapter 5

A Flood of Questions

ABBIE PERKINS couldn’t shut her mouth.

Which doesn’t mean she couldn’t keep her own counsel, for she jolly well could do that. But owing to an unfortunate formation of jawbone and teeth, her lips refused to stay closed.

So, as opportunity creates the sinner, she talked a great deal. Perhaps her ingrained economy made her feel that since her mouth was open necessarily, she might as well use it for conversation.

She took Bert Moffatt to a pleasant room on the third floor.

“Kinda up in the world,” she observed, “but as you know, Mr. Moffatt, we ain’t got such a lot of extra bedrooms. And if this here house party is going to stay on indefinite like, and it does seem ’sif they’re going to, why, I’ll be put about to take care of ’em. But, my land, there’s room enough of course, only, I just can’t get used to doing without Mr. Homer. Say, Mr. Moffatt,” she entered the room with him and closed the door, “who in the mortal universe killed that blessed man?”

Moffatt looked at her earnestly.

“I can’t imagine, Abbie,” he said. “But I suppose suspicion will rest on those two girls. Yet it couldn’t have been——”

“Hush, Mr. Moffatt, no good singing out names. The whole crowd is upset enough. You see, one of those girls was——”

“Which one was Gaylord’s choice of the two?”

“Oh, Miss Kittredge. He worshipped the ground she walked on.”

“That isn’t the dark-eyed beauty?”

“No, sir; that’s Miss Moore. And, if you please, she’s as madly in love with Mr. Homer as he is with Miss Kittredge. Was, I s’pose I should say. I just can’t get used to having him in the past tense, as you might say. Well, there’s the case in a peanut shell. Of them two girls, one loved him and he loved the other. And—they was both in that room with him when he died, and—nobody else was. Figure it out for yourself.”

“Any sign of a burglar? Anything missing?”

“Not as I know of. But, land, they haven’t begun any searching business yet. Going to wait till after the inquest, I s’pose.”

“Tell me all the names of the people staying here.”

Abbie recounted the house guests and added the three Opdykes from next door.

“That’s all,” she finished her list. “Now, can’t you do something to help?” she looked at Moffatt wistfully. “You always were a good friend of Gaylord’s, he liked you, even if you didn’t come here often. Are you any sort of a detective?”

“Not quite that,” Moffatt smiled. “But I do take an interest in ferreting out a mystery, especially when it has to do with my own relative. If I can help, Abbie, you may be sure I will. But of course, the police have it in charge?”

“Oh, yes, sir. But between you and me and the sewing machine, I don’t set such great store by them police. They poke around and pry into things, but do they get anywhere?”

“This looks to me like a difficult case, Abbie, and, from what you tell me, a delicate case.”

“That’s what it is, Mr. Moffatt! Mighty delicate. Think of those two girls, right there beside him, and nobody else in the room, and then, lights up! Man dead! Pretty awful, ain’t it?”

"It is, indeed. Run along, now, Abbie. Send up my things when they come. I telephoned my Jap to bring a suitcase or two. I suppose I'll want dress things?"

"Well, sir, they're a dressy lot, yes, but what they'll do now, I couldn't say. Miss Kittredge, she has switched herself into a black frock, I see, but Miss Moore, she's got on a white dress. Oh, well, they can't all get into blacks. I'll be going along now, Mr. Moffatt. Everything's all right in this room, I know, I looked after it myself. I'm glad you're here, sir, it didn't seem decent to have none of the family connections round about."

"I'll try to represent the family, as far as that goes, but I confess, Abbie, I'm a little bewildered at the whole affair. I can't form any opinions or come to any conclusions until I know more about it all. It's the strangest case I ever heard of."

"Yes, sir, it is, sir."

If it seemed strange to Albert Moffatt at that time, it seemed even more so when he went downstairs shortly after and joined the party at luncheon.

Without being asked, he was given the seat Gaylord had occupied at the head of the table. This embarrassed him a little, but he remembered his promise to Abbie to represent the family, and he tried to do his best.

As all kept their respective seats, he found himself between Diana and Marita, and the prospect of table-talk with those two young women gave him cold shivers.

Yet he needn't have felt too apprehensive, for the girls took the situation in hand.

Diana's course was to ignore him utterly, and he soon saw that there was nothing invidious about that, for she ignored everybody else as well.

Marita, on the other hand, talked incessantly to him and to everybody else. It was a nervous, hysterical chatter, full of broken sentences and anguished exclamations.

She looked beautiful, her big, dark eyes pathetically filled with tears, her mocking laughter stilled, her low, tropical sounding voice quivering with half suppressed sobs.

"He was so dear," Marita murmured, for about the twentieth time. "There never was such a man as Gaylord. Fine, strong, generous—oh, I think he was a very king among men! And how could anyone strike down a man like that? How could anybody drive that terrible dagger straight to his heart—his warm, loving heart."

"Oh, do hush, Marita," burst from Diana. "You'll drive me crazy!"

"Yes? And why not? Are you not already crazy, from grief, remorse, regret, a stricken conscience?"

"Stop it, Marita!" Ted Bingham shouted. "I won't allow you to act like that!"

"And who gave you authority to tell me how to act? I say, Mr. Moffatt, do you think that man ought to dictate to me?"

Moffatt was at his wits' end. Never before had he been in a position like this. How could he answer this excited, emotional girl when at his other side sat that icicle, that snow-maiden, who said no word and betrayed no feeling.

But to his relief, Marita didn't wait for an answer, but went ahead with her tirade, unheeding whether anyone listened or not.

"And now comes this inquest!" she wailed. "An inquest! What is that? I shall be asked questions! Yes? And I shall answer, yes, answer!" her fierce gaze swept the faces of her listeners, coming to rest on Diana, who showed a slight, supercilious smile at the excited talker.

This further roused Marita's ire, and she went on: "And I shall tell the truth—tell who it was who drove that dreadful weapon home!"

"See that you do tell the truth, Marita," Diana said, slowly and coldly, and then, as if dismissing the subject once for all, she turned to Ted Bingham and said, "I suppose we can all go home as soon as it's over?"

"I don't know, Di," he returned; "but I think probably, yes."

The luncheon dragged to a close, and they all rose to go to the lounge, where the inquest would take place.

Coroner Hale was apparently anxious to get matters started.

"Sit here, please," and "Will you sit here?" he said to them as they appeared before him.

Bingham kept a firm grip on Diana's arm and, unheeding the coroner's directions, led her to a davenport, on which he made her comfortable with cushions and then sat down beside her.

Seeing this performance, Cale Harrison whispered to Marita and they two ensconced themselves on another davenport.

The eyes of the small but capable jury took this all in as they gazed curiously at the two girls. Rollin Dare sat by Bobbie Abbott and the Opdykes were all together.

The parents had greatly wanted to leave Polly at home, but the authorities demanded her presence, as they did all who were known to be in the house at the time of the tragedy.

The inquest was not very formal and perhaps not exactly conventional.

Hale chose rather to make a conversational affair of it and addressed himself first of all to Harrison, the secretary.

"Just tell in your own words," he said, "what you did exactly, on leaving the dining-room after dinner."

"I was one of the last to leave the dining-room," Cale said, speaking easily enough. "I went through the hall behind Mrs. Abbott and one or two of the others. I chanced to glance into the Tapestry Room as I passed, and I saw Mr. Bingham in the doorway between that room and this. I went on by them all and went upstairs. The evening mail had been brought in while we were at dinner and it is my habit to go over it and sort out anything that may need immediate attention."

"You then went up to Mr. Homer's study?"

“I did.”

“And you remained there at work until—when?”

“Until after the lights had gone off and had come on again, and I had heard a cry from downstairs and also a general commotion of people moving about and uttering exclamations.”

“And then you went downstairs?”

“Yes, and found Mr. Homer had been killed.”

“What did you do then?”

“I don’t remember doing anything in particular. I was a bit stunned, I couldn’t believe it. In a moment Dr. Opdyke came in and took charge.”

“I’ve been told he put you in charge.”

“Merely in a nominal way. I, mean the doctor took charge of the situation in the Tapestry Room, examined the wound and told us all that Mr. Homer was dead.”

Then Hale turned to Albert Moffatt.

“You are the nearest relative of Mr. Gaylord Homer?”

“Yes, and so far as I know the only relative. I am a second cousin, and there are no other second cousins that I know of, and no nearer relatives.”

“You live in New York City?”

“Yes, in East Thirty-eighth Street.”

“What is your business?”

“I am a real estate agent, in the firm of Garson, Kemp and Co.”

“Where were you last evening?”

“I dined at the Yale Club and afterward went to a Moving Picture show.”

“And after that?”

“I went to a small club, where I met some friends, stayed with them until about half past eleven and then went home and went to bed.”

“Yes, now will you please tell us anything you may know of the doings of Mr. Homer, lately? Please do not take offense at my questions, I only want to learn all I can of the facts. You know, a coroner’s jury doesn’t do anything but discover the cause of death. Then, if it seems to the police that the matter needs further investigation, they take up that part of it.”

"I am quite willing to tell anything I can, but as a matter of fact I have not seen Mr. Homer for two or three weeks. Though as a rule, I don't see him but twice a year."

"You were good friends?"

"Very good friends, but never intimates. My cousin invited me here twice a year, and I usually accepted the invitations. He was companionable enough, and we hit it off all right, but we had few tastes in common and so seldom sought each other's company."

"You were here two weeks ago?"

"About that."

"Did anything especial occur during your visit here?"

"No, nothing at all. In fact, we had rather a dull time. The weather was wretched, and as I am fond of outdoor sports, and could have none, I was frankly bored."

"You two were housed, then?"

"Most of the time. Gaylord invited a couple of his chums in to play bridge but the time dragged."

"When you were here, did Mr. Homer tell you any of his affairs, his personal affairs?"

"Not to any great extent. But he let drop that he thought of marrying if he could win the lady of his choice."

"Did he say who the lady was?"

"No he didn't."

"Did he say how his property would be left?"

"Oh, yes. But he referred to it in a jesting way. He told me he was going to draw up his own will; that he had a book of explicit directions and meant to do it all himself."

"In order to save the lawyer's fees?"

"I assumed so, though he didn't say that. I reminded him how lawyers have said that those books directing people how to make a will have brought large emoluments to the lawyers themselves."

"Why?"

"The idea being that even with the instruction book, the average citizen is so incapable of making a proper will, that the lawyers have to be called in to settle the estate, thereby getting larger fees than if they had drawn the will."

"I see. And did Mr. Homer make this will?"

"I don't know. He merely told me he intended to."

“Did he say how his property would be left?”

“Only in a general way. He said there would be enough coming to me to buy a ring to remember him by. He said he should generously remember the servants who had for the most part been with him a long time.”

“Did he speak of a residuary legatee or principal beneficiary?”

At this point Albert Moffatt began to look worried. He tried to ignore the question, but the coroner repeated it.

“Well, he did say something of the sort,” Moffatt admitted.

“What, exactly, did he say?”

“He said that the bulk of his estate he should will to the lady he hoped to marry.”

“And did he then mention the name of the lady?”

“I would very much like to be excused from answering that, sir.”

A stir of something like admiration ran round the room. Moffatt was a good-looking chap, though firm-lipped and with a shade of stubbornness in his eyes.

“I must ask you to answer, Mr. Moffatt.”

“Well, then, no; he didn’t mention her name.”

“Why did you hesitate to answer that?”

For a moment Moffatt was silent. He seemed to be making up his mind. He was in no way embarrassed, and his dark, rather somber eyes looked steadily at the coroner. His clean-shaven face was strong and his jaw showed determination. Then, with a sudden jerk of his head, he spoke what was in his mind.

“I don’t want to quibble,” he began, “but it was this way. My cousin did not tell me the name of the lady in question, but he showed me her photograph. And so I know her name—now.”

“What is it?”

“Miss Diana Kittredge.”

This was no great surprise to anyone present, for they all knew of Homer’s passion for Diana and knew, too, that it was well-nigh hopeless.

But Moffatt didn’t know this, and he assumed that the pair were practically engaged.

“How did it happen that Mr. Homer showed you the picture but withheld the name?”

“I chanced to go into his study one day, and he was gazing at a small picture he held in his hand. It was merely a snapshot. He held it out for me to look at and then said that he hoped some day she would be his wife. I asked no questions and he put the picture back in his pocket.”

“Now Mr. Moffatt, we have not found your cousin’s will, and we are anxious to do so. Have you any idea where he would put it for safe keeping?”

“Not the slightest.” Moffatt looked astonished. “I know nothing at all of Gaylord’s affairs. Surely, his secretary or his household can tell you, or his lawyer.”

“Probably. Did Mr. Homer speak to you of any other lady?”

“Not that I remember. He may have made casual allusions, but nothing definite in any way.”

“You have not heard from him since your recent visit here?”

“No. We never wrote to one another.”

“And you know of no other relatives Mr. Homer possessed, except yourself?”

“I know of none, though there may be some one on his mother’s side.”

“Then Mr. Moffatt, do you realize that if no such relatives put in an appearance and if Mr. Homer’s will is not found, you will be sole heir to the estate?”

Moffatt’s eyes widened a trifle, but otherwise he showed no elation or excitement.

“I suppose that would thrill most men,” he said, with a little smile. “But I am simple in my tastes and have never longed for great riches. Should I be heir to the estate of my cousin, I would do my best to manage it wisely and carry out any plans or projects he had in mind, if I am advised of them. But I sincerely hope his will may be forthcoming, that his own wishes and desires may be known.”

This speech was in no way rhetorical; every one present felt it to be the simple, straightforward statement of a man of plain tastes and right feeling.

It seemed to say that if the fortune of Gaylord Homer was meant for Miss Kittredge, he wanted her to have it, but if the law designated it as his, he would accept the responsibility of it.

“You are the first man I have ever known, Mr. Moffatt, who was not anxious to get any money that was coming to him.”

A dull red rose to Moffatt’s cheeks, but he only said:

“Perhaps I did not express myself clearly. I do not scorn riches, but neither am I eager for them. To my mind the great object now to be decided is to discover who murdered my cousin. To apprehend the criminal, I would willingly devote any inheritance that may come to me.”

This was a sort of talk that with less sincerity of manner might sound bombastic or hypocritical. But there was no false note in Moffatt’s voice, no hint of diplomacy; his candid air and ingenuous countenance carried conviction and made for confidence.

Coroner Hale noted that this man did not take kindly to any impugning of his motives, and said no more on the subject.

“Then, I take it,” he wound up, “that you can give us no hint as to who the murderer may have been? You know of no person sufficiently inimical to Gaylord Homer to kill him?”

“I certainly do not,” Moffatt replied, quietly, “but I shall do all in my power to aid in finding out.”

He was excused and Hale drew a sigh as he realized that he must soon question the two he dreaded, the witnesses he shrank from, the two girls that were in the room.

But at present he called the doctor who had first attended the victim of the attack.

Eden Opdyke gave his recital over again, telling of the stab wound that had proved fatal.

Opdyke was one of the men that can be called the magnificent type.

He had a mass of snow white hair, bushy and a trifle long; piercing black eyes peered out from beneath shaggy white eyebrows, and yet his healthily red cheeks and smooth, sun-browned skin bespoke not age but a youngish middle age.

As a matter of fact, he was fifty, but save for his white hair, he might easily have passed for forty-five.

He was adored by his wife and daughter, and they were equally dear to him.

As he told the details of the wound that had killed his friend and neighbor, his voice was unsteady and a hard note was heard in it.

“The dagger entered between the seventh and eighth ribs,” Hale repeated the doctor’s words. “Yes, I found it so. Now, would you not say that a knowledge of anatomy was necessary to strike the heart so surely as that?”

“Not a very great knowledge,” returned Opdyke, thoughtfully. “A tyro could accomplish the stroke, though a slight familiarity with the bones would, of course, be an advantage. The difficult part of the matter was the striking in the dark.”

“Is it actually dark when the lights go off at the power-house?” Hale inquired.

“Yes,” Dr. Opdyke told him. “Unless one has candles or oil lamps in readiness it is black dark.”

“Then the blow was planned while the lights were on and delivered the instant they went off.”

“It was probably so.”

“Is it likely that after a stab like that, a man would move?”

“Not likely, but possible. There may have been a convulsive muscular movement, or merely a slump down.”

“Would he make any sound?”

“He might utter a groan or a sigh. Or, as is more probable, he would make no sound at all or, perhaps a slight gurgle in the throat.”

“Would not a man, stabbed in the back, fall forward?”

“If he were standing, yes. But Mr. Homer was seated, and, as I noticed, he was leaning rather far back. Therefore, when he lost control of his muscles he simply sagged down in a heap and did not really fall forward.”

“And there was no blood flow, outside his garments?”

“None. And but a little inside his clothing. The dagger was a sharp one, with two cutting sides. It was thrust in laterally, between the ribs, but aimed downward. So it pierced the heart at once, causing instant death or practically instantaneous.”

Chapter 6

Sky-Eyes and the Other Girl

“ONE more question, Dr. Opdyke,” the Coroner said. “Does the dagger-thrust that was given presuppose a strong, muscular arm that made it?”

The fine face of the doctor took on a slightly annoyed expression.

But he replied, steadily: “Not necessarily. It did not require great force—anyone nerved by anger or hatred could have given it.”

“That is all, thank you.”

Still looking vaguely upset, Dr. Opdyke resumed his seat beside his wife, and Hale next called Abbie Perkins.

She had been sitting in the front row, watching proceedings, with her mouth open and her expensive and very white porcelain teeth exposed in two shining rows.

“Your name?” the Coroner asked curtly.

“Mrs. Abigail Perkins, and as good as you are.”

Abbie’s voice held no trace of pertness, it was as one stating a simple fact, and she was evidently resentful of Hale’s lack of courtesy.

That he understood was obvious from his rising color and he continued in a more gentle tone.

“Where were you when the murder occurred?”

“Do you mean where was I in the dark time?”

“Well, yes, put it that way.”

“I was in my own room.”

“Your bedroom?”

“Land, no. What would I be doing going to bed at that hour? In my sitting-room, I mean, just back of the breakfast room.”

“You were there during the whole of the dark time?”

“I was. I most always am, or try to be. I don’t like the dark.”

“Was it absolutely dark, or could you see a little?”

“Dark as the black cat’s pocket. It is every night. But we don’t bother to light candles, for it’s over in a minute or two.”

“Were you in your sitting-room all through the dinner hour?”

“Oh no. I was back and forth in the pantry and kitchen. And some of the time I was in the breakfast room looking at the party. I like to look in at the pretty ladies and all.”

“When you watched the diners, did you notice anything unusual or peculiar in Mr. Homer’s manner?”

“No, I didn’t. That poor man didn’t know he was going to be killed! Why should he act queer?”

“Did anybody act queer?”

“That ain’t for me to say.”

“It’s exactly for you to say. And you’ll say it. If you noticed anything peculiar about any of the guests, you’ll tell it at once.”

“Well, not to say peculiar. But as you’re outside like, you can judge a lot about those as isn’t talking, but just looking their thoughts.”

“Yes, of course you can,” Hale sought to draw her out. “And what did you judge?”

“I judged there was some people present who didn’t like Mr. Homer overmuch.”

“Yes. And who were these people?”

“Well, I s’pose it’s no secret that Miss Kittredge liked him about as much as a cat likes hot soap. And I likewise s’pose that Mr. Harrison wasn’t crazy about him.”

“I think I have a right to protest against this sort of witnessing,” Cale Harrison put in. He didn’t speak angrily, but rather in an injured tone, as if it was a matter of small importance anyway.

“Did you notice, Mrs. Perkins, that some of the people did like Mr. Homer?”

“Well, you wouldn’t need your fur-off glasses to see that Miss Moore was over head and ears in love with him.”

At this Marita clapped her hands, and murmured, “Good for you, Abbie!”

Hale went on, unheeding. “Mrs. Perkins, where were you when the guests left the table and left the dining-room?”

“I was in the breakfast room, watching the ladies go by, in their fine gowns.”

“The whole party passed you and went out to the hall?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then they dispersed?”

“What’s that mean?”

“Separated—went various ways.”

“Well, yes, they did. I saw Mr. Homer go into the Tapestry Room with Miss Moore a-clinging to one of his arms and Miss Kittredge trying to get away from him on the other side.”

“Trying to get away?”

“Just that. He was urging her along, and she was hanging back, like. He had a grip on her arm.”

“Then these three went in the Tapestry Room?”

“Yeppee, that’s right. And Mr. Harrison, he scooted off upstairs, and the rest of them sorter trailed along into the lounge.”

“Then you went back to your Sitting-room and then the dark time came?”

“Exactly. You got it dead right!”

“Where was the butler at the dark time?”

“I couldn’t see. Better ask him.”

Seeming relieved to be rid of this peppery witness, Hale turned to Wood, the butler, and asked him.

“I was in the dining-room, sir, beginning to clear the table.”

“What did you do in the darkness?”

“Stopped where I stood, until the lights came on again. We always do that every night. For, if you move about you may collide with somebody else and upset something.”

“Were all the other servants out there with you?”

“Out where, sir?”

“Out in the dining-room, or kitchen, or pantry.”

“Yes, sir, except maybe one or two of the maids.”

“Where would they be?”

“I think one was in the lounge, looking after the ash trays, sir, and one may have been upstairs, in the ladies’ dressing-room.”

“Find out definitely and bring me any of the servants who were not under your eye in the kitchen quarters.”

A mere nod on the part of Wood brought one maid from the huddled bunch of servants in the hall.

“This is Rhoda,” the butler said. “She is the parlormaid.”

“Where were you, Rhoda, at the dark time?” Hale asked her.

“I was upstairs, sir, in case the ladies wanted my help.”

“When did you come down?”

“When I heard the scream, that is just after the lights came on.”

“Were there any ladies upstairs?”

“No sir, not any.”

“And when you heard the scream, you ran downstairs?”

“I didn’t run. I came to the head of the stairs and looked down. Then I saw them all running about, and the ladies saying, ‘Oh, dear!’ and I came halfway downstairs.”

“Was Mr. Harrison upstairs then?”

“No, he had gone down—he must have, ’cause he didn’t pass me on the stairs.”

“Were any other of the maids upstairs?”

“No, sir.”

“Or downstairs, in the lounge or hall?”

“No, sir. I tidied up the lounge myself, before I went upstairs.”

“You are a capable servant, Rhoda.”

“I try to do my duty, sir.”

Hale looked at the girl sharply. To his discerning eye she seemed a little too good to be true. She was so smooth and oily that he concluded she could evade the truth if she wished to do so. But he had no hook to hang any suspicion of her on. No reason whatever to doubt her word, yet somehow he did doubt it. He sighed and dismissed the suave Rhoda.

And then he felt he could no longer put off the two witnesses he most dreaded.

He glanced at the two girls, uncertain which to call first.

Then in a quiet voice, he said, “Miss Kittredge, please.”

“Yes,” came the response, in the sweetest tones, he thought, he had ever heard.

“Trying to put it over on me, are you?” he said to himself and set his face more sternly.

“You went into the Tapestry Room with Mr. Homer, on your way from the dinner table?” he said, not so much interrogatively but as if making a statement.

“I did.”

“Willingly?”

Diana looked a little surprised, but answered, steadily:

“Not entirely so. I wanted to go into the lounge, but Mr. Homer urged me toward the Tapestry Room, so I went with him.”

“Mr. Homer was in love with you?”

“Yes.”

“Did you love him?”

The lovely arched eyebrows raised themselves slightly, but the answer came promptly, “No.”

“You liked him?”

“Very much. We were good friends, but I preferred to remain only friends.”

“I see. Now, Miss Kittredge, please tell exactly what happened in the Tapestry Room.”

“I told you last night.”

“I know you did, but you must repeat it for the benefit of the jury.”

“Oh I see,” and Diana went over the narrative she had given the coroner the night before.

“Then,” Hale summed up, “you heard no unusual sound, you heard nothing to let you know that Mr. Homer had received a death blow?”

“Nothing,” said Diana, steadily.

“Have you any idea who struck that blow?”

“Oh,” cried Diana “I cannot answer that!”

“I’m afraid you must.”

"No, no, I cannot—no, I've no idea, no idea at all, who struck the blow."

"Where was the dagger?" Hale asked, suddenly.

"On the table behind Mr. Homer."

"You saw it there?"

"It is always there."

"But was it there when you went into the room last night?"

"Yes, I saw it."

"Can you suggest anyone who might have used it except yourself and Miss Moore?"

Diana looked at him piteously, but as his inexorable attitude demanded an answer, she breathed out a low-voiced "No."

"Do you suggest Miss Moore might have done it?"

"Oh no!" Diana shuddered and looked unutterably wretched.

"Did you do it yourself?"

"I did not!" and now her eyes blazed and her curved lips set in a straight line. There was no tremor of voice or muscle, and her air, if a bit defiant, was heroically brave.

"Miss Moore?" Hale turned toward the girl.

"Yes?" she said, with a decided note of insolence.

"You corroborate all Miss Kittredge has said regarding the few moments before the dark time?"

"Oh, I guess she got it about right," Marita returned, her small brown fingers flicking the ash from her cigarette.

"You sat on the arm of the couch where Mr. Homer was?"

"I did."

"You were, then, very near to him?"

"I was."

"Is it not likely, then, you would have heard some indicative sound when he was stabbed to death at your side?"

"It is likely. And, more, I may have heard such a sound, without knowing its significance. You see, I had no thought of his being killed."

“No, of course not. Who do you think killed him?”

“Mercy, I don’t know. Isn’t that for you to find out?”

“Yes, with your help. Which was nearer to him, you or Miss Kittredge?”

“She was.”

“But you sat beside him. Practically against his left arm.”

“Hold on there, I wasn’t as close as that. But Diana stood right in front of him.”

“Did you, Miss Kittredge?”

“I was in front of him,” Diana said, slowly, “but I was several feet away from the couch.”

“I must be very direct, now,” Hale said, looking keenly at one girl, then at the other. “Did you see the dagger on the table, Miss Moore?”

“No, I didn’t know it was there.”

“Have you ever seen it in the Tapestry Room?”

“Not to notice it especially. There’s such a lot of junk there, and it all looks alike to me.”

“Aside from the facts, is it your opinion that anyone would have time to get that dagger from its place on the table and use it for the murderous deed in the short time known as the dark time?”

“Of course. The dark time is two minutes or more, generally. That’s a longer time than it sounds.”

“But how could the stabbing be accomplished in the dark?”

“Well, it was accomplished, wasn’t it? Then it must have been done by somebody who knew the room well, and who knew how and where to make a successful stab.”

More than the words, Marita’s accusing glance at Diana showed clearly the thought that was in her mind.

“Have you any knowledge of anatomy, Miss Moore?”

“Not the slightest. I don’t know one bone from another.”

“Do you, Miss Kittredge?”

“I have a small knowledge of physiology.”

“I should think she had!” exclaimed Marita. “She studied to be a trained nurse.”

“Is that a fact, Miss Kittredge?”

“Yes,” and Diana turned a ghastly white.

“When did you study nursing?”

“About five or six years ago.”

“Did you graduate?”

“No, I gave it up. I took up the study because I thought I had to support myself. But an uncle died and left me sufficient to live on, so I abandoned my idea of being a nurse.”

Diana’s blue eyes looked straight into Hale’s with serenity and candor.

Yet to those who knew her best, she was clearly nervous and unstrung.

Bobbie Abbott, chin in hand, sat staring at her. Bobbie’s fuzzy, yellow hair stood out like a Circassian girl’s, and the most bewildering thoughts were running through her brain, inside the yellow mop.

One of those two girls must have done the deed, she decided, and now, which one could it have been?

Surely not Diana, that stately goddess woman! To be sure, she detested Gaylord, or, at least, she detested his making love to her, but that didn’t mean she would kill him to get rid of him! No, it must have been Marita. But Marita loved him. Well, then, she killed him because he didn’t love her. Yes, that was it, of course.

Hale was droning on.

“Now, Miss Kittredge, you have said you didn’t stab Mr. Homer. You have said you don’t accuse Miss Moore of the crime. Will you, then, tell me your opinion as to how the tragedy did occur?”

“I cannot imagine how it occurred,” Diana said. “I suppose it must have been the work of either Miss Moore or myself.”

Marita gave a sharp exclamation.

“That’s a confession!” she cried. “For I didn’t do it.”

“You did, Marita! You must have!” Diana’s blue eyes stared unseeingly, she swayed a little, then, with a sudden quick movement, she clasped her hands together and murmured, “Anyway I didn’t do it—I didn’t—I——”

“She did!” Marita declared. “There were only the two of us there. Would I kill the man I loved? For I am not ashamed to say I loved him. I adored that splendid man! Think you, then, that I would put an end to his life? Absurd!”

Hale looked helpless.

He had no witnesses but these two. He had no suspects but these two. It must be, it had to be, that one of these two killed Gaylord Homer. There was no other possible theory.

He turned to Ted Bingham.

“You seem to be the only person who was near these three people in the Tapestry Room, Mr. Bingham. Will you tell exactly how they were standing when the lights reappeared?”

“Miss Moore was not standing at all. She had fallen to the floor. Miss Kittredge stood a few feet away from the couch where Mr. Homer sat.”

“Could you have entered the room in the dark time and gone around behind Mr. Homer and stabbed him and returned to your place?”

Ted stared at him.

“Well, Mr. Hale, I suppose I could have done so, but it would have been a difficult job to manage in the dark. Anyway, I didn’t do it.”

“I am not accusing you. I only want to find out if some other person than these two ladies, could have entered the room, committed the crime and gone out again.”

“That is within the realm of possibility, I should say, but not probability. There was time enough in the dark interval, but the murderer could scarcely get past the two girls and the couch, get the dagger, and do his wicked work all in the dark. He would almost surely run into something or somebody.”

“You were standing in the deep doorway between the lounge and the room where the murder took place?”

“I was.”

“That is a deep doorway and fairly wide. Do you think anyone could have slipped past you in the darkness and so got into the room?”

Bingham paused before his reply.

“I suppose that could have been done. Always, when the dark time comes, people are moving about, on their way here or there, and we never notice it if someone brushes against us, as we would notice in the light.”

“Do you remember anyone brushing against you, as you stood there in the dark?”

“No not at all.”

“Could anyone have entered through the other door, the door to the hall?”

Hale spoke half to himself, half as if he expected someone to volunteer information.

“Nobody did!” Marita exclaimed.

“How do you know?”

“I should have heard them. I have most unusual hearing. I heard every sound in that room.”

“Can you hear as well in the dark as in the light?”

“Even better. I hear the lightest footfall on the softest carpet. I hear the faintest sigh, the softest breathing.”

“Did you hear any footfalls?”

“Yes. I heard someone move stealthily round to the table, get the dagger and then I heard the gasping sigh, which was the last sound Mr. Homer ever made.”

“You heard more footsteps, as the one who used the dagger stepped away?”

“I heard nothing more. I lost my senses. I do not mean I lost consciousness, but I heard no more.”

In a calm voice Diana spoke.

“Miss Moore is making that up,” she said, “for there were no audible footsteps. I have good hearing, though not super-normal, and I heard no footsteps whatever. There must have been some, for the murderer had to walk away, but they were silent on the deep soft rug.”

“You were nearest the hall door, Miss Kittredge. Could someone have come in at that door, passed you by, gone to the table and taken up the dagger, stabbed his victim, and departed the way he came, all in the dark time?”

“I cannot say,” Diana looked perplexed. “There was not time enough, though the dark time seemed unusually long last night. And how could anyone do all that in the dark? And I was standing practically between Mr. Homer and the hall doorway.”

“Then, in your opinion, no one entered that room in the dark time?”

“That is my—my opinion.”

Her beautiful face white, her beautiful eyes glassy, her curved lips quivering as her teeth bit into them, she shuddered as one stricken with the ague. The horror of the whole situation seemed to have just come home to her and she looked round the room piteously, as if in search of a friend.

Bingham rose, brought his chair, and sat down beside her. He said no word to her, nor to anyone, but, folding his arms, he tacitly established himself as her bulwark and protection.

This roused Marita to a point of frenzy.

“You can’t save her, Ted,” she fairly jeered at him. The black looks of the Coroner failed to quiet her, and she went on:

“It was Diana who killed Gaylord. Diana, the haughty, the icicle! She knows where to strike! She knows how to move about noiselessly! She hated Gaylord, she scorned his devotion, and——” the girl’s flaming eyes glared at Diana, “and she wanted the fortune he left to her!”

Chapter 7

Odors of Evidence

THIS last outburst of Marita’s brought a look of terror to Diana’s face. The blue eyes filled with fear, not anger, as the vicious words rang out.

“Kindly keep silent, Miss Moore,” the Coroner said, more sternly than he had yet spoken. “Miss Kittredge, are you aware that Mr. Homer’s will leaves his estate largely to yourself?”

"I know nothing about it," Diana said, in a weak, tired voice. "I didn't know he had made a will."

"Does no one know of this will of Mr. Homer's? Does no one know where it is?"

"I know that he made it," volunteered Mrs. Opdyke. The doctor had been called away to his duties. "I know, because my husband and I witnessed it."

"When was this?"

"About a week ago. Mr. Homer said we could be witnesses because there was in his will no bequest to either of us."

"And where did this incident take place?"

"In the Tapestry Room. There is no writing desk there, but we signed with a fountain pen that Mr. Homer carried in his pocket."

"And was the will a large or long document?"

"No, it seemed rather short. It was a folded paper that Mr. Homer took from the pocket in the cover of a book. He explained that it was a book of directions for making a will, and he had made his in accordance with the directions and on a blank provided. Mr. Homer signed it in our presence and then we signed it."

"Where is that will now?"

"I have no idea. When we left, the book lay on a small table beside the chair Mr. Homer sat in. I never saw it again."

"Mr. Harrison, as Mr. Homer's secretary, do you not know where the book in question may be?"

"No, I don't. I'm quite sure it is not in Mr. Homer's study, and though I've looked about in the Tapestry Room, I can't find it there."

"What sort of book is it? Large?"

"No, rather smallish. Not so big as an ordinary novel, but nearly. It has a brown cover with black lettering on it. That's all I remember about it. I paid little attention to it, for I thought Mr. Homer would read and study it, and then call in Mr. Crawford to make his will in the ordinary way. I was surprised when I learned he had really made a will and had the neighbors in to witness it. But I don't know at all what he did with it, or where he kept it. It must surely turn up, even if he hid it away."

"Do your best to find it, Mr. Harrison."

"I certainly shall," Cale returned, a little haughtily.

Always meek and deferential, he had seemed to grow more self-assertive since Homer's death. Perhaps this was not to be wondered at, as he was now in a position of great responsibility. Except for the lawyer, no one else knew anything about Gaylord Homer's affairs or property.

Homer had been singularly alone in the world. Save for the cousin, whom he so seldom saw, he had no known relatives. He was fond of his friends, but none was an intimate or a confidant.

Ted Bingham was probably the nearest approach to such, and even he knew almost nothing of Homer's financial matters.

Therefore, the only man really cognizant of Homer's daily life and running expenses was Cale Harrison. He, if anyone, would know where the will book was kept.

More than one glance of inquiry was turned upon him, but he bore their scrutiny with perfect equanimity.

His meekness had slipped from him as a garment, and he seemed to be changing, under their very eyes, from an underling to a commander. Not everyone noticed this, but those who did were surprised at it.

Albert Moffatt, calm-eyed and quiet, watched the secretary closely. And then, with a nod of apology to the Coroner, he spoke:

"As the nearest relative of the late Mr. Homer, I am told I must inherit his estate if no will can be found. I am, therefore, most anxious that the will should be found, since we know that one exists, or has existed. For, as you will readily understand, I should not like to take over property that has been devised elsewhere. My cousin told me the last time I saw him, that he intended to make a will, and I learn from Mrs. Opdyke that he did make a will. I think I am within my rights in asking that a most vigorous and exhaustive search be made for that will, by skilled searchers. For unless it is found I shall be in an embarrassing position."

Moffatt's smile was winning and his tone of candor and sincerity impressed the Coroner favorably.

"You are quite right, Mr. Moffatt. The search must be drastic, and it will probably result in finding the will."

The Coroner pronounced this opinion with the air of an ultimatum and then sat for a few moments, looking at the two girls who were, to his mind, under grave suspicion. But he could not decide in his own mind, which was more likely to have committed the murder, so he declared an adjournment for a week in order to collect more evidence for the case.

The wiseacre jury filed out, their minds bewildered at the astonishing situation. Here was a murder with two suspects, no material witnesses, only vaguely suggested motives, exclusive opportunity, and, so far as was known, no clues of any sort.

Small wonder they were bewildered, and the men were glad to leave the house at once, without becoming entangled in perplexing questions.

The inefficient coroner, too, departed, and Detective Sergeant Cram, with his small lot of uniformed and plain clothes men, remained in charge.

"Now, Mr. Moffatt," Cale Harrison said, at once, "in the absence of any real head of this house, I shall carry on just as I did when Mr. Homer was here. Of course, I always attended to the mail and all that, so I shall continue to do so. Mr. Homer, while not in any business, was a director in several companies and had rather wide interests in various fields of finance. My books and accounts will always be open to Mr. Crawford, the lawyer, but I can't feel that anyone else has any right to examine them."

"I can't think of anyone else who would have such a right," Moffatt returned, a slight smile hovering round his lips.

"Well, you see," Cale floundered a little, "I thought you might, as Mr. Homer's next of kin—er——"

“Set your mind at rest, Mr. Harrison,” Moffatt said, in a cordial tone. “I make no claims of any sort. I have small interest in my cousin’s affairs, and I trust the will may be found and its testaments carried out. If I can assist in any way, I shall be glad to do so, if not I will return to my home.”

“I wish you’d stay on a bit, Moffatt,” Ted Bingham said. “I mean to have a hand in this investigation myself. From my point of view, the will is of far less importance than the discovery of who killed Gaylord.”

“That is the main issue,” agreed Crawford, who had been listening in silence. “And I’ve but one suggestion to make. That is, to get a real, live detective, who will find the murderer. I can’t think it was either one of those two girls, yet I can’t see any possibility of anyone else. But I’m no detective. Yet I have great faith in the powers of a clever investigator. He could find the will, too, and the matter could be easily and quickly settled up; whereas, if left to the police, it will drone along for weeks or months. You all saw how efficient that coroner was! And while Cram is bright enough, he is hampered by the machinery of headquarters, and unable to go his own gait.”

“Hush, here comes Cram,” whispered Cale.

“I don’t care,” said Ted, independently. “Mr. Cram, we are talking about getting in a private investigator. Would you have any objections?”

The detective’s face fell.

“Well, I would,” he admitted, “but I don’t suppose that would keep you off it. If you’re set to get one you’ll get him. And there’s so many of you. I don’t even know who I’m to report to.”

“To me,” said Harrison quickly. “As Mr. Homer’s confidential secretary, I am in authority.”

“I’m not sure about that, Mr. Harrison,” Crawford said a little curtly. “If the will is found and appoints an executor, you have nothing to say. If the will is never found, the state will take charge, and you will have still less to say. Don’t be too cocky, young man.”

“And don’t be too dictatorial, Mr. Crawford. At present, there is no executor and no state in charge. Therefore, I, as knowing the most about Mr. Homer’s personal affairs, am in the seat of authority, if only temporarily.”

“Oh, well,” Crawford said, carelessly, “the matter isn’t worth quarreling over. The estate must be and will be looked after properly. But the detective work ought to be started at once. I know a first-class chap, a man named Pitt, who is in the business, and he will give it his personal attention if I ask him. I’ll write him at once. It’s not a thing for the telephone.”

“Are you staying here, Mr. Crawford?” Ted asked.

“I’ll stay for a day or two. There’s much to be done. I’ll go over the desk with Mr. Harrison, and we’ll all turn in and search for the will. Shall you stay, Mr. Moffatt?”

“I don’t know exactly what to do. I think I’ll run down to town this afternoon, and back tonight or tomorrow morning.”

“Don’t get too far away,” said Crawford. “Remember, if the will doesn’t materialize, you’re the heir.”

“Oh, you’ll find the will,” Moffatt told him. “Gaylord was set on making it and unless you can find a flaw in his home-made document, it will be all right.”

“Then I take it, Cram, you won’t be all upset at our engaging a detective of sorts,” the lawyer went on to the police detective.

“No, sir. I know you want him, and I’m not so stuck on my own powers as I might be. I’m a plodder, sir, but I’ve little originality.”

“That’s a fine statement,” Moffatt said, smiling his approval. “I’ve never before seen a detective who wasn’t stuck on his own powers. Get your man, Mr. Crawford, and I’m sure Cram, here, will work with him, and no antagonism.”

“The antagonism may be on the other foot,” Cram said shrewdly. “Those hifalutin tecs aren’t crazy to have the police help them.”

“Oh, Pitt is all right,” Crawford declared. “He wants results, and he doesn’t refuse help anywhere he can get it.”

“I think you make a mistake to call in a detective yet,” Harrison observed. “Why not give Cram a chance to see what he can do?”

“No,” Crawford insisted. “A detective, to be any good, must have the first chance at clues and evidence. In fact, nothing ought to be touched until he comes. Nothing, I mean, in the Tapestry Room, or Homer’s study or bedroom.”

“The rooms upstairs have nothing to do with the murder,” Cale said, frowning.

“No matter, they must not be touched until Pitt comes. Wood, come here.”

The butler came, impassive as always and waiting the word.

“Wood,” Crawford went on, “I want you to lock the Tapestry Room and bring me the key.”

“It is locked, sir, and Mr. Cram has the key.”

“Oh, well, then, that’s all right.”

Crawford looked crestfallen, and said no more about locks or keys.

“How can we search for the will, with that room locked up?” Ted asked.

“I’ll open it when you want to look for the will,” Cram told him, and then Ted became quiet.

It rather seemed that the strongest wills rose to the top and held the supremacy.

Harrison had subsided to his old-time meekness. Bingham, little interested in the will, anyway, relapsed into silence. Moffatt was non-committal.

Really only Cram and Crawford were taking the lead, and the rest seemed to agree tacitly.

Rollin Dare had gone for a stroll in the grounds with Bobbie Abbott, and the Opdykes had gone home.

“What about the house crowd?” Crawford asked of Cram. “Can they come and go as they please?”

“Not quite that,” and Cram’s face looked sober. “The two young ladies who were—who were——”

“Yes, who were in the Tapestry Room.”

“Yes, sir. They must stay for a time, and they are under surveillance.”

“They can go out in the gardens?”

“Yes, but they will be constantly watched. It’s my job, you know, to find out which one of them is guilty.”

“Meaning that one of them must be?”

“Certainly, sir. Who else could have done it?”

“That’s for our detective to find out. I’ll go and write that letter now.”

“And I’ll take the next train to New York,” Moffatt said, looking at his watch. “Shall I mail your letter in the city, and so gain a few hours’ time?”

“Yes, do. I’ll have it ready and leave it on the hall table.”

Moffatt went up to his room, and almost immediately Abbie Perkins followed him.

“I’ll have to ask you to excuse me, Mr. Moffatt. But I just had to come to you. I can’t get anything out of anybody else. Do tell me what they think. Do they judge that one of those two young ladies killed Mr. Homer? ’Cause if they do, I just simply can’t stand it, that I can’t!”

“I’m afraid, Abbie, that’s what they do think.”

“Do you think so?”

“Like you, I can’t bear to believe it, yet, what else is there to think?”

“I’d rather suspect Mr. Bingham.”

“Bingham! Why he was Gaylord’s best friend.”

“Well, it’s more like a man’s work than a woman’s.”

“I’ve told you all I know, Abbie. Mr. Crawford is sending for a big detective. Perhaps he can find out the truth.”

“Goody! I like detectives. Mr. Homer did, too. He had a good friend, who was a detective. Well, I won’t stay and bother you. You’ll be back tonight, Mr. Moffatt?”

“Tonight or tomorrow morning. I can’t tell which till I see about some business in New York.”

Left alone, he stood a moment at the window and looked out on the gardens.

“It’s an open and shut case,” he said to himself. “No suspect but those two young women. I wonder which one they’ll fasten it on. And so, Miss Kittredge has a knowledge of anatomy. But the little Spanish beauty has a power to stab as a birthright. All tropical people stab, especially Spaniards. And Marita is wild enough for anything. I’ll help her if I can. I like her better than the Vere de Vere one. Well, the will will probably be found, and then Lady Diana will come into her own.”

The Lady Diana was, at that moment, lying on a chaise longue in her boudoir. She had telephoned her home in New York City, that she would stay at Twin Towers a few days longer.

Her mother had been dead many years, and her father was a helpless invalid. It was her father’s nurse to whom she had telephoned, a man of good sense and judgment. She had told him that doubtless he would read in the papers what had happened, but on no account to let her father know about it. This would not be a difficult matter, for the sick man never read the papers and the nurse could pick and choose what to read to him.

Diana had no brothers or sisters and lived with her father in one of the still unchanged brownstone houses just off Fifth Avenue.

Having told Carlisle, the nurse, she lay back among her pillows, and tried to face the situation.

She knew that she was in very real danger. Aside from the suspicion that had fastened itself upon her, she was menaced by Marita’s enmity. The Spanish girl was of a positively venomous nature and would stoop to words and deeds that Diana would scorn.

Her thoughts flew back to that dinner party. Gaylord had been unbearable. He had vowed he would make her marry him, make her love him—and all the time her heart was beating wildly with love for Ted Bingham. She had never realized until last night how much she cared for Ted, with his open, honest nature and his gay, debonair ways.

She had told Gaylord this, at least, she had hinted of it, and Gaylord had said he would kill any man that she loved better than she did him.

She had thought he said it jokingly, until——

Someone was knocking at her door.

“Come in,” said Diana wearily, and Bobbie entered.

“You blessed angel,” her visitor said, “isn’t there something I can do for you? Take heart, Di, darling, they’re sending for a whacking big detective, and he’ll know by looking at you that you couldn’t do a wrong thing if you wanted to. Where do you keep your cigarettes? Under some beflounced doll thing, I s’pose.”

“No, they’re in that jade box on the stand there.”

“Here, have one yourself, it will iron out your nerves.”

Diana accepted one and then lay staring at Bobbie.

“Bobs,” she said, suddenly, “who killed Gaylord?”

“You,” said Bobbie, calmly, inhaling smoke.

“Do they all think that?” Diana went white.

“Oh, not all. ’Bout evenly divided. Dunno as I think it myself. Just wanted to give you a jolt.”

“Yes, you do think it. So I suppose Rollin does, too.”

“Yes, Rollin does. But Ted doesn’t.”

“No, of course not. What’s Marita doing?”

“Singing Spanish songs to her guitar, in the music room.”

“Who’s with her?”

“Caley, of course. What a queer duck he is! One minute he’s a regular Uriah Heep, then in a jiffy, he’s acting like a strutting Napoleon. I don’t get him.”

“Wonder if he thinks I’m guilty?”

“Sure! He’s on Marita’s side.”

“Are there two camps?”

“Yep. It’s a game. It must have been either you or Marita. So we choose sides.”

“Bobbie, be serious a minute! Do you really suspect me?”

“Well, yes and no. I do and I don’t. But it must be one of you, for there’s no way anybody else could have got round to it.”

“If you didn’t have a case on Rollin, or if he didn’t believe I’m the one, you wouldn’t either, would you?”

“Why, no, Di, I dunno’s I would.” She shook her straight Dutch bob, and gazed into Diana’s sky-blue eyes.

“No,” she repeated, “nobody could look at you and call you wicked. You beautiful angel! Oh Diana, do you know how lovely you are?”

“Yet you think I am a mur——”

“Hush, don’t say it! I don’t! I won’t think any wrong of you. And I won’t let Rollin, either!”

“Look here, Bobbie, don’t get too much mixed up with Rollin Dare. What will Roger say when he comes home?”

“Don’t worry. I’m only having the lightest kind of flirtation. Roger’s coming home in a few days and then it’s good-bye, Rollin Dare!”

“Are you going to stay here long?”

“Until Roger comes for me. I say, Diana, I wonder if we’d be allowed to leave if we wanted to. You and Marita wouldn’t, of course, but I suppose I would, or Rollin.”

“I suppose so. There’s someone at the door. See who it is, Bobbie.”

It was Abbie Perkins, and with mouth and eyes open she came into the room.

“Well, Miss Kittredge,” she said, “I just happened in to see if I could do anything for you. You going down to dinner, or you want it up here on a tray?”

“What do you advise, Bobs?”

“Oh come on along down. Put on a smashing frock and putty up your face and come down and make a good impression. Injured innocence and all that.”

“Say, Miss Kittredge, you didn’t do that job, did you?”

Abbie looked at Diana, half scared, half defiant.

“No, Abbie,” came the reply. “But if I had, do you suppose I’d say I did?”

“Land sake, miss, what a thing to say! ’Course I know you couldn’t have stob Mr. Homer, but likewise also I know Miss Moore couldn’t have done it.”

“Why not, Abbie? Why couldn’t she?”

“Why, ain’t she in love with him?”

“But sometimes people kill the ones they love.”

“They do, miss! Now why ever would they do that?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Diana turned pettish. “I wish this thing was all over! I wish I’d never come here!”

“Why don’t you take it more sensible, Miss Kittredge? Instead of yelpin’ like a hurt dog, why don’t you brace up and find out some other suspek? I mean ’sides you and Miss Moore.”

“There’s nobody else to suspect.”

“Well, get up some evidence. Some what do they call ’em? Clueses.”

“I’m not the one to hunt for clueses, Abbie. The detectives must do that.”

“But you were there, in the room. Didn’t you hear anything?”

“No, Marita did the hearing for us all. She heard a whole heap of things.”

“She hears better’n you, ma’am.”

“Oh, I hear well enough, only there wasn’t anything to hear.”

“You couldn’t see a thing, s’pose?”

“See? Mercy, no. It was pitch dark. But I’ll tell you one thing, I could smell!”

“Now, that’s something, miss. And they do say, folks as don’t hear so awful good, smell better’n others. What, now, did you notice, a-smellin?”

Bobbie burst into shrieks of laughter, but Diana was serious.

“I noticed an awful lot of smells, Abbie. Of course, there was the cyclamen perfume I always use. And, too, that heavy stuff Marita likes; jasmine, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” said Bobbie, making a face. “Sickening stuff.”

“What else, Miss Diana?” Abbie urged on.

“Well, tobacco, of course, we had all three been smoking more or less. And then, the incense was burning in the Oriental vase. That was floating round in the air. And I remember there was some freesia in one of the flower vases. I hate freesia. But I noticed it. And that’s all—oh, yes, I did notice a smell of mothballs. You know, those carbolicky ones. I don’t mind that odor, it’s so nice and clean. But where did it come from? I never use mothballs. Was Mr. Homer’s coat done up in them ever, Abbie?”

“Why, yes, Wood keeps those tar things in the closets where the woolens are. But Mr. Homer’s evening things wouldn’t be there, they’d be in his own wardrobe.”

“Well, I smelled it, and I can’t be mistaken about that.”

“That’s a clue,” exclaimed Bobbie, triumphantly. “Now, Di, from that mothball we’ll track down the villain! Abbie, can’t you help us? You go round the house while we’re at dinner, and smell into everybody’s closets and bureau drawers and trunks, and see if you can catch a whiff of mothballs. Will you?”

“Do you mean it, Mrs. Abbott?”

“Of course I do. Now, you see to it.”

Chapter 8

Fleming Stone Takes Up the Case

IT was nearly noon the next day when Cram called Lawyer Crawford and Albert Moffatt to a conference.

Moffatt had just returned from New York, and said, as he joined the others:

“I’ve fixed up things in my office so I can stay here a few days more. I may as well confess I’ve a leaning toward detective work, and if I can be of any help in sleuthing about, I’ll be glad. I don’t read detective stories, I’m not that sort of enthusiast, but I do believe in looking matters squarely in the face and trying to grasp their meaning.”

“That’s the sort of detective work that counts, Mr. Moffatt,” Cram said, approvingly. “I don’t take much stock, myself, in scientific deduction or psycho-analyzing.”

"They're all right in their place, Cram," Crawford told him. "But what I want to talk about is this. We must get hold of Homer's will. I'm his legal adviser and I can't tackle the estate or do any settling, until I know whether the man died intestate or not. It's all very well to say the will can't be found, but it's got to be found. It isn't like a document that would be stolen by interested parties. Maybe he made a will and didn't leave Miss Kittredge the residuary legatee at all. Maybe he gave great sums in charities. Any way we must track it down. The thing to do is to search the Tapestry Room thoroughly."

"I've done that, Mr. Crawford," Cram asserted. "I've been through every piece of furniture that has cupboards or drawers in it, and there's no sign of that will book. It isn't like an ordinary will, just a folded sheet of paper, that could be slipped between other papers and so hidden. This thing is a book, a fair-sized book."

"Maybe he didn't leave the will in the book finally," suggested Moffatt, "but hid it somewhere by itself."

"Then, where's the book?" countered Crawford. "He wouldn't throw the book away, after buying it for a purpose. Sure it isn't in the Tapestry Room, Cram?"

"Oh, of course, I didn't go over all the bookshelves, but Harrison says he never put the book on the shelves, just kept it around on the table or windowseat."

"Well," the lawyer said, decidedly, "Gaylord never hid that book and that will. Why should he? They were for use in case of his death. Why on earth would he conceal them?"

"I'm not saying he did conceal them purposely," Cram said, slowly. "I'm not saying he concealed them at all. But they can't be found."

"What price Harrison hiding them?" Moffatt asked. "I don't know that chap at all, but he seems a man of infinite resource and sagacity."

"Where's the sense of that? If the will is found Harrison may receive a legacy. If it isn't found, he most certainly will not. Where's his motive?"

"Motives seem to be lacking all round," Moffatt remarked, thoughtfully. "The murder, now. Who had a motive for that? Well, the little Spanish pepper-pot might have the motive of jealousy or hatred. You know what's said about a woman scorned. But the fair girl had no motive. Even if she resented Gaylord's persistent attentions, that isn't a reason for murder."

"You forget the legacy," Crawford said. "If she was to inherit a fortune——"

"Oh, don't! It's too impossible!" Moffatt's face showed his unfeigned horror.

"Now, see here," Cram said. "Here are three of us who were not present at the time of the murder, so we can't be biased by what we saw or didn't see. On the face of things, just judging by the evidence, who killed Homer?"

"When you say evidence, I suppose you mean the evidence we've heard so far," Crawford put in. "There may be—must be a lot of unknown evidence."

"Which may never be known," suggested Moffatt. "It seems to me there are only two people who could tell us any more about the matter than we know already. And, for obvious reasons, they won't. Why, if, say, some outsider did come in, through the window or any other way, and either of those girls heard him,

which they must have done in such a case, don't you suppose they'd tell of it mighty quick? They're not anxious to accuse one another except in self-defense."

"That's so," said Cram. "If anybody crept in, and they heard him, of course they'd say so. But how could anybody creep in? From where? And who? Now, between ourselves here, how many possible suspects are there? Only those two girls and perhaps—a very slim perhaps—young Bingham. He was in the doorway and he could have crept over to the table where the dagger was and used it and crept back again, in the dark time."

"Oh, no!" cried Moffatt. "In the dark? Impossible!"

"And why would he?" asked Crawford. "He was Gaylord's good friend, why would he kill him?"

"Take the shape of the room," Cram spoke musingly. "Queer shape, ain't it? That vaulted ceiling, they call it a groined ceiling, I'm told, sorter runs down to the four walls. Then the four walls—why, they ain't walls at all, They're deep alcoves, all four of 'em. One arches over the door to the hall. One arches over the door to the lounge place. Opposite that, against the dining-room wall, is the fireplace, and opposite the hall door is a big window. The books are all in cases under the arches, and 'longside the windows and doors. Not a terrible lot of 'em."

"And then the tapestries, that's what the room's named for. Two of those, one each side of the fireplace. I've heard they're both worth thousands, but they look to me just like any upholst'ry goods."

"They're wonders!" declared Crawford. "Among the finest in this country."

"Are they?" exclaimed Moffatt. "I confess I'm pretty near in Cram's class. They mean nothing to me. I remember hearing Gaylord gloating over them, but I thought it was just part of his fad for antiques."

"No, tapestries are tremendously valuable, very rare pieces. But as to the murderer. I think everyone who was in the house at the time ought to be suspected and thoroughly investigated."

"I agree to that," Moffatt declared. "I hope your man Pitt is a good one at a quiz. You can learn a lot from the way people answer questions, even if they're not guilty themselves."

"What about Dr. Opdyke?" said Cram, suddenly.

"Heavens, man, he's a long-time friend of Homer's. And why would he do it? He'd have no possible motive."

"Bequest," said Cram, laconically.

"But the doctor and his wife witnessed the will. They couldn't have done that if they were to inherit anything at all."

"Ah, yes, Cram said, "but the girl, the daughter. Homer meant to leave her quite a nice sum."

"How do you know?"

"She told me herself. She's a gabby little piece, and I had a talk with her. Oh, I haven't been absolutely idle."

"But surely you can't suspect that child of any wrongdoing!" Moffatt cried, aghast at the idea.

"No," Cram agreed, "I don't. But say the doc is in financial straits and the kiddy's bequest would pull him out. And—he would know where to strike."

"But how could he get in the house?" asked Crawford.

"That's the trouble," said Cram. "I've talked with the servants and that butler person declares nobody could possibly have come in at the front door and across the hall in the dark time. For, he said, he always instinctively stands near the door between the dining-room and hall and listens, when it is dark each evening. He says it's a habit with him and he always does it. So, if the doctor or anybody else tried to scoot across the hall to the Tapestry Room, Wood must have heard him, if he couldn't see him."

"It's hardly credible," Moffatt said; "I can't suspect Dr. Opdyke. Why, he looks like a saint, with that halo of white hair."

Wood appeared just then, with a telegram for Crawford.

As he read it, the lawyer's face fell.

"Pitt can't come," he said, "he's just starting for California on an important case."

"Don't you know of anyone else equally good?" asked Moffatt.

"No, I doubt if there is anyone equally good."

"Let me dig along for a few days, Mr. Crawford," Cram begged. "I'm making headway, I think. Anyway, leave it till after the funeral."

"Bad plan to postpone investigations," Crawford said, musingly. "I'll think it over, Cram. You'll stay over for the funeral, Mr. Moffatt?"

"Oh, yes, of course. Today being Sunday, I think I'll stick around the house. Unless somebody would like to go for a motor drive. What about Miss Kittredge?"

"She's had a bit of a collapse. The doctor put her to bed with orders to see nobody for twenty-four hours at least," Crawford enlightened him.

"And Miss Moore? Mrs. Abbott?"

"They're about somewhere, I suppose. But I doubt if Miss Moore would be allowed to go——"

Moffatt looked his astonishment, and Cram put in:

"You must try to realize, Mr. Moffatt, that this is a very grave case. Those two ladies had exclusive opportunity. Nobody else had a look in. One of those girls committed that murder just as sure as I sit here. So, we daren't let either of them out of our sight, until we know which of them is the guilty party."

"How do you propose to find out?" asked Moffatt, looking greatly distressed.

"There are ways," said Cram, with a mysterious nod; "and since I can't see Miss Kittredge today, I'll have a session with Miss Moore. Want to be present, Mr. Moffatt?"

“Lord, no! I do want to help in the work of avenging my cousin’s murder, but I’d rather do anything than interview those two girls!”

The three men went their ways, but as Crawford started to go home, Wood silently beckoned him aside.

The two went into the breakfast room, and the butler closed the door.

“I don’t want to seem forthputting, Mr. Crawford, sir, but this seems to me a time when eggstrawdinary measures are called for.”

“Yes, yes, Wood, you may say what you wish. Make any suggestion you have in mind.”

“Thank you, sir. Then, it’s just this. I couldn’t help hearing you say that the detective you wanted can’t come. Now, I know of a great detective who was an old friend of Mr. Homer’s. Mightn’t it be a good thing to get him?”

“Why, I don’t know. Who is this man?”

“Fleming Stone, sir. He’s famous, I’ve been told; indeed, Mr. Homer said he was the best detective outside a story-book.”

“Yes, I’ve heard of him. I didn’t know he knew Homer.”

“Oh, very well, sir. That’s why I think he would come.”

“Know his address?”

“No, sir, but surely you can find that out.”

“Yes, without doubt. Well, Wood, I’ll look it up. I’m going home now, but I’ll be back tomorrow for the funeral. Are there no relatives at all to come?”

“A few, from out of town. Just connections by marriage. No, no real relatives.”

“Never knew a chap so alone in the world. You’ve lost a good master, Wood.”

“I have that, Mr. Crawford. If so be that Mr. Moffatt inherits, I hope he keeps me on.”

“I hope so, too, Wood. I like that man. He is quiet and a bit queer, but very much the gentleman.”

“Yes, sir. Good-day, sir.”

As Crawford drove down to the city in his roadster, he thought over Wood’s suggestion, and it struck him favorably.

He concluded to try to get Fleming Stone, without saying anything to anybody about it. For, he argued to himself, he had suggested Pitt and no objection was raised by anyone, so they could not logically object to Stone. And, too, who had any right to object? Moffatt, perhaps, but he was always ready to agree to anything that would further the cause, so Crawford concluded to go ahead. He easily found Stone’s address and telephoned him at once.

By a lucky chance, Stone was free at the moment, and on learning that it was Gaylord Homer's death he was asked to investigate, he agreed to call on Crawford immediately.

He kept his word, and inside of half an hour, the two men were seated in the lawyer's office, going over the case.

"As soon as I heard of the tragedy, I wanted to offer my help," Stone said. "I've known Gaylord for years, and I'm glad of the chance to track down his murderer. A fine chap was Gaylord Homer, and if tireless perseverance can accomplish it, this particular criminal will be run to earth."

Stone was a tall, spare man, with deep-set, dark eyes, and greying hair. His manner was calm, but with a hint of forcefulness, and his keen gaze was penetrating enough to disconcert a guilty conscience.

"Who is in charge?" he asked, directly. "Who is engaging my services?"

"That's the queer part of it," Crawford replied. "There is no one in charge legally. Gaylord left no heirs, no relatives at all, but one second cousin. He is said to have made a will, but it cannot be found. So there are no executors. But I am engaging you, Mr. Stone, on my own. If you will take up the matter, I will see that your fees are paid, either from the Homer estate or by myself."

"I wasn't thinking of that part of it," Stone smiled. "If I can bring to judgment the man who killed Gaylord Homer, I shall not care whether I get paid for it or not. But, I want to make one stipulation. The room where he was killed, has it been used, or cleaned?"

"Neither. The police sergeant locked it up at once, and has kept the key."

"Very well. See to it, he lets no one in that room until I see it. I may not crawl around the carpet with a lens, but there may be clues that a careless person could brush away unwittingly."

"All right, but we did search the room enough to learn that the murderer didn't drop anything."

"Dropped clues are out of date. Nobody now drops a handkerchief or a cuff-link, any more than he leaves fingerprints. But the clues I like best are not dropped articles."

"I don't altogether understand, but it doesn't matter. I'm so glad you will come to our aid. Now I must tell you how matters stand."

With his usual brief clarity, the lawyer told the detective all he knew about Gaylord Homer's death and all that had transpired since.

Stone listened in silence, save for a question now and then, and grew more and more absorbed as the interest developed.

He caught at the salient points at once.

"You say Miss Moore has unusually sharp hearing?" he asked.

"Yes, she says so, and I've noticed instances to prove it. On the other hand, I think Miss Kittredge's hearing is a little defective. She won't admit it—in fact, she claims to hear perfectly, but I doubt it. Why?"

"Only that if Miss Moore hears so well, she would have heard any intruder who came into the room from the lounge or who came into the house by the front door and entered the room that way. If it was

somebody she didn't wish to incriminate she might shield him, but that is unlikely when she is herself a suspect."

"But nobody could enter the front door, cross the hall, get into the Tapestry Room and find the dagger and give the stab, all in the dark."

"No, I admit that would be impossible," Stone agreed, "and even if it could have been, Miss Moore must have heard a sound of some sort. Then, unless it was somebody in collusion with her, she would have told of it, to save herself."

"There are many theories to be conjectured, Mr. Stone, but the facts remain that those two girls were within a foot or two of Gaylord, and within equal distance of the table where the dagger lay."

"I can't assume anything until I see the room," Stone said, positively. "Now, what shall I do? Go up there, openly, or in disguise?"

"I see no reason for disguise. If the guilty party knows you are on the job it can do no harm. To my mind there is not the slightest shadow of doubt that one of those girls stabbed Gaylord; that is self-evident. I am shocked, of course, at the idea of such a thing, but there it is."

"What about the girls' natures? And were they both in love with Gaylord?"

"Oh no. Miss Moore was in love with him, deeply, passionately—she's of Spanish descent. But Gay didn't care two cents for her. He was in love with the other one, Di Kittredge. And she scorned his devotion."

"Oh, I see. Quite a complication. The girl he loved and the girl who loved him, each had opportunity. And motive? For Diana, I mean?"

"A material one, that she is supposed to be the residuary legatee, and a less plausible one, that she was tired of Gaylord's persistent love-making."

"Neither of them very strong. Not in it with the Spanish girl's unrequited passion."

"But Marita isn't a Spanish girl, really. Her remote ancestors were, but she's American enough, save for a dash of temperament."

"Did the coroner get anywhere?"

"Nowhere at all. He's one of those men who talk and talk and never say anything. But, I tell you, Mr. Stone, there's nowhere to get, except to find out which girl struck the blow."

"Either of them have any anatomical knowledge?"

"Yes, Miss Kittredge studied for a trained nurse, Miss Moore, no knowledge of physiology at all."

"A Spaniard doesn't need that to know where to stab."

"The deed is much more in keeping with Miss Moore's make-up than with Miss Kittredge's. Marita flies into spasms of anger or joy on the slightest provocation. Diana is cool, calm, collected, always. She is absolutely mistress of herself, whereas Marita continually loses her head and her temper."

“You make them about equally suspectable! Both have traits that argue the criminal. Shall I go up there today?”

“Why not? You remember Wood, the butler?”

“No, not definitely.”

“Never mind. He remembers you, or at least, he remembers you’re Gaylord’s friend. He’ll look after you. I needn’t go back there?”

“Oh, no. I’m not shy. I’ll just walk in and camp down.”

“Yes, do. Cale Harrison is the confidential secretary. He’s a milk-minded chap, spineless and rather abject. There’s a character sketch of a housekeeper, but smile at her and she’ll coddle you. A few more guests and the cousin.”

“Oh, yes, the cousin. What’s he like?”

“A good sort. Nothing brilliant about him, but a comfortable, easy-going type. Says he doesn’t hanker for Gaylord’s money, but if it must come his way he’ll bear up under the strain. Somehow I believe in him; he’s of simple tastes and most eager to get even with the one who did for Gaylord, whoever it may be. I think he shrinks from the idea of the girls having done it, and is bent on finding an intruder or something like that. He’ll welcome you, for he was much disappointed that the coroner got nowhere. Oh, yes, there’s Bingham—Ted Bingham. He was a great friend of Gay’s. Now, he stood in the doorway between the Tapestry Room and the lounge. Maybe he could have slipped in, grabbed the dagger and used it—but I doubt it. And why would he? To be sure, he is in love with Diana, and she with him. There’s a chance but it’s too absurd!”

“Nothing is absurd, Crawford, that has a bit of bearing on the case. What about the servants? I may as well learn all I can before I go up there.”

“They’ve been questioned, but except for one of the maids and Wood, they had no opportunity. Unless they could slip in in the dark, and there, again Marita would have heard them. And, again, why? Had one of them wanted to stab Gay, far better opportunity could have been found than those two minutes of dark time.”

“What do you mean by dark time, exactly?”

Crawford explained, and Stone was deeply interested.

“What a beautiful situation,” he exclaimed. “That proves it a premeditated business. For one taking advantage, unexpectedly, of that dark time couldn’t know how long it would last. However, all present were familiar with the routine, weren’t they?”

“Yes, I suppose so. I think they all had been there before, unless perhaps Mrs. Abbott. And I think it was Marita’s first visit.”

“Why was she asked, if Gaylord didn’t care for her?”

“He used to be in love with her. But along came Diana, and Gay turned to her like the sunflower to the sun. This stirred up the firebrand, and she is said to have sworn vengeance and all that. Incidentally, the secretary person is in love with Marita.”

“The milk and water chap?”

“Yes, isn’t that the way of the world! Marita would lead him a life, should they two hit it off! Now, I think that’s about all the dramatis personae. Rollin Dare doesn’t count. I think he was just asked to make an even number.”

“He may be the dark horse.”

“Oh, no. He’s an average, law-abiding citizen. Flirting just now with Mrs. Abbott, but it’s merely a playful game.”

“I’ll keep my eye on him just the same. These playful gamesters sometimes are deeper than they seem. I’ll land up there about tea time, I suppose. Do they have tea? Not all of our best people do.”

“It’s a well run house. If you want tea you’ve only to say the word. I’ll be up tomorrow for the funeral. Till then, good-by.”

“Good-by,” echoed Fleming Stone and set off on his new quest.

Chapter 9

The Ticking Clock

FLEMING STONE reached Twin Towers late in the afternoon. Though it was but a short walk, he had taken a taxi over from the station, and as it chanced, the driver was gracious.

Stone didn’t check his flow of language, but listened eagerly, for he was never above picking up information from any source.

“Yes, mister, it’s a puzzlin’ case. That is to say, I mean, it’s a puzzle to know which of them ladies done it. Oh, I’ve heard all the dee-tails. I know he loved one lady and t’other one loved him. That’s a set-to to begin with, ain’t it? Now I says to myself, mabbe them girls was in what they call c’lusion. But old Cram, he says that ain’t noways possible. And you can see tain’t. Why’d they want to help each other to kill him?”

“Then which one do you think did it?” Stone asked.

“Oh the little furriner, of course. She’s Spanish inclined, and she was desprittally in love with Mr. Homer. Yes, sir, she’s the vilyun, she is.”

“But would she kill a man she loved?”

“Yes, sir! That’s wimmen all over! They’re first of all, jealous. And once a woman’s jealous, it’s all up with the man.”

“You seem to have made a study of the sex.”

“Don’t need to. It’s all on the outside. I’ve seen that black-eyed witch, that Miss Moore, and she’s a killer, all right. You can see it stickin’ out all over her! She’d knife any man who didn’t give her what she wanted.”

“And what did she want?”

“Want? Why, Mr. Homer, and his big house and his fortune and all. And more than that, she didn’t want the other girl, the angel-faced one, to get him. So he had to go out, biff!”

“Well, you—what’s your name, by the way?”

“Farley—Jed Farley.”

“You know the people staying at the Homer house?”

“Can’t help seeing ’em about. They’re always comin’ down to the village, buying things in the shops or kitin’ to the post-office or telegraphin’ or cajooverin’ around for something. ’Course I know ’em. The angel-faced lady never killed anybody. And for why should she? She didn’t love Mr. Homer, she’s sweet on the Bingham man, but she never jabbed a knife into anybody. Well, here you are, sir, here’s Twin Towers. You see, they’s a big tower on each of the two front corners, that’s why it’s named that.”

“Yes, I see,” and Fleming Stone looked at the two towers that rose high above the roof in accordance with no known rule of architecture. Yet the effect was not unpleasing, and he concluded the towers were all right and they made delightful reading nooks inside the house.

Dismissing his garrulous Jehu, he rang the bell at the front door, which, as has been said, was around at the side of the house.

Wood answered it, and when he saw Stone, he allowed himself a smile of real welcome.

“Mr. Stone, isn’t it?” he exclaimed. “I’m right glad to see you, sir.

“Well, Wood, here I am, and on a sad errand.”

“Yes, sir. Mr. Crawford sent you?”

“Yes. Can you put me up? And who will receive me?”

“Mr. Harrison, I think, sir. Or Mr. Bingham. Do you know him?”

“No. Better hand me over to Harrison.”

So the butler showed Fleming Stone up to the study, where Cale Harrison was engaged looking over papers at Gaylord Homer’s desk.

He rose, with a questioning glance, as the distinguished-looking stranger advanced.

“Mr. Fleming Stone,” Wood announced, and immediately effaced himself.

“Mr. Stone, the detective?” said Cale, quite evidently surprised.

“Yes,” Stone replied, suavely. “At Mr. Crawford’s request, I am here to investigate the death of my friend, Gaylord Homer.”

Stone sensed in the attitude of Harrison a decided objection to his presence, but this had no effect on the detective, save to make him look more keenly at the secretary, and then let his glance stray to the papers on the desk.

“Mr. Crawford did not tell me he expected you,” Cale said, rising and shuffling some of the top papers together.

“No? I think he wasn’t sure I could come, and so said nothing until he found out. I hope you welcome my assistance, Mr. Harrison?”

“Yes—oh, yes—of course. But I always dislike to be surprised.”

“It isn’t pleasant. I’m sorry. Now, if you will turn me over to a housekeeper I will settle myself into my rightful niche.”

Cale touched a bell, and vouchsafed no further word until Abbie appeared.

“Mr. Stone is staying here,” he said, a little curtly. “Give him two of the best rooms you can, Abbie. Make him comfortable.”

The housekeeper looked embarrassed.

“The house is very full, Mr. Harrison,” she began, but Stone interrupted her.

“One room will do me,” he said, “and a small one at that. Or, if you are crowded, I will go to the inn, if there is one.”

“No, no, you must stay here,” Harrison said, though quite evidently speaking against his will. “If Crawford sent you, he’ll want you right here.”

“There’s Mr. Homer’s rooms, sir,” Abbie said, hesitantly.

“Why, yes,” Cale acceded. “Would you mind using those?”

“Not a bit,” Stone said, “if it suits the convenience of the household. Have they taken Gaylord away?”

“Yes. To the mortuary, and from there to the church tomorrow, for the funeral.”

“Very well, if it incommodes no one, let me have his rooms.”

Stone followed Abbie Perkins and was ushered into the beautiful suite of rooms that Homer had designed for his own use.

The large bedroom and sitting-room, the dressing-room and bath were all furnished with fine, quiet taste and the appointments were of the most modern and comfortable type:

“I’m terrible glad you’re here, Mr. Stone,” Abbie said, as she closed the door to the hall. “I remember you well, though I don’t s’pose you remember me. When you was here last, Mr. Homer had just come home from Europe and he brought a lot of Oriental junk, that you just about went crazy over.”

“I remember that, certainly. So you’ve been here a long time.”

“Yes, sir. And that time, too, Mr. Homer brought home the tapestries that hang in the little room where he was killed. Are you going to find out who did it, Mr. Stone?”

“I hope so, Abbie,” said Fleming Stone, gravely. “But it seems to be a mysterious case.”

“Not mysterious a bit. Plain as the nose on your face. That Spanish vixen, she’s the one you’re after. And I hope you can pin it on her, that I do!”

“Miss Moore? Why, I thought she cared for Mr. Homer.”

“Cared for him, is it? She worshipped the ground he walked on. She was in love with him like you read about. But he jilted her.”

“Jilted her! Were they ever engaged?”

“Sure they were. Or at least, she said so. And he chucked her over as soon as he met Miss Kittredge. Ah, there’s a lady for you! Do you know her, Mr. Stone?”

“No, I’ve never met her.”

“Well, once you lay your two eyes on her you’ll know she never could do a stroke of wrong. She’s a born angel. Why she couldn’t love Mr. Homer is more’n I can tell. But she didn’t, and there you are. We can’t always direct the beatin’s of our hearts!”

Abbie rolled her eyes upward, as if her greatest griefs were the occasions when she couldn’t return the loves that were laid at her feet.

“I shall be glad to see Miss Kittredge,” Stone said, casually. “Is tea served, Abbie?”

“It will be today, yes, sir. Sometimes ’tis and sometimes ’tain’t. You can always have it if you like. Now here’s the bath, sir, as you see, and here’s the bells. But mostly you’d better ring Wood or me. The younger servants is all more or less nervous and ’stericky. The maids are no good whatsoever, and the men are ’bout as bad. Wood will look after your things—or are you bringing a man?”

“No, with Wood’s help and yours I shall do nicely for myself. Abbie, why are you so sure Miss Kittredge is so much less to be suspected than Miss Moore? Only because of her angel face?”

“Mostly that.” Abbie nodded her tightly knobbed head vigorously. “But, too, Miss Kittredge is a lady, a calm, sweet genteel sort of person, and Miss Moore is no lady at all! She’s low-bred, common, and wild-tempered. She was so jealous of the other one it made her fairly yellow in the face. And when she found out that Mr. Homer hoped to make this party an announcement party, she broke loose and put a stop to it all, in her own way. Well, sir, as soon as you see the two of ’em, you’ll realize I’m telling you the truth.”

Left alone, Fleming Stone threw himself into an easy-chair that stood at a window overlooking the gardens.

At first he gave himself up to the æsthetic enjoyment of the flowers beneath him, the blue sky above, and the green woods and fields in the distance.

The room, too, pleased his rather fastidious taste, and he was glad they had given him Homer’s apartments.

Also, he hoped that some chance might reveal a clue or a helpful bit of evidence in those rooms. It would not be strange if he should find a stray letter or account-book that might prove of value.

Yet he had to admit to himself that, so far as he could see, there was no one to suspect but the two girls who were in the room when Gaylord died.

He remembered the room, with its great arches above the deep doorways. Over the doors were lunettes, beautifully painted by celebrated artists. The whole house was not only luxurious but in the best of taste, and Stone sighed at the thought of the sudden end of it all for the man he had called his friend.

This friendship, though not an intimate one, extended over many years, and several times Fleming Stone had visited at Twin Towers.

Then realizing that he was here for a purpose, the detective made ready and went downstairs.

Voices in the lounge turned his attention that way, and he went in the room to find most of the party assembled there.

Harrison performed somewhat perfunctory introductions, and it didn't take the shrewd detective half a minute to learn that there were two distinct divisions, one hostile toward him and one friendly.

The facts were patent in voice, look, and gesture.

Ted Bingham greeted him with all the warmth a man can show to a welcome visitor. Moffatt, too, grasped his hand in friendly cordiality. But Diana Kittredge was not present.

Stone was told that owing to a nervous breakdown, she had been ordered to bed, but expected to be able to attend the funeral ceremonies next day.

Polly Opdyke, who was very much in evidence, capered around Stone like the child she was. She remembered him from his last visit, and she drew her chair close to his own and sat gazing up into his eyes in rapt admiration.

"You see, when I saw you last, I hadn't ever read any detective stories," she chattered, "but now I've read lots of them, so I know just how you set to work."

"You must help me, then," said Stone, smiling at her "for I'm uncertain myself how to set to work."

"Begin on me, Mr. Stone," and from the tone of her voice, Stone knew that Marita was inimical to his presence among them.

Cale Harrison, sitting by her, looked at her apprehensively, but save for a clouded brow, he offered no hindrance.

Bobbie Abbott gave a little gasp, and turned away from Stone to whisper to Rollin Dare, who, as usual, was at her side.

The atmosphere seemed electric, and Stone rapidly and accurately sized up the mental attitude of those about him.

He wondered on which side Diana would range herself, and then smiled as he realized that Bingham would never have welcomed him so pleasantly, unless Miss Kittredge was of similar mind.

"Yes, Miss Moore," he said, easily, "I will begin with you, and thank you for the invitation. As you all know, I am here at Mr. Crawford's request, to try to discover the murderer of Gaylord Homer. It is not my

custom to mince words or to gloss over unpleasant facts. Mr. Homer was killed in a brutal manner and with consummate cleverness. I think we need have no maudlin sympathy or pity for the murderer, for anyone who would strike a man in the back, and also in the dark, is among the lowest ranks of villains. I have been told that suspicion rests on two women who were in the room when Mr. Homer died. But I do not propose to start my investigation with any preconceived notions of my own or anyone else's. So, Miss Moore, when I question you, do not think I am accusing you, but only getting necessary information for my work."

"Go to it, Mr. Stone," said Marita, fitting a fresh cigarette into a long jade holder, and letting Harrison light it for her. "Don't bother about me, just satisfy your curiosity. To save your time, I'll help along by saying I was in love with Gaylord Homer, I thought him the most fascinating man I ever met. He didn't reciprocate, for some unimaginable reason, and I resented that. But not to the extent of putting him out of the way entirely! No, that was the work of—of somebody else, somebody who loved him less than I did."

Though the words were straightforward and commonplace in themselves, Marita's manner gave them a fire and a sting that made them seem positively venomous. And the last sentence had a spiteful fling that left no one in doubt it was meant for Diana.

Not often surprised, Stone was truly amazed at this tirade, for the quick speech and sharp accents made it a tirade. But accustomed to conceal his thoughts he let no hint of what he felt appear on his face, and calmly knocked off ashes from his cigarette as he went on unconcernedly. "I see. It hardly seems that you would kill the man you loved so well—yet such things have happened."

At his first sentence Marita smiled at him, but as he added the latter clause, her face changed and her red mouth twisted into a veritable grimace of wrath—of wrath mixed with fear. In the big black eyes fear showed plainly for all to see.

"You have perfect hearing, Miss Moore?"

"More than that," she snapped. "My hearing is super-normal. I can hear sounds at a distance that would amaze you."

"Then—and remember, I'm only trying to find another suspect than yourself or Miss Kittredge—then, if any other person had come into the Tapestry Room in that dark time, you must have heard him?"

"I most assuredly must have," she said, but the insolence had gone from her voice now. "I have wanted to think that happened, for it would help to remove unjust suspicion from me, but I am sure I heard no footsteps."

"But you said you did," Stone calmly interrupted her. "You said so to the coroner. You told him you heard Mr. Harrison walk across the hall."

"Oh, I didn't say any such thing! I didn't! How dare you say I did?"

"It's on record," said Stone, quietly. "Why did you say you heard Mr. Harrison's step?"

Marita turned sullen. "I s'pose I thought I did. I s'pose it was Wood stepping about."

"Wood was not in the hall during the dark time. He stood in the dining-room door. Now, as your hearing is so acute, you must have heard the step you thought you heard. Do you still think it was Mr. Harrison's?"

“No, I don’t. He was upstairs all through the dark time.”

“How do you know that?”

“He told me so.” She cast a look of sudden fear at Harrison, who looked the picture of dejection.

“You corroborate that, Mr. Harrison?” asked Stone.

“Yes, of course, I’ve said all along I was upstairs in the study at that time. I came down when I heard Marita scream.”

“Then, Miss Moore, whose step can it be that you heard?”

“Then,” Marita lifted her head with a look of defiance and went on steadily, “then, I can only think it was the step of Miss Kittredge as she went round to get the dagger from the table where it lay.”

“But you said the step was in the hall, and your hearing is so——”

“Don’t say any more about my hearing!” she cried, pettishly. “I’m tired of hearing about it! I suppose I could be mistaken as to where the step was. That I heard a step I am positive. Therefore it must have been in the room and not in the hall. Surely that is plain!”

“Very plain,” agreed Stone. “Now, Mr. Bingham stood in the lounge doorway. Could it have been his step?”

“No—that is—I suppose it could have been.”

“You’re romancing, Miss Moore. Stick to the truth. Was it like Mr. Bingham’s step?”

Marita’s thoughts could be read in her face. About to say No, she suddenly thought better of it, and exclaimed, “Yes, of course it could have been. That’s just who it was!”

“Then your hearing is far from acute. You could be mistaken in thinking you heard a step, or its direction. But one with acute hearing would not mistake one well-known step for another or one direction for one nearly opposite. Your self-avowed super-normal hearing would preclude that.”

“Nonsense! How could I tell what or where the sounds were. I was all upset.”

“Why were you upset? The tragedy hadn’t occurred at that time, or if it had, you didn’t know of it.”

“It’s none of your business why I was upset. Talk to somebody else.”

“I will,” and Stone turned unperturbed to Ted Bingham.

“These scenes are unpleasant,” he remarked, “but they have to be gone through with. Now, Mr. Bingham, you were in a somewhat precarious position standing in the doorway of the room where the crime occurred. You saw nothing, I assume, during the dark time?”

“Nothing at all, Mr. Stone. Accustomed to its occurrence every evening, I merely stood there, waiting for the return of the lights.”

“And did you hear nothing?”

“That is a question I have asked of myself since. That night I said and believed I heard nothing, but a sort of subconscious memory makes me think I did hear some faint sounds.”

“Such as what?”

“A sort of deep, fluttering sigh, which I now think was the death gurgle of my friend. Also the ticking of the clock and the squawk of the parrot, that Miss Moore has already mentioned. Now, I’m quite willing to admit that maybe I didn’t hear these things, but they are suggestions from hearing of them.”

“You heard no footsteps?”

“No footstep of any sort. The murderer must have stepped softly, also the rug is soft and thick. Besides, there was more or less chatter and laughter in the lounge. The dark time is provocative of squeals and giggles always, and I heard the girls laughing in there. That might have dulled the sound of a footstep.”

“Then the first sound you heard after the lights came on was—what?”

“Miss Moore’s scream and her fall to the floor.”

“You picked her up?”

“Yes.”

“Did she seem frightened, as of somebody else, or, more as if aghast at her own deed? Answer carefully, please.”

For a time it seemed as if Ted didn’t intend to answer at all. Then, with an effort, and slowly, he said, “She seemed to me as if aghast or stunned.”

“That isn’t a full answer. Aghast as at her own deed?”

“I can’t tell that. I thought nothing of such fine shades of meaning. I saw her fallen to the floor, and I had no impulse but to raise her to her feet. I didn’t know then what had happened to Gaylord, and I thought only of Marita.”

“At that moment, what was Miss Kittredge doing?”

“I don’t know. I was concerned only with Miss Moore. I thought she was going to faint.”

“And did she?”

“No, I placed her in a chair, and then I turned to see about Homer.”

“Now, listen carefully, Mr. Bingham. The lights came up, you heard Miss Moore scream, you heard or saw her fall, you sprang to her assistance, and all this time you did not know anything had happened to Mr. Homer?”

“You have stated it truly.”

“Then, how did Miss Moore know something had happened to him?”

Ted stared as the intent of this question was forced upon him.

True enough, if Ted knew nothing of Homer’s death, how did Marita know? Even sooner, even as the lights came on, she knew. She screamed and fell to the floor, before Ted, only three or four feet distant, had any idea of the tragedy.

“Answer for yourself, Miss Moore,” Stone’s inexorable voice rang out. “How did you know so instantly that Mr. Homer was dead or dying?”

“Because I heard that footstep, and I knew that someone in that room, someone near me, had stabbed him with that terrible dagger.”

“You heard his death sigh?”

“Of course.”

“You knew it for what it was?”

“There is no mistaking a sound of that nature.”

“That is all for the present; thank you, Miss Moore.”

Chapter 10

Abbie Perkins Helps Along

THE funeral services for Gaylord Homer were to take place on Monday afternoon at three.

Fleming Stone remained in his room most of the morning, but came down and went for a walk before luncheon.

“Not a very sociable chap,” commented Moffatt, as he and Marita watched the detective walk swingingly down the path.

Moffatt had become friendly with the girl. He felt sorry for her, he told himself, but aside from that, he was under the spell of her subtle lure.

Never one to seek the society of women, his manner was a little shy, his speech a little uncertain. This piqued Marita’s interest, for her men friends were usually of the most sophisticated. She played him at once, as the experienced angler plays the simple-minded trout.

“No,” she returned. “He’s rather stunning looking, but he’s one of those know-it-all chaps. Me, I prefer the strong, silent men, like you.”

Now, Moffatt was often silent for the simple reason that he could think of nothing to say. But he was not strong, that is, not with the strength usually attributed to the strong, silent class. He was of average strength, physically; of average strength mentally, but his character was too vacillating and changeable to be called strong. He was kindly by nature, gentle in his ways, and pathetically grateful if anybody seemed to like him.

Marita, clever little devil, read him like a book, and decided to add him to her train.

He made no reply to the somewhat barefaced compliment, because he could think of no effective bit of speech, but he gave the girl a look of such sincere gratitude that she began to think she really liked him.

“He thinks I killed Gaylord,” she went on, an angry flame of resentment coming into her eyes. “You don’t think so, do you, Mr. Moffatt?”

If he had been positively convinced of her guilt, he could not have said so, with those limpid dark eyes looking into his.

“No,” he replied, “of course I don’t. I don’t think any woman did it. It was the work of a man, I’m sure.”

“Then it must have been Ted. But why are you so sure?” She looked at him with a wheedling smile.

“Only that it seems to me impossible that a woman could have struck that blow. It was a vicious stroke, a blow of real force.”

“Diana is strong,” Marita suggested.

“Yes, she is athletic, muscular, I know. But she is of high, noble character. A queenly nature. No, she couldn’t have done that thing!”

“Then was it Ted Bingham?” Marita’s red lips parted in a horrified wonder. “I can’t believe Ted would kill his friend—his chum, like that!”

“He had motive and opportunity,” Moffatt said, slowly. “That’s what the detectives look for, you know.”

“Are you of a detective—what do they call it—instinct?”

Moffatt smiled a little.

“Hardly that, but I’d like to look into this case a bit. I’m going to ask Stone to let me work with him. I’m sure I could be of use, and I’m quite willing to be under orders.”

“I wish you’d be under my orders,” the siren voice grew lower and lower until it trailed off to silence.

“Oh, Miss Moore—Marita——”

“Now, now, who said you might call me that?” But the accompanying smile belied the words, and Moffatt’s heart leaped with joy.

“Let me be under your orders, do, Marita—do!”

For once he seemed to forget his shyness, and he took a step nearer and laid his hand on the rosy fingers that curled themselves over the window sill.

“Why, why, you bad, strong, silent man! Don’t you dare flirt with me! Don’t you know that I’ve more suitors now than I know what to do with?”

“No, that won’t do. You said you wished I’d be under your orders—and I will. Give me some now.”

“Oh, I only just said that because—because——”

“But let me help you, I wanted to and I’m sure I can.”

“You just said you meant to help Mr. Stone, and he is—against me.”

“Then I’m against him! I’m for you, and you only. Tell me how I can help. I’ll do anything—anything at all.”

“Then,” and Marita looked serious, “then keep to your first idea of helping Mr. Stone, but also give him to understand I didn’t kill Gaylord. Can you do that?”

“I can do my part of it. Why shouldn’t I? I don’t think for a minute you killed Gaylord. I’m glad to say that to anybody. But the thing is to find out who did do it. That’s the only thing that will relieve you and Miss Kittredge both of suspicion. Now, who did?”

“Well,” the girl hesitated, “you see, I don’t think, as you do, that it had to be a man. I don’t see why Diana couldn’t have done it. She is very strong, not only physically, but she is a strong character, with an inflexible will. She knows anatomy. And circumstances aided her. I mean she was standing; a step would take her to the table where the dagger was, and a few seconds would see the matter through. Then, too, she has collapsed since. The deed and the aftermath proved too much for her.”

“But the motive? She had no real reason to kill Gay.”

“The money. She knew Gaylord had made a will in her favor. She didn’t know it was not among his regular papers. She is poor and proud. Her father is old and ill, and Ted Bingham has no money.”

Marita stopped suddenly, alarmed at the horror stamped plainly on Moffatt’s face. She realized he was shocked at her attitude, at her speech, and she hastened to repair the damage.

“Oh I don’t want to think she did it, don’t misjudge me! But what other explanation is possible? Ted Bingham simply couldn’t get by me and across the room to reach the dagger. He couldn’t have stabbed Gay and then have got back to his place in the doorway in the time he had.”

“They say it was more than two minutes.”

“Yes, but Ted wouldn’t do it, anyway. He loved Gaylord, and even though he is mad about Diana, he wouldn’t commit murder for her sake.”

“No, I don’t think he would. But, there must be somebody else—some other suspect.”

The luncheon gong sounded, and Marita slipped her arm through Moffatt’s as they went toward the dining-room.

Fleming Stone materialized with surprising quickness, and most of the others appeared at once.

The party was a silent one, for all realized that the last rites for Gaylord Homer had to be solemnized without their having discovered the identity of his murderer. Even the servants went round like shadows and Wood positively seemed on the verge of collapse.

Stone helped a little, by his calm composure, and his flow of pleasant small talk on light and interesting subjects.

But when they all began to take the places in the motor cars that awaited them, Stone drew Wood aside, and whispered that he should not attend the funeral but would remain at the house.

Wood nodded, understandingly, and then after the rest were all looked after, the butler himself got into the last car.

Fleming Stone, left alone in the big house, set at once to work.

Miss Kittredge, whom he had not yet seen, for she didn't appear at lunch, had gone to the church with the rest, and Stone went to her room first.

His suspicions centered on this girl rather than on the emotional Marita, but he had, as yet, no bit of evidence against her.

He, therefore, went at once to her room, knowing which one it was.

Softly turning the knob, he went in, and received a decided surprise.

In a low chair in the middle of the room, sat Abbie Perkins, complacently nodding her head at him.

"I thought you'd come here first," she said, calmly. "So I sat and waited for you."

"Why aren't you at the funeral?"

"My duty is here," she said, solemnly. "You're here to find out the wicked murderer and I'm here to help you."

"But I don't want any help."

"You want mine, or leastwise, you'll take it whether you want it or not. I propose to go over the house with you, for I know that's what you're out for to do."

"Well, yes, I am. But I prefer to work alone."

"And I prefer to work with you. Now, come along and get about your snoopin'."

"Do you object to my investigation?"

"Not a bit, but it is snoopin', ain't it? See, I've been through the burey draws myself. Nothin' in 'em but Miss Di's innercent belongin's for the most part. But under a pile of linjerry was this note. You'd better read it."

Fleming Stone was baffled. He wished he could pitch Abbie Perkins out of a window, but he couldn't feel he had a right to resort to such drastic methods.

And she was so smiling and commonplace. With such an air of making herself at home, and expecting him to accept the situation.

To gain a moment to think, he read the note she held out to him.

It ran:

Di Darling:

Tonight must settle it. In the Tapestry room, after dinner you will say yes, won't you? But you said you would—you promised—my beauty, my queen! For a few hours more, then,
Your waiting lover.

So interested was Fleming Stone, that he forgot Abbie was an intruder on his work and his time, and tacitly accepted her as part of the game.

"This is Gaylord's writing," he said, nodding his head at the clear, characteristic script.

"Yes, sir, I'd always know his writing."

"But after all, it's only a reminder that she said she'd give him his answer that night after dinner."

"Yes," Abbie said, slowly, "and she give him his answer—didn't she?"

"Don't jump at conclusions. This note is no proof."

"It is to me."

"What, of Miss Kittredge's guilt?"

Abbie nodded like a mandarin.

"But, look here, Abbie, you told me yesterday you were sure Miss Moore did the deed."

"I know I did, and I've changed my mind. You see, I'm a-hunting clueses, and so, havin' found that there note, I hold it's a clue and it means Miss Di is the murderess after all."

"You talk like a crazy woman. Now, I don't want to hear any more of your ideas or opinions. If you want to go round with me to show me the rooms, come along, but don't chatter all the time."

And then Stone made his own investigation of Diana Kittredge's room, but it wasn't a matter of searching bureau drawers. He looked at the photographs and trinkets scattered about, he stepped into the bathroom, and looked at the bottles on the shelf there, noting those that contained medical prescriptions. He asked Abbie to find the shoes Miss Kittredge had worn on the fatal night, and when the silver slippers were produced, he looked long and intently at their soles.

"She didn't step in no blood spots," Abbie said, sapiently. "There wasn't no blood came from that wound, to speak of."

"Then don't speak of it!" snapped Stone, and Abbie, leaving her mouth open, stared at him.

He gave her back the shoes, looked around a bit more, then left the room.

Abbie trotted after and Stone said, curtly, "Miss Moore's room next."

"Golly! won't she be mad!" murmured his guide. "Come on, here, then."

Marita's room was in a turmoil. It was evident she had dressed in a hurry, and also, had tried on different gowns before making a choice. A hat or two had been thrown on the chaise longue and some scarfs lay on the dresser.

Abbie made a dash for the dresser-drawers and Stone let her alone. He turned to the desk and then to the books and letters on a night table, and even opened a portfolio that lay in the window seat.

Half a dozen books were there, too, and the detective glanced at their titles. All were recent novels of the lightest type.

"Her own books or Mr. Homer's?" he inquired.

"Mr. Homer's," Abbie said, after a quick glance. "He always leaves those paper covers on his books till they fair drops off in tatters. Me, I jerk off that cover soon's I get a book."

This was Stone's habit, too, but when he noticed the fruit stains and cigarette burns on the books in question, he understood why the protecting covers stayed on.

The portfolio yielded two or three passionate love notes from Cale Harrison, notes so ardent that Stone marvelled at their being the work of that apparently timid and diffident man.

"Two soul-sides," he murmured and went on with his distasteful task.

The other rooms were done up in short order. Bobbie Abbott's desk showed a few short notes from Dare, left out in full view, and not of great interest. Also some long letters from her husband, which Stone forebore to read.

He lingered longer in the rooms of Rollin Dare and Ted Bingham. But he found nothing that made for evidence and nothing that could be called a clue.

Both men had hidden away trifling souvenirs, a faded flower or a tiny handkerchief, but Stone thought only, "How young they are!"

Albert Moffatt's room was also bare of interesting items. Stone noticed neatness and the tidy way the letters and papers were placed in the desk.

He hastily ran over the letters and found them merely business matters, evidently brought up from his New York office.

In every room Stone looked carefully at the shoes available, but in no case did he find any that claimed more than a passing notice.

"All over, Abbie," he said at last. "I didn't learn much, it's true, but I feel a little better acquainted with these people. Now, for the Tapestry Room."

"Mr. Cram keeps that locked up, sir."

"I know it, but I have the key."

"May I go in with you, Mr. Stone?" Abbie inquired, duly humble after Stone's small snubs.

“Yes, if you’ll not chatter. Come along.”

For the first time, Fleming Stone went into the room where the tragedy had occurred. The room from which he hoped to gain some information, some idea of which way to look for the criminal. He had been there before, but he stood still, as he entered, impressed anew by the beauty of the place.

They had entered by the door from the lounge, so that he paused in the very doorway where Ted Bingham had stood.

The door itself was an ordinary one, but it opened into the deep arch that formed that side of the room.

Both sides of the door held bookshelves, built in to the height of six or seven feet. Above were pictures, and higher, in the arch itself, a lunette painting of great beauty and worth.

Opposite him was the fireplace, that filled the arch on that side. Either side of the fireplace hung the rare and celebrated tapestries. They hung flat and straight, a few inches from the wall, and on a table near by, were various magnifying glasses through which visitors studied the exquisite handiwork.

To Stone’s right was the arch over the window, and to his left the arch over the hall door. Both these arches were flanked by bookcases, and all the bookshelves were full.

As is so often the case in a small library, the overflow of books were laid flat on top of the standing books, giving an effect of untidiness, but also one of homeliness and comfort.

There were several tables, laden with curios and rare volumes, several chairs and the small sofa or love-seat, on which Homer had met his death.

Everything, Stone had been assured, was just as it had been left the night of the tragedy.

He stepped around softly, his eyes roving swiftly over every detail of the place.

“Hope I’m not intruding,” said a quiet voice, and looking round, Stone saw Albert Moffatt standing in the doorway to the lounge.

“Not at all, come on in,” said Stone, cordially, rather glad of someone to speak to beside the unsatisfactory Abbie. “Is the funeral over?”

“Yes, but most of them stayed to talk with friends or neighbors. I didn’t know the friends and neighbors so I came along home here. Snug little room, eh?”

“Yes, a beautiful room, and comfortable too. Gaylord used it a lot.”

“Oh yes, he loved it. Whenever I’ve visited here, we always sat here after dinner every night.”

“And he told you all about the treasures, I suppose.”

“He tried to,” Moffatt smiled a little. “But I wasn’t terribly interested in the history of the tapestries or the old books. I suppose I’m a Philistine, but the love of those things was somehow left out of my composition. See here, Mr. Stone, are you going to catch the one that killed Gaylord?”

“I hope so, Mr. Moffatt. Can you give me any hint or advice?”

“Why, I don’t see that I can. But I do want to ask you to look in any other possible direction before you accuse either one of those girls. It’s too preposterous to think they could do it!”

“It seems so to me, too.”

“Why, I’d like to know!” exclaimed Abbie, who had lingered after Moffatt’s arrival. “A woman has as much hate and venom in her nature as a man has. A woman has as much greed and money-lust as a man has. Any woman is quite as capable of murder as any man!”

Abbie’s long, gaunt figure fairly quivered with wrath as she pronounced her decree. Her bony hands knitted themselves together and her foot tapped nervously on the soft, deep rug.

“Leave us now, Abbie,” Stone said, not at all unkindly. “Mr. Moffatt and I want a little talk by ourselves.”

None too willingly, Abbie stalked out of the room, and Stone turned to Moffatt. “I think that you may as well make up your mind that you are your cousin’s heir,” he said. “I can’t think any will will be found, and in fact I can’t feel sure Gaylord made that will.”

“I only know, Mr. Stone, that he told me he intended to make it, and intended to leave most of his wealth to Miss Kittredge. Before I should consent to inherit we must use every effort to locate that will. You see my position, of course?”

“Oh, yes, certainly. Every effort must and will be made. But, I’m only saying I doubt the existence of that will.”

“That’s for the police and the detectives to find out. Tell me, have you any hopes of finding the murderer? That’s more the burden of my desire.”

“I always have hope, Mr. Moffatt. But aside from hope, I confess that so far I’ve found little to work on. Hark, is that the people coming home from the church?”

“Yes, it is. I hear Bingham’s voice and Dare’s.”

“And the ladies?”

“Yes, some of them. Here they are.”

Several came to the open door of the lounge and looked in at the two men in the Tapestry Room.

“May we come in?” asked Polly Opdyke, who had come along with the others.

“No,” Stone said, smiling down at her. “Not today, Polly dear. Tomorrow, if you wish. Tell me, are Miss Kittredge and Miss Moore there? And Mr. Bingham?”

“Yes,” Polly said; “want ’em?”

“I do. Ask them to come here, will you? That’s a good girl.”

Polly did the errand and reluctantly went off home.

The ones Stone had asked for came wonderingly to the doorway.

"Come in," the detective said, in his pleasant voice. "Moffatt, present me to Miss Kittredge, will you?"

And then Fleming Stone looked for the first time on the face of Sky-eyes, the beautiful one.

He often said, afterward, that he was completely bowled over. He had never imagined such perfect beauty as that, and the sudden thought of suspecting that goddess of crime seemed to him too absurd to dream of.

But, accustomed to hiding his feelings, Stone merely bowed his acknowledgment of the introduction, and said, in a tone of real solicitude: "I'm afraid you are weary, Miss Kittredge, after the services."

"Not at all," Diana said, in a strong, tense voice that made Stone look at her quickly. "I am quite well," she went on. "Do you want to question me?"

"No, not now, Miss Kittredge. But I want something else of you, that may be a bit of an ordeal. I want you to do your part in the reconstruction of the scene of the tragedy of Friday night."

Diana paled and her air of bravado seemed to leave her.

"Come on, Di," Marita said, with a touch of haughtiness in her tone. "We've got to do it, if Mr. Stone asks us, and we may as well do it now as to put it off. Come on, I'm ready."

"Thank you, Miss Moore," Stone said. "Believe me, I would not ask it save that I think it necessary. Mr. Bingham, will you assist us?"

"I suppose I'll have to," growled Bingham, not at all pleased at the idea.

"I say," Moffatt interrupted, "is it necessary, Stone? It'll be a hard strain on nerves pretty much frazzled already." He looked at Diana.

"It is necessary," Stone said, coldly.

Chapter 11

The Reconstruction

"I'M SORRY," Stone said, in a really regretful tone, "but since I am investigating this case, I feel I must do it in my own way. And while this reconstruction is, I know, a painful ordeal for all concerned, yet we all want to get at the truth, and so I am counting on your cooperation."

"Count on mine, Mr. Stone," Moffatt said; "if you think this thing must be done, I'm sure it must be. I think we all have only the wish you mention, that of getting at the truth, and this may be the means of discovering the real criminal."

"Then will you two ladies please stand by this couch—no, better yet, go to the dining-room and walk in here. Who will act Gaylord's part?"

Fleming Stone spoke in no light tone, he gave the affair no effect of stage-play, but neither was he lugubrious about it. He was business-like and cool, and he looked from one to another of the three men before him, for Dare and Bobbie Abbott had come into the room.

"Count me out on that!" Dare said, emphatically.

“And Bingham has his own part to play,” Moffatt said, “so it devolves on me.

“Yes, please,” Stone returned. “Will you, then, go into the dining-room with the two ladies and come back here, just as it was done Friday evening?”

“Of course, and the ladies will give me instructions.”

Diana’s blue eyes filled with horror, but she walked steadily to the hall and on to the dining-room.

Marita grasped Moffatt’s arm and drew him with her, in Diana’s wake.

“Take your place in the doorway, please, Mr. Bingham,” Stone directed. “Mr. Dare and Mrs. Abbott, please step into the window alcove, and do not speak.”

It began to seem eerie, but Stone’s matter-of-fact manner was cool and determined.

A little frightened, Rollin Dare and Bobbie withdrew into the deep window embrasure, and much to his distaste, Bingham stood in the doorway to the lounge.

“Now come in,” Stone said clearly to the waiting trio. “Enter just as you did Friday night.”

In a deathly stillness, Moffatt came through the hall, with one hand clasping that of Diana, as she walked by his side, and on his other arm, Marita clung with both hands.

They came into the room, watched by Stone and Bingham, as well as the pair in the window.

Then, Marita, who was too much of an actress not to enter into the spirit of the thing, drew Moffatt down on the love-seat, and perched herself on the arm of it, at his left side.

Diana paused before reaching the couch and stood, a few feet in front and to the right of Moffatt.

Bingham stared from the doorway, his face white and his lips in a tense line.

“Now,” and this time Stone’s voice had a bit of hollow ring in it, “all close your eyes and pretend it is the dark time. Keep them closed until I tell you to open them.”

None dared disobey, and as if hypnotized, they closed their eyes, all but Fleming Stone himself.

Standing in front of the group, he watched them all.

And then Marita, carried away by the dramatic situation, gave a sudden start, screamed and fell to the floor.

Without volition of his senses, Bingham started toward her, to raise her, but Moffatt was ahead of him and had picked up the slight figure, and placed her in an easy chair.

“I don’t want to criticize your method, Mr. Stone,” he cried, “but I do think this is all a bit of unnecessary cruelty.”

“I doubt if it has seriously harmed Miss Moore,” Stone said, coolly. “She seems all right now.”

And sure enough, Marita was quite herself and almost seemed to be enjoying her little scene.

Diana had accepted the chair Stone pushed toward her, and Ted came and stood behind her.

“It was necessary,” Stone went on, “for I needed to know just the situation. Remember, we have no eye-witness save the two ladies, and they can scarcely be called such in the dark. Now, if you please, a few questions.”

“May I come in?” and Harrison’s apologetic voice sounded in the hall doorway.

“Yes,” Stone said, curtly, “but sit down and be quiet. Miss Moore, what made you scream and fall?”

“I don’t know,” she replied, and her face was colorless. “I think because it brought back the scene so sharply. And I kept listening for the sounds I heard that night, but I heard none of them, except——”

She paused, and her face grew horrified as she saw, for the first time that Harrison had entered.

“Go on,” Stone said, quickly, “except what?”

“I heard none of them,” she declared. “None at all.”

“Except the step in the hall,” prompted Stone.

“Yes,” she said, obediently, “except the step in the hall.”

“Mr. Harrison’s step,” Stone supplied, and she nodded her head.

“You didn’t hear the parrot call?”

“No.”

“Nor the gasp of—of Mr. Homer?”

“No—no!” she shuddered.

“Nor the laughter and talk from those in the lounge?”

“No.”

“Nor the clock ticking?”

“No.”

“It is not strange,” Stone said, musingly, “for now your nerves are taut and your mind is in a whirl. Friday night you were calm and collected, with senses calm and receptive.”

“Yes,” and Marita nodded comprehendingly.

“You are sure you heard the clock ticking Friday night?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Ticking loudly?”

“Not very loudly, but clearly and unmistakably.”

“Miss Moore,” Stone looked at her, and then looked quickly round the room, “there is no clock here.”

Marita looked round, wonderingly, curiously.

“Then it’s been carried away,” she said, positively. “I know I heard it.”

“Maybe it was your wrist watch,” Stone said, looking at the diamond and platinum bracelet watch she wore.

“No,” Marita looked perplexed, “this watch of mine has the faintest tick—listen,” she held up her arm, and the sound was barely audible, “and any way, I wouldn’t think my own watch, that I’m accustomed to, was a clock! No, there was a clock in here, I’m sure of it!”

“We’ll look up the matter,” and Stone spoke soothingly. “Did you hear a clock tick, Friday night, Miss Kittredge?”

“No I did not.”

“You heard nothing, I believe?”

“Nothing at all, Mr. Stone.”

There was a silence, and then Marita exclaimed:

“Why, there it is! Hear it!”

And a soft ticking sound was faintly but clearly audible in the room.

“That’s a watch,” said Moffatt, listening.

Involuntarily, every one in the room glanced at his or her own hand.

Diana, Stone, Bingham, and Moffatt wore no wrist watch. Bobbie and Dare both had them on, but theirs were as faint of sound as Marita’s own.

But Cale Harrison’s wrist watch, neither a beautiful nor valuable one, ticked quite as loudly as a small clock might do.

Harrison stared at it, with a slightly embarrassed air.

“Guess it’s my watch you hear, Marita,” he said. “It isn’t one of those expensive ones, it’s a good timekeeper, but it has a loud tick, hasn’t it?”

“Sounds just like the ticking I heard Friday night,” Marita said, her whole attention on Cale’s wrist.

“Then, Miss Moore,” Stone went on, smoothly, “if you heard Mr. Harrison’s step in the hall and Mr. Harrison’s watch ticking, during the dark time, won’t we have to assume that Mr. Harrison came downstairs a bit sooner than he thought he did?”

The secretary half rose from his chair, an angry light in his eye.

“Is this an accusation, Mr. Stone?” he cried.

“By no means, Mr. Harrison. It is a well known fact that when a sudden shock occurs to one, the memory is often apt to become a blank for a few moments. It is far from improbable that you are quite unable to remember the exact moment that you came downstairs on Friday night. Nor is it likely that it makes any difference to our inquiry. But we want the facts as far as we can get them, that’s all.”

“Yes, of course,” Harrison said, but his eyes were frowning.

“Send me Rhoda,” Stone said, carelessly, to someone in the hall, and Wood did his bidding.

The maid appeared, looking a little sullen.

“Rhoda,” Stone said, looking directly at her, “think carefully now, when you came downstairs, Friday night, after hearing somebody scream, who was left upstairs?”

“Nobody sir,” the girl said, fingering her apron.

“Nobody except Mr. Harrison, you mean?”

“Not Mr. Harrison, sir. He had gone down already.”

“And when did he go down?”

A sudden look passed between Harrison and the girl. It was all too easily read. It was a warning, a menacing look, and Rhoda caught its intent.

With an easy grace, she shifted her attitude and, looking thoughtful, said:

“No, I’m wrong about that—let me see—Mr. Harrison came out of the study, just after I ran downstairs.”

“You’re sure of that, Rhoda?”

“Oh, yes, sir.”

“You may go.” Then, turning to the others, he said. “That lets Mr. Harrison out—if Rhoda is telling the truth.”

“She isn’t,” came from Marita, in a spiteful tone. “Abbie Perkins says Rhoda is an awful liar, and never tells the truth.”

“Why, Marita!” exclaimed Harrison, in such a hurt wail, that Bobbie broke into nervous laughter.

“Now, I think,” Stone said, gently, “you have all been most kind in your efforts to help me. And I think you’d all be better for a good rest or bit of recreation. Run away, please, all but one of you. I have a little more to do in this room, and I want the help of one. I don’t care which one.”

“Not me,” Cale said, sharply. “I’ve had enough reconstruction!” and he left the room swiftly and suddenly.

“Hateful thing!” Marita exclaimed. “Then I did hear him, and it was his watch I thought was a clock! But——” her eyes grew big with fright, “he didn’t kill Gaylord, did he?”

“Don’t try to deduce without all the facts, Miss Moore,” Stone spoke gravely. “Better run away for a little time, and get some exercise.”

“Well, I will. Come along, Mr. Moffatt.”

“I was about to offer my services to Mr. Stone,” was the hesitating reply.

“Oh well, then don’t come!” and Marita flung herself angrily out of the room.

“But perhaps you don’t want me,” Moffatt turned to the detective.

“I’d like either you or Mr. Bingham.”

“Oh, please—any other time,” Ted said, for he was longing to get off for a little talk with Diana.

“Then, it looks like you, Mr. Moffatt,” and Stone smiled at him. “Sorry to impose on your good nature, but—well, I’ll tell you.”

Meantime, while talking, he had dismissed the people all except Moffatt, and had closed the doors of the Tapestry Room.

“You see, I think it imperative that the will, if any, be found. I think we can’t go ahead intelligently until we settle that matter. For, no matter what your cousin told you, is it not possible that he changed his mind before he made the will?”

“It is quite possible, Mr. Stone. Gaylord was not at all of set purpose. He was often vacillating. But I, too, want the will found, whatever its contents. You see,” he smiled a little, “if he did change his mind and left me the bulk of his estate, how much more comforting for me to know that, than to take it by default as it were. And if he left it to Miss Kittredge, I shall indeed be glad to know I am not getting it under false pretensions.”

“I see. Well, then, Mr. Moffatt, I want to search this room for that will, and while the room is not large, it’s a goodish job. If you’ll help, it will cut the work in two.”

“Indeed, yes. Any plan of approach?”

“Well, what do you think? Suppose we each take half the room, and then take over one another’s half. Thus we can check up on each other, and make the thing thorough.”

“Fine. Let’s go. Which side do you want to begin on?”

"I don't care. I'll start here, at the hall door and go back toward the fireplace, and you start at the hall door and go the other way. When we meet we'll change places."

"Righto. Now, do we open every book?"

"Oh, no, we'd never get done, that way. How big was the book?"

"About like this." Moffatt took from the shelf the play of *The Bluebird*, and held it up.

"I see. Then, let's skip over all big folios and quartos and also all duodecimos and just take down books of this size. And we'll just take the ones of which we're uncertain. I mean, where there's a whole shelf of plays or novels or poems, and we can read their labels clearly, there's no sense in pulling them down. But we must look behind the books. In a word, satisfy ourselves that the book in question is not here. We've a good two hours before dinner. That ought to do it. Are you game?"

"Game it is," and already Moffatt had three or four books in his hand which he quickly ran over, and replaced.

Both men were alert at this sort of work, both were efficient and of quick motion, and they worked away in silence for a time.

"Fine set of Conrad here," said Moffatt; "fond of him, Mr. Stone?"

"I've only read half a dozen or so. I'm sorry to say, I get scant time for reading. I care a lot for bindings, though. Old or rare bindings are a treat to me, just to look at."

"Then you must look in this case. It's full of that sort of stuff. Probably you don't care much for light reading, then. I mean, novels and poems, and brief essays."

"I almost never read novels and poems. Essays, sometimes. What an incongruous lot there is here."

"All sorts, yes. I wonder why so good a mind as Gaylord had would waste itself on trash. Here's a whole case full of the silliest truck: love stories, adventure, detective stories—you ought to like those, Mr. Stone."

"No, I don't. I have enough in real life not to read about sleuthing."

"And plays. Gaylord seems to have run to plays. Many of them worn out, too, at least, their paper jackets are worn out. Well, we're getting nearly together. No sign of the will book yet."

They met, and confessed mutual failure. Then, in accordance with Stone's rather elaborate plan, they started round the other way, each one going over the other's territory.

It wanted but a quarter of an hour to dinner time when they called the work finished and prepared to leave the room.

"Beautiful place," Stone said, looking about him. "Are there more books anywhere?"

"Oh, yes, two or three big bookcases up in the study. These are the choice volumes, though. Though, of course, he might have taken the will book up there."

“Why call this the Tapestry Room? Why not the library?”

Moffatt shrugged his shoulders. “One of Gay’s fads. He said library was a pretentious word, unless a chap had stacks and stacks of books. He liked bookroom better, but when he got these tapestries, he said they were worthy of a named room. So he called it the Tapestry Room. They’re grand, I know, but I’m no judge of such things.”

“Anything behind them?” Stone asked, as he gazed at the work through a lens, and admired the marvelous coloring.

“One hides a small wall safe, the other nothing. They do fit in, don’t they?”

“They do so,” agreed Stone. “Come on, we’ll miss the cocktails.”

They went to the lounge, for it had been agreed not to dress for dinner that night.

The rest, or most of them, were there, and Stone was surprised to find both Diana and Marita most kindly disposed toward him. He had expected dark looks and cold shoulders, but both girls seemed more friendly than before the scene of the afternoon.

Pleased at this, he, too, made himself agreeable, and when Fleming Stone set out to do that, he did it very well indeed.

Dinner was far less gloomy than anyone had anticipated, and if a dark shadow hung over the group at the table, it was not referred to or noticed by any of them.

The only one who seemed out of sorts was Harrison. Though he had not changed for dinner, he had removed his wrist watch.

Stone thought this a decided improvement, but he made a note of the fact.

Indeed, that astute gentleman was making note of many facts, and his bland and suave demeanor was merely a cover for a riot of facts and theories that were gyrating in his head.

He was not a notebook detective. All he saw, all he deduced, all he imagined he had trained his memory to store up against the time when he could sit down to sort and classify them.

Diana had recovered her poise, and, looking very beautiful, she chose to smile upon him a little.

With Marita on his other side, and far from being a parlor knight, Fleming Stone felt a little embarrassed.

Nor is that entirely surprising. To sit at dinner between two beautiful girls, both under suspicion of murder, is enough to disturb the equanimity of the bravest.

And add to that, the fact that both girls were apparently at their ease, apparently carefree, it is small wonder a mere man was a little unnerved.

But, watching them closely, Stone could see that their pleasant glances for him, did not extend to each other. He sensed an undercurrent of enmity, and read it to his own satisfaction.

He decided that whichever one of them was guilty, they were both smart enough to put on a bold front, thus each wearing the air of innocence.

He was more than ever sure of this when each in turn, tried to talk to him in a low tone, a veritable tête-à-tête.

Diana, first, getting his undivided attention, cautiously inquired if the reconstruction, as she straightforwardly called it, didn't incriminate Marita.

"Why?" fenced Stone.

"Why, because she's so temperamental, you know, and that scene brought it all back to her, and made her scream and fall on the floor, as she remembered the scene of Friday night."

"You're not quite clear, Miss Kittredge," Stone said, smiling into her eyes in a disarming way. "I understand Miss Moore's temperament, but why is it incriminating?"

Diana looked disappointed.

"I only mean," she said, slowly, "that because of that exhibition of temperament, which you may not have before realized, you might agree that Marita was capable of a terrible deed, that a more normal mind could never compass."

"It has been said by a great writer that we are all capable of crime."

"No, Mr. Stone, that isn't so. I don't care who said it, it isn't true."

"Maybe not, Miss Kittredge. I don't vouch for its truth, I merely quote it. But we have to admit that somebody did it."

"That's just what I say! And who so likely as one with a temperament of that sort?"

"Mr. Stone," and Marita's soft voice chimed in at his other side, "you must talk to me a little, you know. You can't let Sky-eyes monopolize you entirely."

"That's true," and Stone turned gracefully enough to Marita. "But mayn't we three talk together?"

"No," said Diana, in her iciest voice, and turned away from them to Bingham, who welcomed her gladly.

"Now, Fleming Stone," said Marita, saucily, "after that exhibition of rudeness, can you doubt which of us girls is the criminal?"

Stone stared at her. Surely, he had never met such an outspoken minx.

"I suppose, Miss Moore, your inappropriate levity is the result of shattered nerves."

"My heavens and earth, what a stilted speech! Do you never unbend? Never act human at all?"

"My vocation leads me among inhuman acts and natures," he said, speaking very seriously.

"Applesauce!" remarked Marita rudely, and turned her back upon him.

Chapter 12

The Mysterious Ticking

THAT evening Lawyer Crawford came over to confer with Stone and as Sergeant Cram arrived about the same time they all discussed matters. They sat in the Tapestry Room, as being a place where they might be alone.

Crawford asked the detective if he felt ready to make a report.

“Not a formal report, no,” said Stone. “But I’m ready to talk things over. I don’t mind saying it is one of the most peculiar cases I ever came across. It seems to me we have no real evidence of any sort. Pointing, I mean, to any individual.”

He told them of the reconstruction he had carried out in the afternoon but declared that it gave no further light on the subject than they already had.

“You must admit, sir,” Cram put in, “that we can ascribe motive and opportunity, exclusive opportunity, to those two girls.”

“I think the motives are flimsy,” Stone said, seriously, “and the opportunity not exclusive.”

“You’re considering a third party?”

“It is a possibility,” Stone answered. “You know those Bridge problems they publish in the magazines. Or, maybe you don’t. Well, anyway, the problem is given and it must be solved against any possible defense.”

“But why do you think of a third party?” asked Moffatt. “And how do you theorize such a thing?”

“It isn’t exactly theory,” Stone replied, “it’s logic. I haven’t been able to choose between those two girls as a likely culprit, but that doesn’t mean their innocence. I’ve tried to get hints from what they say about each other and about other people, but they say very little. As a matter of fact, they are too casual, too light-hearted.”

“I’m afraid, Mr. Stone,” Crawford smiled at him, “your experiences have been with older or more hardened criminals. I admit it is most unusual to suspect a young girl of murder, but with this case before us, I can see no other way to look. One of those girls must be the guilty party.”

“Then we must determine which one,” Stone said. “But Miss Moore has several times referred to a step in the hall at the time of the murder. She says it may have been in the room, says it must have been Miss Kittredge going about her dreadful business. In fact, her remarks about that step she heard are both vague and contradictory. But her vagueness and contradictoriness arise from her changing affections or whims. The point that she did hear a step remains in my mind and it must be investigated.”

“She said it was Harrison crossing the hall,” began Cram.

“Crossing the hall when? From where to where? Harrison didn’t cross the hall, and why should he? He came downstairs, either before or after Miss Moore screamed. I asked the maid, Rhoda, about it. She had said Harrison went downstairs before she did; today, at a glance from Harrison, she gaily changed her mind and said she went down first. Is there something between those two?”

"I believe there is," Crawford admitted. "Homer told me once he should dismiss the secretary unless he quit fooling with the girl. She's pretty, you see, and her duties take her up to the second floor, where the study is, and where Harrison usually is. Now, I believe, Rhoda is jealous of his affection for Miss Moore."

"I think Miss Moore has transplanted her affections," Stone said. "I fancy the secretary has a rival."

"Meaning Moffatt?"

"Yes."

"Natural, too," said Sergeant Cram, gruffly. "That sort of girl always looks to the main chance. She never cared for Cale Harrison, she wanted Homer. And now that there's a probability of Moffatt inheriting the Homer fortune, she whips her affections in his direction."

"Who is Miss Moore?" asked Stone. "How does she come to be in this party at all?"

"She's a dancer," Cram told him. "I didn't know much about her at first, but I've looked her up. She's all right, I guess, but a Tartar as to temper. She lives in New York, with a duenna sort of person, who is respectable, far's I can make out."

"She was engaged to Homer, at one time," Crawford contributed. "A mad fancy of his, which lasted only a short time. Then he met Miss Kittredge and promptly threw over Marita. He said there was no engagement, she said there was, but by dint of argument and some more material means, I induced her to call the engagement off. This sounds worse than it was, I fear. Gaylord was not a Lothario at all. The Moore girl dazzled him and roped him in. He was glad to be rid of her and honestly in love with Miss Kittredge."

"Then why was Miss Moore invited here?"

"I don't quite know, but she worked it somehow. She's a friend of Bobbie Abbott's and she wheedled the invitation through her, I think."

"Then," Stone said, slowly, "then Miss Moore has had time to arrange a premeditated crime. And it is the premeditated crime that is hardest to solve. I've heard detectives say the contrary, but for ease of unraveling give me the impulsive act every time. Unless plans are laid and trails covered with greatest care, unexpected evidence crops up."

"And yet," Crawford objected, "I can't seem to see that gay little piece planning and plotting one of the worst murders I've ever known."

"You're not a criminal lawyer," Stone told him. "Mr. Cram and I have known crimes committed by the least likely people in the world. Haven't we?"

"Yes," said Cram, "and I do think Marita Moore did this one. She's a fury, when she gets really angry. The weapon was one she would choose. Now, if Miss Kittredge had wanted to kill Homer, she'd have shot him. She's a wonderful shot—of course, I've found out all about her—and she's way up on all sports. Rides and hunts and is especially fond of target-shooting."

"Motive?" asked Stone.

"Money," returned Cram.

“Yes,” Crawford agreed, “Diana Kittredge is up against it, financially. If she had the Homer money, she’d be all right. Unless she does get some money, she’ll have to give up her home, and I don’t know what will become of her invalid father. I can imagine that girl doing the thing to help her old father.”

“Hardly,” Stone observed. “A girl of Miss Kittredge’s character isn’t likely to commit a crime out of filial affection.”

“All the same, she had no reason except the money. Whether for herself or for her old dad doesn’t matter,” Cram reminded them. “What bothers me is the absence of clues. I haven’t had time to look for those yet,” Stone said, smiling. “There must be some around.”

He glanced about the beautiful room, as if expecting clues to come fluttering to his feet.

“Bet you won’t find any,” Cram told him. “I’ve hunted this place from the ground up.”

“Didn’t really disturb anything, did you?”

“Of course not. I can skin a room and leave it as I found it. Now, what about collusion between those two girls?”

Stone looked at the sergeant to see if he could be in earnest.

“That seems to me unlikely,” was all, he said.

“Ridiculous,” Crawford exclaimed.

“Then,” Cram went on, “if that idea’s ridiculous, then there’s nothing for it but that one of them did it. Now, the time’s come for action. I’ll have them both arrested, or held under detention or something till we find out for sure which is the one, and there you are. If Marita did the killing, then there’s no will leaving the money to Diana, or the dancer wouldn’t do it. If Diana did the killing then there is a will and she knows where it is.”

“Pretty drastic measures, Mr. Cram,” Stone said, a little taken aback at the policeman’s crude reasoning. “I think there’s something more subtle behind this crime than that.”

“Find it, then, Mr. Stone. The chance is yours. Go over the ground and find your subtle evidence.”

“What about the cousin, Mr. Moffatt?”

“Nothing doing, Mr. Stone. I looked him up and down and all over. You see, he was the obvious suspect from the first, so I had him shadowed at once. There’s two of our best men on him yet. Everything he’s done since Friday night has been recorded.”

“Had his rooms searched?”

“Yes, with a fine tooth comb. Not a thing wrong.”

“Where was he the night of the murder?”

“In New York. He said, at the inquest, he had gone to the Movies that night, to see ‘Jungle Jim.’ That’s that new wild animal film. Said that afterwards he dropped into a little club and staid an hour, then went

home. All that's been checked up over and over. We found the man he sat next to in the theater and we found the girl who sold him his ticket and we went to the little club—a few old foggy sort of young men—and every point is proved. So, we can leave him out. But if you're talking about outsiders, I mean outside of the Tapestry Room, what about Cale Harrison? He still sticks me."

"Motive?" asked Stone.

"Money, of course. I think he has the will, or knows where it is. I think there's a big bequest in it for him, or else—or else, he may mean to raise money on it from Miss Kittredge."

"Where has he hidden the will, then?"

"Somewhere in this room," opined Cram. "Between some of the books, or——"

"Well, Sergeant, I'm sorry to quash that nice theory of yours, but this afternoon, Mr. Moffatt and I searched these books thoroughly."

"You did? Good work! And found no trace of the will?"

"No trace of the will."

"You made a thorough search, I suppose, Mr. Stone?" Crawford spoke dubiously.

"Very thorough, Mr. Crawford. We each took half the room, and then went over each other's."

"Maybe Moffatt gave you the slip, somehow."

"I guarded against that. I had a little gadget, a sort of toy periscope, that I could look into, unseen by him, and I could spot everything he was doing. I didn't search much myself, for I can go over the room any time. But I wanted to see how he would work. He put up an honest search, took down the books, scrutinized them and put them back. You see, if there is a will, he wants to know it, so he won't grab the estate without a right to do so."

"Not a very interesting man, Moffatt, but he seems all right," Crawford said. "Well, I've hunted the desks and filing cabinets in the study, and soon I suppose I'd better set the machinery going to make Moffatt the heir."

"I don't care who's the heir, I want to get the murderer," Stone declared. "I never had a case grip me as this one does, nor one that made me feel so helpless. Gaylord was my friend. I hadn't seen much of him lately, but the old affection is still there. I've never before had a case where a friend was the victim, and then to think I am baffled at the outset! But I'll get at the truth."

"You've nothing to get at," Cram said, moodily, "but to choose between those two girls. One of them did it. The step Marita heard was either Miss Kittredge's or her own."

"Why would she mention it if it was her own?" cried Crawford.

"To put us off the track. I'm fully convinced," Cram went on, "that that step she heard is a fabrication of her clever mind, unless, that is, it was the step of Miss Kittredge."

"I doubt if she heard a step at all," Stone said.

“Probably not. Now, look at it. Say, it was planned, premeditated. That makes it out Marita. For Miss Kittredge didn’t want to go in the room with Homer at all. She tried not to. But Miss Moore forced her way in. She knew the dark time would come in a minute or two. She even told Diana what time it was. She testified that. She had on a wrist watch.”

“That reminds me,” said Stone, and he told them about the ticking clock and Harrison’s loud ticking watch.

Cram thought this over in silence.

Then he said, “That must be looked into, Mr. Stone. But I believe the jade made that all up. I don’t think she heard any ticking watch or clock either. Harrison couldn’t have got into the room, past Diana, without those girls knowing it. Look here, Mr. Stone, you had your reconstruction. Tell us exactly where the three were.”

“Wait a minute,” Stone looked at his watch. “The dark time tonight is almost due. I’ll show you the places, and let us keep them till the light comes on.”

Explaining, Stone placed Crawford in Gaylord’s place on the love-seat, made Cram sit on the arm of it at Crawford’s left hand, and himself stood at the lawyer’s right, half way between the love-seat and the hall door.

“You see,” he said “I am standing just where Miss Kittredge says she stood. Now, I hold it would be impossible for anyone to come in from the hall, get past me without my hearing or feeling him, get over to that table behind Gaylord, and then stab him in the dark and get away in the dark, without being sensed by Miss Kittredge.”

“What do you mean sensed?” asked Cram.

“I mean a sort of sense of somebody’s presence. Perhaps not quite seeing or hearing or feeling, but a mingling of all three.”

“Can’t get that stuff,” Cram grunted, “but I wish you’d all stay like this till the dark comes. In a minute now, I think.”

Willingly enough they kept their positions, and after a moment the lights went off. It was not a new sensation to any of them. The thing had occurred many times in the experience of all of them, yet they felt a thrill as the darkness came like a stroke.

Instinctively they kept silent, and even remained so, when they heard, or thought they heard the ticking of a clock.

The seconds went by, and the ticking though faint was clear. Yet no one spoke, and then they heard a slow, long-drawn sigh like a gasp, and the lights flashed back to them.

The illumination showed each man in his place, but Crawford’s face was white and scared, Cram looked red and angry, and Fleming Stone very grave and puzzled.

“Did you hear it?” whispered Crawford.

Stone nodded. “Imagination,” he said. “We expected to hear it, so we thought we did hear it.”

“Imagination your grandmother!” snorted Cram. “That was a clock with good steel springs in it, or I miss my guess.”

“This isn’t a guessing game,” Stone said, his eyes bright with interest. “Did you hear anything else?”

“Imagination, I suppose,” Cram looked a little sheepish. “But I thought I imagined a sort of sigh.”

“More like a gasp,” said Crawford. “Open the doors, Stone, I’ve had enough of this.”

“Wait a minute. We mustn’t give ourselves away. Those sounds were really imagination or else they were intentionally made. If the latter, the criminal did it. Which girl could?”

“Oh, that Marita,” Cram blurted out. “She’s devil enough for anything. Her and her foreign tricks.”

“Harrison is a mechanical genius,” Crawford said slowly, and Stone turned to him.

“Really? Can he do stunts, ventriloquism, that sort of thing?”

“No, I mean wired things. He could rig up a contraption to make a clock tick in this room when there wasn’t any clock.”

“I’ll soon see,” and Stone eagerly searched round the wainscoting and behind radiators and such places.

“No. Well, never mind hunting it down now. We can see about it tomorrow. But on no account let anyone know we heard or thought we heard anything.”

“Why?”

“Because it would put our criminal on guard. Now, remember, please, don’t tell anyone. But before we leave the room, notice where I stand. Could anyone get past me coming in from the hall and going round to the table there?”

Cram tried it. He found he could not pass Stone on the route indicated, without brushing against him or passing close enough to allow his breathing or footstep to be audible.

“That lays this down as a fact,” Stone said: “unless Miss Kittredge is mistaken in the place she stood, or unless she moved, then the criminal is one of those two girls.”

“Unless she moved, the criminal is Marita,” Cram said, a little drily. “Whoever killed him had to move.”

“I know it,” Stone said and stepped to the side wall near the tapestry to straighten a picture that hung slightly askew. “Can’t stand a picture hanging crooked,” he murmured. “Well, shall we call it a day? Look at the books, Cram. Moffatt and I went over them all, twice. And we both looked out to see that there was no chance of that will book being behind the books in rows. We felt well down behind each row. Thank goodness the books are clean—kept well dusted by the efficient Abbie, I suppose.”

“Where’s the dagger?” Crawford asked, and Cram said, “the police have it. I don’t imagine it’ll be used as a parlor ornament again.”

“No fingerprints?” asked Stone.

“No, but that doesn’t premise a professional, nowadays. A young girl who ever read a thriller—and who hasn’t?—would know better than to leave prints. Not gloves, more likely wrap her hanky round her hand.”

“Probably. Well, Cram, I think I’ll put those two girls through a third degree of my own. Oh, I don’t mean like anything the police set up. Just a little individual grilling of my own. No roughhouse work.”

“All right, Mr. Stone. Have it your own way. Let me know if I can help. But haven’t you spotted any clues?”

“I’ve noticed a few oddments. I don’t know that they will turn out to be clues. You know I don’t look for dropped clues. They’re obsolete. Give a criminal rope enough and he will make his own clues. How long do you suppose the house party will stay here without making a fuss about it?”

“Miss Moore and Miss Kittredge will have to stay as long as the police say so,” Cram returned. “Mr. Moffatt and Mr. Bingham seem inclined to stay. Mrs. Abbott wants to get away as soon as she can, and that Dare man is straining at the leash. He harps on his importance in Wall Street, till I’m afraid the street will fall through if he doesn’t get there pretty soon. Harrison has no intention of leaving till he’s fired. But if he falls under suspicion in any way, he may make a bolt for it.”

“What about the plausible doctor next door?”

Cram stared at him.

“Well, Mr. Stone, it’s funny you should mention him! I’ve been thinking him over, likewise looking him up. He’s over head and ears in debt. Fine man in many ways, but he lives beyond his income. Maybe he can’t collect his fees; he’s a good doctor, but careless in money matters. Well, it’s hard to connect him up with a crime like that, but he was a witness to the will, the will did leave his daughter a large sum, and I did catch him poking around in this room searching among the books. Also, he’d be a slick one at making a stab, and he knows the house well and knows when the lights go off.”

“But he wasn’t at the party?”

“No, but he lives next door.”

“But, Cram, we agreed nobody could come in the hall door, cross the hall, get the dagger, stab Gaylord and get away again, without brushing against Miss Kittredge.”

“We did agree to that, sir, and I stand by it. But that’s a way to look. Maybe he found the book.”

“Oh, no,” argued Crawford, “if he had, and if he could prove his daughter’s legacy by it, he’d show it up.”

“When was the book last seen?” Stone asked.

“Several people have said it has been lying on this table right here, for several weeks. The maid Rhoda, the accredited liar, says it was here when she dusted up just before the people came on Friday. But later than that, I’ve traced it. Polly Opdyke, she’s a chatterer, you know, declared to me she saw it on the table here before dinner that night.”

“After she came and before dinner,” mused Stone.

“Yes, sir. She was in here before dinner; of course, after dinner, after the tragedy, that child wasn’t allowed in here. So, as she’d have no reason to make up such a yarn, we may conclude she saw it here just

before dinner. Say the old doctor prowled around, got in, looked at the will, pocketed it, will book and all, and then became possessed of a mad desire to set the ball rolling so he could get his hands on that legacy to his daughter. Say he went home, secreted the book, and came back at the dark time.”

“And couldn’t get past Miss Kittredge,” mocked Stone. “That’s not a theory, Cram, it’s a fact. There isn’t room for a child to squeeze between me and the bookcase, on the way to where the dagger lay, and you needn’t say there is. Let alone a big man like Dr. Opdyke! Think of his trying to get through here!”

Stone indicated the narrow way between himself and the bookcase, where an intruder would have to pass.

“That’s right,” Cram acknowledged, but he shook his head.

Chapter 13

The Persistent Mothballs

IT was the next morning when Stone decided to use what he called his third degree on the two girls.

It’s a ticklish business, he told himself, for they are both on the defensive to such an extent that a word of anything like suspicion or accusation sends them flying. But we must get down to brass tacks soon, My clues are so airy, so positively nebulous, that it isn’t encouraging, to say the least, A picture hanging slightly crooked, a pressed place on the carpet, three streaks on the table, and a few short blades of grass. Leaves of grass, I shall call them, after Walt Whitman’s famous phrase.

Oh, yes, and a thumbled up curtain and a small jagged slit. A fine lot!

Well, I must find out which of the girls to choose as a suspect. And then, other things being equal, I may get somewhere. But other things so seldom are equal. Fine subjects for an essay; “The Unequalness of Other Things.” Much to be said on it.

These thoughts occupied the detective’s mind as he smoked an after breakfast cigarette, then, rising, he went in search of the victims of his inquisition.

He found Marita first, happily chatting to Albert Moffatt as they walked along a garden path.

“Well, Friend Sleuth, how goes it this morning?” asked Moffatt, pleasantly.

If there was one word Stone detested more than another, it was sleuth.

But he was fair-minded enough to recognize that Moffatt meant no offence, and he answered:

“Not so good. I can’t seem to hit upon the clues that by all the laws of God and man ought to jump to the eye of the vigilant detective.”

“Oh, you’ll get there. We must get there. I say, Stone, I’m getting anxious.”

“Give the man time,” put in Marita. “Mr. Stone has hardly started yet.”

“I know,” Moffatt returned, “but suppose the murderer gets away, beyond recall. As the only relative of Gaylord, I feel I ought to do something. Let me help you, Mr. Stone. Take me on as assistant, won’t you?”

"I'd be glad to, Mr. Moffatt, if you mean what I do by assistant. Just a helper, you know. But I can't take in a partner."

"I don't care how you regard me, just let me do something definite to help. To think that I was sitting there, looking at a moving picture while poor old Gay was being snuffed out!"

"You see, Mr. Moffatt doesn't suspect me," said Marita, her dazzling smile including both men.

The girl had more than beauty, she had charm, lure, seductiveness, the birthright of all of Spanish blood.

She stepped nearer to Stone and drummed her rosy little finger-tips up and down his coat sleeve.

"Who could?" said Stone, and he purposely threw a tender note in his voice while the lowering of his eyelids half veiled a sudden gleam of admiration.

The girl fell for the bait, and her fingers crept downward until they rested on Stone's hand.

"Lots of people do," she pouted. "Tell me, Mr. Stone, can't you get me off?"

Moffatt looked on, amused.

"You're barking up the wrong tree, Marita," he said. "This man is a detective, not a lawyer. Though I'll say he doesn't act like a story-book sleuth and they're the only kind I know about."

"Then you want to be a story-book detective when you help me?" Stone laughed.

"I know a few things," Moffatt seemed a little nettled. "I know about fingerprints, and I know you mustn't touch the body till the coroner comes, and I know the proper caper is to see some small object—glittering preferred—and pick it up and slip it in your pocket."

Stone laughed outright at this.

"You're all right," he said. "Now, I'm going to carry Miss Moore off for a short session, and you go and hunt for the small, glittering object. But don't make it a cuff-link, they're not used by detectives any more."

Taking the girl by the arm, Stone coolly led her away down the garden path.

"You like the new heir?" he said, looking at her a little reproachfully. "I thought you cared for Gay."

"Gay's dead," she returned, and a dangerous light came into her dark eyes. "I suppose you want to quiz me about that?"

"Well, yes—just a little. You see, things are coming to a head," he stopped, aghast at the look of fear on her face.

"Does that frighten you?" he went on, sternly.

"Yes, because I suppose it means you're going to arrest Diana."

“You little brute!” exclaimed Stone, shocked more by the pleased look on her face than by her words. “You don’t think Diana did it, and you know you don’t! You suspect Harrison, though he is your friend. That’s why you’ve thrown him over for Moffatt, and you’ve taken him on, because you begin to think he will be Homer’s heir. There, milady, deny those statements, if you can.”

Instead of showing chagrin, Marita appeared deeply interested.

“Do you think it was Cale, too?” she whispered. “And how do you know?”

As a matter of fact, Stone’s suspicions did not point especially to Harrison, but he was out for information, so he said:

“How do you know?”

“Why, don’t you remember? I said all along that I heard his step in the hall.”

“But you can’t be sure,” Stone spoke gently, “that it was his step, or that it was in the hall. Granting for the moment that you did not do it, somebody must have stepped to the table, snatched up the dagger, made the thrust and then stepped away from Gaylord. Now, those footfalls were doubtless almost inaudible, but if you heard steps at all you must have heard those. Now, could they not have been Harrison’s, Bingham’s, Diana’s, or those of some intruder from outside? You want to clear yourself from suspicion, of course. The best thing you can do in that direction is to tell me most carefully, what you remember regarding those steps.”

Marita shrugged her shoulders pettishly. “I wish I’d never mentioned steps, or my acute hearing, or—or anything!”

Producing a wisp of handkerchief from her watch bracelet, where it was tucked, she used it on one eye, watching Stone with the other. Noting that her few pearly tears affected him not at all, she tucked the wisp back again, and said, curtly, “What do you want to know?”

“Don’t be cross,” he smiled at her. “Just tell me exactly and most carefully what you heard, and remember, a life may hang on what you tell me.”

This touch of the dramatic acted as a spur, which was Stone’s intention.

“I know I heard a step,” she said, slowly. “I know that. And I thought it was in the hall, because it could not have made a sound on the rug in the room. In the hall, there is, of course a margin of wood. In the room, the rug extends to the very walls.”

“Good for you, Miss Moore. You show real powers of observation. When did you hear this step? At the beginning of the dark time?”

“No, near the end, but that I can’t say positively. For the dark time seemed very long that night. I was going to turn to Gaylord—I had my back to him, almost, as I sat on the chair arm—but just then the parrot squawked, and I laughed at that, he sounded so silly!”

“And you thought you heard a clock ticking?”

“Yes, I know I did, or a watch. And it wasn’t my own watch, for that is barely audible. Now, how do you explain that? I know I heard it.”

“That is a point that leads to suspicion of Cale Harrison. We know he has a loud ticking watch, we know he was upstairs and came down, we know he must have crossed the hall, and—he may be said to have a motive.”

“What is it?”

“Only that he hoped for a bequest from Gaylord’s will, and that he knows where the will is, and will produce it when he is ready.”

“It doesn’t seem like Cale, he is so—so——”

“Timid?”

“Yes—and yet not quite that. He isn’t really timid, he’s, well, self-effacing.”

“Well, then, and think carefully, does the step you heard, give the stepper time to get into the room, get the dagger, kill Gaylord and get out again before the lights came on?”

“Most certainly not! The step was only a few seconds before the light. That I am sure of.”

“Then our case against Harrison falls through. And, too, it begins to look as if the step was in your imagination after all. Or it may have been a step of some of those in the lounge, or of Bingham, in the doorway.”

“Whatever it was, it was not my imagination. I am very sensitive to light sounds, and I know—I know I heard that step, faintly but clearly, and I am certain it was in the hall.”

“Then Cale came downstairs a trifle before he said he did, and preferred not to say so because of his fear of being suspected.”

“Then Rhoda lied. But she’d lie for him any minute. She’s terribly in love with him.”

“Everybody seems to be in love with somebody around this house,” Stone sighed. “Wish somebody’d love me.”

“I will. I can love anybody I want to.

“ ‘I can love her and her and you and you,
I can love any, so she be but true.’ ”

“What’s that? A quotation?”

“Yes. I don’t write poetry myself. Now, we’ve pretty well settled that the step was Harrison’s in the hall and the ticking watch was his——”

“Not in the hall. That ticking sound was in the room.”

“By Jove, Miss Moore, you’re a marvelous witness. You’ll let yourself out of the running if you’re not careful!”

“You mean you won’t suspect me?”

“How can I, if you were so busy hearing sounds, you couldn’t be getting at daggers and killing people at the same time. And somehow, I believe your story of the sounds. But nobody wears a wristwatch but Harrison.”

“Among the men, no. But Bobbie and Polly Opdyke wear them.”

“It could have been either of them, then, moving about near the door of the Tapestry Room. But they can’t be considered as suspects.”

“Hardly,” Marita smiled at the thought. “Well, then, that’s all I heard, except Gaylord’s gasp. That, I think, will ring in my ears till my dying day.”

There was no handkerchief trick this time, but two tears rolled unheeded down Marita’s cheeks.

Versed in weighing the sincerity of a witness, Stone came to the conclusion that this girl had been telling him the truth. At that moment he believed her honest in her statements and innocent of the crime. But her next speech clinched his belief.

“I wouldn’t have killed Gaylord, anyway,” she said, “for I was dead in love with him, and I still felt I could get him back out of Diana’s net. Besides,” she added, ingenuously, “I wanted his money.”

Stone could have shaken her for this cold-blooded avowal, but he felt that it was, after all, a further proof that whoever killed Gaylord Homer it was not this lovely though vulgar little piece of femininity before him.

“What about Bingham?” he asked her, being rather impressed by her clear-headed opinions.

“I’ve thought a lot about Ted. He’s a fine man, and he was Gaylord’s best chum, but you know love turns men into devils—even fine men. Suppose he feared Diana would yield to Gay’s coaxing and marry him and his money-bags. For Di is frightfully poor, really poor, you know. And she had promised to give Gay his answer that night. Gay took her to the Tapestry Room for it—I know. That’s why I insisted on going along, too. I wanted to stave off that answer just as much as Ted did. So, you see,” she flashed a smile at him, “Ted and I had the same motive for killing the poor boy. Well, suppose Ted stood there, as he did, and watched us come in, watched Gaylord sitting by me, but gazing at Diana as if he could eat her up; suppose, I say, Ted, from his doorway, saw all that, and just couldn’t stand it, and then he saw the dagger, and the lights went off and—there you are!”

“Bingham doesn’t wear a wrist-watch.”

“I’ve known him to. Perhaps he did that night.”

He could have stepped on the bare floor—returning?”

“Well, yes, there is a patch of wood in the doorway where he stood. But you see, I didn’t notice anything after I heard Gaylord gasp. It went through me like a knife. I heard that step, and that ticking, then the lights came, and I leaned against Gay, just for fun, you know, I didn’t really think at the moment that gasp was his death gurgle, and I saw his face, and his shoulders all humped over, and I lost my senses and slid to the floor. No, I didn’t faint, I didn’t really lose consciousness, I just collapsed. Ted flew to pick me up, and the rest—I guess you know by this time. I’ve heard it often enough. Now, do you think I killed Gaylord Homer?”

“No, Miss Moore—Marita—I don’t.”

Stone held out his hand, and she slipped her little paw into it, but a quiver of intelligence or caution or both made him pull his fingers away quickly.

He knew the type of vamp who can't refrain from physical contact on the smallest provocation.

It's like the enthusiast who would "peep and botanize, upon his mother's grave," he said to himself, but didn't say it aloud lest she should ask him if it was a quotation.

"Then you've veered round to Bingham, from Miss Kittredge?" he said, rising from the garden seat they had occupied.

"Not entirely. But I can't see beyond those two. Oh, goodness, I veer round all the time. An hour ago, I was strong for Caley, now Ted looks more like it. Are you going in? Send dear Albert back to me, will you? And tell him to bring some cigarettes. Last night we were out here, and he had to go clear back to the house to get some. And it was just at Dark time. I was scared into fits here alone. Dark time always scares me now. I wish I could go home."

"I think you can very soon, after all you've told me this morning. I'll see that it's duly reported in proper shape, and I think it will get you off soon."

"Oh, I don't mind staying here, if I'm not alone when it goes dark. Run along, Mr. Stone, send my devoted Albert to me, and don't forget the cigarettes."

Stone went back to the house, having provided Marita with one cigarette to solace her until Moffatt's arrival.

"Well, I fooled him all right," the Spanish beauty remarked to herself, complacently, as she crossed her long silken legs and leaned back among the roses. "If he knew what I could tell him, wouldn't he be standing on one ear! I s'pose I'm as bad as a murderer, but—what's a poor girl to do?"

Stone, unconscious of the insincerity of the lovely witness whom he had just put through his third degree, went on to the house, and running across Moffatt, gave him the lady's message.

Always observant, he saw a strange look flit across Moffatt's face, and he wondered, idly, if he, too, resented the vampish proclivities of the imperious beauty.

Perhaps, he thought to himself, Moffatt is not so securely under her thumb as she thinks he is.

He went on, keen on his search for Diana.

He found her, and not unexpectedly to him, with Ted Bingham by her side.

"Sorry," he said, with no beating about the bush, "but as you both know, I am here on a definite business. So, Mr. Bingham, I have to ask you to let me have Miss Kittredge all to myself for a time."

His manner was suave but his voice carried a note of authority, and Ted understood.

"All right, Stone," he said, and the detective noticed a new, vibrant note in his voice, "I'll go. I wonder, though, if you'd let me stay if I told you that Diana and I have just become engaged."

They were in a small porch, made by the curve of the turret wall, and Diana, in a low wicker chair, was the embodiment of happiness, yet with an undercurrent of sadness plain to be seen in her sky-blue eyes.

"I offer my sincere congratulations," Stone said, "and my best wishes for all happiness. You're announcing this, generally?"

"No," Diana said, "we are not, but I've thought it better to tell you. Now must Ted leave us?"

"Yes, please; it is better to talk alone. You know, Bingham, we're in deep waters. You know, to put it plainly, while Miss Kittredge must be cleared of all suspicion it cannot be done successfully, until we discover the real culprit."

"No," Diana's blue eyes clouded, "it cannot. Go away for a while, Ted, dear. We'll send for you shortly."

As Bingham went off, reluctantly, she looked after him a moment and then turned back to Stone.

"Please be direct, Mr. Stone. Don't try to spare me, don't evade the issue. What is it you want to say?"

In spite of himself Stone stared at her. He thought he had never seen anyone so beautiful. Always lovely, there was now a new light in her blue eyes, a new smile on her curving lips. Surely this radiant being never used a dagger, never premeditated a horrendous crime!

He had to remind himself that many historic criminals were beautiful women, many murderesses had angel faces, but even so, he couldn't believe it. Yet he realized her unusual radiance arose from the fact that she had but just plighted her troth with Bingham, and his racing mind took up the train of thought and wonderment as to why this matter had been arranged in such apparent haste and in such an incongruous setting.

"I regret very much to say anything unpleasant to you, Miss Kittredge, but, as you know, I am here on a very grave errand. And so, I am obliged to ask you some questions."

"Certainly, Mr. Stone; do not hesitate."

Her manner and tone, Stone reflected, were as cold and distant as her beauty was warm and glowing. He strongly resented the fact that the two suspects he had been given in this case, should be two such appallingly beautiful women. Beside Diana, to be sure, Marita was a cheaply pretty type, but after all, her glowing dark eyes and flashing smiles made her bewitching.

Not often bowled over by feminine charms, Fleming Stone wished that this time he had had to deal with plainer dames.

And so he hesitated. Then he plunged in.

"Miss Kittredge, I will be straightforward. Who, in your opinion, killed Gaylord Homer?"

This was a little more straightforwardness than Diana had meant or wanted.

"Have you a right to ask that, Mr. Stone?"

"I have, but you needn't answer unless you choose."

"Then I won't answer."

"Very well. Now, do you suspect Miss Moore?"

“No, I don’t. I’m not intimate with the girl, but I can’t think she did it. Beside, she loved him.”

“But she had opportunity.”

“Yes, she had that. So did I.”

Diana looked so fearfully agitated, so much as if her nerves were getting beyond her control, that Stone, though he couldn’t give up his quest, changed the topic.

“You didn’t hear the step in the hall, or the ticking clock?”

“I did not. I think Marita imagined those. But, you know, Mr. Stone, I noticed an odor.”

“Of what?”

“Several. I told the police people about that. Of course, I could place the freesia, and the jasmine and cyclamen, but I surely smelled mothballs. If you want a clue, Mr. Stone, take that. I am peculiarly sensitive to odors, and of all things I noticed those carbolic scented mothballs. I asked Abbie if they were used in this house and she said only in a closet where unused woolens are kept. Now, Mr. Stone, as you know, I wouldn’t willingly implicate an innocent person, but could it have been Abbie? She, I happen to know, was really more fond of Gaylord than appeared on the surface.”

“You don’t mean there was anything overfriendly between them?”

“I don’t say that, but she adored him, and she is a strange woman. A starved, thwarted nature, capable of—of almost anything. She was inordinately jealous of me, because Gaylord admired me. I shan’t apologize for my frankness, I know you understand. Now, whether it implicates her or not, hunt down those mothballs. I couldn’t have imagined that odor, it was there. And it was not on the person of any one of the guests or on Gaylord himself. I know that because I sat next him at dinner and I should have been aware of it.”

“Thank you, Miss Kittredge, that must be looked into. Now, tell me, did you move from where you stood, during the dark time?”

“When I noticed the mothballs I remember I drew back a little. Why?”

“Was that before the lights went on?”

“Yes, a few seconds or so. They flashed out right after that.”

Chapter 14

Real Clues At Last

“WELL, Mr. Stone,” Cram said, “I guess you’ll have to put up or shut up.”

“Bad as that?” Stone smiled at him. “Why the rush?”

The two sat in the Tapestry Room, which had come to be the conference room of those most deeply interested in the mystery.

“Well,” Cram fidgeted a little, “you don’t seem to be getting anywhere.”

“Do you?”

“Me? Oh, I’m right where I was when I started. One of those two girls shot Homer, and it’s time we found out which one.”

“How about a third party?”

“You got something up your sleeve?”

Cram’s small eyes opened wider, and he leaned forward eagerly.

“Not quite that, but I’ve had a pointer given me,” Stone replied.

“Veerin’ which way?”

“Toward Abbie.”

“Abbie Perkins? Shucks, that woman! She’s the salt of the earth. What’d she want to kill Homer for?”

“I’ve heard she was in love with him.”

“Oh well, a lone woman like that is always in love with any man she can get next to, but they don’t go round killin’ ’em.”

“Somebody went round killing him.”

“Yes. And we’ve got two perfectly good suspects. Now, we got to pick one of them.”

“Well, I’m positively certain Miss Moore didn’t do it.”

“Now, she was my choice.”

“No, she’s innocent. I talked with her yesterday.”

“That third degree of yours?”

“Yes, I call it that, but I assure you I wasn’t brutal.”

“Dessay not. Well, what did you get hold of that’s got any weight to it?”

“Only the obvious facts. That Miss Moore was deeply in love with Gaylord Homer, also that she wanted to marry him for his money; also, that she was not afraid that Miss Kittredge was going to cut her out. Or, rather, she felt that in the combat, she would best Miss Kittredge.”

“Specially as Miss Kittredge didn’t want him.”

“Yes, specially that.”

“Well, it’s sure the logical conclusion. Of course, I leaned to the Moore girl’s guilt because she’s that hot, southern type, but, after all, Miss Kittredge had the motive. She knew—she must have known that Homer was leaving her his money, and she wanted it and wanted it quick.”

“You do put things horribly.”

“Well, they are horrible, ain’t they? And that calm, icy dame could thrust an ice pick into somebody she didn’t like, without turning a hair, I do believe.”

“Well, I don’t believe she is guilty, either.”

“Who then? the cousin? I’d like to fasten the thing on him, but I can’t get a shred of evidence. Can you?”

“No, we can’t. We’ve had him reported on by three people, and—well, here’s what they size him up as.”

Cram drew some papers from his pocket and passed them over the table.

Stone read them attentively.

The sum of them was that Albert Moffatt was a man of the average class.

In business his methods were systematic and correct. He was quiet, diligent, orderly in his office. A real estate agent, in the employ of a fairly well known firm. Not a brilliant business man, in fact, a bit dull, but reliable and honest. The sort that jogs along from day to day, without advancing in any particular.

At his home, which consisted of two rooms in a well-run rooming house, his landlady gave him the highest praise. Said she never had a better behaved or more satisfactory lodger. He has a man who comes in two or three times a week to look after his clothes, otherwise he does for himself.

His recreation seems to be going to the Moving Pictures and attending a small club of men, called The Ivanhoe. This Club’s rooms are plain and provided with books, games and a smoking-room. It is of a Y. M. C. A. type.

On the Friday in question, Moffatt’s movements have been carefully traced.

He left his office at the usual time, went home, read the papers, went to the Yale Club to dinner. From there, he went to the movie of “Jungle Jim,” a popular animal picture. The ticket girl knows him well and remembers selling him his ticket. The usher remembered where he sat, and spoke to him during the show. From the picture show he went directly to the Ivanhoe Club, and to some cronies there, he told the details of the picture he had seen. Staid at the club until eleven-thirty, then went home and to bed.

Called to telephone at twelve o’clock and told of his cousin’s death.

“Clean bill of health,” Stone agreed, handing back the report. “But I tell you Cram, there is, there must be another person to be considered beside those two girls.”

“Then you’ll have to show him up mighty quick, Mr. Stone, for the chief is keen on arresting one or both of those young ladies.”

“You can’t arrest them both!”

“Oh, yes, we can. On suspicion of being connected with the murder, or having knowledge of it. Maybe the threat of an arrest will bring them to heel.”

“Well, Cram, I see I’ll have to let you in on my findings. I meant to do so soon, but you’re so impatient. Look here, then.”

Stone first locked both doors, and drew the heavy curtains together before the window.

“Dark time?” growled Cram.

“I’ll give you some light,” and Stone snapped on an electrolier.

Then he stepped over to the Tapestry that hung to the left of the fireplace.

“You see,” he said, “the other tapestry hangs in front of the safe. But this one has nothing behind it. And it hangs out about ten to twelve inches from the wall. A slender man could easily conceal himself behind that curtain with little fear of discovery.”

“Yeah, but did he?”

“He did. Though I can’t say it was last Friday night that he did. Look here. You know nothing in this room has been touched.”

Drawing the tapestry aside, Stone showed the sergeant a pressed place on the carpet where, it was clearly evident, someone had stood for a time. There were no distinct footprints, but a pair of restless feet had pawed the nap of the Oriental rug, and the long, soft pile still showed a matted condition.

Cram stared at it, thoughtfully.

“Might have been done weeks ago,” he said.

“Yes?” Stone returned, “well, look here, then.”

This time he pointed to the tapestry itself, to a small slit which had been cut at a height of about five feet or more from the floor. The slit was perhaps a little more than an inch in length, and it was not hard to deduce it had been meant for a peephole for the one concealed behind the tapestry.

“Well, I swan!” exclaimed the amazed Cram. “Now, however, did you smell that out?”

“You say nothing about the dreadfulness of slashing into a priceless work of art.”

“Work of art be damned. That’s a hole somebody cut who was a-hidin’ there.”

“My idea exactly, sergeant. Now, see, the edge of this tapestry, at the same height, is distinctly thumbled up. Not frayed and worn, as it is in some places, for it’s an antique bit, but thumbled by someone holding the eyehole to his eye.”

“Exactly that, which proves, good enough for me, that all this happened last Friday night, and that the murderer we’re after stood behind this curtain before or after the stabbin’ affray.”

“Well, then, how did he get in or out?”

“Didn’t. He was here all the time. Got away long afterward. After all the excitement was over.”

“No, don’t be silly. He must have concealed himself here, of course, but after the deed, he merely slipped into the hall and later joined the others when the commotion was on, and his movements would not be noticed.”

“One of the house folks, then!”

“What do you think?”

“It sure looks like it. But I’ve got to think it out. My mind ain’t a hair-trigger one, like yours. Now, see here, those girls must know something about this. And they’re shieldin’ the man.”

“Then, if the man is Harrison, Marita is shielding him, though she has soured on him lately. And if the man was Bingham—— by Jove, Cram, could it have been Bingham, and when Marita screamed, he ran to her from here, not from his doorway?”

“Naw. And anyway, in that case, who pawed the carpet all up, like a frettin’ horse?”

“Yes—that isn’t right. I wanted to cast Moffatt for the part, but your report quashes that idea.”

“It does, and anyway that muff Moffatt hasn’t got spunk enough to put on an act like this. How about Abbie now?”

“There’s an idea. If there’s anything in the story of her being in love with Homer, and if she was insanely jealous of Miss Kittredge, the opportunity was hers. She says she was in her room at the dark time. But nobody can corroborate that. She might have been in here. And she could slip away afterward.”

“And that would be the step Miss Kittredge heard in the hall!”

“It’s pretty thin. And, too, all these arguments would fit Harrison. Say he scooted into the Tapestry Room straight from the dinner table. Say, he got behind the curtain, and watched, and when the others came in he noted their positions. Then at the dark time he came out, grabbed the dagger, killed Homer and whacked himself upstairs. Then the maid did see him there, and did come downstairs ahead of him.”

“Well, we’ve plenty to chew on. Queer we never hit on that slit before.”

“Yes,” said Stone, drily; “it’s queer we didn’t.”

“Anything more up your sleeve?”

“Yes, Mr. Cram, I have. I’ve no objections to sharing my findings with you, for you know the ground up here better than I do, and you know the people, more or less. Now, here’s my last clue. And, as I’ve often said, I don’t care much for clues that people drop about. But by that I mean such as handkerchiefs or bits of torn paper or a broken cuff-link. But if this was left behind by our vandal suspect who slitted that priceless piece of fabric, I hope it hangs him.”

From his notebook Stone produced three or four tiny blades of grass, short, chopped looking bits, and laid them carefully on the table.

“There!” he said, triumphantly. “They lay on the rug behind the tapestry, and if the murderer dropped those, then he came in from outdoors and not from the dinner table.”

"I dunno," and Cram scrutinized the grass thoughtfully. "S'pose he came around the house and in at the window?"

"Might have," Stone nodded. "Was the grass cut that day?"

"Easy to find out, from the gardeners. Then, there's Abbie again. Say she was in her room, and wanted to get into the room, behind that curtain. Wouldn't she come round the outside way, and in at the window, or the outside hall door? Cut grass, with the dew on it, is mighty apt to stick to your boot soles. Some clue finder, you are, Mr. Stone. I'll hand it to you. All I ask is to let me string along. Now, let's sift this thing a little more. How about Caley? He could have stepped outside and round and in at the window and landed up in his hiding place before Mr. Homer and his two lady friends arrived. You know when folks ain't looking for tragedy or trouble, they don't take notice of what others are doing. I'll bet Harrison or Abbie Perkins or Bingham——"

"No, not Bingham. He was in the doorway all the time."

"How do you know he was? Only because he says so. Most of our knowledge is unsupported testimony, you see. Pity the curtain hider didn't drop a few of those handkerchiefs or cuff-links that you despise."

"Here's another point, Cram. Harrison and Abbie both wear loud-ticking watches."

"Yes, I was waiting for you to catch that. Now which of them uses mothballs?"

"Mothballs?"

"Yes. Miss Kittredge is perfectly sure she detected the odor of mothballs. I believe she asked Abbie to hunt round for anyone in the house who had any clothing that had been packed away in them. But Abbie never succeeded in finding any."

"No, she wouldn't if they was her mothballs. Maybe Harrison had some of his togs done up in them."

"Maybe he did. Well, there's all I've found."

"And a lot, I'll tell the world! I'm all for Harrison. I can't think it of Abbie Perkins."

"Know anything about psycho-analysis, Cram?"

"No, and don't want to."

"Well, those who do, would tell you Abbie is a perfect suspect. She's a disappointed woman, Cram."

"Lord, I know that. What old maid isn't? But they don't go round stabbing folks because of that. She must have known Gaylord Homer would never marry her!"

"She may have hoped he would. I'm told there was—well, it was expressed as something between them."

"Shucks! Homer was that sort. I've known him for years. Always an eye for a pretty face or a slick figure. Yes, I know Abbie can't be described thataway, but he was a soft-hearted chap, and if he thought Abbie looked peaked or pinin' he'd chirk her up, mebbe kiss her, for all I know. But that was his way, that's all. And I make no doubt he remembered her in that will of his—if he made one. But she'd never kill him for that. If she did it, it was sure temporary mental aberration, and that's not often a real thing, though a term often used."

“All right. It’s up to us to hunt all this down and find out who could and who couldn’t have sneaked in behind that curtain.”

“And maybe all that messin’ up the carpet was done some other time.”

“Maybe it was. Now, don’t say anything about all this, though I know you won’t. If we tell of the slit in the tapestry, there’ll be a hullabaloo, and they will all poke their fingers in it and make the tear worse.”

“Or else they’ll poke their fingers in the pie and make it all dough. No, Mr. Stone, I won’t tell, but we must get busy. What’ll I do first?”

“Find out if the grass was cut on Friday, and if there was a shower or a heavy dew that evening. Find out, if you can, about the mothballs, but do this discreetly. Find out who saw Bingham in that doorway. It may be all talk, started by himself. You know, Cram, after all he’s the star suspect. I mean, he had the clearest motive. He was crazy about Miss Kittredge—they’re engaged already. He was wild for fear Homer would get her away from him. He knew, probably that Homer had made or was said to have made a will leaving the fortune to her. Oh, I know this sounds base, but we must study every angle.”

“Sure we must, Mr. Stone. What I want to know is whether the stabber stood behind his gashed curtain before or after his dirty deed.”

“Maybe before, maybe after, maybe both. Either Harrison or Abbie could have gone there unnoticed, then slipped back there, and emerged later when the shock of the tragedy occupied everyone’s attention. Those two are inconspicuous members of the household and could go and come unquestioned.”

“Wouldn’t all that apply to the butler, Wood?”

“I think not. He was clearing the table, he said, and if he hadn’t been, some of the servants would have disputed the fact. No, there’s no one else as I can see, who could have crept into this room without being observed.”

“I saw somebody,” said a high, shrill voice, and both Stone and the sergeant jumped.

Cram sprang to the French window, from which direction the voice seemed to come, and flung back the curtains.

There, her face pressed between the two glass doors, only slightly ajar, stood Polly Opdyke, peering in.

“Come in,” Stone said, half laughing, half annoyed. “How long have you been there?”

“All the time,” said Polly, calmly. “I heard every word.”

“You little scalawag,” Stone began, but paused as he saw the look of hurt surprise on her face.

“There was no reason why I shouldn’t listen,” she said, gravely. “I didn’t suppose you were talking secrets. I thought everybody wanted to know who killed Gaylord, and I thought maybe I could help. You see, I know.”

“Know who killed Homer?”

Polly nodded her head slowly, and her big gray eyes took on an inscrutable look.

“But I shan’t tell you,” she went on, “because you aren’t nice to me. I told you, Mr. Stone, that I have read several detective stories, and now I’m all set to help work on this case. And you treat me like a child!”

Her voice broke in a little sob, and Stone tactfully changed his attitude.

“Polly dear,” he said, “you are a child, at least you seem so to two elderly men like us. But we apologize if we have hurt your feelings, and we are glad to have your help. Though we’d rather you’d come to us openly, than to listen at windows. That isn’t nice, you know.”

“I know, and I wouldn’t in any other circumstances. But in detective work we have to sink our manners and our ideals, don’t we?”

“We do,” and Stone concealed his amusement. “Also, Polly, we have to work quickly. Now, if you know anything that can be of help, tell it quickly.”

“Yes, I know you have all those clues to trace down—track down, I mean.”

“Look here, Polly,” and Stone spoke sternly now, “understand you are not to mention to anybody, not to anybody at all, what you overheard. It was not a right thing to do, you are not a detective. But it can’t be helped now, and you are strictly on your honor not to tell. Is that understood?”

“Oh, yes, there’s honor among thieves, you know.” Her absolutely serious air made her speech all the funnier. “Well, I know who committed this crime.”

“Then out with it,” exclaimed Cram, who was greatly annoyed at the whole performance and didn’t know whether he wanted to arrest this nuisance or to spank her.

“Well, it was a man who wore a long linen duster and a broad-brimmed soft hat.”

“If you’re making this up, you’ll be sorry for your trick,” Cram exclaimed.

“I’m not making it up,” Polly said, with calm dignity. “I saw him.”

“Saw him commit the crime?” asked Stone, beginning to be bored by the child.

“No, saw the man.”

“Tell us about it.”

“We were at dinner, you know, and I sat between Mr. Harrison and Mr. Dare. Mr. Dare was at the end of the table, opposite Mr. Homer, of course. So, from where I sat, I could see through the breakfast room and out of its windows. And while we were having the ice cream, I saw this man come up to the house and look in at the window of the breakfast room.”

“A tramp?”

“No, not exactly. More like a country man. He only gave a glance in and then disappeared, toward the front of the house. I never thought of his being the murderer until I heard you just now, telling about someone standing behind the tapestry, so I knew he must be the one.”

Stone looked at Cram and Cram returned the look with interest. The hardened policeman considered the whole tale a pure fabrication, but Fleming Stone, better versed in the psychology of the youthful mind, was ready to bank on the truth of the narrative as Polly told it, whatever bearing it might have on the case.

“Tell us some more about the man,” he urged.

“There isn’t any more to tell. He was medium height, I guess, but I can’t be sure, ’cause I don’t know just how high the window is from the ground. I didn’t see his face well, for it was dark outside, of course, and lighted inside. But as he peered through the window, I caught sight of a smallish moustache, and I noticed particularly the wide-brimmed hat.”

“Gray hat?” asked Cram.

“Gray or light brown, I don’t know. I thought nothing about him, you see, from the time I saw him till now. I never dreamed of an outsider coming after Gaylord! I thought it must be one of those girls.”

Stone looked at her in perplexity. There was nothing of the smarty-cat about her. She showed no hesitation in telling what she knew and no desire to enlarge upon it. She seemed simply anxious to help, and had not the slightest appearance of shame or regret for her eavesdropping.

And but for one thing, Stone would have tossed the whole matter away as of no importance. And that one thing was his bits of grass.

If there had been such a man as Polly described, if he had crept into the house while the dinner was going on and had secreted himself behind the tapestry, he might have carried in on his boot soles some of the wet clippings of grass. That is, if the grass had been mowed that day!

A bit problematical, after all.

“Polly,” he said, “do you remember whether the grass was cut over here on Friday?”

“Yes, I know it was, because the noise of that old cutting machine bothered me so I had to stop my practising.”

“You’re sure, are you?”

“Yes, Mr. Stone, I’m certain. Mother wanted me to go back and practise, but I said I positively couldn’t till they got round behind the house.”

“And you can’t think of anything else distinctive about the strange man?”

“No, there was nothing distinctive about him. He seemed sort of old, but not real old.”

“Gray moustache, did you say?”

“I didn’t say, and I don’t know. But I think it was grayish.”

“All cats are gray in the dark,” murmured Cram, more and more disinclined to interest himself in this matter.

“It wasn’t very dark,” said Polly, meditatively.

“But dinner was over.”

“Oh no, we were eating the ice cream. If it had been anything else, I might have given more attention to the man. Then, we had coffee after that, and liqueurs and then we sat and talked and smoked, oh, it was some time before dinner was over.”

“Well, Polly,” Stone said, after a pause, “I don’t know just what to say to you. I still think you were a naughty girl to listen at a window, but it’s your mother’s place to mend your manners, not my place. Now, it may be you’ve given us a good tip, and it may not. We’ll have to see about that. But remember, if you’re to be one of us, a real detective’s helper, you must promise not to tell anybody a word of all this, and I don’t mean maybe. I mean honest injun, cross your heart and hope to never. Does that go?”

“That goes,” said the girl, solemnly.

“Then run along, now, and remember!”

She went off and the two men broke into laughter. “Out of the mouths of babes,” said Stone. But Cram said, “I fear it means her father.”

Chapter 15

It May Have Been Cale

THE situation was getting rather tense.

None of the house party guests had left as yet; some because they were not allowed to and some because they preferred to stay.

Bobbie Abbott wanted to stay until her husband came for her. Rollin Dare wanted to stay because it was a comfortable place and cost him nothing for board or lodging.

Diana, in her new-found happiness, cared little where she was so long as Bingham was there, too. And Marita was conducting a campaign that she fondly hoped would be successful and result in making her mistress of Twin Towers, with Albert Moffatt as its master.

Yet the presence of Fleming Stone kept them all in full realization of the situation and an uncomfortable atmosphere pervaded the place.

The household machinery ran smoothly, for Abbie was an efficient housekeeper and Wood a perfect butler. The under servants had no wish to lose so good a situation and they went about their duties as usual, but with eyes and ears alert to what was going on.

Cram was despondent, and more and more willing to shift the burden of the investigation to Stone. The two men were amicable and worked together without friction, but while Cram was anxious to arrest Diana Kittredge, Stone declared there was not sufficient evidence against her, which, in his heart, Cram already knew.

Now, the startling story of Polly and the man she saw from the dinner table gave a new angle to things.

Yet Stone doubted whether there was any real importance to it all. The man might have been a gardener or a neighbor or a mere passer-by, attracted by the gay scene of the dinner party, and pausing a moment to look in. Surely such a man could not have known of the tapestry, and of the hiding place it made.

And that brought it back to Cram's last suggestion. If a man from outside did come in and hide, with murderous intent, that man could have been only Dr. Opdyke. He lived next door, he knew of the legacy coming to his daughter, he was in debt, he wore habitually a wrist watch that ticked audibly enough to be heard in a silent room, and most damaging of all, he could stab a man more surely and quickly than anyone else who had been thought of in connection with the crime.

Also, if he had come from home, across the two lawns, he would naturally collect under the instep of his shoe the bits of cut grass that the dew had rendered moist and clinging.

Stone knew from past experiences how long bits of grass or clover will remain sticking to a boot sole. Yet, of course, a few moments of standing on a deep piled rug would dislodge them and leave them behind for evidence.

And somebody had done that. Somebody had stood behind that tapestry and rubbed the grass off on the carpet.

True, it could have been done previous to the fatal night, but it was unlikely, for what would have been the motive?

Stone went to the luncheon table with his mind full of this new view of the affair.

He knew the seat Polly had occupied at the dinner party, and he saw at once that the girl could have seen a man passing by or stopping at the window of the breakfast room.

He turned the talk in the right direction by referring to Polly and her ridiculous assertion that since she had read several detective stories she was now competent to help him.

"Lots of us could help you," Marita told him, her saucy eyes dancing, "but you scorn our aid."

"Not if it's worth more than the aid Polly offered," Stone returned, smiling back at her.

Few men could help smiling at Marita. Even though suspected of crime, the girl could not lose her charm, her wonderful allurements.

Fickle, without doubt, ready to forget the man she had loved so passionately for the new hero who had come into her life.

Moffatt had grown more accustomed to his surroundings, had settled into a sort of tentative ownership of the place, and had, with it, acquired a gentler manner, a more suave demeanor.

He had told Crawford repeatedly that he would never take over the estate so long as there was the least chance of finding the will. And he himself spent many hours ransacking the Tapestry Room and the study for the missing book.

They didn't search much for a document, as both Moffatt and Harrison felt sure the will was in the pocket of the book. The Opdykes, too, declared that Gaylord restored the paper to the book after they had witnessed it.

"I think Marita's judgment a trifle higher than the flapper's," Moffatt said, in response to Stone's smile. "I lean to detective work myself, as who doesn't nowadays? and I think our Spanish princess has a decided talent in that direction."

"Then do help me, Miss Moore," Stone begged. "I'm not the sort who makes a secret of his findings and I'm quite willing to be frank. Is there anyone," he looked inquiringly round the table, "outside this circle, outside this house, who could be imagined as concerned in this affair? Do you know of anyone who was enough of an enemy to Gaylord to get into the house unseen and commit the crime?"

A silence followed this query, but few eyes were turned toward the questioner. It seemed as if their glances, for the most part, strove to avoid his.

But Cale Harrison, for one, looked straight at Stone, and said:

"Have you anyone in your mind, or are you just putting up a man of straw?"

"I have a definite person in mind, but I hesitate to speak his name, unless there is definite evidence."

"Have you indefinite evidence?"

"I certainly have."

"Do you mean Dr. Opdyke?" asked Rollin Dare, quietly.

Dare said little, but when he did speak he not infrequently hit a bull's eye.

"Since you ask," Stone said, also quietly, "I do."

"Then you ought to be ashamed of yourself. To malign that good and honest man——"

"Steady on, Dare," Stone interrupted him. "In my profession, to mention a man's name, or even to suspect a man, is not to malign him. I am here to find out who killed Gaylord Homer. I shall do the best I can to accomplish that end, irrespective of whom I offend or annoy."

"Oh of course," and Dare looked sheepish. "I didn't mean to call you down, but, to imply the doctor's capability for such a deed——"

"His capability is beyond question, physically," Stone returned, calmly. "As to morally—who can say? Criminals, as a rule, are not the ones you expect such things of."

"Stone's right," said Cale Harrison, more decidedly than he often spoke. "We can't say this one or that one couldn't commit a crime. Now, I may know more than the rest of you about one phase of this thing, and that is the money side of it. As confidential secretary, I know that lots of Gaylord's friends were everlastingly at him for help. Financial help, I mean. And one of the most importunate and frequent callers was Dr. Opdyke. Gaylord gave and gave, until he became tired of it. Opdyke has a big practise, and why he is always short of funds I don't know. Any way, he refused the doctor the last two times, and the last time Opdyke went away very angry."

"Did he make any threats?"

"Yes, he did. He said Gaylord would be sorry he had turned him down."

"This is important evidence, Harrison, though, personally, I seldom suspect a threatener. As a rule the murderer doesn't threaten beforehand."

“You know more about that than I do, Mr. Stone. I’m only telling you what I know.”

“Then we may reason that Dr. Opdyke had motive and opportunity.”

“How, opportunity?” Moffatt asked.

“Well, living next door, as he did, couldn’t he slip over here while you were all at dinner, get into the Tapestry Room and hide there. Then, when the dark time came, slip from his hiding place, drive the dagger with a quick, skillful thrust and slip out, at the French window?”

“No,” Ted Bingham said, emphatically. “I was not far from that window and I know it was closed. It makes a fearful noise when it is opened—needs oiling, I guess. But anyway, your murderer never slipped out that window while I was there. And I was there all the time.”

“Also,” put in Moffatt, “where’s a hiding place in that room? It has no closet or cupboard except the book cases.”

“That’s true,” Stone admitted. “But it seemed as if there were several counts against the good doctor. One thing, he is a mothball addict.”

“Is he?” cried Diana, interested for the first time.

“Mothballs?” asked Moffatt, “where do they come in?”

“My pet clue,” Stone told him. “Or, rather Miss Kittredge’s clue. She noticed the delectable odor of the things at the time of the crime. She stated that, I understand, at the inquest. So we want a man who is a user of mothballs.”

“Aren’t we all?” murmured Dare. “My caretaker delights in stuffing them in my clothes the moment they are off my back.”

Stone looked at him with a new interest. He had given little thought to Rollin Dare, looking on him as a mere satellite of Mrs. Abbott.

“Then it’s a toss-up between you and Opdyke, Rollo,” Marita said, shaking her short black curls at him. “Oh, dear, Mr. Stone, do find out and settle the matter once and for all.”

“I want to. Now, then, all cards on the table. Polly says she saw a man looking in at the breakfast room window the night of the dinner. Says he was an oldish man with a gray moustache and a slouch hat and long linen duster.”

“The gentleman with a duster,” murmured Dare.

“Exactly. But could it have been the paternal Opdyke, on his way over here, doing a bit of scouting?”

“It could indeed,” Cale exclaimed. “I believe you’re on the right track, Stone, old man.”

Fleming Stone was frequently annoyed at the secretary’s familiarities, but he never showed it.

“Then help me on, Harrison,” he said. “Now, suppose the man Polly saw was her father, just slightly disguised, and suppose, seeing you all at the table, he dared to go in the front door and secrete himself in

the Tapestry Room, knowing Gaylord would come there from the dining-room. Now, where could he hide?"

Harrison looked blank.

"Not a place," he declared. "I can't think of any nook or cranny where he could hide. Can anybody?"

Nobody could, or at least, nobody did, and the matter was dropped.

But Stone had achieved his purpose. It was too absurd to think that Harrison didn't know of the vacant space behind the tapestry curtain. He knew, of course, of the concealed safe on the other side of the fireplace, and he must know of the corresponding vacant recess. None of the others need know of it, for it was inconspicuous to a casual observer. But Cale certainly did, and he was obviously bluffing.

"The room is so beautiful," Stone went on, "it's a pity it had to be chosen as the scene of a crime. I think tapestry and books the ideal furnishings for a wall. Far better than pictures and wall paper."

"The whole house is in perfect taste," chimed in Bobbie, and then the talk veered to general matters and detective work was laid aside.

But Stone resumed it later in the afternoon, when Crawford came over to have a talk about the situation.

The two went to the Tapestry Room and shut themselves in.

Remembering Polly's proclivities, Stone saw to it that the window was fastened and the shade left up that they might see approaching eavesdroppers.

Then Stone told the lawyer of the discoveries he had made in the room. He showed him the slit cut in the tapestry and the pressed nap of the rug beneath, as well as the bits of grass which he had found just where the pile of the rug was disturbed.

Crawford viewed these things in silence for a moment.

Then he sighed and said:

"So it comes back to Harrison. I feared it all the time."

"What about Dr. Opdyke?"

But Crawford flouted this. Not all Stone's list of charges, including the doctor's habit of coming to Homer for money, and his knowledge of the bequest to Polly had any effect on Crawford's opinion.

"Out of the question," he said, positively. "Opdyke is a careless man with money, he's an extravagant spender, he doesn't collect his bills properly, but he's as sound as a nut. Crime? He doesn't know the meaning of the word in connection with himself. No, Mr. Stone, put that out of your mind at once. I'd go bail for Eden Opdyke any day in the year. Now, this behind the arras business puts a new face on things. It looks like an outsider."

"Or an insider who wants it to look like an outsider," Stone amended.

"Yes, that's clever of you. And more likely. Say one of the household, the servants, I mean."

“Possibly, but the thing is almost too well done to be the work of a brain less than clever.”

“True, but a servant can be clever. Old Wood and Abbie Perkins are both clever enough, but they’re out of it.”

“Why?”

“Why, weren’t they engaged in clearing away the dinner? Had either been absent, the other servants would have said so.”

“Maybe not. And, anyway, Abbie says herself she was alone in her own room all through the dark time.”

“Well, then she’s accounted for.”

“By herself, yes. But that’s uncorroborated testimony.”

“I know, but—you don’t think Abbie did it! Why, that’s as absurd as Opdyke!”

“I have to look every way, Mr. Crawford. Many a crime has been committed by a trusted servant or an old retainer.”

“Yes, yes—well, you must play your own game. But Abbie! why she worshipped the ground Gaylord walked on.”

“That’s just it. And she adored him. And he adored Miss Kittredge.”

“Oho, I see. The fury of a woman scorned and all that. But, no, not Abbie Perkins. She knew her place. Try once more, Mr. Stone.”

The detective looked up in time to catch the sudden quizzical smile of the lawyer and understood it.

“Well, then—but stay, have you exonerated the two girls?”

“Yes; haven’t you?”

“Almost; practically, yes, since the discovery that someone must have hidden in this room. But, remember, there’s always the possibility of those grass blades having been there a long time. They were dry when I found them. Well, then, if I try once more, it must be Harrison.”

“Right! He’s your man. Do the grass blades fit him?”

“Why, no. That is, he could have left the dining-room first. Nobody seems to know in just what order they came out. At least no two stories agree about that. But say Cale came first, slipped into this room and hid behind that tapestry. He knew Gaylord’s habits, and he cut the slit—he’s quite capable of chopping into a museum piece—and stood there, fidgeting, as he always does. Nobody else would worry the carpet and curtains as he would.”

“All right, so far, go ahead.”

“Then—but I can’t think of Harrison, that rabbit! having the nerve to step out, when the dark came, grab the dagger and drive it into poor old Gaylord!”

“It’s those meek, repressed men who dare the wildest deeds sometimes.”

“I know it, and I suppose it is coming around to Cale. He, in that case, knows where the will is, and means to suppress it, so that he can get a snug position on here with Moffatt.”

“I don’t think you’ve hit off the motive yet, though. I think, if he knows where the will is, he’ll keep it safely until the time comes, and then he’ll sell it to the highest bidder. I mean he’ll approach Moffatt, very discreetly, and see if he’ll make it worth his while to keep it dark. If Moffatt scorns this sort of thing, and I believe he would, then I think Friend Caleb will carefully approach Miss Kittredge and tell her that for a consideration he will produce the document.”

“And she would tell him to vamoose instanter.”

“I’m not so sure. The will is legal and all that, and if it benefits her she wants that benefit. She is up against it, poor girl, with her sick father, and her straitened means. And now she’s engaged to Bingham, I hear, who is a lovable chap, but not a man of means. A promising sculptor, they say, but promises are poor pot-boilers. No, if Harrison has the will, he’ll merely pretend he has just found it, and she’ll doubtless give him a thank-offering.”

“And if he tells Moffatt first, you think Moffatt won’t compound a felony?”

“I’m sure he won’t. And Harrison must know that, too, unless he’s a fool. But if I’m mistaken, and Harrison and Moffatt should fix it up between them, they could destroy the will and live happy ever after.”

“If Cale killed Gaylord, he must have known where the will was.”

“It would seem so, unless they had some other quarrel; or unless Harrison mishandled some funds or something like that. Does he fit into all your clues?”

“He can be made to. What I want is some clue that will fit him and nobody else. Anybody so inclined, could walk on the wet grass, come in silently, hide behind the tapestry and then commit his crime and get out again or stay there until a good chance turned up to slip out unobserved. With his convenient peephole he could manage that, of course. Then he has a rather loud ticking watch, and of course, Rhoda’s stories could have been all made up at his orders.”

“In that case Rhoda knows his secret?”

“Maybe and maybe not. She may just suspect and frame an alibi for him on a chance.”

“What about the mothballs?”

“Do they stick in your crop? So they do in mine. But Dare said today that most people use them, so that’s not an exclusive clue either.”

“I don’t think most people use them. I’m sensitive to them, and I rarely come up against them. Well, how are you going to run down the mild-mannered and black-hearted villain?”

“Dunno yet. Harrison is not easy to interview. Either he gets his back up and acts stubborn or else he just baas like an imbecile lamb. But I shall put my mind to it and contrive what seems to me the best plan. Cram will be inconsolable to learn that you frown on the Opdyke suspect. He was sure he had struck a trail there.”

“Not in a thousand years. I say, Mr. Stone, you don’t think that accursed will book is here, do you? It might easily be among the volumes on these shelves.”

“It might be, but I don’t think so. Moffatt and I went over the lot, checking back on each other. I even watched him covertly for trick work, but there was none.”

“At any rate, I’m glad the two girls are out of the running.”

“Not quite that, but I’ve made a study of them, and I can’t pin a thing on them except their proximity to the victim.”

“I’ll tell you another thing. Ted Bingham thinks it’s Cale we’re after, or should be after.”

“All right, we’ll get after him.”

Chapter 16

Another Tragedy

FLEMING STONE was awakened rather early the next morning by a tap at his bedroom door. Observant of sounds, he thought it seemed like the tap of an alarmed or frightened person.

He flung back the coverings, slipped into a dressing gown, and opened the door.

Abbie Perkins stood there, her face more gaunt and drawn than ever, and her fingers nervously twisting her large white apron.

“Mr. Harrison, sir. Is he here?”

“Here?” Stone repeated, “why, no, he isn’t here. What has happened?”

“We can’t find Mr. Harrison.”

“Can’t find him? What do you want of him?”

“Nothing, but we wonder where he can be. His room’s not been slept in and he’s nowhere to be found. Won’t you do something, sir?”

Abbie was trembling with excitement and Stone began to think there was more reason for it than the temporary absence of Cale Harrison.

“You say his bed hasn’t been used?”

“No, sir. It’s turned down and all, just as Rhoda put it, but he didn’t go to bed at all. His pajamas is there, laid on the bed proper, but there’s no clothes lying around, and his brushes and things on his dresser haven’t been touched. So he didn’t go to bed, and where is he?”

“Must have gone to town late last night, unexpectedly, or something like that.”

“No Mr. Stone, that ain’t the explaining of it, that ain’t. You get yourself dressed and come along down, won’t you?”

“Of course I will. Be down in five minutes, Abbie. Ask all the servants if they heard or saw anybody leave the house late. Mr. Harrison was here when we all came upstairs, about eleven.”

Abbie disappeared and Stone made a rapid toilette.

He went downstairs, but first he went to Harrison’s room and gave it a quick but careful look over.

“If he’s done a bolt,” he thought, “that settles it. He’s the murderer of Gay Homer. He must have gathered that he was more strongly suspected of late, and he couldn’t stand the pressure. Just like him to run away. Now, what about the will! I hope to goodness if Moffatt falls into the property he’ll give Diana a slice—if she’d take it.”

Rapidly he took stock of the room. As Abbie had said, the bed was made ready but had not been touched. He stepped in the bathroom, and saw only clean towels and straightened brushes. It looked as if Cale hadn’t come upstairs at all after dinner, but Stone knew that he did come up with the rest, who had all chosen to turn in early. It was about eleven, he reflected, when they came upstairs and said good-night on the various landings.

As he looked about he could gather no idea whether Cale had left the house or merely gone downstairs or to the study. The latter seemed most probable, but of course Abbie or Wood must have looked for him there.

He wanted to hasten downstairs himself, but he felt this first examination of the room was too precious an opportunity to be lost.

He opened the doors of the clothes closets, but though he saw hats and sticks there, he had no means of knowing if any were missing.

The dresser gave no information, just the usual toilet implements, and all in straight rows, proving he had not prepared for bed at all.

He hesitated to open table drawers or cabinets, for if the explanation of Cale’s absence was a simple one, he would resent Stone’s intrusions.

So he gave it up and went out of the room. Passing the study, he saw the door was open and the room empty.

He went on downstairs and found Wood in the hall, calm and imperturbable as always, but to a close observer showing signs of suppressed anxiety.

“Oh Mr. Stone, sir,” he said, “whatever has become of Mr. Harrison?”

“What do you know, Wood?”

“Almost nothing, sir. He can’t have gone out, for here’s his hat and overcoat in the coat closet. He always kept these down here, besides what he had in his room. And yet, sir——”

“Well, what? If you know anything, man, for heaven’s sake speak out!”

“Well, only this. Martin, the second man, says he saw somebody leave the house by the front door just after he went upstairs. That would be about midnight. He doesn’t know whether it was Mr. Harrison or

not. He just saw from his window someone from the house go out the gate. He didn't notice much, only saw it was somebody from the house, and so he supposed it was all right."

"Call the man here," Stone said, and in a moment Martin appeared.

He could only corroborate Wood's statements and said he did see a gentleman leave the house and go out at the front gate at about twelve o'clock the night before. He didn't observe him closely, for he just assumed it was one of the guests of the house, and it was none of his business. No, he couldn't say whether it was Mr. Harrison or not.

"But you know Mr. Harrison well," Stone said.

"Yes, sir, but he passed under the trees as I saw him, and I can only say I didn't recognize him at all. It might have been any of the gentlemen who are staying here."

"Well, as Mr. Harrison is absent, it is strongly probable that it was he. You may go, Martin."

The man left them and Stone turned again to the butler.

"It must have been Mr. Harrison, Wood. He had an errand in the city and went off on the midnight train."

"But his hat and coat, sir?"

"Oh he has other hats and coats up in his room. I saw several there just now when I looked in."

"Yes, but he'd most likely wear these," the butler looked dubiously at the garments in the hall coat closet.

"Well, he'll telephone or come back or something soon. Breakfast ready?"

"No, sir, but if you'll step in the breakfast room, I'll hurry things along."

"All right, just give me a cup of coffee, and I'll go back and make a properer toilette."

Stone turned away, and for no especial reason strolled into the Tapestry Room. This room was not now kept locked, as the detectives felt there was nothing more to be learned from its evidence.

The morning sunlight filtered in between the curtains not yet drawn, and Stone crossed the room and pulled the curtains wide apart and rolled up the shades.

As he turned back he saw himself confronted with a fresh tragedy.

On the floor, behind the love-seat, lay the body of Cale Harrison.

Horried, Stone bent over it, not calling assistance, for he wanted to learn the facts for himself.

Harrison was dead, and from his breast protruded the handle of a dagger. It was of dull, discolored metal, and Stone recognized it at once as one he had seen in a curio cabinet in the room. The body lay on its back, and a moment's feeling of the heart told Stone it would never beat again.

Harrison wore the evening clothes he had on the night before, and Stone at once concluded either the secretary had not gone upstairs when the others did, or had gone up and come down again.

Without disturbing the dead man further, Stone quickly looked around the room. The butler would come soon, he knew, to call him to his coffee, and he wanted to examine the room while it was untouched by other hands.

But all his trained observation and his skilled powers of deduction availed him nothing. He could find no shred of evidence, no trace of a clue, no hint of the personality of the man who had killed Cale Harrison.

“Poor old chap,” he said to himself, “and we were just about to arrest him as a murderer himself. Though, to be sure, this doesn’t preclude that theory.”

And then Wood came to the doorway.

“My God!” he exclaimed, and turned a ghastly white as he looked at the man on the floor. “Another!”

“Yes, Wood, another. So you see, whoever it was that went out of the house last night, it wasn’t Mr. Harrison.”

“No, sir. But whoever it was it was the man who killed Mr. Harrison.”

“That we don’t know yet. Now, I’ll lock this door, Wood, and keep the key. Don’t say anything about this quite yet in the kitchen. Let the breakfast go forward quickly, and I’ll take my coffee while I have the chance. Go upstairs and ask Mr. Moffatt and Mr. Bingham to come down as soon as they can. Don’t bother Mr. Dare. And send Abbie to me.”

Wood obeyed all orders as quietly and promptly as they had been given, and Abbie Perkins came at the summons.

“I told you so,” she said, in a quivering voice. “I knew something happened to Mr. Harrison.”

“Yes, it has. Did Wood tell you?”

“I wormed it out of him. He couldn’t keep a secret from me.”

“Well, everybody must know it soon. Now, you go up and tell the ladies. Tell them as gently as you can, and let them do as they wish about coming downstairs. If they’d rather breakfast in their rooms, very well, but they must be down when the police get here.”

“Good Lord! The police again!”

“Not again, really, they’re still here. But another job for them certainly.”

And then Wood reappeared with a fresh shock for them.

“Mr. Bingham isn’t in his room, sir, and his hat and coat are gone.”

“What are we coming to?” Abbie moaned.

“The end of it all, I hope,” said Stone, gravely. “Wood, cut over next door and bring Dr. Opdyke back with you. Don’t give the alarm over there, though, and don’t let that ridiculous Polly person come over here.”

“Very good, sir,” and Wood went off.

“Now, Abbie, I suppose you’ll have to tell Miss Kittredge that Mr. Bingham is not in evidence, though I don’t in the least think that he is killed, too. And as things look pretty serious I reckon you’d better get everybody up. There’ll be more or less excitement all day.”

Stone drank his coffee, with a brooding look in his deep eyes. He wondered where Bingham had gone and why. The obvious answer was that Ted was the murderer and he had fled. But why would he kill Harrison? Unless—and Stone began to see a ray of light, unless Harrison had found the will and destroyed it. Yet, no, even though he had cut Diana out of her rightful inheritance, Bingham wouldn’t kill for that. To be sure, Cale had been hunting the Tapestry Room a lot lately for that will book, and he had hunted the study too. Stone had seen him more than once searching among or behind the books there.

Hearing a step, he looked up to see Moffatt and Rollin Dare coming in. As they took their seats at the table, Dr. Opdyke arrived.

“What’s this?” the doctor cried, “another victim? Harrison dead?”

“Yes, doctor. Suppose you go into the Tapestry Room and make your investigation, and then come back here and have some coffee.”

Opdyke hurried off and Wood went with him.

“Do tell me the details,” urged Moffatt, his eyes staring with horror and curiosity. “How was he killed?”

“With a dagger,” Stone said. “Not the one that killed Gay, the police still have that. But there are three or four more daggers in that room, on the stands and in the cabinets. This one used, is a dull, old-looking affair.”

“I know it,” Rollin Dare said “a hilt of ebony or teak, with dull bronze ornamentation.”

“Yes, that’s the one. Cale lies on the floor, with that dagger in his breast. That’s actually all I know.”

“Where, on the floor?” asked Moffatt.

“Back of the love-seat, where Gay sat. Between it and the mantelpiece.”

And then a silence fell, and each man seemed lost in thought till Dr. Opdyke reappeared.

“I’ve little to tell you,” he said. “Harrison died probably about two or three o’clock. I can’t put it nearer than that. He was struck squarely through the heart, evidently by somebody who stood facing him. He fell rather in a heap but on his back. The dagger is still in the wound, I left it for the coroner to see. So far as I can judge, Harrison does not seem to have put up a fight, but of that I’m not positive. Were the lights still on this morning?”

“Not when I went in the room,” Stone said. “I opened up the window and let in the light, that’s the first I knew about it. We must ask the servants whether the lights were on. But of course they were not, or they would have seen the body and raised an alarm.”

“Of course,” the doctor agreed. “Well, the police must be notified at once. Some of you chaps look after that, and I’ll go over home and tell my wife. No, no coffee, thank you, I’ll get along home.”

Stone had already telephoned for Cram, and the police sergeant came shortly.

"I'm glad you're here, Mr. Stone," he said, gravely. "This continued story of murders is too much for me. Now, we have the whole performance to do over again."

"I'm afraid we have, Cram," Stone agreed. "You'll have to get the coroner here, and there'll have to be an inquest and all that."

"Of course. And I'll send some men over here to take charge. All the people in the house must stay, and we must follow up Mr. Bingham. Any idea where he went?"

"No," Stone replied, "and we don't know that he went willingly. He may have been forced to go by the people who killed Harrison. Don't assume that Bingham left of his own accord."

"Oh come now, Mr. Stone, it seems to me an open and shut case."

"But sometimes, Cram, openness and shutness are very deceptive. But go on, reconstruct."

"Too easy. Mr. Harrison came downstairs in the night and went into the Tapestry Room to hunt for that confounded will. I'm thinking there is a big bequest for him in it, for he's been hunting for it right along, steady. Well, then Mr. Bingham heard him down here, sized up what he was after and came down to see about it. Then they quarreled or had a row of some sort, and Mr. Bingham stabbed Mr. Harrison. Maybe in self defence. Anyhow the thing happened and then Bingham was so shocked and frightened at his own deed, he just bolted."

"Plausible enough," said Moffatt, who had been listening, "but short sighted on Bingham's part. He must know that to run away is equivalent to a confession. And how can he come back? And how can he stay away? No, I think Bingham too sensible a man to try that dodge."

"What do you think, then, Mr. Moffatt?" Stone asked.

"Hard to say at present. But it seems to me the work of an outsider. It may be a burglar got into the Tapestry Room. You know the newspaper stories have played up the curios and treasures in there. Say an expert thief set out to steal some of the rare books or art objects. And Cale heard him and came downstairs. Then a struggle ensued and Cale got the worst of it. I think that's all more likely than to suspect Bingham of murder."

The women came into the breakfast room as Moffatt voiced this opinion.

Diana, hearing the last words, turned white and sank into a chair at the table.

"What are you talking about?" she said, in a low, moaning voice. "Where is Ted?"

"We don't know where he is," Stone told her, speaking gently, but feeling it was better for her to know the truth at once.

"But isn't he in the house?"

"No, or at least, we can't find him."

"Then he has gone down to the village, or something of that sort," Diana said, keeping her poise, and looking calmly at each in turn. "Perhaps to send a telegram or something."

“Very likely,” Moffatt agreed, and then as Marita entered, he rose to give her a seat next his own. Fresh coffee was brought and then the news of Cale’s death was circulated and discussed.

Marita was visibly affected. She burst into tears, and though Bobbie tried to comfort her, she was beyond consolation.

At last, Moffatt induced her to go for a stroll in the gardens with him, and the two went off.

“I don’t see why Marita is so terribly cut up,” Dare observed. “She threw Cale over long ago in favor of Moffatt.”

“Maybe Marita knows something—something evidential,” Bobbie said, rather proud of her technical word.

“She’ll have to tell it if she does,” Stone said. “I’m glad she went off for a while. Her temperamental moods are hard to manage. Now, does anyone know anything about this whole matter? Either Harrison’s death or Bingham’s disappearance? Please speak out if you do, for the thing is going to be hard enough to handle, and we’ll be glad of any help we can get.”

“I don’t know a thing about it,” Diana said, speaking clearly and slowly. “But I do want to know where Ted is. Do you think, really, he’ll be back so soon, Mr. Stone?”

“I think there’s no use raising false hopes,” Stone said, gently. “I think possibly Mr. Bingham has gone down to the city. It seems Martin, the second man saw someone leave the house about midnight, and it may have been Bingham.”

“Why in the world would he go away at midnight?” exclaimed Diana, her sky-blue eyes opening wide in surprise. “Ridiculous! Perhaps it was somebody else. But someone left here about twelve o’clock last night. Who else could it have been?”

“It was the murderer, of course,” Diana declared. “But Mr. Bingham was not the murderer. That is certain!”

“Then he’ll probably turn up soon,” Stone said. He spoke absent-mindedly, and finishing his coffee, he excused himself with a word and left the table.

“Carry on, Cram,” he said as he drew on a light overcoat. “I’m going down to the village a few minutes.”

He left the house, and commandeered a small car from the garage. He drove it himself and went straight to the railroad station.

A few questions proved to his mind beyond all shadow of doubt that it was Ted Bingham who had taken the midnight train to New York. The ticket seller was the day man now, but he gave Stone the address of the night agent and Stone telephoned him.

Not at all pleased to be awakened, he growled out his responses. But learning the identity of his questioner, he became more amenable and declared it was Mr. Bingham.

“Yes,” he said, “I know him. He’s been here several times before. He was a great friend of Mr. Homer. Good-looking chap, acts as if he owned the earth, but willing other people should walk on it.”

This pretty well described Ted, and Stone chuckled. “Tall and fairly heavy?” he said.

“Yep, and goldy hair, little bit curly, but a real he-man all right.”

“That’s the chap,” Stone sighed. “Did he seem nervous or upset? Or just natural?”

“Oh, just natural. Well, maybe a little bit jumpy.”

“Sure he took the train to New York?”

“Sure. Dunno where he left it, though.”

“We’ll get that from the conductor. Many thanks. Good-bye.”

“Good-day, sir.”

Then Stone happened to catch sight of the gawky rustic who had driven him over to Twin Towers the day of his arrival.

A slight effort of memory brought the name to his mind, Jed Farley.

“Hello, Farley,” he said, going toward him. “Want to do me a favor?”

“Sure, sir, if so be’s it helps you and don’t hender me none.”

“Well, then cast your mind back to the night Mr. Homer was killed. Remember it?”

“Like as it was yesterday, sir.”

“Well, that night did anyone come into New Warwick on the midnight train?”

“No sir, they didn’t. I waited around all evenin’ for a fare, but nary a one turned up.”

“What, not earlier in the evening, either?”

“No, sir, not a passenger offen the trains wanted the use of a fust-class bus like mine, that whole endurin’ night.”

“Nobody got off of any train?”

“Well, yes, a few stragglers got offen trains, but nobody who was hankerin’ to ride. They all seemed possessed to walk.”

“Who were they, some of them?”

“Oh, well, nobody you’d be likely to know. There was the Murdocks, comin’ home from a theater party, and Mr. Ellsworth and Mr. and Mrs. Greer, and——”

“Anybody you didn’t know?”

“Nope. Or well, they was a couple, an old man and an old woman. But I didn’t notice them much. They dropped offen a train long ’bout ha’past nine or so and they struck off across the tracks towards the country.”

“Towards Twin Towers?”

“No, the other way. Towards the Highway. I never saw ’em again.”

“What did they look like?”

“Oh, I disremember. She looked like a workin’ woman and he—well he looked a mite tastier. Had on a soft hat, kinder broad brimmed, and a linen duster, or mebbe ’twas a light overcoat. I dunno. Anyway, they didn’t go to Twin Towers, if that’s what’s interestin’ you.”

“Nothing interests me just now that hasn’t to do with Twin Towers.”

“Then cut out them two old critters.”

“Do you think they were a married pair?”

“Land! How could I tell that? I don’t keep a bureau of vital statistics!”

Chapter 17

The Man With Jane Black

A MURDER and inquest in a house is an upsetting and nerve-racking affair. But when the affair is duplicated and all the wearing details of inquiry and inquest have to be gone over again, it is well-nigh unbearable.

Twin Towers was again in the hands of the police. Again Coroner Hale was carrying on his interminable questionings.

The women were on the verge of nervous breakdown and the men were chafing at this new delay of hoped-for departure.

To be sure, none of them had any real affection for or even a deep interest in Cale Harrison. He was, to all of them, merely Homer’s secretary. But no one can see a fellow human being forcibly removed without a feeling of regret and sympathy and a righteous indignation against the criminal.

Marita, of course, was almost in hysterics. True she had discarded Harrison for the more profitable Moffatt, but her excitable temperament moved her alternately to bursts of wrath and tumultuous weeping.

To her surprise Moffatt wasn’t quite as attentive to her as she thought he should be. In fact, he somewhat neglected her in favor of Fleming Stone.

“What did you find out?” he asked Stone, on his return from the railroad station.

“There’s practically no doubt that Bingham went to New York last night on the midnight train,” Stone told him. “Or, rather, that he took that train. Whether he left it before reaching New York, we don’t know yet. I keep hoping the chap will turn up. It’s all a strange case, Moffatt. I don’t know just where we stand.”

“Yes, this new blow is unlooked for, and I can’t understand it. Have you any clues?”

“No finger prints or cuff-links,” Stone said, with a grim smile. “But until Ted returns, he will, of course, be more or less suspected.”

“You don’t suspect him?”

“Not in a thousand years!”

“Yet somebody drove that dagger into poor old Harrison. I say, Mr. Stone, let me help on this thing. I may not be much good, but I’ll work under your orders. Isn’t there something I can do?”

“Yes, find that will, or will book. Then find out who was the man Polly saw while she was at dinner——”

“What man? I never heard of him!”

“Oh, just a prowler, I suppose. But for the moment, you’d better see what you can do for Miss Moore. She’s on the edge of her nerves.”

“I’ll try to calm her, and then perhaps you’ll have thought of something I can do to help along.”

Coroner Hale was at his wits’ end. He questioned everybody he could get hold of, but he learned absolutely nothing illuminating as to the death of Harrison or the disappearance of Bingham.

Cram was searching the Tapestry Room with zeal but with non-success.

Stone went in there after him, and closed the door. The coroner had finished his examination of the body and given permission to have it taken away to the mortuary.

“How about the slit tapestry and the foot-marked carpet this time?” Cram said.

“They don’t seem to cut any ice in this case,” Stone returned, gloomily. “There is absolutely nothing resembling a clue to this murder.”

“That means a mighty clever brute we’re trying to track down.”

“It does. And I can’t help thinking the same hand is responsible for both murders. I don’t suspect Bingham at all, do you, Cram?”

“I won’t say that, but I’ll reserve judgment till I can talk to him. He’s the only one I can think of, except, of course, Miss Kittredge, who has an interest in finding that will. Now it must have been the will Harrison was down here looking for, because it couldn’t have been anything else. He could search the study when he liked, but he couldn’t poke around in this room, unseen. And naturally, he didn’t want his continued searching noticed. I’m sure there was a good big sum left to him in that will, for Homer thought a lot of him. And doubtless he told Harrison of it, for those two were here alone most of the time, you know.”

“I can understand Cale’s everlasting hunt for the will, but I don’t get Ted Bingham in the game. I think he had nothing to do with the whole affair, and he had some sudden errand in town, and he came downstairs and went off without going in the Tapestry Room at all.”

“Pure conjecture, but you’ve a right to that. What about Dr. Opdyke?”

“He’s always hovering in the background, of course. Well, between you and me, Cram, Coroner Hale won’t find out much more about this case than he did about Homer’s. So it’s up to us to get busy and solve the mysteries.”

“Mr. Moffatt is very anxious to help. What do you think of him?”

“He certainly seems concerned over Cale’s death. In a way, though, he is head of the house, and as there seems to be less and less hope of finding a will, he’ll have to come into the property. He told me if he did, he should offer a handsome settlement to Miss Kittredge.”

“I hope she takes it,” Stone said, heartily. “It would be foolish of her to refuse. And yet, I don’t see how she can, when she didn’t care for Homer. It would be different if they had been an engaged couple.”

Moffatt came tapping at the door then, and Cram let him in.

“Glad to see you, sir,” he said. “I suppose we may as well look on you as head of the house, for in the absence of a will, the property must come to you.”

“I suppose so,” Moffatt sighed as he took a chair near them. “I confess I would rather have had Gaylord’s will found, whatever its contents. For this unsettled condition is far from pleasant to me. I little thought, when he was talking to me about it, that things would turn out like this.”

“Just what did he tell you?” Cram pursued.

“Said he had concluded to make a will, leaving the bulk of his estate to Miss Kittredge. Said he would leave me a fair slice. And said he meant to make his own will.”

“That was just a whim, of course.”

“Yes, he was full of whims. Then he showed me the book, but I wasn’t much interested in it, and paid only slight attention.”

“At that time he hoped to win Miss Kittredge?”

“He certainly did. I think he had no doubt she would accept him.”

“You’ve looked all over this room for the will book?”

“Yes, I have. I’m sure it’s not on these shelves. And Harrison told me he was sure it was not up in the study. So there we are.”

“Lucky you have an alibi for the night of your cousin’s murder,” Cram said with a nod of his head.

“Alibi? Why, no, I haven’t an alibi. Oh, well, I’ve told where I was, of course, but do you know, the word alibi to me suggests a cooked up yarn.”

“You’re right, Moffatt,” Stone said, approvingly. “An innocent man doesn’t have an alibi. Oftenest he can’t remember where he was at the critical time.”

“I remember all right, for you know they asked me about it the very next day. But, after all, my evenings are pretty much alike, or were, before these tragic times began. I go to the movies usually twice a week. I

go to the club two or three times a week, and other nights, I just sit at home and read or write letters. Except for a two weeks' vacation in the summer, and my infrequent visits to Gaylord up here, I've always been a great homebody. If I do fall into this estate, I shall lead the same sort of simple life, even in this great house. My tastes don't run to gayeties much."

"But your wife's tastes may," and Cram smiled.

"Referring to the little Senorita?" Moffatt asked, good-naturedly. "Oh, I think she's only playing with me. But I want to do some real work on this case," he continued in a serious tone. "I wish you chaps would give me a definite assignment."

"Detective work is seldom done by definite assignment," Stone told him. "But I'll offer you this job. Find out who came here the night of Gaylord's party and looked in the window of the breakfast room, while the guests were at dinner."

"That's the man you spoke of before. Tell me more of him."

"We don't know much about him. Polly Opdyke saw him——"

"Don't you know, Mr. Stone," Moffatt smiled a little, "girls of that age are very apt to make up sensational yarns?"

"That's true enough," Stone agreed. "It may well be the child imagined she saw the man, or she may have even made it up for mischief."

"Not exactly mischief," Moffatt said, "but in a spirit of——"

"Exhibitionism," prompted Stone.

"That's the word I wanted! It's a phase of adolescence that leads youngsters to say or do something to get in the limelight."

"Yes, it's a well known condition. And Polly may have been romancing. But you take the matter up, will you? I can only tell you that the chap she saw had on a linen duster and a slouch hat and wore a moustache, rather gray."

"Observant child!" murmured Moffatt. "All right, I'll take on the commission and see what I can do about it. Anything else?"

"Only to find the will," Stone smiled at him. "But that, I think, is hopeless."

"Maybe not. I wish to Heaven it could be found. I daresay you think I'm insincere in my statements, but I tell you honestly, I'd rather have no share in the property than to get it without good and sufficient legal authority."

"Don't worry, Moffatt. If it comes to you, it will be because there's no other way to arrange matters."

After this confab, Fleming Stone set out in search of Abbie Perkins.

He found her in her own sitting-room, a pleasant place, back of the breakfast room.

She was nervous and jumpy, with a tear-stained face and quivering lips.

“Somebody else dead?” she asked, in a hollow voice as Stone appeared.

“No Abbie, and I hope there won’t be. Now, try to be more composed. I want to talk to you. Do you know of any old or elderly couple, who would go to New York and come home late or fairly late in the evening?”

“Land, no, I don’t believe there are any folks like that in New Warwick. I’m s’posin’ you mean common folks, not swells?”

“Well, say, good, simple country people, an old couple.”

“No, there just aren’t any.”

Stone looked at her, uncertain whether she was sincere or trying to shield somebody.

“You seem positive,” he said.

“I am. I’ve lived here all my life and I know all the people of my own sort. And there’s none like that. There’s a woman, old Mrs. Black, she’s been traipsin’ down to town a lot of late, to see her granddaughter, who’s sick. And once in a while she might come home late at night, but there wouldn’t be a man with her. No sir-ee, not with Jane Black! No, I don’t know of any couple. Why?”

“Never mind why. Has the coroner talked with you yet?”

“Land, yes. Long ago. And all the rest of us. But we didn’t know anything. Exceptin’ Martin, of course, who saw Mr. Bingham go out. Oh, Mr. Stone, don’t let ’em hang that nice Mr. Bingham! And it’d break Miss Diana’s heart!”

“We can’t hang him till we catch him, Abbie. Where do you think he is?”

“He went on some arrant for Miss Di, I’m thinkin’. But why he went off in the middle of the night, is more’n I can guess.”

“Don’t try. Somehow I think Mr. Bingham is innocent of crime and will be proved so soon. Now, brace up, and keep hold of yourself. Go and see if you can do anything to help the ladies.”

Stone left the room, and crossing the hall, looked in for a moment at the group around the coroner, in the lounge.

With his usual lugubrious face and funereal aspect, Hale was questioning his squirming victims. He thought it his rôle to make everyone feel guilty, whether he was or not, and he shot questions at them, without cessation.

Knowing he would get a full report of all this later, Stone found his coat and hat and in the small car set off again for a talk with Jed Farley.

He knew, none better, that unless a person is interested in a passer-by, he can’t remember details about him, and he had small hopes that Jed had noticed the people he wanted to know about. But it was worth trying, and by good luck, Stone found the cab driver idle at the rank.

“Just a question or two, Farley,” he said, cheerily. “And it’s about that old couple you saw that night and paid no attention to.”

“What night?”

“The night of Gaylord Homer’s death. An elderly couple who got off a late train.”

“Oh, yeah. Well, they wasn’t so elderly, and it wasn’t so late.”

“That so? Now, can’t you place them? Can’t you think who they were or could have been?”

“Well, it’s a queer thing, but since you mentioned the matter, I’ve been thinkin’ over that pair. And it might have been old Jane Black, but she’s been a widder for years and years. And she wouldn’t have a man with her.”

“Might have been a neighbor, who happened along on the same train.”

“No, Jane Black ain’t got any neighbors. No, I don’t get it. But that’s all I can tell you. It couldn’t of been Jane, with a man, and I don’t know anybody else it could of been. So there you are.”

“Yes, there I am. Now, where does Jane Black live?”

“Oh, just over that way, down the road a piece. But you won’t get anything outa her, and she’ll bite your head off besides.”

“I’ll risk my head,” laughed Stone and started his car in the direction indicated.

He soon reached the home of the redoubtable Jane, and rang the bell with a feeling that he was about to find out something in spite of Farley’s predictions.

The small place was immaculate and the woman who answered his ring was most neat and tidy, but with the expression of the old lady in the poem, who “lived upon lemons and buttermilk.”

A sourer faced dame Stone thought he had never met.

But with his most deferential air, he inquired if he spoke to Mrs. Black and if he might enter.

“What do you want?” she asked, in curt, bitten-off words of inhospitality.

Stone changed his tactics.

“I represent the law, madam, and it is for your own interest to tell me what I wish to know.”

This succeeded better, and with a trace of fear on her gaunt old face she made way for him to come in.

She led the way to a tiny parlor and offered a chair.

“It is nothing alarming,” Stone tried smiling at her once more, “but I am obliged to discover whether you went to New York on the evening of April fourteenth.”

“I don’t remember dates like that, how long ago?”

“Two weeks ago tomorrow.”

“Why, yes, I guess I did. Say, was that the day Mr. Homer was killed?”

“That night, yes.”

“Well, then, yes, I was down to town that day. Why?”

“What time did you get home?”

“I came on the train due here at nine-thirty.”

“Was it on time?”

“Why, yes, I guess so. I don’t know for sure.”

“Who was with you?”

“Nobody. Nobody never’s with me.”

“But I was told a man accompanied you from the train.”

“Nothing of the sort! Who dares to say a thing like that about Jane Black?”

Her old eyes snapped, and her scrawny throat knotted itself into cords with her indignant grunts of disdain.

“But think back. Some man did step off the train with you.”

Sudden recollection dawned in her eyes.

“Yes, that’s so. I don’t know who he was, but he did step off right along behind me. He didn’t bother me none, but he asked me the way to the Highroad. That was just the way I was goin’, and he took a step or two ’long by my side. Then he sorter fell back, like he didn’t mean to trouble me, and I thought no more about it. If he’d kept on speaking to me I’d have given him his comeuppance, but he just fell away like and I didn’t see him again.”

“What did he look like?”

“Land, I didn’t notice him. Didn’t so much as glance at his face.”

“Well, how was he dressed?”

“I don’t know that, either. Or, yes, he had on a long light coat——”

“A linen duster?”

“Land, no. More like a light spring overcoat.”

“And his hat?”

“Lemme see. Seems like it was a biggish hat. But I didn’t notice. I can’t tell you another mite about him, ’cause I didn’t take notice. Me never dreaming I’d be questioned about him! Who was he?”

“We don’t know. Now just one more thing. Did you notice the odor of mothballs?”

“Why, yes, I did. How’d you know that? Not strong, but I noticed it. Well, anything more?”

“No, thank you, Mrs. Black, and I’m much obliged.”

“Oh,” Stone turned back as she was closing the door, “did he have a moustache?”

“I don’t know! I didn’t look at him, I tell you!”

The door slammed and Fleming Stone went away well satisfied with his interview.

“Bless that Diana and her mothballs!” he said to himself. “I do believe we’ll avenge Gaylord by those things!”

He went home full of hope and found that Ted Bingham had returned.

“Well, old chap,” Stone said, grasping his hand, “you gave us a scare. We thought you had been kidnapped.”

“Pity I hadn’t been,” Ted returned. “Then I’d have an alibi. As it is, I’m suspected of doing in Cale Harrison.”

“Oh, well, we ought to be able to fix that up. Come in here with me.” Stone led him into the little breakfast room, and closed the door. “Where’ve you been?” he said,

“I’ll tell you. I suppose I was a chump, but I got a notion about who killed Gay, and I couldn’t rest till I tracked it down.”

“Tell me all about it.”

“I know it’s foolish, but I had a suspicion of Moffatt.”

“Moffatt!” exclaimed Stone, but keeping his voice low.

“Well, Diana was so set on the mothball business, that I thought it would be grand if I could pin the mothball onto somebody. And Moffatt was the only one I could think of. So I was lying there in bed last night and I was possessed to go down to Moffatt’s place and trace it out. So I did. I didn’t dream it would raise such a rumpus. I just put on my hat and walked out of the front door in time to catch the late train. Then I went to my diggings when I got to New York, and early this morning I went to Moffatt’s home and interviewed his landlady. That’s all.”

“Did it get you anywhere?”

“Nowhere at all. The old woman said Mr. Moffatt never liked mothballs. Said he found one once that she had put in his blankets or something and he made quite a row about it, and told her never to do such a thing again. I asked if I might go into Moffatt’s rooms to get a book he had asked me to bring him. She made no objection, showed me the rooms and went off and left me. I played sleuth, but there was nothing

to find. All his things were in the neatest order and even his papers and things in his desk were in apple-pie trim. I hunted all over to find some clue or bit of evidence against him, but nothing doing.”

“What in the world made you suspect him?”

“Well, he had a motive.”

“Oh, Bingham, why he cares almost nothing about the inheritance.”

“Well, honestly, Stone, I was at my wits’ end to think of some way to look that didn’t lead to Diana! Or Marita. But I think those fat-headed policemen have discarded Marita for Di. And, I tell you, I’m scared to death. Why, if they take the notion, they can railroad Diana right through! There’s no other suspect—and I must find one—I must!”

Bingham had a wild look in his eyes and his fingers nervously intertwined themselves.

“Oh I know you’ve done all you can, Stone. You’re a wizard and all that, but even a wizard has to have something to bite on. And you haven’t. I’ve no more idea who killed Gay this minute than I had in the beginning. And now, if they accuse me of Cale’s death, they’ll probably tack Gaylord’s on me, too.”

“Yes, Ted, I fear they will.”

“Then I’m glad of it! If I swing for it, that will set Diana free, and that’s all I care about.”

“No calm down—be sensible. You’re not accused yet, but you’re going to be questioned, and soon, too. What are you going to say?”

“Say? The truth.”

“Oh, come now, don’t say you went down to the city to pry into Moffatt’s affairs. They’ll all be down on you then. But be sure to say just what time you went, for they have set Cale’s death at about two or three o’clock, and that lets you out. It’s your only chance at an alibi.”

“I shall tell the truth,” repeated Bingham, doggedly.

And then the coroner sent to summon him.

Chapter 18

The Solution of the Whole Matter

STONE stayed out of the lounge, where Hale was conducting his investigation, and started for the Tapestry Room, which place he found most conducive to thought on this tangled case.

He was not very well pleased with himself. He felt that he had not made the rapid strides toward success that he usually did accomplish. He knew he had had little to work on, but he had hoped for inspiration that didn’t come. He set it down in part to the fact that he was working on the case of a dear friend, and he argued that he couldn’t do as good work as he could in a disinterested affair.

Cram met him in the hall and turned with him to the Tapestry Room.

Stone detailed his interview with Mrs. Black, but Cram wasn't greatly interested.

"Pretty ridiculous," he said. "A man going away from Twin Towers asks the way to the Highroad, just in the opposite direction from this place. Then he goes about his business. No, I can't see anything there. And as to Polly's man, I'd as soon believe a fairy story made up by one of my own youngsters. No Mr. Stone, we're on the right track now, with Bingham and Miss Kittredge both involved. They have motive, Miss Kittredge wants the money and he wants the girl. I had a talk with Miss Kittredge and she told me what a wonderful sculptor Bingham is, or promises to be, but alas, he has no money. If he could study abroad, he would be a world shaker after a while."

"But she never would have said all that to you, Cram, if she had killed a man for the sake of getting that money they want!"

"Oh well, we argue round in a circle. Wait and see what Hale gets out of Bingham. It's pretty sure Bingham knows who killed Harrison. He must know, when he was poking around the house about midnight. Now, I must go back to the seat of war. Coming?"

"No. You see that careful notes are taken. I'm going out for a while, can't stay in this house. It's too oppressive."

"All right, I'll look after things."

"Wait a minute, Cram. What about Moffatt?"

"What about him?"

"Yes, as a suspect?"

"No, I've ploughed that field thoroughly. He was my pet candidate, but I've been to his rooms in New York, and I've interviewed his cronies and I've hunted through all his belongings, and there isn't a trace of suspicion anywhere possible. His business associates, his club fellows, his landlady, all give him the warmest praise, and set him down as a quiet, decent, honest citizen. A bit dull, some of his acquaintances say, but thoroughly reliable. And his cronies check up his story of that evening. He met them at the club, as he said, and told them the story of the movie he had seen, an animal picture, you know. And I even went to the picture house, and saw the ticket girl. She knows him well, and remembered his coming. No, there's not a shred to hang on that man. He's as quiet as they come. Why, his very rooms are quiet. When I was there, I noticed how quiet they were. And that reminds me, you know that I telephoned Moffatt that first night, perhaps an hour after Mr. Homer died. Well sir, I could hear his clock ticking over the telephone. That shows how quiet his place is."

"Yes," Stone sighed, "he is a quiet man. And he seems sincere in not being crazy to inherit the estate. But I guess he'll get it all the same."

"Of course he'll get it, and he ought to have it. He says he'll look out for Miss Kittredge."

"She won't take anything."

"Don't be too sure of that. I've heard of these folks who wouldn't take money, and then——"

"Oh, hush, Diana Kittredge is a superior woman. I know that. But she has an invalid father, and she wants Bingham to pursue his art studies. She'd sacrifice her pride for those two men."

“Maybe.”

“That is, if she gets out of this scrape. I tell you frankly, Mr. Stone, unless you trump up some other suspect, and a good one, too, mighty soon, it’ll be black days for Miss Kittredge and Mr. Bingham, too.”

“When will the inquest be? Tomorrow?”

“Yes, probably. Hale’s rushing his preliminary investigation through.”

“Go along, then, Cram, and be sure to have a verbatim report made especially for me. I’ll see you later.”

Unheeding the group in the lounge, Stone went upstairs and hurriedly prepared for a trip to New York.

Once there, he went to Moffatt’s home.

The landlady, a Mrs. Bindle, seemed none too glad to see him.

“I suppose it’s all right,” she said, grumblingly, “but I wish Mr. Moffatt would send some word if he wants people going through his things all the time!”

“Why,” said Stone, affably, “who has done it before?”

“Who hasn’t done it before?” she cried. “Policemen and a man early this morning,—sitting on the door step he was, when I came here! And now you.”

“Well, I assure you it’s all right. You see Mr. Moffatt is an important man now. His cousin is dead, and he may be the heir to all the property. So he can’t be running about to attend to trifles, and we do it for him. Now I’ll take a look in his rooms to see if I can find the paper he asked me to bring him. You needn’t wait.”

“Indeed, I won’t wait. I have my work to do. Tell me when you’re through and I can lock his doors.”

So Fleming Stone embarked on the voyage of investigation that had already claimed the attention of others.

But the results were much the same.

Everything was in perfect order. Books were stood in neat rows, papers folded in tidy piles, and the desk a very model of immaculate order.

In the bedroom it was the same. Clothes in closets or dresser drawers all placed just so, ties, handkerchiefs, gloves, all wearing apparel just where it should be.

Pipes, cigarettes, tobacco, all in their proper receptacles.

Stone gave a grunt of annoyance.

“Who could find a clue in a place like this?” he exclaimed to himself. “Not even a scrap in the wastebasket! Well, I guess Moffatt is a blank draw. Which way shall I look next?”

He gave one last survey of the clothing and toilet implements, and left the room.

Finding Mrs. Bindle, he gave her the keys and stood talking a minute.

“Not but what I’ll be glad for Mr. Moffatt to come into money,” she said, “but I’ll miss him here. He’s the best roomer I ever had. Quiet and decent and makes no trouble at all.”

“And generous?”

“Oh yes. He gave me this,” touching an ornament she was wearing, “and he’s free enough with tips to the servants.”

“That reminds me,” Stone said. “Mr. Moffatt wanted me to see the—what do you call him—janitor? porter?”

“Oh, you mean the handy man, Thomas. Well he’s around back. Go round if you like, but I’ll have to see to my baking,” and for the second time that day Fleming Stone had the door slammed at him by a woman.

Smiling at this coincidence he sauntered round back and came upon one who was most evidently the Thomas in question.

“Oh, here you are,” Stone said genially. “I say, Mr. Moffatt asked me to give you a little tip. Said he forgot it when he was here last.”

“Forgot it, did he? Well, the more the merrier.

He held out a grimy hand and Stone gave him a noble douceur.

“Guess Mr. Moffatt gives you other things, too, eh?”

“No,” said the man, wonderingly. “No, he don’t, ’ceptin’ a coat once, he never gave me nothin’, barrin’ some chicken feed now’n then.”

“Oh, well, it doesn’t matter. I’ll tell him that I saw you.”

Smiling, Stone turned away, and made briskly for the nearest corner to hail a taxi.

Except for a short stop at a public telephone booth, Stone went directly to the station and took the train for New Warwick.

It was when he was about halfway there, that he had a brilliant idea, so brilliant that he emitted a long, low whistle, and made several people look round in surprise.

But his grave, ascetic face made them feel uncertain that he was the whistler, and they promptly forgot the incident.

“For the love of Mike!” exclaimed Stone to himself, for he used slang only in soliloquy, “if that isn’t one clever dodge! I can’t wait to get there! That clears up everything, I believe! And there was I innocently rummaging through Moffatt’s belongings! Well, I must be getting in my dotage.”

Back at Twin Towers, Stone went in search of food, and though it was mid-afternoon, Wood and Martin saw to it that he had a satisfactory repast.

Then he went to the Tapestry Room, took precautions to lock the doors and draw the curtains. But in less than a minute he had the curtains open and the doors unlocked again, and the severest scrutiny could not have detected the slightest change in the room or its contents.

Slowly Stone sauntered across the hall and went into the lounge.

He took a seat near the door, next to Diana.

As he looked at her, and noted how sad and despairing she looked, he permitted himself to touch her hand and give her a whispered word of cheer.

But she only returned a wistful glance and sank back into her pathetic apathy.

Coroner Hale was floundering on, getting nowhere at all beyond the first and undeniable facts, when Stone, taking advantage of a pause, said, slowly:

“Mr. Coroner, I think I am prepared to present some evidence, which may turn the tide of suspicion in a new direction. Shall I do so now?”

“I wish you would, Mr. Stone,” and the worn and harassed coroner gave a sigh of relief. “I am glad to listen to any well authenticated evidence.”

“It may be rather a long story,” Stone said, “as I must go back to the first crime committed here, the murder of Gaylord Homer.”

To say that everybody present became alertly attentive would be putting it very mildly.

Diana and Bingham drew a little closer to one another, and she let her hand steal into his.

Marita’s face was expectant, yet a bit fearful, and the others showed varying expressions of surprise and interest.

“I was not here at that time,” Stone went on, “but those of you who were here can correct me if I am wrong. I am prepared to give you, if not the name of the murderer, at least sufficient data to allow you to supply the name yourselves. As you know, the circumstances of that first crime were strange, even dramatic. The fact that there were only the dead man and the two girls in the room when the lights flashed on would make it seem that one of those girls must have done the deed.”

“Which one was it?” asked Moffatt, his eyes wide as he awaited the answer.

“I have not said it was either of them,” Stone returned, in his low, level voice. “I said it seemed so.”

“I prefer that Mr. Stone should not be interrupted save by myself or Sergeant Cram,” the coroner announced.

Moffatt acknowledged the rebuke with a good-natured nod, and Stone went on.

“When I came up here and heard the particulars of the case, I thought it over and came to this conclusion. Either one of the two girls in question committed the crime, or it was the work of some outsider who gained entrance to the Tapestry Room. For all the rest of the household were known to be in certain places where the commission of the crime would be impossible. A single exception might have been Mr.

Harrison, and he will be considered, though as he is now the victim also of the murderer's dagger, it seems to eliminate him.

"By a reconstruction of the crime, I, of course, knew as well how the matter stood as if I had been present. Learning, therefore, that Miss Kittredge stood between the love-seat and the doorway to the hall, I soon saw that unless she moved from that position before the crime, nobody could enter from the hall. But if she moved from that position during or after the crime, somebody could get out through the hall. I was told by Miss Kittredge that she did move backward when she smelled the mothballs. For that odor is most distasteful to her, and she naturally drew back. Therefore, somebody could go past her and into the hall after the stabbing but not before. And this is exactly what happened. Somebody was already in the Tapestry Room before Mr. Homer and the two ladies went in there."

"In the room!" the exclamation burst involuntarily from Marita.

"Yes; concealed behind the tapestry curtain at the left of the fireplace. This somebody was the murderer, waiting there for the dark time. He stood behind the curtain, but he cut a little slit or peephole, that he might see into the room. Also, he stood there so long that his boots made press marks in the deep pile of the rug, and, moreover, his nervous fingers plucked at the side of the curtain, leaving visible marks."

"Finger prints!" exclaimed Moffatt, "how interesting!"

"Not fingerprints in the police sense of the term. But creased marks, which may be seen, as they are still there. This man, then, stood there in concealment until the dark time came. At that moment, he knew exactly where everyone was, also where the dagger was. And bear this in mind. When he stepped out from his hiding place, he, being accustomed to the darkness behind the curtain could see better than one whose sight has just been cut off by the elimination of a bright light. Then knowing just where to find it, he grasps the dagger, and in a few seconds has driven it home to its fatal mark. Then he glides past Miss Kittredge, who has drawn back a little, and he steps into the hall and out of the front door."

"Cale!" murmured Marita, her face scared and her voice a mere whisper.

Stone made no reply and went on with his narrative.

"Now, it is impossible to mistake the identity of this man because he left so many positive clues behind him. Moreover, he was seen. It was during dinner that Polly Opdyke saw a man steal up and look in at the window of the breakfast room, which she could see, of course, between the pillars that divide that room from the dining-room.

"Polly described him as an oldish man, with a gray moustache, a wide-brimmed hat and a linen duster. A man answering this description was also seen by two other people and his identity has since been learned. Incidentally, he wore a rather loud ticking wrist watch, which is what Miss Moore thought to be a clock ticking. Also, this man wore a garment which was strongly scented with the odor of mothballs, which Miss Kittredge noted. Also, and most important of all, this man had the greatest possible motive, from his own point of view, for the removal of Gaylord Homer. Now shall I tell you his name, or will you tell me," Stone looked around at the awed group, "or—will he himself confess?"

A silence fell, which lasted so long that Stone spoke again. "It would seem that he does not mean to confess, so I suppose I must say his name."

Ted Bingham looked miserable. Diana but a little less so.

Stone suddenly realized that Bingham thought he was the accused man, and he spoke out involuntarily:

“Good Lord, Bingham, not you! Moffatt!”

At this, Albert Moffatt roused to fury. He changed in an instant from the mild-mannered, suave gentleman, to a raging brute. Two men waiting in the hall sprang to seize him and pinioned his arms and held him firmly. But so unmanageable did he become, they had to resort to handcuffs.

He flung at Stone abuse and epithets. He jeered at Bingham, and even threw spiteful remarks at the two girls.

But as they were about to remove him, Stone bade them pause.

“One moment, Moffatt,” he said, calmly. “Before you go, tell us where the will book is.”

A leer of cunning passed over Albert Moffatt’s face.

“That you will never find,” he shouted.

“Oh I don’t know,” Stone said, and stepping to the Tapestry Room, while they all breathlessly waited, he returned with the will book, and showed that in the pocket of its cover was the will of Gaylord Homer.

He handed it over to Cram, who put it in his pocket.

Moffatt’s face became fairly livid with rage. “Where did you get that?” he shouted. “Where did you find it? How did you think of it? Oh, if I could get at you, Fleming Stone!”

And then, fairly frothing at the mouth, he was half led, half carried away.

“A clever villain if there ever was one,” Stone said, looking at the others.

“My work is done, I suppose, Mr. Stone,” Cram said, “but I wish you would tell us a few more details of your discoveries.”

“I’ve told you most,” Stone said. “You see, Moffatt is that terrible thing that Poe called a monstrum horrendum—an unprincipled man of genius. He is a man of genius, but genius in a wrong direction. He planned out this great coup long ago. He laid all his wires and, in fact, planned his whole life to this one end. He knew he was the only heir. If Homer died intestate the property must all be his, and he set to work to bring it about. But he overreached his own ends. He builded not wisely but too well.”

“What do you mean by that?” asked Bingham, greatly interested.

“Just this. He planned to live such a simple, blameless life, that when the time came nobody could suspect such a colorless, commonplace man of a great crime. But he overdid it. Bingham went to his rooms and found everything in such order that he was amazed. I went down there and found it all so perfectly in order that I suspected it was done on purpose. Now, he was the man in the linen duster. A false moustache and a slouch hat changed his appearance completely, though he mightn’t have been recognized anyway. Note his cleverness. He got off the train that night at half past nine, stepped along by an old lady, that passers-by might think they were companions. He asked her the way to the Highroad, just opposite to his real destination. Then, after she answered, he slipped away, turned and came over here and reached here about nine-forty, glanced in the dining-room to be sure the coast was clear and then slipped into the Tapestry Room and behind the curtain.

“But—before doing so he pulled off the cleverest bit of all. He picked up the will book from the table, and hid it——”

“Where?” came in a chorus.

“He took a play, ‘The Blue Bird,’ from the shelf, took off its paper jacket, put the jacket on the will book, and put it on the shelf among the plays. ‘The Blue Bird,’ he put on the same shelf without a jacket. So, we all looked over the books again and again, but didn’t take down any of the plays or novels. In fact we took down no books that were distinctly lettered. We looked behind books and we peeped into books about whose titles we were uncertain, but not those we felt sure about. I just bethought me of this possibility as I came up in the train this afternoon. I am an imbecile not to have thought of it sooner.

“There were other clues. One of the best was a few blades of grass dried and found lying on the floor behind the tapestry. These I felt sure were left by the murderer if he had walked across the lawn, which had been mowed that day.

“Well, he had, and I also found a few dried grass blades on the soles of one of Moffatt’s shoes in his room in New York, this afternoon. That was a slip on his part. They were up between the heel and sole. It is astonishing how long such bits remain. And then, too, if you please, there was his landlady wearing a wrist watch which she said Mr. Moffatt gave her recently. Of course, it was his wrist watch which Miss Moore heard, and also Sergeant Cram heard it over the telephone when he gave the information of Homer’s death. And the handy man this afternoon, told me of a coat Moffatt had given him. That was the light overcoat—it wasn’t a linen duster, though it was thought to be—and of course Moffatt gave it away because it smelled of mothballs, an unusual condition for his clothing, as he disliked the odor.

“No, a made-up story won’t stand the test. Truth can be knocked about and come out victor. But a lie, once it begins to be tracked down, must fail. Moffatt worked too hard to make his alibi perfect. He made it too convincing.”

“What about his alibi?” asked Bingham, suddenly.

At that point Cram returned, having seen his prisoner safely on the way to jail.

“What about it, Cram?” Stone asked, “did you dig it out of him?”

“Oh, yes, he babbles about everything as if he was proud of it.”

“Such distorted minds are proud of their deeds,” Stone said, sadly. “A criminal is an exhibitionist and he admires his own work. What about his movie stunt?”

“Oh, he had it all timed to the minute. Went to the movies, as he said, at half past eight. Then, if you please, he makes his slight changes in the darkened theater, clips on his false moustache, gets up, gets into his long light coat, and dons his soft hat, sticking his cap in his pocket. Out he slips, catches a taxi, makes the nine-ten train, gets here at nine-thirty, to the house at nine-forty, into the Tapestry Room at once and waits behind the curtain watching through the slit; then he does his fell work in two minutes of the dark time and is out of the front door before the lights are on again. Doesn’t dare risk the station again, so goes back to New York by trolley and taxi, and is at his club soon after the theater is over. Goes in and meets his friends and tells them all about the picture which he really saw a few nights previous! Then home and to bed, and is awakened—if he could sleep!—at midnight by me, calling on the telephone that his cousin is dead! What a brain!”

“Devilish!” said Stone. “I can’t regret anything that is coming to him. Now as to Harrison.”

“Yes,” said Cram, “Moffatt fessed up to that. Still cocky and proud of his exploits. It seems, he heard Harrison come down stairs last night—long after you left the house, Mr. Bingham—and he sneaked down after him to see if he was after the will. Well, he was, and he found it, Harrison did, I mean, and so Moffatt grabbed another dagger and did for him. My, I’m glad that fiend is off the earth, or as good as!”

“I wonder,” Stone said, “if he was at the bottom of that foolery one other night at the dark time——”

“Yes, he was,” Cram replied. “He chuckled over it. Said he held his watch outside the window so you’d hear the ticking and be scared. He gave a gasp, too. He had come to the house on an errand for Miss Moore, and grabbed his chance.”

“And another thing he did,” Stone declared, “was to suppress that letter he said he’d mail to Pitt. I telephoned Pitt this afternoon, in New York and found that out.”

“Is there no end to that man’s baseness?” exclaimed Bingham. “I can’t stand any more. Come, Diana, come out with me for a walk in the garden, do.”

“Wait,” and Stone smiled, “till you hear the contents of Gaylord’s will. You’re the most interested parties.”

To the surprise of none, all of Homer’s estate was left to Diana, except for some generous bequests to the servants and certain charities.

Diana had no qualms about accepting it now, as it could not benefit Moffatt in any case and there were no other natural heirs.

So she went with Ted into the garden, happy and at peace for the first time in many weeks, and quite ready to accept his suggestion that they strive to forget the worst man they had ever known, and to think only loving thoughts of Gaylord, who had made possible their happy future.

“Funny about the will book, Mr. Stone, wasn’t it?” said Cram. “I’m just dumb enough never to think of the disguising jacket, but it fooled you, too.”

“It did,” Stone said, frankly. “It’s the oldest dodge known to history. You know, Poe’s Purloined Letter was worked by that game. They hid the important letter right in plain sight, on the desk, so everybody overlooked it! Here, we all pawed over those books on the shelves and probably saw the cover on the book we were hunting a dozen times, but, of course, thought nothing of it. Oh, Moffatt was a clever villain, but he did smell of mothballs and he did walk across the freshly cut and dew-laden lawn and left his blades of grass behind him. Well, one can’t think of everything, as the man said, when he went to the woods to chop down trees and forgot his axe.”

THE END

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