

THE MEREDITH MYSTERY

Natalie Sumner
Lincoln

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Title: The Meredith Mystery

Author: Natalie Sumner Lincoln

Release Date: January 2, 2019 [eBook #58597]

Language: English

Character set encoding: UTF-8

START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE MEREDITH MYSTERY

E-text prepared by Roger Frank and Sue Clark

Note: Images of the original pages are available through Internet Archive. See <https://archive.org/details/meredithmystery00nata>

THE MEREDITH MYSTERY

“GIVE ME THAT KEY!”

THE MEREDITH MYSTERY

By NATALIE SUMNER LINCOLN

Author of "The Cat's Paw," "The Unseen Ear," "The Red Seal,"
"I Spy," "The Moving Finger," etc.

A. L. BURT COMPANY
Publishers New York

Published by arrangement with D. Appleton & Company
Printed in U. S. A.

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Printed in the United States of America

TO
MARIE LOUGHBOROUGH CHAMBERLAIN

*A kind tender heart, and a true loving friend
Are God's best gifts—from beginning to end.*

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THE MEREDITH MYSTERY

CHAPTER I

THE TEMPTATION

Anne Meredith looked at her mother, appalled. "Marry David Curtis!" she exclaimed. "Marry a man I have seen not more than a dozen times. Are you mad?"

"No, but your uncle is," bitterly. "God knows what has prompted this sudden philanthropy," hesitating for a word. "This sudden desire to, as he expresses it, 'square accounts' with the past by insisting that you marry David Curtis or be disinherited."

"Disinherited—?"

"Just so"—her mother's gesture was expressive. "Having brought you up as his heiress, he now demands that you carry out his wishes."

"And if I refuse—?"

"We are to leave the house at once."

Anne stared at her mother. "It is too melodramatic for belief," she said, and laughed a trifle unsteadily. "This is the twentieth century—women are not bought and paid for. I," with a proud lift of her head, "I can work."

"And starve—" Mrs. Meredith shrugged her shapely shoulders.

Anne colored hotly at her mother's tone. "There is always work to be found—honest work," she contended stubbornly.

"For trained workers," Mrs. Meredith supplemented.

"I can study stenography—typewriting," Anne persisted.

"And what are we to live on in the meantime?" with biting irony. "The savings from your allowance?"

Again the carmine dyed Anne's pale cheeks. "My allowance," she echoed. "It has kept me in clothes and a little spending money. But you, mother, you had father's life insurance—"

“My investments have not turned out well,” Mrs. Meredith looked away from her daughter. “Frankly, Anne, I haven’t a penny to my name.”

Anne regarded her blankly. “But your bank account at Riggs’—”

“Is overdrawn!” Walking swiftly over to her desk she took a letter from one of the pigeonholes. “Here is the notification—see for yourself.” She tossed the paper into Anne’s lap. “If you refuse to accede to your uncle’s wishes, we leave this house *beggars*.”

Beggars! The word beat its meaning into Anne Meredith’s brain with cruel intensity. Brought up in luxury, with every wish gratified, could it be that want stared her in the face? Her gaze wandered about the cozy boudoir, and she took in its dainty furnishings, bespeaking wealth and good taste, with clearer vision than ever before. With a swift, half unconscious movement she covered her eyes with her fingers and found the lids wet with tears.

Rising abruptly she walked over to the window and, parting the curtain, looked outside across the well-kept lawn. The giant elms on the place gained an added beauty in the moonlight. From where she stood she glimpsed the Cathedral, resembling, in the mellow glow from hidden arc lights, a fairy palace perched high upon a nearby hill, and far in the distance the twinkling lights of Washington, the City Beautiful. It was a view of which she had never tired since coming to her ancestral home when a tiny child.

The historic mansion, set in its ten acres, from which it derived its name, had been built by a Virginia gentleman over one hundred years before. He had occupied it with lavish hospitality until his death, after which his widow, a gracious stately dame with the manner and elegance of the *veille cour*, had led Washington society for many years. The wits, beaux, and beauties of the early nineteenth century, the chief executives, as they came and went, the diplomats and American statesmen, together with every foreigner of distinction who visited the capital city had been welcomed there, and as one Washingtonian whispered to another:

“A passport viséd by St. Peter would not be more eagerly sought by some of us than admission to these dear old doors.”

The prestige which clung to beautiful Ten Acres was one of the reasons which had induced John Meredith to purchase his brother’s share in it and, as his fortune grew with the years, to renovate the colonial mansion and make it one of the show places within the District of Columbia. With the exception of a wing added to increase its size, he had left the quaint rooms and corridors untouched in their old-time simplicity.

From her chair by her desk Mrs. Marshall Meredith watched her daughter in silent speculation. A woman of the world, entirely worldly, she had seen to it that Anne, her only child, had been provided with the best of education in a convent in Canada. Upon Anne's graduation a year before, she had prevailed upon her brother-in-law, John Meredith, to give her a trip abroad before she made her debut.

John Meredith's pride in his pretty niece had intensified with her success in society, and once again Ten Acres had become the center of social life. Diplomats, high government officials, and residential society sought eagerly for invitations to the banker's lavish entertainments, and Mrs. Meredith's pet ambition—a titled son-in-law—seemed nearer attainment.

Like a bolt from the blue had come Meredith's extraordinary interest in David Curtis, a patient at Walter Reed General Hospital, his invitation for a week-end visit to Ten Acres, and now his ultimatum that his niece marry David Curtis within a week or leave his house forever.

Mrs. Meredith's outlook on life was shaken to its foundations. Her frayed nerves snapped under the continued silence and she rose as Anne turned back from the window and advanced to the center of the room. She looked very girlish in her pretty dressing gown which she had donned just before her mother sent for her to come to their boudoir, and her chestnut hair, her greatest glory, was still dressed as she had worn it that evening at dinner. Her mother switched on another electric light and under its direct rays Anne's unnatural pallor was intensified.

"It is cruel of Uncle John to force such a marriage," she declared.

"You will agree to it?" The question shot from Mrs. Meredith. Anne shook her head. "But think of the alternative—"

"There may be *but* the one alternative." Anne had some difficulty in speaking and her voice was little more than a whisper. "Suppose—suppose there was an unsurmountable obstacle—"

"An obstacle—of what kind?"

"A—a previous marriage—"

"Good God!" Mrs. Meredith stepped back and clutched a chair for support. "You don't mean—Anne—!"

"That I might be already married?" Anne's soft voice added flame to her mother's fury. Stepping forward she gazed sternly at her daughter.

"No; it is not possible," she declared. "I know every incident in your life. The

good Sisters kept a strict watch, and you have never been away from my chaperonage since you left the convent. You cannot avoid your uncle's wishes with such a palpable lie." In her relief she laughed. "Anne, you frightened me, silly child."

"And what are your feelings compared to mine?" Anne raised miserable, agonized eyes and gazed straight at her mother. "Uncle John demands that I marry David Curtis, and you, mother, are playing into his hands for this most unnatural marriage—"

"Unnatural—?"

"Yes. You both wish me to marry a stranger—a blind man."

"Say, rather, a hero blinded in the late War."

"Cloak it in any language," Anne's gesture of despair was eloquent. "Oh, mother, I cannot marry him."

"Cease this folly, Anne, and pull yourself together," Mrs. Meredith's voice was low and earnest. "I have been to your uncle this evening, and he has agreed that this marriage with David Curtis is to be a marriage of convenience only; and yet, ungrateful girl that you are, you forget all that I have dared for your sake."

Anne recoiled. "For me?" she said bitterly. "Oh, no. You love luxury, wealth, power, and by sacrificing me you can attain your desires. You wish to force me to marry this blind man—to make a mockery of the marriage vows by assuring me that the ceremony is all that is required of me. Do you think God smiles on such vows?"

Her mother stepped to her side and seized the girl's hand. It was marvelous how her long, slender fingers could compress the tender flesh. Anne uttered a cry of pain, then threw back her head and met her mother's furious glance with an amount of resolution which amazed her.

"I am more than six years old," she said quietly. "And I am subservient to your will only because you are my mother and I am not yet of age. If I must do this abominable thing, let it be done immediately."

Mrs. Meredith dropped her hand. The passion died out of her face and the smooth, handsome mask covered it as before.

"I am glad that you have recovered your senses," she said in a calmer voice. "Your uncle has retired for the night, not feeling well, but Sam Hollister is waiting in the library to learn your decision."

Anne shrank back. "Sam knows—" she gasped.

"Certainly; he has been your uncle's confidential lawyer for many years,"

replied Mrs. Meredith. "Sam was present this evening when your uncle disclosed his wishes to me regarding your marriage."

"And why was I not present also?" demanded Anne, stepping forward as her mother walked toward the hall door.

"Because John has a horror of hysterics," she stated. "He has often told you that he never married because he dreads a tyranny of tears," and going outside she shut the door with a firm hand.

Anne stared at the closed door for a full minute, then walked unsteadily over to the couch and threw herself face downward among the sofa pillows. Not until then did her clenched hands relax.

"Uncle John, how could you? How could you?" she gasped and her voice choked on a sob.

The grandfather clock in the big entrance hall to Ten Acres was chiming eleven when Mrs. Meredith pulled aside the portières in front of the library door and crossed its threshold. At her almost noiseless entrance a man standing with his back to the huge stone fireplace, which stretched across one end of the large room, glanced up and made a hasty step forward. With characteristic directness Mrs. Meredith answered his inquisitive look.

"Anne has consented to marry David Curtis," she announced and stopped abruptly, her hasty speech checked by Sam Hollister's upraised hand.

"Doctor Curtis is here," he said, and indicated a lounging chair upon their right.

Mrs. Meredith faced David Curtis as he rose and bowed. In the brief silence she scanned him from head to foot. What she saw was a tall, well-set-up man, broad-shouldered and with an unmistakable air of breeding. Ill health had set its mark on his face, which was pale and furrowed beyond his years, but the features were fine, the forehead broad, and the sightless eyes a deep blue under their long lashes.

The lawyer broke the pause. "Doctor Curtis has just informed me that he cannot accede to Mr. Meredith's wishes regarding a marriage with your daughter," he said. "He will tell you his reasons."

Mrs. Meredith's face paled with anger. Hollister, watching her, felt a glow of reluctant admiration as he saw her instantly regain her self-control.

"Your reasons, Doctor Curtis?" she asked suavely. "Pray keep your seat. I will sit on the sofa by Mr. Hollister."

David Curtis, with the instinct of location given to the blind, turned so as to

face the sofa.

“Your daughter, madam,” he began, “is a young and charming girl, with life before her. I”—he hesitated, choosing his words carefully—“I have to start life afresh, handicapped with blindness. Before the War I had gained some reputation as a surgeon, now I can no longer practice my profession. Until I learn some occupation open to the blind, I cannot support myself, much less a wife.”

“But my brother-in-law proposes settling twenty-five thousand dollars a year each upon you and Anne after your marriage,” she interposed swiftly. “It is—” she hesitated and glanced at Hollister. “Have you told him?”

Hollister bowed gravely. “It is to be a marriage in name only,” he stated. “You can live abroad if you wish, Curtis. Meredith only stipulates that this place, Ten Acres, is to be occupied after his death for two or three months every year by you both, and never sold.”

“And Mr. Meredith’s reasons for wishing this marriage to take place?” demanded Curtis. “What are they?”

Hollister shook his head. “I do not know them,” he admitted. “John told me to tell both Anne and you that he would state his reasons immediately *after* the marriage ceremony. I have known John Meredith,” the lawyer added, “for nearly fifteen years, and I know that he always keeps his word.”

Curtis’ sensitive fingers played a noiseless tattoo on the chair arm. “It is too great an injustice to Miss Meredith,” he objected.

“But the alternative is far more unjust,” broke in Mrs. Meredith. “My brother-in-law has announced that if this marriage does not take place, he will disinherit Anne. She has never been taught any useful profession; she is delicate in health—her lungs,” her voice quivered with feeling. “If this marriage does not take place Anne will be a homeless pauper. Upon you, doctor, rests the decision.”

She was clever, this woman. She instinctively seized Curtis where he was vulnerable; she appealed to his kindly heart and the human interest which was part of his profession.

The seconds ticked themselves into minutes before Curtis spoke.

“Very well, I will go through with the ceremony,” he said, and Mrs. Meredith had difficulty in restraining an exclamation. Hollister read rightly the relief in her eyes and smiled. He had no love for the handsome widow. She rose at once.

“You will not regret your decision, Doctor Curtis,” she said, and turned to Hollister. “Will you tell John?”

“If he is awake, yes; if not, the news will keep until to-morrow.” Hollister

concealed a yawn. "Good night, Mrs. Meredith," as she walked toward the entrance. Curtis' mumbled "good night" was almost lost in her clear echo of their words as she disappeared through the portières.

"Coming upstairs, Curtis?" asked Hollister, pausing on his way out of the library. "Can I help you to your room?"

"Thanks, no. I've learned to find my way about fairly well," answered Curtis. "I'll stay down and smoke for a bit longer."

"All right, see you in the morning," and Hollister departed, after first pausing to pick up several magazines.

In spite of his statement that he was fairly familiar with his surroundings, it took Curtis some moments to locate the smoking stand and a box of matches. While lighting his cigar he was conscious of the sound of voices in the hall, which grew louder in volume and then died away. He had resumed his old seat and his cigar was drawing nicely when a hand was laid on his shoulder.

"Sorry to startle you," remarked the newcomer. "I am Gerald Armstrong."

"Yes, I recognize your voice," Curtis started to rise, but his companion, one of the week-end house guests at Ten Acres, pressed him back in his chair.

"I only stopped for a word." Armstrong hesitated as if in doubt. "I've just learned of—that you and Anne Meredith are to be married."

"Yes," answered Curtis as the pause lengthened. "Yes?"

"You are going through with the ceremony?"

Curtis turned his head and looked up with sightless eyes in Armstrong's face.

"Certainly. May I ask what affair it is of yours?"

"None," hastily. "But you don't know Anne—"

"I do."

"Oh, yes, you know that she is the only daughter of Mrs. Marshall Meredith and the niece and reputed heiress of John Meredith, millionaire banker," Armstrong's usually pleasant voice was harsh and discordant. "As to the girl herself—you are marrying Anne, sight unseen."

With a bound Curtis was on his feet and Armstrong winced under the grip of his fingers about his throat.

"Stand still!" The command was issued between clenched teeth. "I won't hurt you, you fool!" Shifting his grip Curtis ran his sensitive fingers over Armstrong's face and brow. He released him with such suddenness that Armstrong, who had stood passive more from surprise than any other motive,

staggered back. "Go to bed!"

Armstrong hesitated; then without further word, whirled around and sped from the library.

Curtis did not resume his seat. Instead he paced up and down the library, dexterously avoiding the furniture, for over an hour. At last, utterly exhausted, he dropped into a chair near the doorway. His brain felt on fire as he reviewed the events of the evening. He had promised to marry a girl unknown to him three days before. He would marry her "sight unseen." God! To be blind! Fate had reserved a sorry jest for him. What could be the motive behind John Meredith's sudden friendliness for him, his invitation to spend a week at Ten Acres, and now his demand that he and Anne Meredith go through a "marriage of convenience"?

And he had weakly consented to the plan! Curtis rubbed a feverish hand across his aching forehead. Forever cut off from practicing his beloved profession, with poverty staring him in the face, handicapped by blindness, it was a sore temptation to be offered twenty-five thousand dollars a year to go through a mere ceremony. But he had steadfastly refused until Mrs. Meredith had pointed out to him that Anne would thereby lose a fortune.

Anne—his face softened at the thought of her. Could it be that she had sung her way into his heart? The evening of his arrival he had spent listening enthralled to her glorious voice. Her infectious laugh, the few times that she had addressed him, lingered in his memory.

With a sigh he arose, picked up his cane and felt his way out into the hall. He had cultivated a retentive memory and his always acute hearing had aided him in making his way about. He had grown both sure-footed and more sure of himself as his general health improved. At John Meredith's suggestion he had spent a good part of a day familiarizing himself with the architectural arrangements of the old mansion until he felt that he could find his way about without great difficulty.

Curtis was halfway up the circular staircase to the first bedroom floor when he heard the faint closing of a door, then came the sound of dragging footsteps. As Curtis approached the head of the staircase the footsteps, with longer intervals between, dragged themselves closer to him. He had reached the top step when a soft thud broke the stillness. Curtis paused in uncertainty. He remembered that the wide hall ran the depth of the house, with bedrooms and corridors opening from it. From which side had proceeded the noise?

Slowly, cautiously, he turned to his right and moved with some speed down

the hall. The next second his outflung hands saved him from falling face downward as he tripped over an inert body.

Considerably shaken, Curtis pulled himself up on his knees and bent over the man on the floor. His hand sought the latter's wrist. He could feel no pulse. Bending closer he pressed his ear against the man's chest—no heartbeat!

Curtis' hand crept upward to the man's throat and then was withdrawn with lightning speed. He touched his sticky fingers with the tip of his tongue, then sniffed at them—blood. An instant later he had located the jagged wound by sense of touch. Taking out his handkerchief he wiped his hands, then bending down ran his fingers over the man's face, feature by feature, over his mustache and carefully trimmed beard, over the scarred ear. The man before him was his host, the owner of Ten Acres, John Meredith.

With every sense alert Curtis rose slowly, his head bent in a listening attitude. The silence remained unbroken. Apparently he and John Meredith, lying dead at his feet, were alone in the hall.

CHAPTER II

THE SCENTED HANDKERCHIEF

Fully a minute passed before David Curtis moved. Stooping down, he groped about for his cane. It had rolled a slight distance away and it took him some few seconds to find it. Possession of the cane brought a sense of security; it was something to lean on, something to use to defend himself.... He paused and listened attentively. No sound disturbed the quiet of the night. Taking out his repeater he pressed the spring—a quarter past two. He had remained downstairs in the library far later than he had realized.

How to arouse the sleeping household and tell them of the tragedy enacted at their very doors? In groping for his cane he had lost his sense of direction. He took a step forward and paused in thought. Sam Hollister! He was the man to go to, but how could he reach Hollister without running the risk of disturbing the women of the household? Suppose he rapped on the wrong door?

To be eternally in the dark! Curtis raised his hand in a gesture eloquent of despair; then with an effort pulled himself together. Falling over a dead man, and that man his host, was enough to shake the stoutest nerves of a person possessing all his faculties—but to a blind man! Curtis was conscious that the hand holding his cane was not quite steady as he felt his way down the hall in search of his bedroom. The soft chimes of the grandfather clock in the hall below brought not only a violent start on his part in their train but an idea. The house telephone in his bedroom! John Meredith, that very afternoon, had taught him how to manipulate the mechanism of the instrument.

Quickening his pace Curtis moved down the corridor and turned a corner. If he could only be positive that he was going in the right direction and not away from his room. His outstretched hand passed from the wall to woodwork—a door. He felt about and found the knob. No string such as he had instructed the Filipino servant, detailed to valet him, to tie to his door as a means of identification in case he had to go to his room unaccompanied by a servant or

friend, was hanging from it.

With an impatient ejaculation, low spoken, Curtis walked forward, taking care to step always on the heavy creepers with which the halls were carpeted. He had passed several doors when his hand, raised higher than usual, encountered an electric light fixture. The heat of the bulb proved that the light was still turned on, it also restored Curtis' sense of direction as recollection returned of having been told by Fernando, the Filipino, that an electric fixture was near his room. A second more and he again paused before a door. Cautiously his fingers moved over the polished surface of the mahogany toward the door knob and closed over a piece of dangling twine.

With a sigh of utter thankfulness Curtis pushed open the door, which was standing slightly ajar, and entered the room. The house telephone should be in a small alcove to the left of the doorway—ah, he was right—the instrument was there. What was it John Meredith had told him—his room number was No. 1; that of the suite of rooms occupied by Mrs. Meredith and her daughter Anne, No. 2; his own bedroom call No. 3; that occupied by Gerald Armstrong, No. 4. Lucile Hull, Anne's cousin and another guest over the week-end, was No. 5—no, five was the number of Sam Hollister's bedroom in the west wing. But was it? Curtis paused in uncertainty. He did not like the idea of awakening Lucille Hull at nearly three o'clock in the morning. He was quite positive that to tell her John Meredith lay dead in the hall would send her into violent hysterics. It was no news to impart to a woman.

Suddenly Curtis' hand on the telephone instrument clenched and his body grew rigid. A sixth sense, which tells of another's presence, warned him that he was not alone. It was a large bedroom with windows opening upon a balcony which circled the old mansion, two closets, and a mirrored door which led to a dressing room beyond and a shower bath.

From the direction of the windows came a sigh, then the sound of some one rising stiffly from the floor, and a chair rasped against another piece of furniture as it was dragged forward with some force.

Moving always in darkness it had not occurred to Curtis to switch on the electric light when first entering the room. But why had not his appearance alarmed the intruder? He had made no especial effort to enter noiselessly. It must be that the room was unlighted. There was one way of solving the problem. Curtis opened his mouth, but the challenge, "Who's there?" remained unspoken, checked by the unmistakable soft swish of silken garments. The intruder was a woman.

What was a woman doing in his bedroom? His bedroom, but suppose it wasn't his bedroom? Suppose he had walked into some woman's room by mistake and *he* was the intruder? The thought made him break out in a cold perspiration. No, it could not be. It was *his* bedroom; the string tied to the door knob proved that.

A sudden movement behind him caused Curtis to turn his head and the sound of a light footfall gave warning of the woman's approach. As she passed the alcove something was tossed against Curtis' extended hand, and then she slipped out of the room. Curtis instinctively stooped and picked up the object. As he smoothed out the small square of fine linen he started, then held it up to his nose—only to remove it in haste. Chloroform was a singular scent to find on a woman's handkerchief.

The door of his bedroom had been left ajar and through the opening came a woman's voice.

"Good gracious, the hall is in darkness!" Mrs. Meredith's tones were unmistakable. "Anne, how you startled me!" in rising crescendo. "Come to bed, child; the fuse is probably burned out." A door was shut with some vigor, then silence.

Curtis slipped the handkerchief inside his coat pocket and once again turned to the house telephone. His nervous fingers spun the dial around to the fifth hole and he pressed the button. He must chance it that Hollister's call number was five. Three times he pushed the button, each with a stronger pressure, before a sleepy "hello" came over the wires.

"Hollister?" he called into the mouthpiece, keeping his voice low.

"Yes—what is it?"

"Thank the Lord!" The exclamation was fervid. He had secured help at last without creating a scene. "This is Curtis speaking. John Meredith is lying in the hall, dead."

"What? My God!" Hollister's shocked tones rang out loudly in the little receiver. "Are you crazy?"

"No. He's there—I stumbled over his body. Yes—front hall. Bring matches—the lights are out."

Curtis was standing in the doorway of his room as Hollister, in his pajamas, ran toward him down the hall, an electric torch in one hand and a bath robe in the other.

"Have you rung for the servants, Curtis?" he asked, keeping his voice lowered.

“No. I couldn’t recall their room numbers or find a bell.”

Hollister brushed by him into the bedroom, switched on the light, and, pausing only long enough to get the servants’ quarters on the house telephone and order a half-awake butler to come there at once, he bolted into the hall again.

“Where is John?” he demanded.

“Lying near the head of the staircase—” Not stopping for further words Curtis caught the lawyer’s arm and, guided by Hollister, hurried with him down the hall.

At sight of the figure on the floor Hollister stopped abruptly. Loosening Curtis’ grasp, he thrust the electric torch into his hand, then dropped on one knee and looked long and earnestly at his dead friend.

“You are sure he is beyond aid?” he stammered.

“Absolutely. He died before I reached him.”

Hollister crossed himself. “John—John!” His voice broke and covering his face with his hands he remained upon his knees for fully a minute. When he rose his forehead was beaded with tiny drops of moisture.

“Go and hurry the servants, Curtis. Oh, I forgot—you can’t see.” It was not often that the quick-witted lawyer was shaken out of his calm. “We must get John back into his bedroom.”

“You cannot remove the body until the coroner comes,” interposed Curtis.

“But, man, the place is all blood—it’s a ghastly sight!”

“I imagine it is,” replied Curtis curtly. “The coroner must be sent for at once.”

“Very well, I’ll attend to that. You stay here and keep the servants from making a scene; we can’t alarm the women.” Hollister stopped long enough to put on his bath robe. “I’ll telephone from my room—there’s an outside extension phone there; then I’ll put on some clothes before I come back,” and he sped away.

Herman, the butler, heralded his approach with an exclamation of horror.

“Keep quiet!” Curtis’ stern tones carried command and Herman pulled himself together. “Go and see what is the matter with the electric lights in this corridor; then come back. Make as little noise as possible,” he added by way of caution and the alarmed butler nodded in understanding.

At sound of the servant’s receding footsteps Curtis dropped on one knee and ran his hand over John Meredith. A startled exclamation escaped him. He had left the body lying partly on one side as he had found it; now John Meredith was

stretched at full length upon his back. Could Hollister have been so foolish as to turn him over? Only the coroner had the right to move a dead body.

As Curtis drew back his hand preparatory to rising, he touched a strand of hair caught around a button on the jacket of Meredith's pajamas.

"If I could only see!" The exclamation escaped him unwittingly. He hesitated a brief second, then deftly unwound a few hairs and placed them inside his leather wallet just as Herman stopped by his side.

"There weren't nothing the matter with the lights," he said, in an aggrieved tone. "They was just turned off. My, don't the master look awful! You oughter be thankful, sir, that you can't see 'im."

Hollister's return saved any reply on Curtis' part, and the servant stepped back respectfully to make room for him.

"Coroner Penfield is coming right out," the lawyer announced. "Also Dr. Leonard McLane, Meredith's family physician. I thought it best to have him here when we break the news to Mrs. Meredith and Anne, not to mention Miss Hull—she's a bundle of nerves."

His thoughts elsewhere, Curtis failed to remark the change in Hollister's voice at mention of Lucile Hull's name.

"Did you notify the police?" he asked.

"The police? Certainly not." Hollister stared at his companion. "We don't need the police, Curtis. Say, are you ill?" noticing for the first time the blind surgeon's pallor.

"I'm beginning to feel a bit faint." Curtis pushed his hair off his forehead and unloosened his collar.

"Here, Herman, nip into my room and get the flask out of my bureau drawer," directed Hollister. "Hurry!"

As the servant hastened on his errand Hollister half guided, half pushed Curtis to a hall chair and propped him in it. Not pausing to dilute the fiery liqueur, he snatched the flask from the breathless servant and tilted it against Curtis' lips.

"Take a good swallow," he advised, keeping his voice low. "There, you look better already," as the fiery stimulant brought a touch of color to Curtis' cheeks. "Rest a bit, then I'll let Herman take you to your room and help you undress. You haven't been to bed?"

"No. I was on my way to my room when I tripped over Meredith's body." Curtis spoke with an effort, the sensation of deadly faintness had not entirely vanished, in spite of the stimulant. He had no means of knowing that Hollister

was watching him with uneasy suspicion. "I stayed down in the library until around two o'clock or a little after."

"Ah, then you don't know the exact hour you found poor Meredith," Hollister spoke half to himself, but Curtis caught the words.

"It was a quarter past two by my repeater," he answered.

"A quarter past two—and you did not call me until three o'clock," exclaimed Hollister. "How was it that you let so long a time elapse?"

"Because I did not know which was your room," explained Curtis, speaking slowly so that Hollister could not fail to understand. "I thought it best to call you on the house telephone, and it took me quite a time to find my way back to my bedroom. The moment I got there I telephoned to you—"

"The moment you got there," repeated Hollister. "The moment you got to *your bedroom*, do you mean?"

"Yes. I identified it by the string on the door knob. You found me standing in my doorway when you came down the hall."

Hollister stared at him, his eyes big with wonder. "Was it from that room you telephoned to me?" he asked.

"Yes," with growing impatience. "I have already told you that I called you on the house 'phone in my bedroom."

"But, my dear fellow, that wasn't your bedroom."

Curtis half rose. "That wasn't my bedroom," he gasped. "Then whose was it?"

"John Meredith's bedroom—good Heavens!" as Curtis collapsed. "Help, Herman. Doctor Curtis has fainted."

CHAPTER III

A QUESTION OF COLOR

Coroner Penfield waited with untiring patience for Inspector Mitchell to complete his examination before signing to the undertaker's assistants, who stood grouped at the further end of the hall, to remove the body. In utter silence the men came forward with their stretcher, and all that was mortal of John Meredith was tenderly lifted and carried to a spare bedroom. As the bearers passed Mrs. Meredith's boudoir door it opened and Anne Meredith stepped across the threshold.

Dressed in her white pegnoid and the unnatural pallor of her cheeks enhanced by the deep shadows under her eyes, she appeared, in the uncompromising glare of the early morning sunlight, like a wraith, and the men halted involuntarily. Before any one could stop her, Anne stepped to the side of the stretcher and drew back the sheet. A shudder shook her at sight of the bloodstains. With a self-control little short of marvelous in one so young she mastered her emotion and laid her hand, with caressing tenderness, against the cold cheek.

"Poor Uncle John!" she murmured. Her hand slipped downward across the broad chest. There was an instant's pause, then stooping over, she kissed him as some one touched her on the shoulder.

"Anne," her mother's voice sounded coldly in her ear. "Come away, *at once*."

Under cover of the sheet Anne plucked at a button on the jacket, then with a single sweep of her arm she tossed the sheet over the dead man's face.

"Pardon me," she stammered as Coroner Penfield walked over to the stretcher. "Uncle John was very dear to me," her voice ended in a sob. "I—I—had to see him—to—to—convince myself that this awful thing had really happened. Oh, merciful God—"

Her mother's firm grasp on her arm checked her inclination to hysterics.

"Come." There was no mistaking the power of the imperious command. With a grave inclination of her head to Coroner Penfield and Inspector Mitchell, who

had stood a silent spectator of the little scene, she led her daughter inside the boudoir and closed the door. Not until Anne was in her own bedroom did Mrs. Meredith release her hold upon her arm.

"I trust your morbid curiosity is satisfied," she said, making no effort to conceal her deep displeasure.

Anne walked over to her bureau and, turning her back upon her mother, opened a small silver bonbon box and in feverish haste slipped several hairs, which she had held tightly clenched between the fingers of her left hand, under the peppermints which the box contained.

"I am quite satisfied, mother," her voice shook pitifully. "Would you mind sending Susanne to me. I—I will lie down for awhile."

"An excellent plan." Mrs. Meredith turned back to the door connecting Anne's bedroom with the boudoir. "Doctor McLane expressly ordered us to remain in our rooms until Coroner Penfield sent for us. Have you—" she paused—"have you seen Lucille?"

"No." Anne looked around quickly. "Has she been told about Uncle John?"

"She was still asleep when I went to her room half an hour ago, and I thought it best not to awaken her." Mrs. Meredith laid her hand on the knob of the door, preparatory to closing it behind her. "I will go there shortly. Try and rest, Anne; a little rose water might make your eyes less red," and with this parting shot, her mother retreated.

Crossing the boudoir Mrs. Meredith hastened into her bedroom. The suite of rooms which she and her daughter occupied were the prettiest in the old mansion, overlooking the well-kept grounds and lovely elm trees, but she did not pause to contemplate her surroundings, although the large bedroom and its handsome mahogany furniture were worthy a second look.

"Susanne," she called. "Order my breakfast at once, then go to Miss Anne."

"*Oui, madame*" The Frenchwoman emerged in haste from the closet where she had been rearranging Mrs. Meredith's dinner gowns. She smiled shrewdly as she went below stairs. "You give orders as if you were already mistress here," she muttered, below her breath. "But wait, madame, but wait." And with a shrug of her pretty shoulders Susanne hastened to find the chef.

Mrs. Meredith regarded herself attentively in the long cheval glass, added a touch of rouge, then rubbed it off vigorously. Pale cheeks were not amiss after the tragedy of the night. Powder, delicately applied, removed all traces of sleeplessness, and finally satisfied with her appearance, she left her bedroom.

The old mansion had but two stories, with rambling corridors and unexpected niches and alcoves. The wide attic was lighted by dormer windows and a deep cellar extended under the entire building.

The large drawing-room, library, billiard room and dining-room were on the first floor, the servants' quarters in a wing over the kitchen and three large pantries, and the ten masters' rooms took up all the space on the second floor. A second wing, added at the time John Meredith had had electricity and plumbing installed, furnished three additional bedrooms and baths and were reserved for bachelor guests. The ground floor of this wing made a commodious garage.

As Mrs. Meredith walked down the broad corridor she noted two detectives loitering by the head of the circular staircase and frowned heavily. Her pause in front of the door leading to the bedroom occupied by Lucille Hull was brief. She knew, from her earlier visit that morning, that her cousin had neglected to lock the door upon retiring the night before. Without the formality of knocking she turned the knob and entered. The dark green Holland shades were drawn and in the semidarkness Mrs. Meredith failed to see a pair of bright eyes watching her approach. By the time Mrs. Meredith reached the bedside, Lucille was in deep slumber, judging by her closed eyes and regular breathing.

Lucille's good looks were not due to cosmetics, Mrs. Meredith conceded to herself as she stood looking down at her. Even in the darkened room the girl's regular features and beautiful auburn hair which, flying loose, partly covered the pillow, made an attractive picture. Mrs. Meredith laid a cool hand on the girl's exposed arm, and gave it a gentle shake.

"Lucille," she called softly. "Wake up."

Slowly the handsome eyes opened. Her first glance at the older woman became a stare.

"Good gracious, Cousin Belle, you!" she exclaimed. "And fully dressed. Am I very late? Have I slept the clock around?"

"On the contrary it is very early; only six o'clock." Mrs. Meredith's somewhat metallic voice was carefully lowered. "I have distressing news—"

Lucille raised herself upon her elbow, her eyes large with fear.

"What is it? Father—? Oh, Cousin Belle, don't keep me in suspense."

"Hush, calm yourself! My news has nothing to do with your immediate family." Mrs. Meredith was not to be hurried. "Turn up that bed light, Lucille; I cannot talk in the dark."

Bending sideways the girl pushed the button of the reading lamp. Its adjusted

shade threw the light over the bed, but her face remained in shadow. "Go on," she urged. "Go on!"

"Your Cousin John has—has—committed suicide."

With a convulsive bound the girl swung herself out of bed.

"W-what?" she stammered. "W-what are you saying? Cousin John a suicide?"

"Yes."

She stared at Mrs. Meredith for a full second. "Did he kill himself?" she asked, in little above a whisper.

Mrs. Meredith nodded. "His dead body was found in the hall near the staircase early this morning," she said. "It has shocked me unutterably."

"Cousin John dead! I cannot believe it. It is dreadful." Lucille spoke as one stunned. She covered her eyes with her hand in an attitude of prayer, then rose and walked over to the windows and raised the shades until the bedroom was flooded with light.

"And Anne?" she questioned. "Has Anne been told?"

"Yes." Lucille, still with her back to her cousin, felt that the keen eyes watching her were boring a hole through her head. "Doctor McLane broke the news to Anne after he had spoken to me. I fear she is inclined to be hysterical."

"Poor Anne!" Lucille whirled around with sudden feverish energy. "I will dress at once and go to her."

"Not just now, she is lying down and absolute quiet is what she needs," Mrs. Meredith's manner, which had thawed at sight of the girl's emotion, stiffened. "If you will come to the dining room, breakfast will be served shortly."

"Breakfast!" Lucille shuddered. "I don't feel as if I could ever eat a mouthful again. Oh, Cousin Belle, how can you be so—so callous?"

"So what—" Mrs. Meredith stopped on her way to the door, and under the steady regard of her fine dark eyes Lucille's burst of temper waned.

"So calm," she replied hastily. "I wish that I had your self-control."

A faint ironical smile crossed Mrs. Meredith's pale face. "Self-control will come when you cease smoking," she remarked dryly, pointing to an empty cigarette package and a filled ash tray by the bed. "And, you doubtless recall your discussion, only yesterday, with Cousin John on the subject of keeping early hours."

Lucille flushed. "Cousin John was absurdly puritanical," she protested. "We—ah—" she hesitated. "How has Cousin John's death affected his plans for that

extraordinary marriage? Surely, Anne won't be forced to wed that blind surgeon. Doctor Curtis?"

"Our thoughts have not gone beyond the moment," replied Mrs. Meredith. "We can think of nothing but John's tragic death; all else is secondary. We must adjust ourselves," she paused. "Hurry, Lucille, and join me in the dining room."

Lucille dressed with absolute disregard of detail, a novel experience, as her personal appearance usually was a consideration which loomed large on her horizon, and generally consumed a good part of two hours of every morning. Loving luxury, the idol of an indulgent father, she had spent twenty-six indolent years, petted by men and gossiped about by women. She had made her debut into Washington society upon her eighteenth birthday and, in spite of the many predictions of her approaching engagement to this man and that, one season had followed another and she still remained unmarried.

Her father, Julian Hull, by courtesy a colonel, was a first cousin of John Meredith, and at one time a business associate. But unlike Colonel Hull, John Meredith had early deserted the stock-brokerage field and devoted his financial interests and his business ability to banking. He had climbed rapidly in his chosen profession, and finally attained the presidency of one of the oldest banks in the District of Columbia, a position which he had held until, upon advice of Doctor McLane, he had resigned owing to ill health. The brokerage firm of Hull and Armstrong had likewise prospered and, upon the death of its junior member, his son, Gerald Armstrong, had been taken into partnership, a partnership which, rumor predicted, would culminate in his marriage to Lucille.

Lucille and her father were frequent week-end visitors at Ten Acres, and Lucille was often called upon to act as hostess at dinners and dances when Mrs. Marshall Meredith was not present. John Meredith's affection for his niece, Anne, and his cousin's daughter had appeared to be about equally divided until Anne graduated from her convent school and came, as he expressed it, to make her home permanently with her uncle. Her half-shy, wholly charming manner, her old-world courtesy and consideration for others, and her delicate, almost ethereal beauty had made instant appeal, and John Meredith had been outspoken in his affectionate admiration. His marked preference for Anne had brought no appreciable alteration in the friendship between the cousins, and, in spite of the eight years difference in their ages, she and Lucille were inseparable companions.

It had been Meredith's custom to have guests every week-end from January to June and from June to January at Ten Acres. He never wearied of improving the stately old mansion and its surrounding land and enjoyed having others share its

beauty. Anne's nineteenth birthday anniversary two days before had proved the occasion for much jollification, but the house party, to the surprise of Mrs. Meredith, had only included Lucille Hull, Sam Hollister and Gerald Armstrong. The arrival of David Curtis just in time to be present at the birthday dinner had aroused only a temporary interest in the blind surgeon and a feeling of pity, tinged with admiration on Anne's part, for Curtis' plucky acceptance of the fate meted out to him. What had occasioned surprise was Meredith's absorption in his blind guest the night of the dinner and the following day; then had come his interview with his sister-in-law and the peremptory statement of his wishes respecting a marriage between Anne and David Curtis. In every way it had proved an eventful Sunday, ending with John Meredith's suicide.

Lucille checked her rapid walk down the corridor only to collide with some vigor with David Curtis as she turned the corner leading from her bedroom into the main hallway.

"Oh, ah—excuse me!" she gasped, as he put out a steadying hand. "Let me pick up your cane," and before he could stop her she had stooped to get it.

"Thank you," he said, as she put the cane back in his hand. "It was awkward of me to drop it. I hope that I did not startle you, Miss Hull?"

Lucille looked at him queerly for a moment, "Miss Hull," she repeated. "Why not Anne Meredith?"

"No. *Miss Hull*," his smile was very engaging; and again she noted the deep blue of his sightless eyes.

"You are very quick to guess identities, Doctor Curtis," she remarked. "Are you coming downstairs?"

"Not just now. Coroner Penfield is waiting for me," he added by way of explanation.

"Then I will see you later," and with a quick bow Lucille hurried toward the staircase.

As Curtis stood listening to her light footfall he heard some one approaching from the servants' wing of the house.

"That you, Fernando?" he questioned.

"Yes, sir," and the Filipino boy bowed respectfully. "I ver' late. Please pardon. This way, sir," and he touched Curtis' arm to indicate the direction.

"Just a moment," Curtis lowered his voice. "What color is Miss Hull's hair?"

"Mees Hull," Fernando paused in thought. "She got what you call red hair."

Curtis tucked his cane under his arm and took out his wallet. Opening it he

carefully drew out several hairs.

“What color are these, Fernando?” he asked. “Look carefully.”

Fernando bent over and then glanced up, a mild surprise at the question in his sharp black eyes.

“These, honorable sir,” he said slowly, “these are white hairs.”

CHAPTER IV

RUFFLES

As David Curtis crossed the threshold of the door of John Meredith's bedroom Doctor Leonard McLane sprang forward with a low ejaculation.

"Dave! It's you—really you," he exclaimed. "Penfield said a Doctor Curtis was here, but it did not dawn on me that it was you." He looked closely at his old friend and his expression of eager welcome gave place to one of compassion. His handclasp tightened. "I'm—"

"Leonard McLane," Curtis' tired face lightened. "I recognized your voice when you first spoke."

"The same keen ears." McLane pulled forward a chair, and helped his blind companion into it. "I recollect your memory tests; they were almost uncanny—"

"Freakish, is a better word," broke in Curtis, and a short sigh, which McLane caught, completed his sentence. "My early training is standing me in good stead, for which," his smile was whimsical, "praise be!" A movement to his right caused him to cease speaking as Coroner Penfield stepped into the room.

"You are acquainted, gentlemen?" he asked, observing McLane's hand resting on his friend's shoulder.

"Well, rather!" McLane smiled broadly. "We were pals at McGill Institute in Canada and graduated in the same class. I came here and Doctor Curtis went to Boston."

"Where I remained until I went overseas with the Canadian forces at the outbreak of the World War," added Curtis. "I saw service with them until we entered the War and then joined an American medical unit. I was blinded in the Argonne." He stopped for a moment, then asked, "Am I speaking to Coroner Penfield?"

"I beg pardon, I thought that you two had met," ejaculated McLane, as Penfield shook Curtis' extended hand.

"I know Doctor Curtis by reputation," the latter said. "It is a pleasure to meet you, even in such a ghastly business as this," and he wrung Curtis' hand hard before releasing it.

"It is a ghastly business," agreed McLane gravely. "A most shocking affair."

His words were echoed by Sam Hollister who, at that instant, came into the room followed by Inspector Mitchell.

"Meredith's suicide has fairly stunned me," he added, as the men grouped themselves about Curtis, who occupied the only chair in that part of the room. "It is incomprehensible, astounding. A man in the best of health—"

"Hold on!" Coroner Penfield held up his hand. "Let me do the questioning, Hollister." He turned to McLane. "You were Mr. Meredith's family physician, were you not?"

"Yes; for the past five years."

"Was he in good health?"

"He had made an excellent recovery from a nervous breakdown," explained McLane. "Yes, I should say that he was, until last night, enjoying normal health."

"Why until last night?" questioned Hollister, and Penfield frowned at the interruption.

"Last night—he died," replied McLane dryly, and would have added more, but Penfield again cut in on the conversation.

"Can you place the exact time at which you found Meredith, Doctor Curtis?" he asked, turning to the surgeon.

"A quarter past two this morning," answered Curtis. "Meredith was dead when I tripped over his body." He paused. "I should say, however, that he died only a few minutes before my arrival."

"How do you know that?" demanded Hollister, and McLane glanced at the little lawyer in some surprise; his manner was far from courteous.

"By the warmth of his body and its limp condition." Curtis spoke quietly, his sightless eyes turned toward Hollister. "Besides, I heard Meredith coming down the corridor as I came up the staircase."

"Did he walk briskly?" asked Hollister before Inspector Mitchell could speak.

Curtis shook his head. "He appeared to drag one foot after the other; then I heard a soft thud—"

"Probably staggered along the hall and fell," broke in Mitchell.

“But where was he going?” persisted Hollister, not deterred by Coroner Penfield’s irritation at his continuous questions.

“We have not yet found an answer to that question,” replied Mitchell.

“He was probably on his way to summon help,” suggested McLane.

“But he had the house telephone right here at hand,” objected Hollister.

“If he regretted his rash act and wished immediate aid he did not have to leave his room and crawl down the hall to find it.” He looked belligerently at the others. “Why didn’t John cry out? That would have been the quickest way to have awakened us.”

“A man with such a gash in his throat would not have breath enough to shout,” McLane pointed out.

“He could not have lived ten minutes after—”

“Inflicting it,” supplemented Hollister. “Then it is all the more extraordinary that he left his bedroom and tried to go down this winding corridor.”

Coroner Penfield and Inspector Mitchell exchanged glances.

“Mr. Hollister,” the latter asked, “when did you last see Meredith?”

“On my way to bed,” responded the lawyer. “I looked in for a moment. It was just after I left you in the library,” he turned to Curtis; “about eleven-twenty, I suppose.”

“And where was Meredith?” asked Mitchell patiently.

“Here in his room, reading in bed, as was his custom.” Hollister twisted the ends of his waxed mustache until they pointed upward.

“And did he appear in his usual health or did he evince any, eh, morbid tendencies?” Mitchell hesitated over his words, but Hollister’s reply was instant.

“He seemed to be his usual self except that he showed unusual excitement over the—” with a side-long glance at Curtis—“arrangements for the marriage of his niece, Anne, to Doctor Curtis.”

Curtis lifted his head. “Ah, then you told him the result of our conversation?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“And did it appear satisfactory to him?”

“Yes.” Hollister paused before adding: “John insisted upon my drawing up the prenuptial settlements so that he might sign the agreement before I left.”

“Oh, so he signed some legal papers, did he?” Mitchell looked keenly at the lawyer and then at Curtis; the latter’s expression puzzled him, and he put his

next question without removing his gaze from the blind surgeon. "Can you let me see the papers?"

Hollister shook his head. "I haven't them," he answered. "I left the papers lying on the bed by John Meredith."

With one accord the Coroner, Inspector Mitchell and Leonard McLane wheeled around and stared at the carved four-post mahogany bedstead which occupied one side of the large room. It was evident that the bed had been slept in; the pillows were tumbled about and the bedclothes turned back in disorder. A dressing gown lay on the floor not far from the bed. No papers of any kind were on the bed, but on the right side an ominous red stain had spread a zigzag course from the under sheet to the carpet.

Curtis broke the long pause. "I take it the papers are not on the bed *now*, judging from your silence," he said. "Was any one, beside yourself, Hollister, aware that Meredith had drawn up this, what did you call it—"

"Prenuptial agreement," interposed Hollister.

"The witnesses knew—"

"And who were the witnesses?" asked Mitchell, notebook in hand.

"Miss Lucille Hull and Gerald Armstrong." Hollister glanced keenly about the bedroom and moved as if to cross to a mahogany secretary which stood near one of the windows. "Perhaps they are in Meredith's secretary—"

"Just a moment, Mr. Hollister," Coroner Penfield held out a detaining hand. "Nothing is to be touched in this room. Inspector Mitchell and I will conduct a thorough search later on. In the meantime have you any notes, any memorandum of the agreement signed by Meredith last night which you could give us?"

Hollister nodded. "I made a rough copy, and if I remember correctly I stuffed it in the pocket of my dinner jacket. I'll get it," and he started for the door, only to be halted at the threshold by a question from Coroner Penfield.

"After the signing of the agreement were you the first to leave Mr. Meredith, or did the witnesses go first?" he asked.

Hollister thought a moment. "Gerald Armstrong left immediately," he said. "Miss Hull and I started to go at the same time, but Meredith called her back."

"I see," Penfield paused, then looked up. "All right, Mr. Hollister, if you will get that paper for me, I'll be much obliged." As Hollister disappeared through the doorway, he turned to Mitchell. "Inspector, will you look up Miss Hull and Mr. Armstrong and tell them that I wish to see them within the next half hour."

"Do you wish to see them together?" questioned Mitchell, stopping halfway to

the door.

“No, one at a time,” and Mitchell hurried away as Fernando, the Filipino, upon the point of entering, stepped back to allow him to pass from the room.

“If you please, sir,” said the latter, reappearing and bowing low to McLane. “Doctor Pen is wanted on the telephone.”

McLane, knowing Fernando’s habit of clipping names, smiled. “It’s you he wants, Penfield,” he explained, and as the coroner went out of the bedroom, followed by Fernando, he closed the hall door and turned to Curtis.

“The years drop away, Dave,” he drew up a chair as he spoke. “It seems only yesterday that we were together in Montreal.”

“‘But we’ve wander’d mony a weary foot,
Sin auld lang syne,’”

quoted Curtis, and his voice held a depth of pathos which touched McLane. “I’ve heard with delight, Leonard, of your success and of your happy marriage.”

“My wife is—well,” McLane laughed, a trifle embarrassed. “You must meet her and then you’ll know for yourself how dear she is. Why haven’t you let me know you were in Washington, Dave?”

“I intended to do so to-day anyway, even if this tragedy had not happened,” explained Curtis. “John Meredith yesterday promised to run me in to see you this morning.”

McLane eyed him closely. “I had no idea you were an intimate friend of John Meredith’s.”

“I wasn’t,” broke in Curtis. “I only met him ten days ago at Walter Reed—”
“What?”

Curtis nodded. “Just so,” he exclaimed. “I saw Meredith again on Monday and he very kindly insisted that I come over here last Friday evening, and spend the week with him.”

McLane glanced at his watch, then turned again to his companion. “Is it really true,” he spoke with some hesitation, “really true that you are to marry Anne Meredith?”

Again Curtis nodded his head. “It is as wild as an Arabian Nights’ romance,” he said somberly. “John Meredith appealed to the latent dare-devil spirit that still lingers with me by such an extraordinary proposition.”

“Exactly what was the proposition?” questioned McLane.

“Meredith wished me to marry his niece, Anne, and declared that after the ceremony I need never meet her again except for a few months each year at Ten Acres,” replied Curtis. “He agreed to settle twenty-five thousand dollars a year on us individually.”

“A very tidy sum,” interposed McLane.

“And mental degradation!” The words came almost in a whisper. “Meredith tempted me more than he knew. To be handicapped with blindness and poverty, and then to be offered a chance to get away, to have some means of subsistence for the life remaining to me—on the other hand, the humiliation of taking such a means of rescue. God!” He shaded his face with his hand.

McLane leaned over and patted him on the shoulder. “I understand,” he said softly. “You agreed to Meredith’s proposal—”

“Only after I had been told by the girl’s mother that Meredith would otherwise disinherit his niece and that thus she would be left penniless,” answered Curtis. “Then I consented to go through with the ceremony.”

“One for Anne and two for herself,” McLane muttered, too low for Curtis to catch the words, then raised his voice. “Take it from me, Dave, Mrs. Marshall Meredith is Satan in petticoats.”

Curtis laughed mirthlessly. “It would seem so,” he agreed. “Think of it, man, was there ever so mad a scheme? A bride, and one that I have never laid eyes on. I wonder if she be ugly as Hecate or with the temper of Xanthippe.”

“Neither, I assure you,” replied McLane warmly. “Anne Meredith could not do a mean or dishonorable act. Convent bred, she is at times painfully shy, but she has plenty of character. And,” McLane wound up, “she is very beautiful.”

Curtis passed a nervous hand across his sightless eyes. “What you say makes our marriage appear even more unsuitable; in fact, a mockery. I am a derelict—human flotsam—whereas Anne Meredith is at the threshold of life with the world before her.”

McLane stood up and looked down at his companion. “Blindness with you will not be a handicap,” he said stoutly. “I know your capabilities, Dave; your generous heart and splendid courage. I am not afraid of the future for either you or Anne,” and as Curtis opened his lips to speak, he asked: “But tell me, what inspired Meredith’s wish that you and Anne should marry?”

Curtis rose also and stood leaning on his cane. “Good knows, I don’t,” he said. “I have absolutely no idea why he wished the marriage to take place, or why he selected me—a blind man and a stranger—to be the bridegroom.”

McLane stared at him in incredulity. "Most extraordinary!" he ejaculated finally. "Has no one any inkling of the reason?"

"Sam Hollister said last night that Meredith would tell us after the marriage ceremony," answered Curtis. "But now he is dead."

"Another mystery!" McLane drew a long breath. "Upon my word, Dave, you have two very pretty problems on your hands."

Curtis swung closer to his side. "You think that the two are linked together?" he asked. "Meredith's sudden determined wish for this marriage and then his death—"

McLane hesitated. "It's impossible to say at this stage of the investigation," he admitted. "And it is early to surmise." His voice trailed off as he stopped to glance about the bedroom. Curtis' hand on his shoulder brought his attention back to the blind surgeon.

"Describe the room, Leonard," he suggested. "Everything, just as it stands now."

"I judge the room's about fifteen by twenty-two feet," McLane began. "There are four windows opening on a balcony, two facing the east and two the north. Two closet doors, one ajar, and another door leads to the bathroom."

"And the furniture," prompted Curtis, as McLane stopped speaking.

"The four-post bedstead, a bed table, with reading lamp and smoking set on it; a highboy and a bureau with toilet silver." Curtis was listening with close attention to every detail. "Meredith's desk-secretary is near the east window, and there is a table with books and magazines upon it and another reading lamp near the bathroom door."

"What about chairs?"

"Three; one a large tufted lounging chair near the north window; a chair by the desk, and, eh," bending his head to peer around—

"One by the bed," supplemented Curtis. "It is overturned."

McLane glanced at him in astonishment. "It is," he admitted. "But I can only see the legs of the chair from where we are standing. How did you know the chair was there and lying on the floor?"

"Intuition perhaps, or only a good guess," Curtis smiled oddly. "On which side of the bed is it? On the side Meredith climbed out?"

"No, on the far side." Curtis nodded his head thoughtfully as he stepped forward.

“Which way is the bed?” he asked. For answer McLane led him to it.

With touch deft as a woman’s, Curtis passed his hands over the pillows and the bolster, leaving them undisturbed; then his hands traveled across the sheet, hovered for a second on the edges of the bloodstain and followed its course over the side of the bed and from the valance to the carpet.

As he dropped on one knee and ran his fingers along the carpet the hall door opened and Coroner Penfield entered. He halted abruptly at sight of David Curtis creeping across the floor, his long sensitive fingers playing up and down the carpet, and glanced questioninglly at McLane. Before the latter could explain Curtis broke the silence.

“Meredith must have either fallen or stooped over here,” he said. “Oh, I forgot,” his smile was a bit twisted. “*You* can see this and deduct it for yourself.”

“But we can’t,” cut in Penfield quickly. “What makes you think Meredith stopped there? It is not on the way to the door.”

“Because of the amount of blood on this spot.” Curtis raised his head. “See for yourself.”

“But we can’t see the blood,” exclaimed McLane. “The carpet is red.”

“So!” Curtis paused as Penfield bent down and felt the spot indicated by the blind surgeon.

“You are right,” he exclaimed. “The carpet has been saturated with blood. What was Meredith doing in this corner of the room? There are no stains on the mahogany wainscoting,” he added, as Curtis turned to his left and ran his hands over the wall, “nor on the paper.”

“It is quite possible that Meredith lost his sense of direction,” suggested Curtis, rising. “He was probably frightfully weak from loss of blood. It is remarkable that he got as far as he did with such a wound. Is the bed to my left?”

“Yes, this way.” Penfield, as interested as McLane, followed Curtis back to the four-poster. “Inspector Mitchell followed my instructions, and nothing has been touched in this bedroom.”

“You are quite certain that no one has entered since your arrival?” asked Curtis.

“Positive. Mitchell stationed a detective outside the door and another on the balcony on which these windows open,” with a jerk of his hand in their direction. “Well, what the—”

The coroner’s voice failed him as Curtis, who had approached the bed from its other side, dexterously avoiding, as he did so, the overturned chair, lifted the

tossed-back sheet, blanket and counterpane and disclosed a parrot. The bird, its brilliant plumage sadly tumbled, lay inert upon its side, its eyes closed.

“Good Lord! Ruffles!” exclaimed McLane. “Is he dead?”

Curtis picked up the parrot and examined it. “There’s a heartbeat; pretty feeble, but the bird’s alive.” Suddenly he raised the bird and sniffed at its beak, then bent over and put his head down where the parrot had lain.

“Why in the world didn’t the parrot get out from under the bedclothes before it was smothered,” exclaimed Penfield. “I’ve always understood that parrots were nearly human.”

“Ruffles is,” declared McLane. “I can tell you many stories of his sagacity. Meredith was devoted to the bird. He never tired of hearing him talk—he said that Ruffles took the place of wife and watchdog.”

“Watchdog?” Curtis raised his head. “Um!” He held up the parrot. “Carry him over to the window, Leonard; the fresh air may revive him. He has been chloroformed.”

“Well, I’ll be d—mned!” ejaculated a voice behind them and Inspector Mitchell, who had returned a few minutes before, went with McLane to the window and carried the parrot’s stand to him. McLane laid Ruffles on the flooring under the perch and refilled the water cup, sprinkling some of its contents on the bird, and then pulled back the curtains so that the air blew slightly upon it.

Curtis wiped his fingers on his handkerchief and turned to Coroner Penfield.

“Where have you taken Meredith’s body?” he asked.

“To the empty bedroom next to this,” answered Penfield. “We will hold an autopsy there within the hour. McLane will aid me. Would you care to be present, Doctor Curtis?”

“Yes, if I may.” Curtis moved over to the window. “How is the parrot, Leonard?”

“Coming out of his stupor,” Mitchell answered for McLane, who had gone into the bathroom. “There, Ruffles, drink a little water.” He held the cup up to the bird. “Have you called the inquest, Doctor Penfield?”

“Yes; it will be held this afternoon,” answered the coroner. “Will that suit your plans, Mitchell?”

“Sure!” Mitchell set the parrot on its perch and placed a steadying hand on its back as the beadlike black eyes regarded him with an unwinking stare. “Will the inquest be here or at the morgue?”

“I haven’t quite decided.” Penfield stroked his chin thoughtfully. “But I have fully decided that Meredith’s death is not a case of suicide, but of murder.”

McLane, reentering the bedroom, stopped as if shot and gazed in horror at the coroner. Curtis replaced the handkerchief in his pocket and changed his cane to his right hand.

“May I ask what has led you to that conclusion. Doctor Penfield?”

Penfield hesitated and looked behind him to make certain that the hall door was closed, then lowered his voice to a confidential pitch as the men gathered about him.

“For one thing,” he began, “the absence of any weapon. Had Meredith killed himself the weapon would have been in this bedroom or in the hall. It is a case of murder.”

A hoarse croak from the parrot cut the silence and turning they looked at the bird. Ruffles leered drunkenly at them, before he spoke with startling clearness:

“Anne—I’ve caught you—you devil!”

CHAPTER V

THE INQUEST

The opening and closing of doors and the murmur of distant voices came fitfully to David Curtis as he sat near the window of his bedroom, his head propped against his hand and his sightless eyes turned toward the view over the hills to the National Capital. He had sat in that position for fully an hour trying to reduce his chaotic thoughts to order. Out of the turmoil one idea remained uppermost—John Meredith had undoubtedly been murdered. Who had committed so dastardly a crime? Would the answer be forthcoming at the inquest?

Contrary to custom, Coroner Penfield had decided to hold the inquest at Ten Acres instead of having it meet in the District of Columbia Morgue, and he had specified three o'clock that afternoon—it must be close to the hour. Curtis touched his repeater—a quarter past three. The inquest must have started. Curtis reached for his cane and then laid it down.

Coroner Penfield had said that he would be sent for when his presence was required.

Curtis had eaten both his breakfast and luncheon in solitary grandeur in the small morning room upstairs, waited on by Fernando who had been told by Mrs. Meredith to act as his valet. During the morning he had requested an interview with Anne, but a message had come from Mrs. Meredith stating that the girl was completely unstrung by the shocking death of her uncle and could see no one.

That the entire household was thrown out of its usually well-ordered existence was evidenced by the confusion among the servants. It had required all Mrs. Meredith's combative personality to check the incipient panic and keep them at their work. The servants represented a number of nationalities. Jules, the chef, and his sister, Susanne, Mrs. Meredith's maid, had come from France before the outbreak of the World War; Gretchen, the chambermaid, was a new acquisition, having arrived from Holland only the previous fall; Fernando and his twin

brother, Damason, had been in John Meredith's employ from the time he brought them with him from the Philippine Islands eight years before. But in point of service Herman claimed seniority, having served first as office boy and then been taken into Meredith's bachelor household as valet and later as butler.

Curtis had judged somewhat of the excitement prevailing below stairs by Fernando's unusual talkativeness, except on one point—he became totally uncommunicative when the subject of string was broached.

"You tell me you say last night, 'Fernando, hang string on my door so I find bedroom,'" he had repeated. "But please, Mister Doctor, you no tell me that," with polite insistence. "Always I do what you say. I good boy."

"Yes, yes, I know," a touch of impatience had crept into Curtis' quiet voice. "How was it that a string was tied to the knob of Mr. Meredith's bedroom door and thereby led me to believe that it was my bedroom?"

"I dunno," Fernando clipped his words with such vigor that his lips made a hissing sound. "Please, Mister Doctor, I dunno," and with that Curtis had, perforce, to be satisfied.

Curtis stirred uneasily in his chair. He would have given much for an interview with Anne before the inquest. As it was he was going further into the affair blindfolded. His lips curled in a bitter smile—a blind man blindfolded! Did Anne wish to go on with the marriage ceremony arranged for her by her uncle? Was he to consider himself engaged to her? He had been given no key to the situation—no inkling even whether he was expected to remain as a guest at Ten Acres, or to leave immediately after the inquest.

Mrs. Meredith had left him severely alone, but he had been informed by Fernando that his fellow guests had gone their several ways into town but would return in time to appear at the inquest. Leonard McLane had hurried away also at the conclusion of the autopsy, first having extracted a promise from Curtis that he would make him a visit of at least a week's duration should he decide to leave Ten Acres.

A discreet knock on the door brought back Curtis' wandering thoughts with a jump.

"Please, Mister Doctor, you are wanted downstairs," announced Fernando, and stepping forward he offered his arm to Curtis.

The coroner's jury to a man gazed with curiosity at the blind surgeon as Fernando guided him to the chair reserved for the witnesses. Upon consultation with Mrs. Meredith and Sam Hollister it had been decided to hold the inquest in the library and Coroner Penfield had lost no time in summoning his jurymen,

while the servants, under Mrs. Meredith's direction, had arranged tables and chairs and made of the attractive living room a place in which to conduct a preliminary investigation. The general public had been excluded, but Coroner Penfield had seen to it that a large table and chairs had been set aside for representatives of the press who had early put in an appearance on the scene.

Doctor Mayo, the deputy coroner, who had been busy jotting down the details of the opening of the inquest, laid aside his fountain pen and, picking up a Bible, stepped forward and administered the oath—"to tell the truth and nothing but the truth"—to Curtis. As the latter resumed his seat and Mayo went back to his table, Coroner Penfield stepped forward.

"Your full name, occupation, and place of residence, doctor?" he asked.

"David Curtis, surgeon, of Boston," he answered concisely. "I graduated from McGill Institute in 1906. I am," he added, "thirty-eight years of age. I was blinded in the Argonne offensive when serving with American troops."

"And when did you return to this country?" questioned the coroner.

"About eight months ago." Curtis paused, then added: "I was pretty well shot up, and have been in first one hospital and then another in France, and was not in shape to return until recently. I came to Walter Reed Hospital a month ago for treatment, hoping my general health would benefit thereby."

"And when did you meet John Meredith?"

"He called upon me ten days ago."

"Had you never met previous to that time?"

"Never."

"And what was the occasion of the call?"

"Mr. Meredith said that a mutual friend, Arthur Reed, had written him that I was at the hospital and requested him to look me up," explained Curtis. "Mr. Meredith took me out in his car a number of times and then asked me to spend this week at Ten Acres."

"I see!" Penfield disentangled the string of his eyeglasses, which had slipped off his nose. "Had you met any member of this household before you came here on Friday?"

"No; they were all strangers to me."

"Doctor Curtis," Penfield referred to his notes, "were you the first to find John Meredith?"

"I was."

“Describe the circumstances.”

Curtis cleared his throat. “As I was coming up the staircase I heard footsteps approaching and then a soft thud. I could not place the sound and went ahead up the staircase and down the corridor; the next second I had fallen over Meredith’s body.” He hesitated. “I could find no evidence of life.”

“And how did you learn that it was John Meredith who lay before you?” questioned Penfield.

“Since my blindness my fingers have been my eyes,” replied Curtis. “Meredith bumped his head against a door yesterday and asked me to see if he had injured himself. On investigating the slight abrasion, I ran my fingers over his head and face, and noticed his Van Dyke beard and that the top of his right ear was missing. This aided me in establishing the identity of the dead man.”

Penfield regarded Curtis for a moment before putting another question.

“What did you do next?” he inquired.

“I found my way into a bedroom and called up Mr. Sam Hollister, a fellow guest, on the house telephone and told him of my discovery,” answered Curtis. “He came at once.”

As Curtis ceased speaking the foreman of the jury leaned forward and, with a deprecatory look at Penfield, asked:

“Was the hall lighted, Doctor Curtis?”

Curtis’ hesitation was hardly perceptible. “I could not see,” he said simply, and the foreman, intent on the scene, flushed; he had forgotten, in his interest, that he was addressing a blind man. “But on feeling my way along the hall to the bedroom, my hand came in contact with an electric fixture. As the bulb was hot I concluded the corridor was lighted.”

Penfield paused to make an entry on his pad. “Did you hear any one moving about, doctor? Did any noise disturb you as you examined Mr. Meredith?”

Curtis shook his head. “No, I could detect no sound of any kind,” he answered. “As far as I could judge I was alone in the hall with the dead man.”

“In what position did you find the body, doctor?” asked Penfield.

“Meredith had evidently fallen forward, for he lay partly turned upon his right side, his face pressed against the carpet,” replied Curtis. “His head was almost touching the banisters which guard that side of the staircase.”

Coroner Penfield glanced about the library and saw a vacant chair near the huge open fireplace.

“That is all just now, Doctor Curtis,” he said. “Suppose you sit over here; it will be more convenient if I should want you again.” And stepping forward he walked with Curtis to the vacant chair. Returning once more to his place at the head of the big table around which were seated the jurymen, he summoned Herman, the butler, to the stand.

Herman’s perturbed state of mind was evidenced in his slowness of speech and dullness of comprehension. It required the united efforts of Penfield and the deputy coroner to administer the oath and to drag from him his age, full name and length of service with John Meredith.

“He was a kind master,” Herman stated. “Not but what he had his flare-ups and his rages like any other gentleman what has a big household. But mostly he was right ca’m.”

“And did Mr. Meredith have one of his rages recently?” asked Penfield.

Herman tugged at his red side-whiskers. Of German parentage, he had been born and raised in England and brought to the United States when a lad of fifteen by an American diplomat. From the latter’s employ he had drifted to the brokerage firm with which Meredith and his brother, Marshall Meredith, had been at that time identified. There he had stayed as office boy and utility man until Meredith engaged him as valet.

“Yes, sir,” he admitted finally. “He’s been in a temper ever since a week ago.”

“And what brought on the temper?” asked Pen-field patiently.

“I don’t know, sir.” Herman paused, then added: “He found fault with the cooking, with the way the car was running, with the postman because he was late, with Miss Lucille and Miss Anne because they kept him waiting. Oh, he blessed us all out this week, sir.”

“And you say he was a kind master?” remarked Penfield dryly.

“A kind and generous master,” replied Herman stubbornly. “He always had his hand in his pocket to help some one.”

“Did you ever hear Mr. Meredith express enmity against any one?” questioned the coroner, then noting Herman’s blank expression, he asked: “Did he ever say he hated any person in particular?”

Again Herman fingered his side-whiskers. In his appearance and deportment he resembled a model English manservant.

“I can’t exactly say, sir,” he replied evasively.

“I must have a direct answer.” Penfield’s voice deepened and Herman glanced at him under half-closed lids.

“Yes, sir, certainly; but as one of the family, so to speak,” he coughed deprecatingly. “Twenty years service, come this Christmas; I dislike to—to tell tales, sir. But if you insist,” observing Penfield’s impatient expression, “why, sir, I heard Mr. Meredith, sir, speak very harshly, sir, to some—some female, last night, sir, as I was on my way to bed.”

“And who was the female? Come,” as Herman again hesitated. “You are unnecessarily taking up the time of this court. Answer more quickly.”

“Very well, sir.” Herman held his portly figure more erect. “As I was passing down the corridor, sir, after closing the house for the night I heard Mr. Meredith say—his bedroom door being partly open—‘I intend to have my will in this matter, whatever the consequences; so save your hysterics. Beggars cannot be choosers. Not one penny of my money will go to—’ That’s all I heard, sir,” ended Herman.

“And the woman, who was she?” demanded Penfield. “Come, did you not catch a glimpse of her through the open door?”

Herman wagged a bewildered head. “Nary a glimpse of her face,” he said. “But—but—I saw a bit of her dressing gown reflected in the mirror of the bathroom door and it resembled one that Miss Anne wears.”

Penfield regarded the butler attentively for a moment. “At what hour of the night was this?” he asked.

Over in his corner by the fireplace Curtis’ hands contracted tightly around his cane and the lines of his face grew set and stern. Was Anne Meredith to be dragged so soon into the investigation?

“It was just before midnight.” Herman spoke with more assurance. “I had locked up the house for the night as was my custom.”

“Do you generally close the house at midnight?” questioned Penfield.

“Oh, no, sir. The time varies according to the hour Mr. Meredith and his guests retire,” explained Herman quickly. “I waited up last night until after Mr. Armstrong left.”

“Oh, so he went away last night?”

“Yes, sir. He came down just as I was putting up the night latch on the front door and asked me if he could get his car out of the garage, so I went with him, sir, and roused Damason.”

“Damason?” questioningly.

“Yes, sir; Fernando’s twin brother and Mr. Meredith’s chauffeur. He sleeps in the lodge down by the gate,” Herman added. “It took some time to rouse him

and that made me late in closing the house.”

“I see!” Penfield fussed with his papers. “Just one more question, Herman. Did you find the house locked this morning as you had left it on going to bed?”

“It was, sir.” Herman rose and stood respectfully waiting, and at Penfield’s gesture of dismissal he left the library. As he sought his pantry he passed the drawing-room and hurried his footsteps at sight of Mrs. Meredith sitting composedly by a window, reading a book.

Sam Hollister did not keep Penfield waiting. His quick and courteous replies to every question put to him, after the oath had been administered, gained grateful looks from the reporters whose eyes had traveled several times to the clock on the mantel during Herman’s testimony.

“You state that you drew up some legal papers last night for Mr. Meredith which he signed in the presence of Miss Lucille Hull and Mr. Gerald Armstrong,” repeated Coroner Penfield. “Where are those papers now?”

“I have no idea,” replied Hollister. “I last saw them on the bed by Mr. Meredith. This morning, in the presence of Doctor Leonard McLane, and with the assistance of Inspector Mitchell, I searched Meredith’s desk and his room, but could find no trace of the documents.”

“So!” Penfield gnawed at his underlip, a habit of his when in doubt. “What were the documents, Mr. Hollister?”

Hollister drew out two folded papers and spread them open. “This is a rough draft,” he explained. “It is what is known as a prenuptial agreement, and in it Mr. Meredith settled upon his niece, Anne Meredith, and her fiance, Doctor David Curtis, a yearly income of fifty thousand dollars, share and share alike, for their lifetime, and a sum in cash of ten thousand dollars apiece upon their marriage within the week. He also,” the lawyer spoke more slowly, “wished a codicil added to his will in which he revoked a bequest of one million dollars to Anne and gave it to his cousin’s daughter, Miss Lucille Hull.”

“Did he give a reason for altering the bequest to his niece in favor of her cousin?” questioned Penfield, after a brief pause.

“He said that Anne Meredith was amply provided for by the terms of the prenuptial settlement.” Hollister laid the papers in the coroner’s hand. “I forgot to mention that if the marriage between Anne and Doctor Curtis does not take place, Anne is to be disinherited.”

Penfield ran his eyes down the two papers, then laid them in front of him.

“These are rough, unsigned drafts,” he stated, turning to the jury, then

addressed the lawyer. "Does the original will stand?"

"Yes, until the codicil and the prenuptial agreement are found," replied Hollister.

"Then Miss Anne Meredith inherits a million dollars by the terms of her uncle's will," Penfield spoke with added gravity. "And her cousin, Miss Lucille Hull, does not receive that amount?"

"Just so." Hollister drew out a handkerchief. "Anne Meredith will inherit a handsome fortune whether the will stands or the codicil and prenuptial agreement go into effect or not."

"But as matters stand she will inherit a million dollars without having to be married," Penfield pointed out dryly, and his eyes sought Curtis.

The latter had gradually pushed his chair backward so that he was sheltered from the general gaze by a corner of the fireplace. There was a second's pause before Penfield resumed his examination.

"Did you hear any noise during the night after retiring to bed?" he asked.

Hollister shook his head. "I am a heavy sleeper," he admitted. "And last night I was very weary. I fell asleep at once and never awakened until Doctor Curtis called me on the house telephone, and told me that John Meredith was lying dead in the hall. I stopped only long enough to get my electric torch and rushed out and joined the doctor."

Penfield looked up. "Why did you want your electric torch?"

"Because Doctor Curtis informed me that the lights were out," replied Hollister concisely.

Penfield referred to his notes for a second. "When did you last see Mr. Gerald Armstrong?" he asked.

"When he left Meredith's bedroom after witnessing the signing of the codicil." Hollister gazed at his highly polished shoes and then about the room. "I left Miss Lucille Hull with Mr. Meredith a few minutes later and went to my room."

"Were you aware that Mr. Armstrong intended to leave the house at once?" asked Penfield.

"No. On the contrary I supposed that he was still here, as we had all been asked to stay longer," replied Hollister. "I had no idea that he had left last night until I went to find him early this morning, and was told by Herman that he had departed."

Penfield turned and whispered a few words to the deputy coroner, who nodded attentively; then addressed the lawyer.

“That is all, Mr. Hollister, thank you.” And as the latter left the witness chair Doctor Mayo approached Curtis.

“Coroner Penfield has recalled you to the stand,” he said. “Allow me—”

But Curtis did not wait for the offered arm. With assured tread he made his way to the witness chair and waited for the coroner to address him.

“Doctor Curtis,” the coroner turned back his notes until he came to the entry he wished, “you stated in your direct testimony that to the best of your belief the electric lights were turned on in the hall at the time you found Mr. Meredith’s body, as the bulb was hot to the touch. Why then did you telephone Mr. Hollister that the lights were out?”

Curtis’ fingers grew taut about his cane and his sightless eyes stared straight before him. “From where I stood in the bedroom trying to telephone to Mr. Hollister, I overheard Mrs. Meredith tell her daughter Anne that the hall was in darkness,” he stated quietly.

Penfield closed his notebook and rose.

“You are excused, doctor; please resume your seat by the fireplace.” He waited until Curtis had crossed the room and then turned to Doctor Mayo.

“Call Mrs. Marshall Meredith to the stand.”

CHAPTER VI

TESTIMONY

In the interval that followed the members of the jury relaxed and leaned back in their comfortable chairs, but no one broke the silence. Only the rustle of paper at the press table as reporters prepared copy could be heard, and David Curtis waited with the patience and quietude which his long convalescence in hospitals had engendered. He was not aware of the many curious glances cast in his direction, but the keen-eyed reporters who had scented a story of unusual interest in the rumored marriage between the blind surgeon and Anne Meredith, gained nothing by their scrutiny. Curtis' expression was not indicative of his feelings.

When on the witness stand he had contented himself with answering the questions put to him. He had evaded nothing, nor had he volunteered information. No one had questioned him as to his having gone to John Meredith's bedroom instead of his own, and he had not mentioned the presence of a woman in the dead man's room. Could it be that she was the "female" of Herman's story, and was that "female" Anne Meredith, as the butler evidently believed? If so, what then did the parrot's cry, "Anne—I've caught you—you devil!" signify? Had the parrot repeated Meredith's death cry?

The lines about Curtis' firm mouth tightened. His creed in life was simple: to live straight, never forget a friend, and never go back on a woman. Some natures there are with a direct appeal to each other—deep calling to deep—and since his first meeting with Anne he had found his thoughts engrossed by her charming, piquant personality. The first impression had deepened, and then had come Meredith's extraordinary plan for their marriage. Small wonder that Curtis had been unable to put Anne out of his thoughts.

The opening and shutting of the folding doors and the sound of men rising indicated the arrival of Mrs. Meredith, and Curtis moved his chair forward that he might not miss any of the proceedings. Mrs. Meredith was conscious of the concentrated regard which her entrance attracted.

With a courteous inclination of her head to the coroner she took the chair he indicated and waited with outward serenity for her examination to commence.

“Are you a resident of Washington, madam?” asked Coroner Penfield, after the oath had been administered and the usual first questions answered.

“I make my winter home in Washington,” replied Mrs. Meredith. “I am a native New Yorker.”

“Your name before your marriage?”

“Anabelle Rutherford.” Mrs. Meredith settled back into a more comfortable position. “I married Marshall Meredith twenty-three years ago and came with him to Washington. After his death I spent a great deal of time traveling, but at the earnest solicitation of my brother-in-law I decided again to make Washington my permanent residence.”

“And did you make your home with him?”

“No. I have an apartment at the Dresden. My daughter Anne and I generally spend every holiday and week-end here at Ten Acres with my brother-in-law, however.” Mrs. Meredith was given to short sentences, loquacity not being one of her failings. “Mr. John Meredith was devoted to Anne and desired to have her with him as much as possible.”

“Mrs. Meredith,” Penfield laid down his pencil and looked keenly at the handsome widow. The black gown which she had donned was modish in cut and very becoming, but it occurred to the coroner that her beautiful diamond earrings were inappropriate for the occasion and the deep mourning of her attire. “Did your brother-in-law appear in his usual spirits yesterday, or did he seem troubled in mind?”

“John appeared about as usual,” she replied, “except for his excitement over the prospective marriage of my daughter to Doctor Curtis. That absorbed his attention to the exclusion of all else.”

At mention of Curtis’ name Penfield glanced involuntarily toward the spot where the surgeon was sitting and Mrs. Meredith caught his look. Until then she had not observed Curtis and had not realized that he might be in the room. Mrs. Meredith smoothed the frown from her forehead and again fixed her gaze on Coroner Penfield.

“When did you last see John Meredith alive?” he asked.

“At dinner,” she answered. “He complained of a headache and went to his room soon afterward.” Penfield paused and referred to his notes, before putting the next question. “Did you retire early, Mrs. Meredith?”

“No, it must have been about eleven-thirty or a quarter of twelve.” She twisted her lorgnette chain in and out of her fingers. “I read in bed for a little while and then fell asleep.”

“And did no sound disturb you? Did you sleep through the entire night?” asked Penfield. A certain eagerness crept into his voice and Mrs. Meredith caught its warning note in time to be on her guard.

“On the contrary, I was very restless,” she said. “My daughter Anne is a wretched sleeper and I heard her moving about a number of times during the night.”

Penfield looked at her steadily for a second. “And what was your daughter doing in the hall at the time John Meredith died?” he asked.

The crepe trimming on Mrs. Meredith’s gown betrayed her rapid breathing, otherwise she sat calmly facing them.

“Anne started to get a book from the library,” she explained, and her voice was admirably controlled. “I heard her walking through the boudoir which separates our bedrooms and went to remonstrate with her. When we found the hall in darkness she returned to her bedroom.”

Penfield raised his eyebrows. “Without being aware that her uncle lay dead only a short distance down the hall?” he asked.

“The hall is winding and was also unlighted,” she reminded him quietly. “We were informed of Mr. Meredith’s death by Doctor McLane very early this morning.”

The coroner looked a trifle nonplused and drummed his fingers on the table in indecision for a second.

“Was Mr. Meredith on good terms with every member of his household?” he asked finally.

“To the best of my knowledge he was,” she stated, meeting his eyes with a level gaze. “I assure you, sir, I know of no reason for my brother-in-law’s rash and unhappy act.”

“Act, madam?”

“In committing suicide.” Again her fingers played with her lorgnette chain. “The tragedy has quite unnerved the entire household. Aside from the first shock, we grieve for the loss of a courtly gentleman and dear friend.”

Curtis would have given much to have been able to study Mrs. Meredith’s expression. He had followed every word of her testimony with keenest attention, his ears attuned to catch every inflection in her voice, every hesitation, however

momentary, and he admitted defeat. She had shown admirable composure and nimbleness of wit. Her explanation of the scene in the hall with Anne, which he had overheard, was quick—too quick to convince him of its truth.

Penfield considered Mrs. Meredith in silence for a moment. “I think that is all just now, madam,” he said courteously. “In case we should require you again at this hearing, kindly remain in your bedroom.”

With one last comprehensive look at the silent jury and the busy reporters, Mrs. Meredith wasted no time in leaving the room. Her place was taken in rapid succession by Jules, the chef, and Fernando, the Filipino, both of whom stated that they had retired early, slept soundly through the night and knew nothing of the death of John Meredith until awakened by Herman the next morning. Susanne, Mrs. Meredith’s maid, told of sharing her bedroom with Gretchen, the chambermaid, and of sound and dreamless slumber until also awakened by the agitated butler. Gretchen, the next witness, stuttered and stammered to such an extent that Penfield finally lost patience with her.

“There is no occasion for tears,” he said. “Just answer my question. Did you hear any unusual noise last night?”

Gretchen nodded her head dumbly; two big tears in her blue eyes obstructed her vision and she brushed them away with the hem of her white apron. She was an extremely pretty girl and the foreman of the jury eyed her admiringly. She spoke fairly good English, considering her short stay in the country.

“What sort of a noise was it?” demanded Penfield as she remained silent. “When did you hear it and where?”

“Peoples—they talk under my window,” she stammered. “My bed it is—how you say?” with a graceful gesture, “it is close by. The woman she say: I will do it to-night.’ And the man he reply: ‘Don’t lose your nerve.’ Then, gentlemens, I hear,” her eyes were twice their usual size, “the north door shut and by and by footsteps go softly, softly by my door. Then—” her voice trailed off.

“Well, what?” asked Penfield, after a second’s wait.

“Nothings, gentlemens; I go to sleep.” There was more than a hint of obstinacy in both tone and appearance, and Penfield showed his displeasure.

“Come, come!” he exclaimed. “You can tell us more than that. If you don’t, you will get into serious trouble with the police.”

“But, indeed, gentlemens, I go to sleep,” she protested, tears again welling to her eyes. “Nothing more do I know until Herman bang upon our door this morning and say the master is dead.”

Penfield eyed her steadily. "Did you recognize the woman's voice?" he asked.

"Please, gentlemens, it was," she gazed in fright about the room. "It was—" her eyes had strayed to David Curtis. She saw him facing her, his whole expression one of suspense. Her voice ended in a gurgle.

"Go for some aromatic spirits of ammonia," directed Penfield, as Doctor Mayo sprang to his assistance. "The girl will be all right in a minute; there, let in the air, the room is stuffy. What think ye, doctor," as Curtis approached. "A fake or faint?"

Curtis ran his fingers gently over the girl's forehead and across her closed eyelids, then listened to her rapid breathing.

"A case of excitement and fright combined," he said, as smelling salts were thrust into his hand by Fernando, who had stuck his head inside the door at the sound of the commotion and, with the quickness which characterized all his movements, secured Anne's bottle of salts which she had left on the hall mantelpiece some days before and forgotten. Curtis moved the salts back and forth before Gretchen, and in a few minutes her blue eyes opened, only to close the next instant as he bent over her.

"It is all right, Gretchen." His calm voice held a soothing quality which brought confidence to overwrought nerves. "You have nothing to fear."

"But the gentlemens—he say—" her voice was husky with emotion. "I don't tell on my young Mees."

Curtis' heart contracted suddenly. Was Anne again to be dragged into the investigation? Coroner Penfield, at his elbow, allowed no time for thought.

"You mean Miss Anne Meredith?" he demanded.

A nod was the only answer of which she was capable, but it satisfied Penfield. He exchanged a look with Mayo, then continued his examination as his assistant gave the girl a dose of aromatic spirits of ammonia.

"And the man," he began. "Did you recognize his voice also?"

"No, gentlemens." Gretchen straightened up and handed the empty glass to Mayo. "I tell everything I know," and she held out her hands in appeal. "Everything."

"You are excused," exclaimed Penfield, and Gretchen, with a sidelong glance at Curtis, slid out of the witness chair and from the room as the surgeon went back to his seat by the fireplace.

Gretchen's place was taken by Damason. His facial resemblance to his brother was marked, but whereas Fernando was thin and wiry, Damason was above

medium height and thick-set. His testimony was brief and to the point. He corroborated Herman's statement of having been aroused the night before by the butler and Gerald Armstrong.

"Mr. Armstrong got his car," he went on to say. "And when he drove away I went back to bed."

"Did you hear any one walking about the place, Damason?" questioned Penfield.

"No, sir."

"That is all, thanks." And at a sign from the coroner Damason rose and stepped toward the door with alacrity, then halted and turned back.

"I forgot, please, sir," he said, with a low bow. "This note has just come for you, sir."

Penfield tore off the envelope and read the few lines penned on the note paper. Turning he addressed the jury.

"This is a note from Mr. Gerald Armstrong," he began. "In it Mr. Armstrong states that," he replaced his eyeglasses and read aloud, "'The news of Mr. John Meredith's tragic death has proved a great shock. I have just learned that the inquest is called for three o'clock. Unfortunately I have an engagement which I am unable to break and cannot be present. As you probably have been told, I left Ten Acres just before midnight, therefore know nothing of the distressing event which transpired there after my departure, and my testimony would not aid your investigation.'"

Penfield laid down the note without comment. "Mayo," he said, "kindly request Miss Lucille Hull to step here."

CHAPTER VII

SUSPICION

Lucille's prompt arrival drew a pleased look from Coroner Penfield, which quickly changed to one of admiration. She had taken more than ordinary pains with her toilet and her mirror had told her, five minutes before, that she was justified by the result. Her name had figured in too many social events to be unknown to the reporters and they one and all favored her with close attention.

"What relation are you to Miss Anne Meredith, Miss Hull?" asked Penfield, after she had answered a number of questions.

"We are second cousins," she replied. Her voice did not carry very well and Curtis moved his chair nearer the center table. "My father, Colonel Julian Hull of Washington, was a first cousin of John Meredith and," she added, her voice deepening, "his lifelong friend."

Penfield scanned his memorandum pad. "Mr. Hollister testified, Miss Hull, that you were one of the witnesses at the signing of the prenuptial agreement in favor of Miss Meredith and Doctor Curtis and of the codicil to Meredith's will —"

"Not of the codicil," she broke in quickly. "Only of the agreement. As Mr. Hollister pointed out, I could not witness a document under which I stood to benefit."

"Ah! Then you were aware last night of the contents of the codicil," ejaculated Penfield, and Lucille flushed warmly.

"What business is that of yours?" she demanded; her voice had a shrill note to it generally lacking. Penfield replied to her question with another.

"What became of the codicil and the agreement?" he asked.

Lucille raised her eyebrows. "How should I know?" She shrugged her shoulders. "The last I saw of them, they were on Cousin John's bed."

Penfield regarded her attentively. "Mr. Hollister also stated that as you were

leaving, after signing the document, Mr. Meredith called you back. Please tell the jury what he said to you.”

“It was a personal conversation,” she commenced heatedly. “It had nothing to do—”

“We are the best judge of that,” broke in Penfield. “According to the evidence thus far adduced this afternoon, you are the last person known to have seen your cousin *alive*.” Lucille changed color. “Therefore, the conversation you had with him then, however trivial it may appear, may have some bearing on the tragedy and may aid the police in solving the mystery surrounding his death.”

“I assure you,” Lucille spoke so low that Curtis again edged nearer so as not to miss what she said, “we talked only of my cousin Anne and her prospective marriage. I am very outspoken.” Lucille’s beautiful eyes flashed spiritedly and her color rose. “I told Cousin John I thought that it was abominable of him—to”—she stammered and stopped, then added weakly—“to make a cat’s-paw of Anne to further his plans.”

“And what were his plans?” asked Penfield swiftly.

“I—it was a figure of speech.” Lucille’s high color faded, leaving her deadly white. “I was indignant and did not choose my words.”

Penfield studied her in silence. “Then we are to understand that you knew nothing of Mr. Meredith’s so-called ‘plans’?” he asked dryly.

“Yes.”

Penfield stroked his chin thoughtfully. “What answer did Mr. Meredith make to you?” he inquired a minute later.

Again Lucille flushed. “He told me to hold my tongue,” she replied. At the bitterness in her voice Curtis’ lips twitched. “And then I went to bed.”

“Were you disturbed during the night by any sound in the house?” asked Penfield.

“No.” The curtness of her tone brought a sharp look from Penfield, but he contented himself with a slight bow and gesture of dismissal as he said:

“Thank you, Miss Hull.”

On leaving the witness chair Lucille hesitated at sight of Curtis, then with an inclination of her head, of which he was entirely oblivious, she hurried from the library, conscious that several of the reporters were edging her way in quest of an interview.

“Inspector Mitchell of the Central Office, will be the next witness,” Penfield announced, and there was a stir of interest as the well-known police official

advanced to the center table. The coroner's questions were brief and to the point.

"Have you made a thorough search for the two documents signed by John Meredith last night and last seen by Mr. Hollister and Miss Hull lying on his bed?" inquired Penfield a few minutes later.

"I have, sir, but can find no trace of them," responded Mitchell.

"Did you find any evidence that a burglar might have broken into the house last night or early this morning?"

"No, sir."

Penfield shuffled his papers about until he found one that he wished.

"On examining the body of John Meredith as it lay in the hall this morning, did you find near it the weapon with which the wound in his throat was made?" asked Penfield.

Mitchell shook his head. "We have searched everywhere but can find no weapon of any kind," he stated. "It is not in his bedroom where, judging from the bloodstains, the wound was inflicted, nor was it lying by the body, nor along the hall down which he staggered until he fell dead at the staircase."

Penfield laid down his pencil. "Did you examine the body upon your arrival?" he asked.

"I did, sir." Mitchell paused and took an envelope out of his pocket. "Mr. Meredith was dressed only in his pajamas and was barefooted. There was nothing noticeable about the pajamas except that the jacket was unbuttoned about the throat and chest. Caught around the second button I found these hairs." Mitchell leaned over the table and carefully shook some hairs on a paper pad. Penfield as well as the members of the jury leaned forward to get a better look at them. Mitchell enjoyed the interest he had aroused for a moment before adding: "The hairs are from a woman's head and are chestnut in color."

Curtis, who had listened to Mitchell's statements with absorbed attention, started to his feet. The few hairs which he had taken from around that selfsame button were *white*. What, then, did Inspector Mitchell mean by declaring the hairs he had were *chestnut*? Curtis made a step forward then halted, stopped by a sudden thought—he had asked Fernando the color of the hairs and the Filipino had declared they were white. Suppose the lad had lied to him and they were chestnut after all? To be sightless—Curtis bit his lip to keep back a groan; a second later he had mastered his feeling of helplessness. The question of color could be easily settled by handing what he had to Coroner Penfield. Curtis pulled out his leather wallet and opened it. His search among its various compartments

was unrewarded—the hairs were not there.

Dazedly Curtis resumed his seat and again turned his attention to what was going on in time to hear Penfield address the next witness in the chair.

“Doctor Mayo, kindly inform the jury of the result of the autopsy,” he directed.

The deputy coroner held up an anatomical chart and as he spoke traced a red line to illustrate his meaning.

“Meredith died as the result of a wound inflicted in his throat,” he stated. “The larynx was opened and one of the larger vessels severed. The wound,” he spoke slowly, deliberately, “could not have been self-inflicted.”

A dead silence followed his statement. The reporters sat with their pencils poised, their eyes fixed intently upon the scene being enacted before them. Curtis, also, had hitched his chair around close to the table and sat forward resting his weight upon his cane.

“Then in your opinion, Doctor Mayo,” Penfield spoke with distinctness, “John Meredith was murdered?”

“Yes, sir; the autopsy proves that,” Mayo hesitated. “If you wish further evidence to that end, the absence of a weapon furnishes it.”

“That is all, doctor.” The deputy coroner had started back to his seat when Penfield stopped him. “Please tell Miss Anne Meredith that we require her presence here at once.”

The minutes dragged interminably to Curtis as they waited for Doctor Mayo to return. Suddenly the prolonged silence was broken by the pushing back of the folding doors and Curtis heard a light tread follow Doctor Mayo’s heavier footsteps across the room to the center table. Anne paused by the vacant witness chair.

“You sent for me?” she asked, looking questioningly at Coroner Penfield.

“Yes, Miss Meredith. Just a moment, please,” as she was about to seat herself. “Doctor Mayo will administer the oath.”

Anne’s clear tones never faltered as she repeated the solemn words and Curtis’ stern expression relaxed a little; there was no indication in her voice of hysteria, such as he feared might be the result of the strain she must have been under. Again he longed for sight as he tried to visualize the scene, longed for a glimpse of Anne, longed with a great longing for an opportunity to aid her should she require aid. Surely his blindness had not cost him the privilege of serving a woman!

“Miss Meredith,” Penfield’s usually harsh voice took a softer note as he studied the face before him. Gowned entirely in white, the slender figure seemed an epitome of girlhood. Her air of distinction, her small shapely head, whose fine outline was unaltered by the beautiful chestnut hair coiled about it, and the unwonted color which her unaccustomed prominence had brought forth, gave the final touch to what the coroner realized suddenly was actual beauty, and that of a high order. Her half foreign, wholly quaint manner and her deep blue eyes were at variance, however, with the cold, haughty gaze which met his. Penfield changed the words upon his lips. He had not expected to find such composure in so young a girl.

“Miss Meredith,” he began again, “have you seen your mother during the past two hours?”

“No,” she replied. “By your direction, I believe, we have kept to our own bedrooms and have not communicated with each other.”

Penfield glanced down at his notes, then across at her. “Were you aware that your uncle drew up and signed a prenuptial agreement settling fifty thousand dollars a year upon you and Doctor Curtis?”

A burning blush crimsoned Anne’s face as her gaze rested for a second on Curtis seated across the table from her.

“I was told so,” she answered, lowering her voice, but Curtis caught the words.

“Who told you of the document?” asked Penfield. “Your uncle?”

Anne shook her head. “No.” She spoke with more of an effort. “I met Mr. Gerald Armstrong as he was leaving the house last night and he told me.”

“And did he tell you also that Mr. Meredith had signed a codicil to his will revoking a bequest to you of one million dollars and giving it to your cousin, Miss Lucille Hull?”

Again Anne nodded her head. “He did,” she said simply.

“Miss Meredith,” Penfield spoke impressively, “where are those documents now?”

“I have no idea.” Anne regarded him in grave surprise. Penfield’s chagrin was manifest; his question had not shaken her composure. “I presume my uncle put them away safely.”

“They cannot be found,” replied Penfield. “Until they are located, Miss Meredith, you will receive the original bequest of one million dollars.” He paused, then added gravely, “You will thus be extremely wealthy without having

to go through a marriage ceremony.”

Again a burning blush covered Anne’s cheeks and brow, but her eyes did not falter in their direct gaze at the coroner.

“You overstep your privilege,” she replied with gentle dignity. “My private affairs are certainly no concern of yours.”

Penfield colored under his tan. “Are you aware that your uncle was murdered?” he asked.

“Murdered!” The horrified exclamation escaped Anne as she reeled in her chair and then recovered herself. “Murdered? No—impossible!”

“The result of the autopsy proves that he was murdered,” reiterated the coroner. “Can you tell us of any one who bore him enmity?”

Anne was conscious of a deadly faintness and she clutched the arms of her chair with a convulsive grip.

“No,” she faltered. “No.”

“Think carefully,” advised Penfield, viewing her emotion with satisfaction. Was she at last unnerved?

“No.” The monosyllable rang out with greater clearness and Curtis smiled, well pleased; she had gotten herself in hand again.

Penfield changed his tactics. “When did you last see your uncle alive?” he asked.

“After dinner last night,” she replied. Her pause was infinitesimal.

“When did you first learn that he was dead?”

Anne stared at him as the silence lengthened. So swiftly that none guessed his intention, Coroner Penfield reached across the table and took up a sheet of paper on which lay a few hairs.

“These,” he said, “match your hair in color, Miss Meredith.”

Anne looked at the paper and her expression changed to one of horror.

“Where”—she could scarcely articulate—“where did you find them?”

“They were found by Inspector Mitchell wound around the second button on Mr. Meredith’s jacket.” He stopped, then added smoothly, “Inspector Mitchell left several hairs still around the button, and we watched you cleverly remove them before our eyes when the body was being carried past your door on a stretcher.”

Anne never took her gaze from his face. The coroner was the first to speak. “Come, Miss Meredith, suppose you tell us where you were when John Meredith

was murdered.”

Twice Anne tried to speak, but no sound passed her dry lips.

“I—I”—again she stopped, then gathering courage in the stillness—“I have nothing to say.”

For one long minute Coroner Penfield regarded her. The silence in the big library grew oppressive. Somehow Curtis found himself upon his feet and by Anne’s side.

“Did your hair,” went on Penfield remorselessly, “get caught around that jacket button when you pressed your ear against Meredith’s chest to find out if his heart was still beating?”

As one stricken Anne gazed dumbly at the coroner. Curtis’ deep voice cut the silence.

“Miss Meredith has a right to be represented by counsel,” he said. “You exceed the authority vested in this inquest, Coroner Penfield.”

Penfield frowned, then smiled.

“The inquest stands adjourned until Thursday afternoon,” he announced. Stepping forward, he checked the rush of the newspaper men. “Not now, gentlemen; you cannot interview Miss Meredith,” with a side glance at the tableau near him. “Doctor Curtis will give you the name of her counsel.”

CHAPTER VIII

THE PLEDGE

The violent slam of the front door jarred through the house, then came the sound of rapid footsteps up the staircase and down the hall. Colonel Julian Hull hesitated at his bedroom door, stood in thought for fully three minutes, then continued on his way to a room at the back of the house which he designated as his "den." His wife looked up at his entrance. Her mild blue eyes widened at his disheveled appearance.

"Why, Julian! Is anything wrong?" she asked.

"Wrong?" Colonel Hull flung himself into his desk chair. "Wrong? Is anything right?"

His wife's only answer was a patient smile. Thirty years of married life had accustomed her to his explosive tendencies. She wisely changed the subject.

"Did Lucille get you on the telephone?" she inquired.

Colonel Hull brought his revolving chair back to its upright position with a jerk.

"No. Why didn't you tell me at once that she called up?" He reached for the instrument resting on his desk. "Just like a woman. Central," switching the hook up and down, "Central, Cleveland 64. What's that? Special operator—I don't need her—the number is correct. What? Service discontinued. Well, I'll be—" He banged up the receiver and turned, red-faced, to his wife. "They have cut off their telephone at Ten Acres."

"I am not surprised," replied Mrs. Hull. "They were probably pestered with calls."

"But how am I going to reach Lucille?" he demanded.

"Why not motor out there after dinner?"

Colonel Hull's good looks were marred by a scowl. "I had to leave the car at the shop—burned out a bearing," he admitted.

“Julian—your new car!”

“Yes, yes, I know; but I had to get to”—leaving the sentence unfinished he picked up the evening paper and turned the sheets swiftly until he came to the financial page, read its quotations, and then flung it down on the flat-top desk. “Jove, Claire, John’s death has been a frightful shock. It’s—it’s”—holding out a hand which shook slightly—“it’s unnerved me.”

Mrs. Hull laid aside her embroidery and looked directly at her husband, her eyes full of tears.

“John Meredith was a good man,” she said, “and the soul of honor.” She hesitated, then added in an awe-struck whisper, “Lucille said on the telephone that the authorities believe he was murdered.”

Her startling news did not have the effect she had anticipated; instead of the intense excitement she had expected, Colonel Hull nodded his head solemnly and remained absolutely silent. Mrs. Hull scanned him in surprise.

It was from her father that Lucille inherited her finely chiseled features and brilliant coloring, also her tendency to “nerves.” Mrs. Hull’s phlegmatic disposition matched her colorless appearance. There was nothing original about Mrs. Hull; she led a parrot-like existence, taking her ideas of life from her husband and depending upon Lucille for style in dress and deportment. Her kitchen and housewifely duties bounded her horizon. A woman of independent means, she had married Julian Hull at a time when his fortune was at low ebb and in spite of the fact that he was some five years her junior in age, and, prophecies to the contrary, the match had turned out most happily. Mrs. Hull had not shone in society, and it was with inward thanksgiving that she had, upon Lucille’s debut, laid the reins of entertaining in her daughter’s clever hands, and retired to her charities and her garden.

“Do you realize what I said, Julian?” she asked finally. “It is thought that your Cousin John was murdered.”

“I heard you the first time,” he said testily, brushing a hand across his gray mustache. “I am horrified, yes, but scarcely surprised.” Catching his wife’s startled look, he added: “John wasn’t the caliber to commit suicide.”

“But—but why should any one murder him?” she demanded. “He never harmed any one.”

Hull stirred uneasily in his seat. “It was a shocking crime,” he answered. “Let us hope the murderer will be caught at once and meet the punishment he deserves. Did Lucille speak of Anne and her mother?”

“Only to say that Belle was wonderfully calm and collected,” replied Mrs. Hull. “She did not mention Anne. I gathered that the household was demoralized —”

“Small wonder,” broke in her husband. “We must go there to-night; I’ll engage a taxi. What’s the matter?” observing the change in Mrs. Hull’s expression as he reached again for the telephone.

“I—must I go?” she asked timidly. “You know how scenes distress me.”

Colonel Hull leaned over and patted her gently on the shoulder. “I think it best, dear,” he said. “We will not stay long.”

Submissive always to his slightest wish, Mrs. Hull rose.

“I will tell Jane to serve dinner as soon as it is ready,” she said. “You look very tired, Julian; you will feel better after you have had a good meal,” and, not waiting for an answer, Mrs. Hull sought her waitress.

Colonel Hull remained in his chair for over five minutes, then rousing himself he walked to the mantel and lifted down a large silver mirror. He stared at his reflection with critical eyes.

“Tired—bah!” he muttered, half aloud. “It’s age—and ghosts.” Putting down the mirror he unlocked a lower section of his desk and took out a decanter and glass. The cordial brought back his color and relieved his sense of depression. He was whistling cheerily when, after sending his telephone message, he went to his room and dressed for dinner.

Eight o’clock came all too soon for Mrs. Hull’s peace of mind. With his dinner jacket Colonel Hull acquired good humor, and not for many a day had his wife found him so entertaining. The dinner itself was particularly appetizing, and it was with a sigh of regret that Mrs. Hull left the table and went to her bedroom for her wrap.

Ten years before they had given up their old home on Capitol Hill and moved to a more pretentious house on Wyoming Avenue. The change had proved more agreeable to Lucille than to her mother, who loved the old garden and the quaint house, with its air of bygone grandeur. In her eyes electric lights and English basements did not compensate for homely comfort and the peace of a street not frequented by automobiles.

When Mrs. Hull reached the reception hall on the ground floor she heard voices coming from the little room which opened from it. At her approach a young man brushed by Colonel Hull and came to meet her. Under the soft glow of the shaded hall lights she recognized her husband’s junior partner.

“Why, Gerald,” she exclaimed in pleased greeting, “I am so glad that you are here. I understood Lucille to say that you were out of town.”

“I am on my way to the train now,” answered Gerald Armstrong. “I stopped, thinking that Lucille might be home. The Colonel tells me, however, that she has remained at Ten Acres.”

“Yes, Cousin Belle asked her to stay—”

“I don’t know why Belle feels called upon to act as chatelaine,” interrupted her husband. “I suppose she will feel her oats now more than ever.”

“She is *grande dame*”. Armstrong’s smile only partly covered a sneer. “John Meredith’s suicide was a frightful thing.”

“But it wasn’t suicide,” broke in Mrs. Hull in her turn. “Lucille said it was a case of murder.” Armstrong’s step backward brought him under one of the bracket lights and Mrs. Hull noted with concern his pallor and the haggard lines in his face. He flushed hotly on meeting her gaze, and to cover his confusion stroked his fair mustache, which hid the weakness of his mouth.

“Murder!” he repeated. “It can’t be. Why, John Meredith was beloved, not hated.”

“That is just what I told Julian,” declared Mrs. Hull. “Lucille said it wasn’t a burglar, but it *must* have been.”

“Of course it was.” Armstrong’s voice of conviction pleased Mrs. Hull, confirming her high opinion of him. It was his custom to side with her in any family discussion. Swiftly he turned to Colonel Hull. “Did Lucille tell you that John Meredith left her a million dollars?”

“Good gracious!”

“Well, by Jove!”

The simultaneous exclamations brought a smile to Armstrong’s lips, but his eyes remained hard and watchful.

“Have you seen Lucille?” he asked.

“No, we are on our way to Ten Acres now,” Mrs. Hull spoke as a person in a daze, and her husband, immersed in a large silk handkerchief, blew his nose with vigor. “To think of John leaving such a sum of money to Lucille! I knew he was fond of the child, but”—she drew a long breath—“it passes belief!”

“Here is your car,” exclaimed Armstrong, as a taxi puffed its way to the door and stopped. “Let me help you in, Mrs. Hull,” and taking her firmly by the elbow he piloted her down the few steps leading to the driveway which cut across the sidewalk and led to their front door and the garage in the rear of the

house. Colonel Hull followed them more slowly. He did not speak to Armstrong until the latter had tucked a light lap robe over his wife's expensive gown.

"Will you come out with us, Gerald?" he asked, one foot on the running board. "I am sure Lucille and Anne will be glad to see you."

Armstrong shook his head. "I haven't time to make it, Colonel," he answered. "Thanks, just the same." He partly closed the door. "About Anne," his voice changed, "there's a chap out at Ten Acres—David Curtis. Ever met him?"

Colonel Hull dropped heavily on the seat by his wife's side.

"David Curtis," he repeated. "N-on, I can't say that I have. A banker?"

"A surgeon—and blind at that." Armstrong shrugged his shoulders. "Anne is to marry him. Good night," and he slammed the door shut.

His parting salutation met with no response. Both Colonel Hull and his wife were temporarily bereft of speech.

Lucille was stifling a yawn when Herman ushered her mother and father into the drawing-room at Ten Acres. She was unaffectedly glad to see them.

"I hoped that you would come," she said, as her father kissed her. "Why didn't you get here for the inquest this afternoon, Dad?"

"Couldn't leave the office—Armstrong didn't show up—stocks a bit critical," Colonel Hull replied jerkily as Mrs. Meredith came toward them. She had heard the arrival of the taxi when in her boudoir and had paused only long enough to inspect herself in her mirror before going to the drawing-room. Hull successfully concealed a frown as he bowed to the handsome widow; outwardly friends, their mistrust was mutual and of long duration.

"We expected you earlier in the day, Julian," she said. "Didn't Sam Hollister reach you on the telephone?"

"No." Hull followed her to the sofa and sat down. "I was told by 'Central' that your phone was disconnected."

"For outsiders, yes, but we can still send calls from here." She looked at Lucille and her mother and lowered her voice. "Would you care to see John?"

Colonel Hull's ruddy complexion paled. "No," he answered, with unnecessary vehemence; then, catching her surprised expression, modified his tone. "I can do John no good, poor lad! And—and—viewing the body would be—ah—harrowing. I would like to remember him as I last saw him."

"And when was that?" asked a quiet voice at his elbow.

Twisting around Hull found himself confronted by a stranger whose presence

had been partly concealed by the wing chair in which he was seated. Mrs. Meredith viewed Hull's astonishment with some amusement. She broke the pause.

"Julian, this is Doctor David Curtis," she explained. "Doctor Curtis, my cousin, Colonel Julian Hull."

Curtis' long, nervous fingers closed over Colonel Hull's flabby hand with a force which made the latter wince. Hull mumbled a greeting and continued to stare at the sightless man before him. Curtis felt the scrutiny as he wheeled his chair around so as to make one of the group.

"I am sorry," he began apologetically. "I thought that you were aware of my presence. I have been sitting here talking to Miss Hull, and she left me for a few minutes to find Mr. Hollister. You say"—and Hull was struck by the way Curtis located without apparent hesitancy each speaker. It seemed as if his blindness had sharpened his other faculties abnormally. "You say, Colonel Hull, that you would like to remember John Meredith as you last saw him. Exactly when were you with him last?"

"What is that to you?" demanded Hull aggressively.

Curtis took time, before answering, to light the cigarette which Mrs. Meredith, an interested listener, handed to him.

"Mr. Hollister, at the request of Miss Anne Meredith, is acting as her attorney." Curtis' speech was deliberation itself. "And he has asked me to aid him in clearing up the mystery surrounding John Meredith's death—"

"Therefore you try to implicate me," broke in Hull.

"On the contrary, I asked a very simple question with a view to finding out how Meredith looked when you last saw him. If I bungled my meaning you must not take offense," replied Curtis.

Colonel Hull covered his anger with bluff heartiness, while inwardly registering a score to settle with the surgeon at some future date.

"Certainly, I'll answer any questions," he exclaimed, with a broad smile. "But you must admit your meaning was a bit obscure—and from a total stranger; well, we'll let it go, eh, Belle?" with a sidelong look at Mrs. Meredith. "What is it you wish to know?"

"When you last saw Meredith, was he agitated or his normal self?" questioned Curtis.

"Oh, he was a bit excited," Hull admitted, with an air of candor. "He called at my office one day last week and got uneasy over stock quotations. He had been

dabbling in oil, against my advice.”

“And that was the last time you saw him?” At Curtis’ polite persistency Hull’s color deepened, but he was saved reply.

“Dad!” Lucille tapped him on his shoulder. “Mother is waiting in the hall. She isn’t feeling well,” turning to Mrs. Meredith, who had risen also, “so don’t keep her waiting, Dad.”

“I’ll come at once.” Colonel Hull waited courteously for Curtis to precede him. “I am told, little girl, that John left you a very handsome fortune.”

“In a codicil to his will,” Mrs. Meredith replied for Lucille who, a step or two ahead, had not caught her father’s remark. “Unfortunately the codicil cannot be found.”

Colonel Hull stopped dead in his tracks and glared at Mrs. Meredith.

“What’s that?” he demanded. “Do you mean the codicil has been suppressed—stolen, if you like it better?” meeting Mrs. Meredith’s stony look with angry eyes.

“Dad!” Lucille laid a restraining hand on his arm and pressed it warningly. “Don’t excite yourself. You will alarm mother.”

Mrs. Hull, who had been too nervous to keep still, stopped her aimless wandering about the square hall and waited for their arrival. Lucille, in advance of the others, turned to Curtis.

“Mother,” she said, “let me introduce Doctor David Curtis,” she hesitated before adding, “Anne’s fiancé.”

“I am very pleased to meet you.” *Savoir faire* was not Mrs. Hull’s strong point, and that she was ill at ease was as apparent to Curtis, sensitive of his surroundings, as it was to his companions. She shook his hand listlessly, then dropped it and pulled her evening cloak up about her shoulders.

“The taxi is at the door,” announced Colonel Hull. “Come, Claire.” But she lingered a moment to address Mrs. Meredith.

“When will John be buried?” she asked in an undertone.

“We will hold funeral services to-morrow morning in the chapel at Oak Hill,” responded Mrs. Meredith. “Only the family will be present. I thought Sam Hollister had told you of the arrangements; he has them in charge.”

“I haven’t seen Sam.” Mrs. Hull kissed Lucille warmly, and then shook hands with Curtis before she moved toward the front door. “Good night, doctor. Oh, Belle,” with a change of tone, “it does make me feel so badly to come here and not find John. He was so genial, so kind. Only the last time I talked with him

about Julian's career, he said I was my husband's lodestar."

Mrs. Meredith did not answer in words. After administering a cold kiss on Mrs. Hull's flushed cheek, and with a wave of her hand to the Colonel, she turned back to Curtis, who stood waiting near the entrance to the library.

"Lodestar is good, only spell it 'load'" she commented, caustically, but keeping her voice lowered so that it would not reach the Hulls. "John had quite a sense of humor."

Curtis smiled. "Are you going upstairs, Mrs. Meredith?" he asked.

"Yes—and you?" pausing on the lower step.

"I'll smoke awhile in the library; it is only nine o'clock," as the clock chimed the hour. "Good night."

"Good night," she echoed, and continued up the staircase.

Curtis listened until her soft footfall faded away in the distance, then turned thoughtfully and entered the library. The servants had spent but scant time after the inquest in replacing the furniture in its accustomed places, and Curtis found some difficulty in moving about.

"Oh, do be careful," exclaimed a soft voice to his right, and a hand touched his. "This way. I," her dignity sat quaintly upon her, "I am Anne."

"As if it could be any one else!" Curtis spoke with involuntary fervor, and Anne laughed shyly, then recollection returned to her, and her expression grew serious.

"I came downstairs hoping to find you," she explained, her color mounting. "When I heard Cousin Claire and Cousin Julian talking in the drawing-room I came in here to wait until they left. I want," she hesitated, selecting her words carefully, "to speak of Uncle John's plan for—for our marriage." The last words came with a rush, then she paused, tongue-tied.

Curtis came to her rescue. "I understand," he began gravely. "We will call the whole affair off. In other words," striving to spare her embarrassment, "I release you from your promise."

She plucked nervously at her gown. "It is you who do not understand," she said. "I don't wish to be released."

Curtis raised his head. Had his ears played him false?

"You mean," he asked slowly, "that you wish to go on with the marriage ceremony?"

"Yes." The affirmative was little more than a whisper.

“But,” it was his turn to hesitate, “it seems now that you are very wealthy; it is not necessary to carry out the bargain your uncle wished to force upon you.”

She did not answer at once. “I gave my word to him,” she murmured. “I cannot break faith with the dead.”

The ticking of the mantel clock was distinctly audible in the silence. Suddenly she spoke again, a catch in her voice.

“You hesitate—you do not wish to—to marry me?” she asked.

The hot color mounted to his brow and then receded.

“I only hesitate on your account,” he said. “In marrying me you will be tied to a blind man—a failure.”

She did not reply at once. Instead, Curtis heard her move backward a few steps and then a slight click sounded as an electric lamp was switched on. Anne turned and regarded Curtis gravely under its direct rays. There was none too much flesh even yet on the tall, straight figure, but the air of alertness and poise which had formerly been characteristic had returned to him. His face still bore traces of mental suffering, although its unyouthful sadness had been effaced.

“Because it is a bargain,” Curtis’ voice startled her from her contemplation of him, “I wish it to be a fair one. You are offering me the wherewithal to live. I can offer you nothing—”

“Perhaps,” she broke in swiftly, “I crave your friendship, your aid.”

Curtis felt his heart skip a beat and then race on.

“I will do anything, *anything* for you,” he replied, a trifle unsteadily. “And will gladly carry out your uncle’s plan.”

“Thank God!” she whispered.

The portières were thrust back suddenly and Mrs. Meredith stood on the threshold, with Hollister behind her.

“You may go to your room, Anne,” she said in icy tones.

A second later the portières dropped back into place and Curtis was alone.

CHAPTER IX

TWO PIECES OF STRING

David Curtis felt around his empty cigarette case and sighed regretfully; he had not realized his rapid consumption of its contents. The cigarettes had, at least, provided diversion of a sort. Since Anne's peremptory summons by her mother, he had been left severely alone. No one had entered the library and the folding doors, which had been in use for the inquest in place of the portières, and closed again by Mrs. Meredith after Anne's departure, had prevented his hearing anything transpiring in the hall. The clock on the mantel had ticked off the minutes with maddening regularity. At the stroke of ten he laid on the smoking table, by his elbow, a box of matches, which he had been twiddling between his fingers, and picked up his cane. The opening of one of the library doors caused him to face in its direction.

"Excuse me, sir," apologized Herman as he advanced further into the room, "I did not know you were still here, sir. I was thinking of closing up the house for the night."

"I won't detain you," replied Curtis quickly. "I am on my way to bed now. Has every one retired?"

"Yes, sir." Herman busied himself closing one of the long French windows opening on the veranda and bolting the other four. "Mr. Armstrong has just come back."

Curtis paused on his way to the door. "Mr. Armstrong," he repeated, inquiringly. "Mr. Gerald Armstrong?"

"Yes, sir." Herman dusted off his hands with a deprecatory gesture. "He told me, sir, that he missed his train, so he came back, sir, to spend the night."

"Oh!" Curtis' ejaculation covered doubt. He caught and wondered at the badly suppressed excitement in the butler's usually unemotional voice. "Where is Mr. Armstrong?"

"He went straight to his old room, sir; he hadn't taken away his things."

Herman switched off two of the tall standing lamps, leaving the room in semidarkness. "Said I need not disturb Mrs. Meredith to tell her of his arrival. Is there anything I can do for you, sir?"

"No, thanks." Curtis reached the doorway and turned around. "Good night, Herman."

"Good night, sir." Herman watched the tall, erect figure pass into the hall, a glint of admiration in his eyes. "He beats all," he muttered under his breath, then devoted his attention to closing the house.

As Curtis reached the staircase a thought struck him and he hesitated. Why not get Herman to refill his cigarette case from the stock which John Meredith had kept for his guests? He swung around and had partially retraced his steps when he paused abruptly. He had caught the sound of heavy breathing on his right, then light, receding footsteps.

"Herman?" His low call met with no response, and after a moment's wait he returned to the staircase and slowly mounted it, his cane swinging at a convenient angle in his right hand. It was leaded and made an excellent club in an emergency.

Keeping his left hand on the banisters, he circled the corner of the staircase, recalling McLane's clear description of the way to his bedroom. He had just made the turn into his corridor when a hail from Sam Hollister stopped him.

"Hello, Curtis!" Hollister kept his usually hearty voice at a low pitch. "I am glad you haven't gone to bed. I want a word with you."

"You can have more than one if you wish," responded Curtis. "I am in no hurry."

"Good! Suppose we go to John's old bedroom. This way." He slipped his arm inside Curtis' and suited his step to his as they went down the winding corridor. "I was on my way to look you up."

"Yes?" queried Curtis, as his companion ushered him into the bedroom, switched on the light and then closed the hall door. "What can I do?"

An answer came from an unexpected quarter. "Go to H—I!" shouted Ruffles, awakened from slumber by the brilliant electric light. The parrot hopped about on his perch and flapped his wings in Hollister's face as the latter approached.

"I'll wring that bird's neck some day," he grumbled. "How John stood his infernal talking is one of the mysteries of this place."

Curtis snapped his fingers and hummed a popular tune. Ruffles' plumage assumed its normal sleek appearance and his anger subsided. He gently nipped

Curtis' extended finger, then with one sleepy eye cocked at Hollister, descended from the top of his perch to a lower crossbar and prepared to enjoy his interrupted nap.

"Hum! You seem to have the same knack of pleasing Ruffles as John," commented Hollister, eyeing the parrot with disfavor. "Come over this way, Curtis." He pushed a chair aside and Curtis followed him across the bedroom. He judged they were near an open window from the cooler air which blew upon them. "I'll shut this in just a minute—"

"No, please don't," broke in Curtis. "The room is a trifle close and the fresh air feels good."

"Well, if it's not too much draught." Hollister looked somewhat dubious; he was not a cold-air enthusiast. "Take this seat by the secretary, I'll sit here."

A second later Curtis heard the jingle of keys knocking against wood. Hollister caught his inquiring expression.

"I'm going through John's desk," he explained. "Inspector Mitchell and Coroner Penfield said they ransacked it thoroughly, without results, however."

"And what do you expect to find?" asked Curtis.

"The documents John signed last night," promptly. "Or if not, some clue to their present whereabouts. We could find no trace of them in the bureau or highboy. This," laying his hand on the secretary, "is the only available place for John to place the papers. He certainly did not leave them lying around the room."

"Perhaps he gave them to some one," suggested Curtis, as Hollister inserted a key in the top drawer of the secretary.

Hollister twisted and turned the key before he could get the drawer unlocked. "If John did that, wouldn't that person come forward now and turn them over to me or to the police?" he asked.

"Provided that person has heard of Meredith's death," supplemented Curtis.

Hollister turned his head and stared at him. "Not know of his death!" he ejaculated in astonishment. "If John did give them to any one, that person is living here now. You will recall that no one was admitted to this house after Gerald Armstrong's departure."

Curtis tapped his cane thoughtfully. "I do not recollect that the coroner asked if any caller was admitted to the house after Meredith retired to his room," he said.

"Maybe he didn't," retorted Hollister. "But you know that no one called here,

for you were down in the library later than anybody else, and the library is near the front door—”

“And I am blind.”

Hollister looked taken aback. “I forgot,” he mumbled. “But you have remarkable hearing—”

“The heavy portières were drawn and I sat in the far end of the library, near the fireplace,” Curtis pointed out. “Also, I was absorbed in my thoughts. I cannot swear that no one was admitted last night.” Hollister took out, examined, and replaced the contents of the drawer before answering.

“It hadn’t occurred to me that some one—some outsider—might have had access to John last night after we left him,” he admitted slowly. “Frankly, I have been haunted by one idea—that the papers were stolen—”

“By whom?” Curtis’ quiet voice gave no hint of the anxiety consuming him as he waited for Hollister’s reply.

Hollister carefully sorted a bundle of papers and put them back in one of the pigeonholes. “By the person who benefited through the disappearance of the documents,” he said, and Curtis frowned at the indirect answer.

“And who is that?” he asked.

Hollister eyed him keenly. “You know as well as I,” he exclaimed roughly. “None other than John’s niece—Anne Meredith.”

Curtis bent the cane in his strong grasp, then let it spring back. “Miss Meredith asked to have you retained as her lawyer,” he said. “As her representative you should be the last person to point suspicion toward her.”

“As her lawyer I am trying to divert suspicion from her by finding those cursed documents,” snapped Hollister, his quick temper rising. “And look here, Curtis,” swinging toward the blind surgeon in his excitement, “it is going to be damned serious for her if we don’t find them. Don’t forget that John was murdered.”

“By heaven! Do you mean to insinuate—”

Curtis was on his feet, his hand clenched about the other’s arm.

“No, no. Let go, you fool!” Hollister strove to free himself. “I haven’t the faintest idea that she murdered her uncle, but,” as Curtis released his grip on his arm, “but I do believe that she took those papers.”

Curtis mastered his temper with difficulty. “Your reasons for thinking Miss Meredith a thief?” he demanded.

Hollister's appraising glance at his companion lasted fully a minute.

"Well," he said finally, "through the disappearance of the codicil and the prenuptial agreement, Anne inherits a large fortune without having to go through a marriage ceremony with you."

"And is that your only reason for thinking she took the documents?" persisted Curtis.

"Isn't that enough?" replied Hollister, insolently. "She wanted to dodge being married to you. That, depend on it, made her a thief."

"Indeed?" Curtis laid his cane across his knees and bent a little forward. "Then how do you account for the fact that she is still willing to marry me?"

Hollister dropped the loose papers he had at that moment removed from a smaller drawer of the secretary.

"Do you mean to say that you two are going on with Meredith's plan?" he stammered. "You are going through with the marriage farce?"

Curtis bowed affirmatively. "We are," he said. "Anne and I have just reached that decision."

"I'll be everlastingly blessed!" Hollister sat back and contemplated his companion in astonishment. It was some seconds before he spoke. "Anne is a damned sight cleverer than I thought!"

"I don't get your meaning?"

"You don't, heh? Well," Hollister pulled himself up short, "let's see what we can find in this desk." He stooped over and picked up the papers which he had dropped some moments before. "Receipted bills, household accounts," running his eyes down them. "Stop a minute, what's this?" He unfolded as he spoke a legal-size sheet. "Evidently part of an inventory, furniture and so on. Here's a notation in one corner, written crisscross, in John's hand: 'Contents of safe deposit belongs to'—that's all," looking up blankly at Curtis.

"Well, what about it?" asked Curtis, with growing impatience.

"Oh, nothing." Hollister refolded the paper, gathered the others in a neat bundle and replaced them in the drawer, but the legal-size sheet with its inventory of "furniture and so on," he slipped inside his coat pocket.

"Put it back," advised Curtis sternly. Hollister's mouth dropped open and his hand fell to his side.

"How?" he began, then turned fiercely on Curtis. "Damn it, you *can* see!"

"No." Curtis smiled. "You simply forgot that that grade of paper rustles badly."

It required no particular art of divination to detect you, but don't try to fool me again, Hollister."

The lawyer colored hotly, bit his lip, hesitated, then took out the paper and put it with the others in the drawer.

"I kept it out on impulse," he said apologetically. "I don't know why, unless it was that John's handwriting in that notation seemed a bit shaky."

"Was there room to complete his sentence?" Hollister took the paper from the drawer again and extended it toward Curtis. "Feel here," he said, and guided Curtis' fingers over the lower right-hand corner. "What do you find?"

"That the corner has been cut off diagonally," replied Curtis. He ran his hand over the sheet. "The other corners are untouched."

"Just so." Hollister crossed his short legs and assumed a more comfortable attitude. "Well, the notation is just above the corner and runs from edge to edge of the paper. It reads: 'Contents of safe deposit box belongs to'—the name must have been written just beneath it."

"And cut off." Curtis handed back the paper. "Put it away, Hollister. The question now is, did Meredith cut off the corner or did some one else? And if so, with what object?"

"And what has the contents of the safe deposit box to do with John's murder and the disappearance of the codicil and the prenuptial agreement?" demanded Hollister, his excitement mounting.

"The answer to that will be found when his safe deposit box is opened," replied Curtis dryly. "Does Coroner Penfield know of this safe deposit box?"

"I told him that John had a box at the Metropolis Bank," answered Hollister. "We have taken steps to have it opened in the presence of the Registrar of Wills and the bank officials to-morrow morning."

"Good!" Curtis leaned forward and placed the inventory sheet in the open drawer, then closed it. "Go ahead, Hollister, and look through the desk."

"There is only one drawer more that I haven't examined." The lawyer opened it as he spoke and went over its contents with care. "Pshaw! nothing but invitations, souvenirs, and menus." He closed the drawer with a slam. "Our hunt is a failure, Curtis."

Curtis pushed back his chair. "It would seem so," he admitted, "as far as locating the missing papers is concerned. Tell me, Hollister," as his companion rose, "what was the relationship between John Meredith and Gerald Armstrong?"

“Why, none,” responded Hollister. “Armstrong is a man of about thirty, I should imagine. He is a partner of Colonel Hull’s and that threw him more or less in contact with John in a business way, as Hull’s firm transacted some financial deals for John at one time.”

“Is Armstrong particularly attractive?”

“I believe he is quite a favorite with women.” Hollister’s tone lacked enthusiasm. He paused by the electric light switch, preparatory to turning it off, when Curtis, who followed him more slowly across the bedroom, should have reached the hall door. “John liked him well enough. They always appeared friendly, and he was a frequent visitor here. I can’t understand why Armstrong left so suddenly last night, or why he hasn’t been back.”

“Armstrong returned just before I came upstairs.”

“He did?” Hollister stared at Curtis in silence for a second, then spoke with more than usual rapidity. “Have you talked with him?”

“No. Herman told me of his arrival and that he had gone at once to his bedroom.” Curtis paused by the open door and, unseen by Hollister, who had partly turned his back to switch off the lights in the bedroom, laid his hand on the outside door knob. From it still dangled the piece of string which the night before had led him to believe that he was entering his bedroom. “Coming, Hollister?”

The lawyer closed the door tightly behind him. “I’ll walk with you to your bedroom,” he half whispered. “It is later than I thought.”

Their footsteps made no noise on the heavy carpet and they traversed the corridor in silence. At the entrance to Curtis’ bedroom Hollister bade him a low voiced “good night.”

“Just a second.” Curtis stopped him as he was about to turn back. “Can I borrow a cigarette?”

“Certainly, take these,” and the lawyer thrust a package into his hand. “No, I don’t want any to-night,” and not waiting to hear Curtis’ words of thanks, Hollister hurried away.

The package had been thrust into his hand upside down, and to Curtis’ dismay the cigarettes scattered on the floor before he could catch them. Stooping down he groped around and after some difficulty located the majority of them. He was about to rise when he touched a string partly tucked out of sight under the edge of the strip of carpet which ran the length of all the corridors.

Getting to his feet, Curtis closed his door, then stooped over. The bit of string

lay in the corridor directly under the door knob.

Curtis carried the string into his bedroom, closed the door, and making his way to a chair, sat down. First laying aside his cane, he lighted a cigarette, then held up the string and felt it carefully. He judged it to be about six inches in length, of ordinary twine, and one end was tied in a loop which had been neatly cut. Curtis held the two ends of the loop together. Its size proved that it could have been tied over his door knob.

Curtis smoked for many minutes without moving, the twine held suspended in his left hand, and his mind busy with the enigma of the two strings. Why had Fernando denied tying a string to his door knob, so that he, Curtis, might identify his bedroom? Why had the string been cut off, and why, above all, had a string been tied to John Meredith's door knob? An hour later Curtis undressed and went to bed with the enigma still unsolved.

CHAPTER X

THE SOLITARY INITIAL

Gretchen, the chambermaid, craned her neck over the banisters in her endeavor to find out what was going on in the large square reception hall on the floor below. Her limited knowledge of English prevented her understanding much of what she overheard. The voices grew more indistinct as the speakers moved away, and finally ceased entirely. Gretchen straightened up and rubbed her stiff muscles, then with a backward glance down the corridor toward Mrs. Meredith's boudoir door, she turned to her right and ran into Susanne.

"Oh, excuse!" she exclaimed in confusion, her pretty color mounting.

Susanne picked up the lingerie which Gretchen's unexpected collision had knocked from her hand and smiled kindly.

"*Mon Dieu*. You are in a hurry," she commented. "But, *petite*, why so white?" as Gretchen's color receded as rapidly as it had come.

"I"—Gretchen caught her breath sharply—"it is this house; it make me nervous." Tears hung on her eyelashes and she brushed them away. She edged closer to the French maid, who was eyeing her in real concern. "Did you go with madame to the funeral?"

"But, yes." Susanne's kindly expression altered to one of deep seriousness. "The services were of the most simple at the chapel, but at the grave were many strangers and they crowded about until some one in authority ordered them back. Mademoiselle Anne was greatly upset and Madame Meredith very angry."

"Have they returned?" questioned Gretchen timidly.

"*Oui*. Here comes madame now," as Mrs. Meredith's voice was heard on the staircase. With an alarmed look behind her, Gretchen darted past Susanne and down the corridor toward the back stairs. The French maid regarded the flying figure thoughtfully for a second, then advanced in time to meet Mrs. Meredith at the head of the circular staircase.

“Shall I pack madame’s trunks?” she asked as the older woman paused to take breath after her rapid climb upstairs.

“No; Mr. Hollister wishes us to remain here for several days longer,” replied Mrs. Meredith. “Have you seen Miss Anne?”

“*Oui, madame*; she has gone to her room.” Susanne followed her mistress down the corridor. “Doctor McLane just telephoned, madame, that he call soon to see Mademoiselle Anne.”

“Very well, let me know *first*,” with emphasis, “when he comes. Wait for me in my bedroom, Susanne,” and Mrs. Meredith crossed the boudoir. Not stopping to knock on the panel of the closed door, she opened it, and stepped inside her daughter’s room. Anne looked up from the couch where she had thrown herself twenty minutes before, and at sight of her mother, half rose.

“Don’t get up.” Mrs. Meredith drew a chair over to the couch and seated herself. At her air of conscious rectitude Anne’s heart sank. “There is something I wish to discuss with you.” Unconsciously Anne braced herself; her mother’s “something” was sure to be disagreeable—it generally was. “I noticed, Anne, that during the funeral services you sat in the same pew with Doctor Curtis.”

“Yes, mother, I did.” Anne judged she was expected to answer as Mrs. Meredith came to a full pause.

“And you took his arm and walked with him afterward from the chapel to the grave?”

“I did.” She gazed full at her mother. “He is blind, you know.”

“So that was it—philanthropy.” Mrs. Meredith nodded her head, well satisfied. “But, my child, don’t let your kind heart run away with our discretion. It is no longer necessary to cultivate Doctor Curtis’ acquaintance.”

“I beg your pardon, mother.” Anne’s heart was beating a bit more rapidly. “I do not agree with you.”

Mrs. Meredith sat back in her chair. “When you take that tone, Anne, I know you are going to be obstinate. But you must listen to me. The so-called ‘engagement’ between you and Doctor Curtis is at an end.”

“On what grounds?” meeting her mother’s eyes. “Expediency?”

“Anne, how dare you?”

Anne straightened her slender figure and threw back her head. “On the contrary, mother,” she said clearly, “Doctor Curtis and I will carry out Uncle John’s plans to the letter.”

Mrs. Meredith gazed at her, thunderstruck. “You mean—”

“That our marriage will take place before this week is out.”

Mrs. Meredith, livid with wrath, sat for some moments absolutely silent. When she finally spoke, both voice and manner were more conciliatory.

“Heroics are all very well in their place,” she began, “but before this rash marriage is consummated, there are many things to consider. First, Doctor Curtis is blind. He has no future,” she paused, “but he has a past—”

“Explain your hints, mother,” as Mrs. Meredith paused again.

“Has he spoken to you of his past career?”

“No.” Anne’s white cheeks turned crimson. “We have never had a lengthy conversation.”

“It is just as well,” dryly. “I have started an investigation—”

Anne was on her feet, her usually calm, cold demeanor transformed into passionate fervor. “I warn you, mother, to stop any so-called investigations. Is your record, and mine, so clean in this plan for a hurried, wild marriage that we can afford to blacken the man, who under hard pressure of blindness and destitution consented to it?”

“Anne!”

“Stop, mother; I will be heard,” as Mrs. Meredith raised her hand with an imperative gesture. “Doctor Curtis afforded us the means to gratify that mysterious mandate which Uncle John insisted upon by agreeing to marry me, and by that marriage, in name only, I will inherit a large fortune.”

“Your uncle’s death alters that—”

“Does it?” For the first time Anne did not meet her mother’s eyes. “Doctor Curtis has proved himself a gentleman and a man of honor in his treatment of me. Yesterday, when I was heckled by Coroner Penfield, he came to my assistance. I,” raising her head proudly, “I will not be a party to any act, overt or concealed, which endeavors to pry into his past.”

The door banged shut as Anne, springing to her feet, fled through it. Pressing her hands against her hot cheeks, she leaned panting against the wall of the boudoir to recover her self-possession before going to Lucille’s bedroom.

Downstairs in the library Sam Hollister rubbed his bald head with a large silk handkerchief and gratefully accepted Herman’s suggestion of a cocktail from what had once been John Meredith’s private stock.

“Bring three,” he added. “I am sure Mr. Armstrong will join me, and Doctor Curtis will be here presently.” As the butler disappeared, he turned to Gerald Armstrong. “A cocktail,” he remarked dryly, “may make you a more agreeable

companion.” Armstrong transferred his gaze from his carefully creased trousers to Hollister’s flushed countenance.

“Why so heated?” he asked. “Sit down and take things calmly.”

The look that the lawyer cast at his younger companion was anything but complimentary. “Calmly?” he fumed. “Where is that ass, Hull?”

“Do you mean Colonel Julian Hull?” Armstrong made no attempt to conceal his amusement. “My revered senior partner is, I believe,” glancing at his wrist watch, “in our office watching the stock market.”

“And you ought to be with him,” with equal vehemence. “Why are you hanging around this house?”

“Isn’t that my business?” Armstrong’s sallow cheeks had turned a deep red, but otherwise he displayed no anger. His voice had not lost its teasing quality, which to many people was an annoying characteristic.

“It may be the coroner’s business if you are not careful,” exploded Hollister, losing his little store of patience, which had been sorely tried that morning. “What put it into your head not to appear at the inquest yesterday afternoon?”

“My dear Hollister,” Armstrong smiled tolerantly, “I explained in my note to Coroner Penfield, which I understand he did me the honor to read at the inquest, that not having been in the house at the hour John Meredith died, my testimony would add nothing to the investigation.”

His voice carried to the farther end of the library and David Curtis listened attentively as he skillfully avoided the furniture in his slow progress toward the two men. Absorbed in watching each other, neither man heard his approach. Curtis paused almost at Hollister’s back and gently struck his cane against the side of a mahogany card table. Armstrong swept a startled glance behind him and then resumed his nonchalant pose, while Hollister stepped to one side and laid his hand on a chair back.

“Hello, Curtis!” Hollister pushed the chair he had grasped toward the blind surgeon. “Sit down and be comfortable. Here comes Herman with the cocktails.”

“Thanks, but I won’t have any,” Curtis said, as the butler stopped before him, silver tray in hand. “Cocktails and brain work don’t go together successfully.”

“And what does your brain work comprise?” asked Armstrong, with a snicker of amusement as he took one of the frosted glasses. He drained his before Herman had time to serve the lawyer. “If you don’t wish the one Doctor Curtis scorned, I’ll take it, Hollister.” He drank the second cocktail more leisurely, then turned to Curtis. “You haven’t answered my question, doctor.”

“Ever hear of the fourth dimension, Armstrong?” Curtis smiled, as he addressed the young stockbroker; it deepened at the latter’s sulky nod. “Well, a problem of that kind provides very good mental relaxation—”

“For a blind man,” interjected Armstrong, contemptuously.

“Just so,” agreed Curtis, his manner unruffled. He turned to their silent companion. “Why so fidgety, Hollister? You have snapped your watch cover shut half a dozen times since I have been sitting here.”

Hollister replaced his hunting-case watch in his pocket.

“Mrs. Meredith is late,” he explained. “We have to be at the Metropolis Bank in twenty minutes.”

Armstrong leaned forward, a touch of eagerness in his manner.

“So you are going to open John Meredith’s safe deposit box to-day,” he commented. “I understand the bank officials had called it off until later in the week.”

“I don’t know who your informant could have been,” replied the lawyer dryly, “but it has not been postponed, except as to hour, to oblige Coroner Penfield. Ah, here is Mrs. Meredith,” as the widow appeared in the doorway.

“Don’t let me disturb you, Gerald,” she exclaimed, as Armstrong went with Hollister to the door. “Oh, Doctor Curtis, I did not at first see you,” catching sight of the blind surgeon over Hollister’s shoulder. She turned to the lawyer. “I am sorry to have kept you waiting, Sam; but Anne detained me. How long do you suppose we will be at the bank?”

“About an hour, perhaps two, but not longer than that,” Hollister added, catching her expression of dismay.

“In case we are delayed in returning,” Mrs. Meredith addressed Curtis directly, “I have told Herman to serve luncheon and not to wait for us. In our absence, doctor, I trust that you will act as host.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Meredith,” replied Curtis, bowing deferentially. He could not see the sudden look of aversion which Gerald Armstrong cast in his direction, but he was aware intuitively that Mrs. Meredith’s formal courtesy cloaked the animosity which he fully realized from almost their first meeting was only slumbering, ready to burst forth at any moment. That she had not taken kindly to his inclusion in the house party had been incautiously told him by Lucille Hull; and he judged that only dire necessity had later induced Mrs. Meredith to agree to her brother-in-law’s plan for his marriage to her daughter.

Herman’s approach broke up the little group. “Damason is at the door,

madam, with the car," he announced, and with a bow to Curtis Mrs. Meredith moved away, Hollister in her wake. Armstrong was about to follow them when Herman addressed him.

"Inspector Mitchell has just telephoned to ask if you were here, sir," he said. "He is waiting to speak to you."

Armstrong smothered an oath. "Tell him to go to—Guinea!" he directed. "No, wait," as Herman bowed and moved a few steps away. "I'll talk to the beggar," and he hurried back into the library, and over to the branch telephone standing on a small table in a corner, which had been devoted exclusively to John Meredith's use.

Armstrong's conversation over the telephone with Inspector Mitchell appeared to be a strictly one-sided affair, or so Curtis judged from the few monosyllabic remarks from the stockbroker. When he hung up the receiver a few minutes later he was scowling.

"Persistent devils, these detectives," he said, walking over to the smoking stand and striking a match which he applied to an expensive cigar. "Mitchell insists that I wait until he gets here."

"Does his request put you to inconvenience?" asked Curtis politely.

Armstrong shrugged his shoulders, but whatever answer he would have made was forgotten on catching sight, through one of the windows, of Lucille and Anne walking across the lawn toward the lodge. Without a word of explanation to Curtis, he opened the French window and hurried after the two girls.

Curtis made his way over to the window and stood in it facing the lawn. He was not aware that his tall figure in its well-fitting suit of gray clothes was silhouetted against the dark background of the library, or that, at Armstrong's hail, Anne and her cousin had swung around. Anne's gaze traveled past Armstrong's advancing figure and rested on Curtis. She instinctively raised her hand to wave a friendly greeting, then dropped it. For an instant she had forgotten that Curtis was blind. There was a catch in her throat as she spoke to Armstrong and her face was unsmiling as she walked with him and Lucille to the lodge.

It was fully ten minutes before Curtis left the window and went slowly upstairs to his bedroom. Pausing by his bed, he laid his cane across it. In doing so his hand touched some clothing. Lifting it up he found it was a suit of pajamas. Curtis bent down and passed his hand rapidly over the bed; it was, as he thought, made up. Why then were his pajamas laid out on the bed at noon? Had Gretchen, the chambermaid, forgotten to put them away or was it

carelessness on the part of Fernando, his Filipino valet?

Somewhat perplexed, Curtis again picked up his pajamas. As he ran his fingers over the jacket he drew out a handkerchief from the pocket. Holding it close to his nose he detected the odor of chloroform. Only a faint, very faint, trace of the chloroform remained, but it was sufficient to identify the handkerchief as the one thrown toward him by the unknown woman in John Meredith's bedroom on the night of Meredith's murder.

Curtis sat down in the nearest chair and spread the pajamas across his knee. In the rapid march of events he had forgotten the handkerchief which he had inadvertently stuffed into the pocket of his pajamas on going to his room to rest after the discovery of Meredith's body.

He judged the handkerchief to be of the finest linen, of dainty size. Deftly his fingers traveled around its edges. Was there no mark by which he might establish the identity of the mysterious woman in Meredith's bedroom? His long, sensitive fingers stopped at one corner. Slowly they traced out the solitary initial—the capital letter “A.”

CHAPTER XI

THE HAND ON THE COUNTERPANE

A low tap at his bedroom door aroused Curtis. Rising in some haste he went over to his bureau, took out his despatch box, and, opening it, securely locked the handkerchief inside it. Not until the box was again in the drawer did he turn toward the door.

"Come in!" he called as the knock was repeated with more insistence. Doctor Leonard McLane stepped briskly inside and closed the door behind him.

"I am glad I found you, Dave," he said, and, observing Curtis' pleased smile on recognizing his voice, added: "I called to see Anne Meredith, but she had gone out motoring with Lucille Hull and Gerald Armstrong. Herman told me that you were in, so I came upstairs."

Curtis sighed with relief. "I am very glad that you are here, Leonard," he exclaimed. "Frankly, I was just thinking of telephoning to you to come over at once."

"Indeed?" McLane drew up a comfortable rocker and seated himself near the blind surgeon. "What do you wish to see me about, and why are you caressing a pair of pajamas?"

As he spoke Curtis had picked up the pajamas from the chair where he had dropped them upon hearing McLane's knock on his door.

"I'll explain all in good time," he answered, seating himself. "Please treat our conversation as confidential, Leonard."

McLane nodded his head thoughtfully. "I presume it's about John Meredith's murder and"—he hesitated—"Anne."

"Why do you connect the two?" quickly.

"It is what every one is doing," said McLane. He noticed the harassed lines in Curtis' face and his expression grew more serious. "Coroner Penfield told me what transpired at the inquest and that you insisted that Anne be represented by a

lawyer. How,” he glanced keenly at his companion, “how did you happen to pick on Sam Hollister?”

“Anne asked for him,” replied Curtis. “Isn’t he a good lawyer?”

“W-why, yes; so I understand.” McLane’s tone did not convey conviction. “But he is not a criminal lawyer.”

Curtis hitched his chair closer to McLane. “You think it will come to that?” he asked, with unconcealed anxiety.

McLane nodded his head somberly. “It appears to me that Anne knows more than she has told,” he said. “Why she is withholding information which may aid the police in detecting her uncle’s murderer is one of the mysteries of the case.”

“But there is no criminal action in that,” protested Curtis.

“Unless it comprises being an accessory after the act,” McLane pointed out. He paused a moment before asking, “What are the *known* facts connecting Anne with the murder?”

Curtis sat back in his chair and checked off each point as he spoke. “First, Herman, the butler, testified that he overheard John Meredith quarreling with a ‘female’ in his bedroom that night. He took her to be Anne because he thought he recognized her dress. Secondly, Gretchen, the chambermaid, said that she overheard a conversation between a man and a woman after midnight under her window. The woman said, ‘I will do it to-night,’ and the man replied, ‘Don’t lose your nerve.’”

“Well, did Gretchen identify the woman?” asked McLane as Curtis paused.

“Indirectly, yes. She declined, as she put it, ‘to tell on her young mees.’” Curtis hesitated. “Her statement satisfied the coroner and she was excused.”

“I see!” McLane stroked his chin reflectively. “Well, what next?”

“I overheard Mrs. Meredith speak to Anne in the hall just after I found Meredith’s body.” Curtis spoke with growing reluctance, and McLane nodded his head in silent understanding. “Mrs. Meredith said nothing to connect Anne with the crime, but it did prove that Anne was up and about at the time of her uncle’s murder.”

“Quite so, it did,” agreed McLane. He lowered his voice. “Did anything come up at the inquest about the parrot and its cry: ‘Anne—I’ve caught you—you devil?’”

“No.”

McLane sat back and frowned. “Why not, I wonder?” he muttered.

"The inquest is not over," Curtis pointed out. "Only adjourned until Thursday."

"And this is Tuesday morning—"

"Which leaves us very little time to solve the mystery of Meredith's death." Curtis sighed, then bent forward and laid his hand on McLane's knee. "Can I depend upon your help, Leonard?"

"Absolutely."

"Good!" Curtis' face lighted with his charming smile. "We must work to clear Anne. She must not be dragged any further into the limelight."

"If it only stops at the limelight!" The exclamation escaped McLane involuntarily. "I am afraid, Dave, that Coroner Penfield is holding back something more than the episode of the parrot to spring at the next hearing of the inquest."

"It may be," admitted Curtis. "Penfield stopped his direct examination after producing the hair which he and Inspector Mitchell found wound around the button on the jacket of Meredith's pajamas. The hair matched Anne's in color and texture."

"And Penfield claimed that it was caught around the button when Anne pressed her ear over Meredith's heart to see if it was still beating," broke in McLane. "It was a clever deduction on his part."

"Quite so, and one warranted by facts—as far as he knew them," answered Curtis. "Is the hall door closed, Leonard? Are we alone?"

McLane glanced toward the door and then about the room.

"The door is shut," he said. Rising, he walked over to it, pulled it open and glanced up and down the empty hall, then closed the door and turned the key in the lock. "We are entirely alone, Dave. Go ahead and say what you wish."

Curtis waited until his companion had resumed his seat.

"After I had notified Sam Hollister of Meredith's death, I went back with him to the body," he began. "Hollister left me to telephone to Coroner Penfield. While waiting for him to return, I ran my hands over Meredith's body and found some hair, evidently from a woman's head, caught around that jacket button." He paused. "I may also state that when I first found Meredith he was lying partly on his right side, face pressed against the carpet and his arms outflung."

"So I read in your printed testimony," interjected McLane.

"But when I examined the body for the second time, it was lying on its back," finished Curtis.

“It was?” McLane shot a questioning glance at his blind companion. “Why didn’t you mention it at the inquest?”

“I was not questioned on that point,” calmly. “If I am recalled at the next hearing I will speak of it. In the meantime—”

“Yes?” as Curtis paused.

“I want your advice, and, if need be, your aid.”

“Sure, go ahead.” McLane was listening with deep attention and with increasing impatience at his friend’s deliberation of speech.

“I unwound several of the hairs,” went on Curtis, “and put them in my wallet. Later that morning, that is yesterday, I showed them to Fernando and asked him their color. He said the hairs were white.”

“White!” echoed McLane in astonishment.

“Fernando said that they were white,” repeated Curtis. “I had to depend upon his eyesight.”

“But,” McLane took out his handkerchief and dabbed his forehead, “the hair Penfield found about the button was chestnut in color. I’ve seen it and it certainly came from Anne’s head.”

“Possibly Fernando lied when he told me the hair was white.”

“Sure, he might have; with the object of shielding Anne. The servants are devoted to her,” McLane added. “Let me see the hair and I can settle the question.”

“Unfortunately the hair has disappeared out of my wallet.”

“Good Lord!” McLane sat back and regarded Curtis in startled surprise.

“I discovered it was missing during the inquest at the time it was stated that the hair Penfield found was chestnut in color,” went on Curtis. “Having nothing to prove my statement, I kept silent.”

“I see!” McLane gnawed at his upper lip. A second or more passed before he broke the silence. “There isn’t a white-haired woman in the household,” he said.

“Then Fernando lied,” Curtis’ lips compressed into a hard line, “and not for the first time. Listen attentively, Leonard.” The injunction was hardly needed, but Curtis could not see his companion’s absorbed regard as he sat back watching him. “When dressing for dinner on Sunday evening I told Fernando to tie a string on the outside knob of my door so that when I came upstairs, if I was alone, I could identify my bedroom without difficulty.”

“Did he do so?”

“No. Fernando claims that I never ordered him to tie a string on the door knob.” Curtis spoke more slowly than usual. “But after discovering Meredith lying dead in the hall, I went in search of my room and, finding a string hanging from a knob of a closed door, entered that bedroom, supposing it to be mine.”

“Whose was it?”

“John Meredith’s.”

McLane sat back and again rubbed his forehead with his handkerchief.

“I’m blessed if I see—” he exclaimed.

“Unhappily I don’t see—at any time.” Curtis covered his sigh with a slight cough. “This is the point, Leonard; a string was tied to John Meredith’s door knob and is still hanging there. A string was also hung on my door knob Sunday evening and cut off before I came upstairs.”

“What?”

Instead of replying Curtis rose and went over to his bureau. Taking his despatch box from the drawer he made his way to the bed and, turning the key in the lock, threw back the lid.

“This piece of string,” he said, holding it up, “has one end tied in a loop, which has been cut.” He handed the string to Leonard. “I found the string lying in front of my door, partly hidden under the hall carpet.”

McLane took the string and eyed it attentively. “Just a moment,” he exclaimed. “I’ll be back.” He stopped at the hall door, unlocked it and sped up the hall. During his absence Curtis stood by the bed, head bent in a listening attitude. Barely three minutes elapsed before McLane was beside him again.

“I have compared the string with that still hanging from Meredith’s door,” he said, in explanation. He placed the string in Curtis’ hand. “It is the same color and weight, and was evidently cut from the same ball of twine.”

“And Fernando denies that I ever requested him to tie a string to my door,” mused Curtis, as he put the string back in his despatch box.

“Could he have tied the string on your door, then cut it off, and tied one on Meredith’s door as a practical joke?” asked McLane. “And after the events of Sunday night be afraid to confess?”

“That is a plausible theory,” admitted Curtis, somewhat dubiously, however. “But why pick out John Meredith’s door?”

“Ask me something easy,” begged McLane. “Did you go in Meredith’s bedroom, Dave?”

“Yes. I telephoned from there for Sam Hollister.” Curtis paused, then spoke with added gravity. “While standing before the instrument trying to recall Hollister’s number, I heard a woman moving about in the bedroom.”

McLane’s eyes were twice their usual size. “Go on,” he urged. “Don’t keep me in suspense. Did the woman see you?”

“No. I had not switched on the electric lights,” Curtis explained, keeping his voice low but distinct. “As she went by me on her way out of the room, she tossed this handkerchief in my direction.” He took it out of his despatch box and gave it to McLane. “When I picked it up I detected the smell of chloroform very plainly.”

McLane turned the handkerchief over several times and the solitary initial caught his eye.

“A,” he said aloud, and the gravity of his tone was unmistakable. “Anne?” He laid the handkerchief back in the despatch box. “Lock up the box, Dave,” he directed. “Have you shown the handkerchief to Coroner Penfield?”

“No.” Curtis pocketed the key of the despatch box. “I know you won’t approve, Leonard, but”—and his tone was grim—“I decline to further involve Anne Meredith in the mystery of her uncle’s murder.”

“I am with you there,” declared McLane. “I wish, however, that you had spoken to me sooner about the handkerchief.”

“This is the first time I have seen you since we met in Meredith’s bedroom yesterday,” Curtis pointed out. “But I must confess, Leonard, that the handkerchief did slip my mind. I had left it in the pocket of this suit of pajamas, and only recollected the handkerchief when I found the pajamas lying on this bed about fifteen minutes before you came in.”

“Lazy habits you have,” commented McLane, speaking more lightly. “Leaving your pajamas around your room at this time in the morning.”

“I did not leave them there,” protested Curtis. “I don’t know who could have laid them on the bed. It’s made up, is it not?”

McLane turned about and gazed at the bed as Curtis crossed the room to his bureau, despatch box in hand.

“The bed is made up,” McLane stated slowly. Something caught his eyes and he stepped close to the bedstead and bent forward. “By Jove!” he exclaimed. “There is an impression of a hand on the counterpane—”

“*Monsieur le docteur!*” McLane straightened up swiftly and encountered Susanne’s frightened gaze. The French maid was standing holding the hall door

ajar. “Mademoiselle Anne is calling for you—come quickly!”

CHAPTER XII

MURDER

David Curtis was not far behind Leonard McLane in reaching the hall and instinctively swung in the direction the latter was headed. Anne Meredith turned back from the head of the circular staircase at their approach.

“Oh, Doctor McLane!” she exclaimed. “I found poor Gretchen stretched out here in a dead faint. She is coming to, now. Thank you,” addressing Inspector Mitchell who, seated on the top step, supported the chambermaid’s head on his broad shoulder. “You were very kind.”

“Not at all, Miss Meredith.” Mitchell, considerably embarrassed by his role of nurse, gladly relinquished his place to McLane and Susanne, who at a sign from Anne helped to support the half-conscious Dutch girl.

Herman, standing in the square hall at the foot of the circular staircase, had heard the commotion and, with forethought, instantly provided himself with a glass of water and a smaller glass containing whisky.

Armed with these he appeared on the scene just as McLane, with the assistance of Susanne, had gotten Gretchen stretched out on a broad settee which stood in a window alcove off the corridor. Susanne placed a pillow under Gretchen’s head and loosened her black gown with a deftness which won an approving word from McLane. It took some persuasion to induce Gretchen to swallow some of the whisky and she made a wry face as the powerful stimulant slipped down her throat. It quickly dispelled the deadly faintness which had overcome her. Finally, satisfied that Gretchen would be able to go to her room, supported by Susanne, McLane left her and went over to the small group at the head of the staircase.

“What brought on Gretchen’s attack?” asked McLane, taking care to speak so as not to be overheard by either Susanne or the Dutch girl.

“I don’t know, doctor,” answered Anne. “She has been very nervous and unlike herself ever since the inquest.”

Inspector Mitchell, who had been regarding David Curtis as the latter stood by Anne's side, with fixed scrutiny, broke into the conversation.

"I may have startled your maid unintentionally," he said apologetically. "Herman told me that Doctor McLane was with Doctor Curtis and I came upstairs unannounced. It isn't my custom to make much noise," he smiled. "And your maid did not apparently know that I was near her. When she turned and saw me, she dropped where she stood."

"Pardon, mademoiselle." Susanne had left Gretchen and drawn nearer in time to catch Mitchell's remark. "All las' night and to-day have what you call 'shadows' followed poor Gretchen."

"Shadows?" questioned Anne, frowning in her perplexity.

"Spies, if monsieur permits the word," with a spiteful look at Inspector Mitchell. "The poor girl is distracted with fear."

"What is she afraid of?" demanded Mitchell quickly.

Susanne partly turned her back on him without answering.

"Please, mademoiselle," she began, addressing Anne, "Gretchen must have peace, or she be ill. She is a good girl."

"She is!" Anne spoke with sudden energy. "Come, Inspector, there is no law which permits you to introduce spies into our household."

"I beg your pardon," Mitchell spoke stiffly. "We have not exceeded our rights. Investigations have to be conducted when a crime has been committed."

"A crime?"

"Yes, madam; and the greatest crime of all—murder, cold-blooded premeditated murder."

Curtis, standing close beside Anne, heard her sudden intake of breath, but she faced Mitchell with no other indication of emotion.

"You still contend that my uncle was murdered?" she asked. "And that it was not a case of suicide in a moment of mental aberration."

"I do; the medical evidence establishes that fact." Mitchell would have added more, but Anne turned swiftly to Curtis.

"Can you tell with absolute accuracy from the wound that it was *not* self-inflicted, Doctor Curtis?" she demanded.

All eyes were turned toward the blind surgeon. McLane, as well as Curtis, had caught the unconscious note of appeal in Anne's voice, and he waited with interest for Curtis' answer. It took the form of a question.

“Was John Meredith by chance ambidexterous?” he asked.

“He was.”

An exclamation escaped Mitchell. “Why didn’t you state that fact at the inquest?” he inquired with warmth.

“Because I was not questioned on the subject,” she responded, and again addressed Curtis. “Doesn’t that prove that Uncle John could have killed himself?”

Curtis’ hesitation was imperceptible except to McLane.

“I believe that the fact that Meredith was ambidexterous will enable experts to cast sufficient doubt on the medical testimony to render it practically valueless,” he said.

“Perhaps an expert can tear it to pieces,” broke in Mitchell. “But you can’t get over the fact that no weapon was found near the body. If John Meredith killed himself, what did he do with the weapon?”

“I can tell you.” A new light shone in Anne’s eyes and her voice held an unaccustomed ring, a note of hope, mixed with relief. “I read your testimony in the morning paper, Doctor Curtis, as given at the inquest. You said that Uncle John lay partly on his right side, his hands outflung, and his head resting against the banisters which circle this part of the corridor.”

As she spoke she left the head of the stairs and walked to the spot where Meredith’s body had lain, the others trooping after her.

“Suppose,” she began, addressing Inspector Mitchell who was watching her with eager attention, “suppose Uncle John carried the weapon—shall we say a knife,” her voice faltered, then recovering herself, she spoke with more composure, “carried the knife down this corridor with him, what could have become of it?”

“Blessed if I know,” muttered Mitchell. “We have searched every available spot. There are no cracks and crannies or corners in this corridor which we have overlooked, and have found absolutely no trace of a weapon of any kind. Come, Miss Meredith, did some one,” his voice grew harsh, “carry away the weapon before we got here?”

“No.”

Mitchell turned an angry red as he faced her. He was sensitive to ridicule, and the conviction was growing upon him that Anne was poking fun at him.

“Quit kidding us!” he exclaimed, roughly. “And answer your own question, if *you* can. If Meredith did carry a weapon in his hand, what became of it?”

“The most natural thing in the world happened to it,” she replied, and this time her note of triumph was plainly discernible in her voice. “As Uncle John fell forward, the knife could have slipped from his outflung hand and fallen through the banisters to the hall beneath. Look—” and she leaned far over the railing.

With one accord the men with her followed her example, even Curtis, in the excitement of the moment, forgetting his blindness as he bent forward and hung over the railing.

The wide circular staircase, with its railing of solid mahogany, was colonial in design. It started from the square hall beneath and, the treads being of unusual width, required a larger “well” than was customary. The banisters did not stop at the stairhead, but circled the “well,” thus protecting the bedroom floor, and allowing a general view of the entrance hall and the front door.

Commencing from the base of the staircase in the entrance hall were boxes of hothouse plants which ran almost to the library door. John Meredith had liked the green foliage against the white wainscoting and, the previous winter, had the boxes put there in place of the cushioned benches which had occupied the space formerly.

“That’s a good theory of yours, Miss Meredith,” admitted Mitchell. “If the knife did drop between one of these banister posts, it must have lighted in that flowerbox. Let’s see.” He whirled around and hurried down the staircase, McLane hotfoot after him.

Anne started forward, then stopped. The next instant a small hand was slipped into Curtis’ as he turned to follow the others.

“Come this way,” she said softly. A pretty color dyed her white cheeks as she saw his face light up. His expression altered quickly to one of concern as his grasp tightened over her icy fingers.

“Are you having a chill?” he asked, halting abruptly.

“Oh, no. It is nerves.” Her smile was a bit piteous. “I will be all right. Please don’t worry. I wonder—I—” She checked her incoherent ejaculations as they went down the staircase and stopped by McLane’s side.

Regardless of the danger of injuring the costly ferns and other plants which filled the boxes, Mitchell and McLane ran their hands among them, feeling with feverish haste among the leaves and the moss which formed a dense covering. Rapidly the two men worked their way down the boxes. A short, excited cry from Inspector Mitchell, who had made more speed than either McLane or Curtis, brought the others to his side. Withdrawing his hand from a box completely filled with ferns, he held up a small, discolored knife.

“Found!” he shouted. “Don’t touch it, doctor.” He laid the knife, which he held gingerly between two fingers, in a clean handkerchief, and extended it so that McLane could get a good look at it. “Those are bloodstains.”

“Probably.” McLane bent closer. “A chemical test will be necessary though, Mitchell, to distinguish bloodstains, rust, and fingerprints.”

“Sure. Hold it a moment, doctor, in the handkerchief, but don’t let it get out of your possession.” Mitchell thrust the handkerchief into McLane’s eager hand, and rushing back to the pantry, appeared a second later with Detective Sergeant Brown at his back, and hastened up the staircase.

“Describe the knife, Leonard,” directed Curtis, as McLane stepped closer to his side.

McLane did not reply at once. Anne, who stood watching the two men with eager eyes, was about to speak when McLane broke the pause.

“A curious weapon,” he said slowly, “but a most effective one, Dave. It is a scalpel.”

“A scalpel,” repeated Curtis.

“Yes, one manufactured by Meinicke.” McLane lowered his hand. “Where do you suppose John Meredith obtained a surgical knife?”

Curtis’ face was alight with interest. “A surgical knife,” he muttered. “Strange!” He paused, then spoke more quickly. “However, the fingerprints will tell us—”

“Of murder,” broke in Mitchell’s harsh voice behind them and they wheeled about. “Miss Meredith,” his eyes never left the young girl’s face, “you have led us to the weapon and thereby proved conclusively that your uncle did not commit suicide. It is a case of cold-blooded murder.”

“Explain your meaning,” directed Curtis, before either of his startled companions could speak.

Mitchell stepped back a few paces. “Look up there,” he pointed, as he spoke, to the next floor where Detective Sergeant Brown stood leaning over the railing gazing down at them. “The sergeant is standing exactly where John Meredith’s dead body was found by Doctor Curtis. Now,” he spoke with significant impressiveness, “if John Meredith carried that surgical knife, as you cleverly suggested, Miss Meredith, and it dropped out of his hand and fell between the posts of the banisters it would have alighted in that box of ferns,” indicating one further down the hall. “By no freak of chance or possibility could it have fallen from there into the box where I found it.”

Anne gazed dazedly at the Inspector. "I don't understand," she faltered. "You found the knife—"

"In the wrong place to establish your theory—of suicide." Mitchell's covert smile was ominous, and Anne shivered involuntarily.

"One moment." Curtis changed his cane from one hand to the other, and stepped closer to the Inspector. "Mitchell, suppose you have the sergeant drop a penknife or ordinary knife through the banisters."

Mitchell looked at him keenly. "You mean—?"

"To reenact the scene of Sunday night, or rather Monday morning," replied Curtis. "Tell the sergeant to stagger and fall. As he does so we will see if the knife flies out of his hand, and through the banisters, and thus know," his voice deepened, "exactly where it falls."

"A capital idea!" declared McLane. "Go to it, Mitchell. I'll stay here and you watch the proceedings from above. Wait, though," as Mitchell started for the staircase. "To make the test as complete as possible I'll give you a scalpel from my surgical bag. It's here with my hat. First, however, take this," and he handed the handkerchief and the discolored scalpel, which Mitchell had found concealed among the ferns, back to the Inspector.

As McLane took another scalpel from his surgical kit, Gerald Armstrong ran down the staircase and joined Anne. He was followed more leisurely by Lucille Hull. She shuddered slightly as Mitchell displayed the discolored scalpel before wrapping it securely in his handkerchief and placing it in his pocket. To Anne the minutes seemed endless as she waited for Mitchell to mount the staircase and instruct Detective Sergeant Brown in the role he was to assume.

"What is going on?" demanded Armstrong. He made no attempt to modify his naturally strident voice and it grated on Anne. McLane caught her sudden start, and guessing the strain she was under, explained the situation in a few words. Lucille listened with close attention, her eyes following the movements of the two men on the floor above as far as she could see them.

"Watch out, down below," called Mitchell. "Stand back a little further, Doctor Curtis; you are too near."

Curtis retreated a few steps. Anne put out her hand to guide him but dropped it hurriedly on catching her cousin's gaze; there was a mocking gleam in Lucille's eyes which brought the hot color to Anne's pale cheeks with a rush. It had not faded when the silence was broken by the sound of a heavy fall.

A piece of glittering steel came flying through the air. It fell without sound

among the ferns and was lost to sight.

Leonard McLane was the first to speak. He waited until Mitchell and Sergeant Brown reached them.

“You were right, Mitchell,” he said, addressing the Inspector. “The scalpel fell directly into this box,” laying his hand upon it. “It is the fourth box from the one where you found the discolored scalpel.”

“Then our theory is correct,” declared Mitchell. He bowed gravely to Anne. “Thank you, Miss Meredith.”

Before she could reply Herman appeared from the pantry.

“You are wanted on the telephone, Doctor Curtis,” he announced. “This way, sir,” and in silence Curtis accepted the butler’s guidance.

A second more and the little group in the square reception hall broke up; Anne accompanying her cousin to her bedroom, and Armstrong, at a quiet word from Inspector Mitchell, led the way into the library, followed by the two police officials.

Left to himself Leonard McLane repacked his surgical kit and took up his hat and overcoat; then he paused before opening the front door and stood in thought. Fully two minutes passed before he moved. Replacing his hat, overcoat and bag on the hall table he turned around and went slowly upstairs, and entered David Curtis’ bedroom. Except for himself the bedroom was empty.

McLane walked directly over to the bedstead and halted by it. Bending down he closely scanned the spotless linen. It was unwrinkled, immaculate.

McLane straightened up with a jerk; his eyes wide with wonder.

“I’ll be—!” he gasped. “The counterpane has been changed.”

CHAPTER XIII

PRELIMINARY SKIRMISHING

Gerald Armstrong looked inquiringly at Inspector Mitchell as the latter waved him to a chair in the library; then turned his regard to Detective Sergeant Brown. He learned nothing from the Sergeant's stolid expression and again focused his attention on the latter's superior officer.

"Sit down, Mr. Armstrong," directed Mitchell. Taking a chair he planted himself in front of Armstrong, while Sergeant Brown braced his burly figure against a convenient sofa and remained a silent onlooker. "Now, sir, will you kindly tell us why you avoided the inquest on John Meredith?"

"I did not avoid it."

"No? Well, it appeared that way to us at Headquarters," replied Mitchell, observing Armstrong's unconcealed annoyance with relish. A man in a temper might give out valuable information. "And it has been very apparent that you have also avoided an interview with us since then."

"Well, what of it?" Armstrong assumed a more comfortable position. "Come, Inspector, why worry about the past? Now that I am at leisure I shall be very happy to answer any questions you put to me, provided always," with a smile meant to be ingratiating, "that it is within my power to answer them."

"Of course," dryly. "Why did you leave Ten Acres so precipitately after John Meredith signed those papers on Sunday night?"

"There was nothing precipitate in my conduct," replied Armstrong, with a slight frown. "I remembered that I had some work to do at home and so went there, intending to return to Ten Acres in time for breakfast on Monday morning."

"But you did not return then?"

"No; I overslept."

The explanation was very pat, and the smile left Mitchell's eyes, to be

replaced by an angry glitter.

“And when did you first learn of John Meredith’s murder?” he demanded.

“I learned of his death,” with emphasis on the last word, “on Monday shortly before noon.”

“And who informed you of Meredith’s *murder*?” Mitchell repeated the word intentionally and Armstrong flushed.

“Colonel Julian Hull, my senior partner, told me the news,” he stated. “It seems his daughter, Miss Lucille Hull, telephoned to him. I was not aware until last evening, when I called at the Hulls’, that the police authorities considered Meredith’s death was a case of murder and not suicide.”

“And what is your belief in the matter?” asked Mitchell.

Armstrong shrugged his shoulders. “I have formed no theories,” he answered. “The whole affair is frightfully tragic. That John Meredith would take his own life was incredible, but to any one who knew his lovable character as I did,” meeting Mitchell’s gaze without wavering, “it is inconceivable that any one should have killed him.”

“Inconceivable perhaps, but he was killed,” responded Mitchell grimly, “and we intend to locate the murderer. At what hour did you leave Ten Acres Sunday night, and did John Meredith know that you planned to leave?”

Armstrong shook his head. “No. I left there a little before midnight.”

“Without notifying Mrs. Marshall Meredith or any other inmate of the house?”

“Mrs. Meredith had retired for the night,” replied Armstrong. “Herman and Damason, the Filipino chauffeur, were aware that I left.”

“And why did you not tell Mr. Hollister of your intended departure?”

Armstrong frowned at the Inspector’s persistency. “It was after we had parted that I decided on impulse to return home that night. There was no occasion for disturbing Hollister,” he stated coldly.

Mitchell consulted his notebook in which he had made occasional entries as their conversation progressed.

“Are you well acquainted with Mr. Hollister?” he asked.

“We are friends, yes,” and Mitchell’s eyebrows lifted at the brief reply.

“You have just stated, Mr. Armstrong, that only Herman and Damason knew of your intended departure,” he began. “In her testimony at the inquest Miss Anne Meredith told of meeting you on your way out.”

“Yes, yes, I forgot; I did meet her,” broke in Armstrong with marked haste.

“And you told her of the prenuptial agreement and the codicil to his will, to which you had witnessed Meredith’s signature.” Mitchell paused before asking, “Wasn’t that breaking a confidence, sir?”

“Most emphatically not. Meredith did not pledge us to secrecy,” retorted Armstrong.

Mitchell scrutinized his flushed face for a moment in silence. “How was Miss Meredith dressed?” At the query Armstrong moved uncomfortably.

“I am sure I don’t know,” he grumbled. “She was suitably clad, if you mean that.”

“I never doubted but that she was,” replied Mitchell, disgust creeping into his voice. “How was she dressed, Mr. Armstrong? Did she have on the gown she wore at dinner or a street suit?”

“I don’t know,” sullenly. “It was dark—”

“In the house or out of doors?”

Armstrong’s eyes shifted from Mitchell to Sergeant Brown, who approached them at that moment, and from him back again to Mitchell.

“What’s that to you, Inspector?” demanded Armstrong.

“That’s my affair,” roughly. “Come, sir, I insist upon a direct reply. Where did you meet Miss Meredith on Sunday night?” Receiving no answer, he asked more urgently: “Was it inside the house or out? Answer at once, sir.”

“Outside the house,” sullenly.

“Outside is too vague, sir,” persisted Mitchell. “Did you meet Miss Anne close by the servants’ wing of the house and underneath the window of Gretchen’s bedroom?”

“That’s no business of yours!” Armstrong got to his feet in haste, an angry light in his eyes.

“I want an answer, Mr. Armstrong.”

“You won’t get it,” with sneering emphasis. “If I have anything more to say it will be to your superiors and in the presence of my lawyer.”

“If you are going to take that attitude, Mr. Armstrong,” Mitchell rose also, “I will see that you are served with a subpoena as a material witness to attend the next hearing of the inquest—”

A startled look crossed Armstrong’s face, then disappeared.

“Colonel Hull told me that the inquest was over—”

“For yesterday afternoon.” Mitchell pocketed his notebook and fountain pen.

“The next hearing will be on Thursday afternoon at two o’clock at the District Morgue. I advise you not to forget to attend,” with significant emphasis. “One more question, where did you spend Sunday night—*all* of Sunday night?”

Armstrong’s bright color faded, leaving his sallow complexion a mottled yellow.

“What in blazes!” he shouted, then his voice died down as Herman drew back the portières and stepped inside the library.

The butler bowed deferentially. “Luncheon is served,” he announced. “Miss Anne and Doctor Curtis are already at the table, and Miss Lucille is waiting for you in the hall.”

Flinging a word over his shoulder, which Mitchell failed to distinguish, Armstrong hurried into the reception hall as the Inspector, with a quiet nod to Herman, opened the French window on the veranda and, followed by his faithful henchman, Sergeant Brown, strode across the lawn in the direction of the lodge.

Luncheon, judged by Curtis’ feelings, was a long and trying ordeal. No one except Lucille felt inclined for conversation. When dessert was served she shot an aggrieved look at her cousin, which Anne missed entirely, and finally lapsed into silence. The scene in the hall and the finding of the discolored scalpel was ever present in Curtis’ mind, and his anxiety was not relieved by Anne’s absent-minded replies and unresponsive manner. As far as possible he bore the brunt of Lucille’s efforts to force conversation. Gerald Armstrong, on the contrary, contented himself with eating a remarkably good luncheon and confined himself to monosyllables, if he troubled to speak at all.

As they left the table, Armstrong edged his way to Anne’s side and motioned to her to wait. She cast a quick glance at Lucille and Curtis, who had preceded her toward the hall, then turned with marked reluctance to face her companion.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Why are you avoiding me?” with blunt directness.

Anne flushed. “I was under the impression that I went for a motor ride with you this morning—”

“With Lucille along,” he broke in, making no attempt to modify his aggressive manner. “You have avoided me.”

“I have not.” Anne’s eyes sparkled with anger. “Nor,” with quiet significance, “have I run away.” It was Armstrong’s turn to flush. “I must see you alone,” he insisted, raising his voice.

Herman, busy removing the dessert plates, turned and eyed them with

unconcealed interest. The servants at Ten Acres had little liking for Armstrong; his overbearing manner and utter lack of consideration for them accounted for his unpopularity. They accepted his generous tips with outward thanks and inward rebellion over his presence in the house.

Armstrong's marked attention to Lucille had explained in Herman's inquisitive mind the reason of Meredith's many invitations to dinner-dances and house parties. That Meredith was particularly attached to the young stockbroker, the butler had had occasion to doubt, having witnessed one or two heated arguments between them. Armstrong had once or twice expressed himself at the dinner table in mocking terms about "bread and butter misses," and therefore, that he should suddenly evince a preference for Anne's society, whose unsophisticated outlook on life, and unspoiled, sunny disposition had endeared her to the servants, caused Herman to linger over his work in the dining room in the hope of overhearing what transpired. His hopes, however, were promptly frustrated.

"I hear the front doorbell, Herman," Anne turned her back on Armstrong to address the butler. Looking over her shoulder, she spoke to Armstrong and the disdain in her charmingly modulated voice made him flush again, but this time with anger. "There is no occasion for seeing you alone, Gerald."

"Isn't there?" His laugh was unpleasant. "Suppose, instead of having a friendly chat with you, I go to the police?"

Anne's hands clenched over her handkerchief. Without deigning to reply, she hurried into the hall in time to meet her mother as the latter came in the front door with Sam Hollister.

"Have you lunched, mother?" she asked, as Susanne appeared to take Mrs. Meredith's wraps, while Herman relieved the lawyer of his overcoat and hat.

"I had a salad and cup of coffee at the Shoreham," replied Mrs. Meredith. "How about you, Sam?"

"No luncheon for me, thanks." Hollister picked up his leather brief case, and glanced at Mrs. Meredith. "Shall we proceed with business?"

"It would be best." Mrs. Meredith removed her hat and handed it to Susanne, paused before the hall mirror to inspect her hair and gave it a deft touch here and there before turning to her daughter. "Come into the library, Anne. Where is Lucille?"

"Already in the library, mother."

"In that case," Mrs. Meredith started for the library, then halted as Gerald

Armstrong appeared from the dining room where he had stood just inside the door watching them. "Ah, Gerald, good morning." As he returned her greeting and stepped forward to accompany her into the library she motioned him to stop. "You will have to excuse us," she explained. "Mr. Hollister is to read Mr. Meredith's will and only his relatives are to be present." With a gracious bow she stepped past Armstrong. The latter tried to catch Anne's eye, but she walked by with head averted, listening to what Hollister, on her right, was saying. Armstrong bit his mustache, paused uncertainly, then, ignoring Susanne's muttered apology as he brushed against her, he opened the front door and stepped out on the veranda.

At sound of Mrs. Meredith's entrance Curtis rose from his seat by Lucille and turned toward her. "Why, Cousin Belle, I did not hear you return," exclaimed Lucille, springing up. "We should have waited luncheon for you," with a reproachful look at Anne.

"I told Anne not to wait," remarked Mrs. Meredith. "While Sam was going over papers in his office I went to the Shoreham and had a bite to eat. Now, Sam, if you will proceed, please."

Hollister drew forward a card table and placed his brief case on it. "I have here," he began, "the last will and testament of John Meredith. It was signed by Meredith in my office a year ago and left in my care. To-day, in the presence of the proper officials, I took it out of my vault and have brought it here to read in the presence of John Meredith's relatives."

"Just a moment, please." Curtis stepped forward, and addressed Mrs. Meredith. "I fear my presence is an intrusion. If you will let me withdraw—"

"Please wait, doctor." The color flashed up in Mrs. Meredith's face, and a smile, which Anne remembered afterwards as both beautiful and ingratiating, lit her fine dark eyes. "My daughter would, I am sure, prefer to have you here."

Curtis hesitated in uncertainty. Was he really wanted?

"Please stay." Anne's soft voice solved his doubts and he resumed his seat as she moved over and sat down by Lucille on the sofa.

Hollister picked up a document which he had taken a moment before from his brief case while watching the little scene between Mrs. Meredith and the blind surgeon. But his reading of the will was doomed to another interruption. The portières were thrust forcibly to one side as Colonel Julian Hull walked unannounced into the library.

"Why wasn't I notified, Belle?" he demanded. "As John's first cousin I am entitled to be present at the reading of his will."

“Lucille represented you,” she replied coldly. “Who informed you, Julian, that the will was being read?”

“What concern is that of yours?” with a scowl. “Go on, Hollister,” and without a word to any of the others he flung himself down in the nearest chair.

It seemed to Anne, as Hollister’s deep voice went on and on, that she would never hear the end of “whereas” and “because of” which sprinkled each page of the document. At its close, Hollister laid the will on the table and touched another more bulky manuscript.

“This,” he explained, “is the complete list, mentioned in Mr. Meredith’s will, of special bequests of his personal effects. Do you wish it read aloud?”

“No.” Colonel Hull was on his feet, his eyes blazing with anger. “I have heard enough. According to that document, Hollister, Anne Meredith is given one million dollars and Ten Acres. The rest of his fortune goes to charities and Lucille, my daughter, gets a paltry one hundred thousand dollars and a diamond necklace. What,” he turned and glared at Mrs. Meredith and her daughter, “what have you done with the codicil, signed by John on Sunday night, in which the million-dollar bequest to Anne was revoked and that amount given to Lucille?”

Mrs. Meredith straightened her stately figure. “Your language is obnoxious,” she said, and would have added more, but Sam Hollister interrupted her, his gaze grave with displeasure.

“We are all aware that the codicil and prenuptial agreement have disappeared,” he pointed out. “When I left John on Sunday night the documents were on his bed and Lucille was with him.”

Lucille paled as she met her father’s glance. “They were still on the bed when I went to my room a few minutes after you left, Sam,” she said, a catch in her voice.

“Do you suppose Lucille would suppress a document giving her one million dollars?” Colonel Hull laughed scornfully, even as he put the question. “The idea is absurd.”

“It is no more absurd than to suggest by inference that some one in this room is responsible for its disappearance,” retorted Mrs. Meredith, with spirit. “You forget yourself, Julian.”

“I shall fight for Lucille’s rights,” shouted Colonel Hull, his temper at white heat. “That will shan’t be probated without a contest.”

Hollister replaced the will and its accompanying manuscript in his brief case and carefully closed and locked the leather flap. Slipping the key in his pocket

he faced the infuriated stockbroker.

"This document will be filed with the registrar of wills at once," he said. "You are at liberty to take whatever action you please." He turned to Mrs. Meredith. "I am going to my room, Mrs. Meredith, and within the hour shall return to my office. Is there anything I can do for you and Anne?"

"Nothing, thank you," Mrs. Meredith was graciousness itself, "except to return in time for dinner. I will consult with you then," and she nodded a friendly good-by.

As Hollister, with a kindly word to Anne who sat as one dazed, passed Curtis he tapped the blind surgeon on the shoulder.

"Come up to my room," he whispered, and not waiting to hear what Curtis said to Mrs. Meredith, slipped out of the room as Colonel Hull and his agitated daughter disappeared into the little-used drawing-room.

Curtis was not far behind Hollister in reaching the latter's bedroom.

"What do you wish to see me about, Hollister?" he asked, as the lawyer closed the bedroom door and half dragged him over to the window seat.

"A new development," answered the lawyer tersely. "You recall this inventory," taking a sheet of paper out of his wallet. "It is the paper we found in John's secretary which bears the notation, in his handwriting: 'Contents of safe deposit box belongs to.'"

"Yes, I recollect it," Curtis said impatiently as the lawyer paused. "The name was evidently clipped off the page. Go on."

"We opened the safe deposit box this morning in the presence of the officers of the Metropolis Bank and court officials," Hollister spoke with subdued excitement. "It was a large box—"

"And what did its contents comprise?" questioned Curtis eagerly. "Meredith's will?"

"No. I had that in my office vault."

Curtis straightened up and turned his sightless eyes upon his companion. "Did you find the missing documents?"

"No, neither of them." Hollister spoke with impressive slowness. "The box was empty except for this key," and he laid it in Curtis' hand.

In dumfounded silence Curtis ran his fingers over the grooves and notches and then traced the name stamped upon it in raised letters.

"A Yale key," he said. "Was this linen tag tied to it?"

“Yes.” Hollister dropped his voice until he almost whispered. “The tag bears, in Meredith’s handwriting, the single word—Duplicate.”

CHAPTER XIV

THE DUPLICATE KEY

David Curtis balanced the Yale key in his hand in deep thought.

“And this key was the only object in Meredith’s safe deposit box?” he asked.

“It was.” Hollister lighted a cigar and puffed vigorously. “Damned odd, isn’t it? Why did Meredith preserve the key so carefully?”

“It might have been left there accidentally.”

“True.” The lawyer pointed to the inventory sheet lying on the window ledge. “That notation reads: ‘Contents of safe deposit box belongs to.’” He folded the paper and replaced it in his wallet. “What do you make of it? There were no ‘contents-’”

“Except this key,” ended Curtis. “But a key has to belong to a—lock.” He smiled. “It is obviously up to you, Hollister, to locate the lock.”

“You think—” Hollister glanced at him keenly as he paused.

“That behind the lock this key fits we may find the missing contents of the safe deposit,” Curtis explained. “I say may, remember, not *will*; and at that it is only a shot in the dark.”

Hollister looked dissatisfied. “How am I to go about it?” he grumbled. “Inspector Mitchell and I have been carefully through every desk and drawer in Meredith’s bedroom and the library. We have found nothing, documents or otherwise, except what is ordinarily in the possession of a very wealthy man. Meredith, judging superficially, left his financial affairs in good shape.”

Curtis did not answer at once. “This key, you say, is marked ‘duplicate’,” he began finally. “Do you recall seeing its original on Meredith’s bunch of keys?”

“I don’t remember it,” admitted Hollister. “But then there were a number of Yale keys on his ring.”

“Did you find a lock for every key that was there?”

“A good point!” exclaimed Hollister, his face clearing. “But I don’t believe that I can answer your question offhand. Mitchell has the keys. Let’s see if he is still on the premises.”

Laying down his cigar Hollister hastened across the room and over to the house telephone. It took him a second or two to get an answer to his ring. “Hello—hello!” he called. “Who is this? Fernando?” finally distinguishing the latter’s broken English. “Where is Inspector Mitchell? At the lodge? Hurry over and ask him to return here, Fernando. Tell him that Mr. Hollister wishes to see him. Hold on, Fernando!” as the Filipino started to hang up his earpiece. “Bring Inspector Mitchell to Mr. John Meredith’s bedroom.”

Replacing his receiver on the house telephone hook, Hollister found Curtis had crossed the room and was waiting for him at the door. As the two men stepped into the corridor and started for Meredith’s bedroom, Gretchen flitted down the corridor leading to the servants’ quarters, paused for a second to cast an uneasy glance at the backs of the two men and then, doubling on her tracks, slipped unheard along the corridor in the direction of Lucille Hull’s bedroom. She missed, by a fraction of a second, encountering Inspector Mitchell and Fernando as they came up the circular staircase. The Filipino had acted so promptly on Hollister’s order that he had caught the Inspector just as he was stepping into a police car driven by Detective Sergeant Brown, which had been parked under the trees near the entrance to Ten Acres.

Inspector Mitchell listened with close attention to Hollister’s account of finding the inventory sheet with its notation regarding a safe deposit box and the discovery of the “duplicate” key.

“Is that the only box Meredith had at the bank?” he asked.

“No,” replied Hollister. “He had another, which we opened to-day in the presence of the proper authorities. It contained the securities, jewelry, and other valuables listed in Meredith’s memorandum of special bequests. We checked it off this morning and all were accounted for.”

“Then you think this notation refers to the box holding only the duplicate key?” asked Mitchell.

“That is my idea, yes,” answered Hollister.

“Did you think to ask the bank officials when Meredith rented the, shall we say, second box?” broke in Curtis.

Hollister nodded his head vigorously. “Yes. The box containing the securities he has had for going on ten years, while this smaller box he rented only four weeks ago to-day.” Hollister looked squarely at Mitchell. “The box rents for

twenty-five dollars a year. Now, why should Meredith pay that amount and place only a duplicate key in it?"

"He may have intended to place other valuables there," suggested the Inspector, shaking several bunches of keys out of a chamois bag which he removed from an inside pocket. He spread the keys on the table before them, and then, taking them up one by one, he matched each key with the one bearing the linen tag with its single word, "duplicate," written plainly upon it. The Inspector was thorough in his examination and Curtis had time to become impatient before he spoke.

"This Yale key is unlike any we have here." Mitchell spoke with more gravity; he had not at first taken Hollister's comments on the importance of the duplicate key very seriously. "And these keys are all that we found in this bedroom, in the library and in the pockets of Meredith's suits of clothes."

"Did you look in the pocket of Meredith's pajamas?" questioned Curtis.

"Wasn't a thing in it, except a handkerchief," replied Mitchell. "If you'll let me keep this key, Mr. Hollister, I'll have Sergeant Brown and an assistant search for its mate."

"And the lock which it fits," put in Curtis swiftly, as the Inspector, taking Hollister's permission for granted, slipped the keys back in the chamois bag, keeping, however, the key under discussion in his right hand.

"We will institute a thorough search, don't fear," responded Mitchell, none too well pleased with Curtis' tone. He brushed by the blind surgeon and was the first to step into the hall, the others just behind him. "Where is that wretched parrot of Mr. Meredith's? It isn't in his old bedroom."

His question was overheard by Fernando, who had loitered near the head of the circular staircase, one eye on the closed door behind which the three men were conferring and the other on the front hall beneath.

"Mees Anne has Ruffles," he volunteered, coming toward them. "The bird, she cry so much, an' Mees Anne say 'Fernando, bring Ruffles to my room.'"

"Oh!" Mitchell scratched his head in some doubt. "Well, see that the bird isn't taken out of the house, Fernando. Say, didn't you look after Mr. Meredith?"

"I took care of his clothes and his room, yes, sir," explained the Filipino. "Always I run errands for him, and I wait at the table under Herman, yes, sir."

"Do you recognize this key?" As he spoke Inspector Mitchell thrust it almost under Fernando's nose. "Do you know what it unlocks?"

Fernando turned the key over and over, his expression inscrutable as he

fingered the linen tag. "I no see it before," he stated, handing it back.

"Have you seen one like it?" asked Curtis, breaking his silence.

"Perhaps," was Fernando's noncommittal reply.

"Mr. Meredith kept always the keys under his pillow at night; sometimes," looking first at one man and then the other, "Mr. Meredith forget in the morning and send me for them."

"Do you identify this positively as like one Mr. Meredith had?" persisted Mitchell.

"Honorable sir," Fernando dropped back a step to let Mitchell pass, and bowed low to the Inspector, "it look like most any key on Mr. Meredith's—what you call it—bunch? You see for yourself; you got keys."

Mitchell took his last words for a statement, but to Curtis' keen ears they sounded like an interrogation.

"So you don't know what this key unlocks?" The Inspector held it out for a second before pocketing it. "All right, Fernando, trot along." He turned to Hollister. "Good-by, sir; I'll be over later in the afternoon."

"Wait," Curtis laid a detaining hand on Mitchell's shoulder. "About that scalpel—" He hesitated. "Have you learned anything?"

"Not yet, but I am dead certain that it was used to kill Meredith—"

Hollister started forward. "You have found the weapon?" he exclaimed, running down the steps after Mitchell. "How—where—"

"Come along and I'll show it to you," called Mitchell over his shoulder, and not waiting for the others to catch up with him, went toward the front door. Curtis hesitated a second, then, tucking his cane under one arm and grasping the banisters, he hastened to keep up with his more active companions.

As their heads disappeared out of sight down the staircase, Fernando drew a long breath. With a prolonged glance up and down the silent corridor, he walked to Mrs. Marshall Meredith's boudoir door and knocked softly upon it. At his second tap he heard Mrs. Meredith's curt, "Come in," and stepped inside, closing the door at his back with care not to let it slam.

"You sent for me, madam?" he asked.

"Yes." Mrs. Meredith pushed her chair back from her desk and regarded Fernando through her gold lorgnettes. "I have already told Herman and the other servants that by the terms of Mr. Meredith's will my daughter inherits Ten Acres," she stated, having seen in her swift glance about the boudoir that the communicating door between it and Anne's bedroom was tightly closed. "Miss

Anne is still a minor and I am her legal guardian. Thus, you understand, Fernando, that retaining your present situation in this house depends upon your fidelity *to me*.”

“Yes, madam.”

“So far I have found you satisfactory. I fail to see why you hesitate *now*.”

Fernando, standing respectfully before her, shifted from one foot to the other, and his yellow face reddened under her angry gaze.

“Do you understand?” demanded the irate woman, a second time.

“Yes, madam. You wish me to find a certain key in Mr. Meredith’s bedroom.”

Fernando drew a step nearer. “The detective man has one like it.” Mrs. Meredith paled under her rouge. “And you did not get it from him?”

“But have patience, please, madam.” Fernando was taking pains with his English and spoke with care. “It may be difficult, madam.”

“I suppose that means you need a bribe.” Mrs. Meredith unclasped her handbag and handed the servant a gold piece. “Have you anything to report?”

“No, madam,” humbly, then as an afterthought, “Herman tell me that Mr. Armstrong try to see Mees Anne *alone*.”

Their gaze clashed. Mrs. Meredith was the first to speak.

“Thank you, Fernando. You may go.”

But Fernando did not stir. “Please, madam, will Mees Anne marry the blind doctor?”

Mrs. Meredith looked at him in marked displeasure. “My daughter’s affairs are not a topic for discussion,” she stated, frigidly. “That is all, Fernando.”

As the hall door clicked shut on the servant’s retreating figure, Mrs. Meredith turned back to her desk with a heavy frown. Could it be possible that her willing tool was growing restive?

Fernando reached the first floor in time to open the front door as the bell sounded. A stranger stood on the threshold.

“May I see Mr. Samuel Hollister?” he asked. “I was told at his office that he was here.”

Looking past the stranger Fernando descried Hollister coming up the graveled walk accompanied by Doctor Curtis.

“Here he is,” he exclaimed. “Behind you, sir. How better you go join him?”

With a somewhat surprised glance at the Filipino, the stranger wheeled around and going down the veranda steps reached Hollister and Curtis as they paused

under the pergola.

“Mr. Hollister?” he asked, raising his hat. “My name is Elliott—Frank Elliott, of Chicago. Your clerk sent me out here as I have only a brief time in Washington.” His slight hesitation was but momentary. “I understand that you were John Meredith’s lawyer and are now an executor of his estate under the terms of his will.”

“Your information is correct,” replied Hollister, as the other stopped. “Let me introduce Doctor David Curtis, Mr. Elliott.”

Elliott looked with some curiosity at the blind surgeon as they shook hands.

“I must see you, Mr. Hollister, on a matter touching Meredith’s estate,” he said. “It is of vital importance—”

“Pardon me,” broke in Curtis. “I had better withdraw.”

“No,” objected Hollister, before Elliott could speak. “Doctor Curtis is engaged to marry Miss Anne Meredith, the chief beneficiary under her uncle’s will; therefore—”

“I can speak before him,” finished Elliott. He stroked his clean-shaven chin and cleared his throat nervously. Evidently he found difficulty in broaching the reason of his presence at Ten Acres, or so Curtis concluded from his rapid breathing.

“I am one of a group of men,” began Elliott, his hand dropping from his chin to his watch fob, which he stroked with restless fingers. “We are, frankly, fighting prohibition and have pooled our interests.”

“By interests you mean money?” asked Curtis quietly, and Elliott eyed him more keenly; he had before centered his attention on the lawyer, and had addressed his remarks exclusively to him.

“Yes, money,” he admitted. “This money we placed in John Meredith’s hands to bank for us.”

“When?” demanded Curtis.

“To be exact it was just four weeks ago to-day,” replied Elliott. “I came on here and personally saw Meredith place the money in his safe deposit box.” Hollister stared at Elliott, his excitement rising. Curtis let his cane swing from one hand to the other as he drew a step closer to the stranger.

“Do you recall the number of the safe deposit box and the bank?” he asked.

“The last, yes—it was the Metropolis Bank. But Meredith did not tell me the number of the box,” responded Elliott. “I do know, however, that he rented it that morning expressly to hold our funds.” Twice Hollister opened his mouth to

speak, then glanced in doubt at his blind companion. Elliott, also, was staring at Curtis and it would have taken a more astute person than the little lawyer to read his expression.

“Mr. Elliott,” Curtis lowered his voice to a confidential pitch, “have you any objection to telling us the amount of money you placed in John Meredith’s care?”

“I have no objection at all,” declared Elliott, modifying somewhat his hearty voice. “It was one hundred thousand dollars in cash.”

CHAPTER XV

AT THE FORK OF THE ROAD

Gretchen looked at the panting woman before her with concern.

"Plees, Mees Hull, sit awhile," she begged, pointing to one of the comfortable wicker chairs on the side veranda of Ten Acres. Gretchen had caught a glimpse of Mrs. Hull toiling up the brick walk, which led from the Rockville Turnpike into the grounds, and, by a circuitous route through the trees, up to the old mansion, and skirted it on either side. She had left the pantry window to open the little-used north door to admit her. Mrs. Hull subsided into the nearest chair with thankfulness.

"I declare, Gretchen," she gasped, "this is a fearful place to reach from the city, unless you have a car."

Gretchen's smile, while expansive, was a trifle vague. It showed her pretty dimples to advantage. "Plees, I get you a drink—"

"Of water," firmly. "I never touch anything stronger, Gretchen," and the chambermaid vanished inside the house.

Mrs. Hull was grateful for the cool breeze which fanned her hot cheeks, and she drew her breath with more regularity and ease after a few minutes of absolute quiet. From where she sat she had an extended view of the old-fashioned garden, with its box-hedge maze, one of the historic features of the place, and the pergola almost completely hidden under its cover of rambler roses. As she sat waiting in patience for Gretchen's return, she saw three men emerge from the pergola and go toward the lodge gates. By his height and the use of his cane she judged the outside man to be David Curtis; Sam Hollister she recognized at once; but the man nearest to her was a stranger.

Gretchen's return and her glass of water diverted Mrs. Hull's attention from the three men, and when she looked again in the direction they had taken they were not in sight.

"How pretty you have grown, Gretchen," commented Mrs. Hull, regarding her

admiringly. "You are stouter than when you arrived here from Europe with Miss Lucille, and it is becoming to you," hastily, observing that Gretchen evidently considered her last remark a doubtful compliment.

"Thank you, madame!" Gretchen dropped a pretty curtsy—one of her foreign ways, as Herman termed it; his attentions to the little Dutch girl had early been discouraged, and his liking had, as in many similar cases, changed to dislike. He had resumed "keeping company" with Susanne, hoping that the astute French girl had not observed his inclination to stray from her side. If she had noticed his sudden ardor for the pretty stranger, Susanne gave no sign, and domestic affairs at Ten Acres had settled down into their well-oiled, accustomed groove.

"You like it here, Gretchen?" asked Mrs. Hull, transferring her gaze from the girl to the view over the garden. The varying shades of green of the late spring were restful to the eyes, and Mrs. Hull was unmindful of the lengthy pause before her question was answered.

"But, yes, madame; it's ver' nice," replied Gretchen. "Would madame like annudder drink?"

"No, no more, thanks." Mrs. Hull took her handkerchief out of her bag. "If ever you decide to leave here, and there may be changes now, remember, you must come to us, Gretchen. I shall always keep a place for you."

"You are mos' kind, madame."

"Not a bit; Miss Lucille is devoted to you, we all are," finished Mrs. Hull. "Is that Fernando coming out of the maze?" As she put the question, Mrs. Hull handed the empty glass to Gretchen and her eyes rested full on the girl's face. Gretchen's eyes were fixed upon the man Mrs. Hull had seen a moment before and a rich carmine dyed her cheeks a deep red. Astonished at the effect of her question, Mrs. Hull repeated it.

"No, no, madame; it is Damason," stammered Gretchen. "Will madame come inside?"

"Is Miss Lucille at home?"

"Yes, madame."

"Then run along and ask her to come out here," directed Mrs. Hull. "And, Gretchen, you need not mention to Mrs. Meredith that I am calling upon my daughter."

Gretchen was saved a trip to Lucille's bedroom, for she met her at the foot of the circular staircase. Her shoes were dusty, as from walking, and Gretchen concluded that she must have entered only a moment before by the front door. A

second more and Lucille was with her mother on the veranda.

“Gretchen must wear Mercury wings,” said Mrs. Hull, after kissing her warmly. “I just saw Damason crossing the garden and mistook him for Fernando, and Gretchen nearly blushed her head off when I called her attention to him.”

Lucille’s pale, set face relaxed into a sunny smile. “That is a budding romance,” she explained. “We are all wondering which brother Gretchen will marry.”

“It must be very uncomfortable to be courted by a twin.” Mrs. Hull swung her chair with ponderous grace toward the one her daughter was occupying close at hand. “I hope Gretchen makes a wise choice.” Then in an altered voice: “Why are you remaining here?”

“Because it is best.” Lucille was careful to speak low. “Have you seen father?”

“No, not since breakfast. Why?” And there was unmistakable anxiety in Mrs. Hull’s usually expressionless voice.

“He was here just after luncheon and made a most unfortunate scene—”

“About what?”

“Hush!” Lucille’s firm hand closed over her mother’s bare wrist with a force which made her wince. “He was present when Sam Hollister read Cousin John’s will. By the terms of that will Anne inherits this place and one million dollars.”

“And you—”

“A paltry one hundred thousand dollars.” The bitterness in her voice cut Mrs. Hull and she involuntarily laid her hand over her heart as if in actual physical pain. Her daughter was oblivious of her emotion as she continued her account of the scene in the library. “Father declared the codicil Cousin John signed Sunday night, revoking Anne’s bequest in my favor, had been purposely mislaid or stolen outright—”

“Lucille!”

“Let me finish, mother.” Lucille had inherited her father’s intolerance of interference, even in trivial matters. “Father plans to contest the will.”

Mrs. Hull stirred unhappily in her chair. “Why will Julian act without thought!” she exclaimed.

“He wished to protect my rights—”

Mrs. Hull appeared silenced, if not convinced. It was fully five minutes before she spoke again.

“And you still wish to remain here as Anne’s guest?” she asked.

Lucille colored warmly. "You never look ahead, mother," she complained.

Mrs. Hull dropped her eyes that Lucille might not see the sudden tears which filled them. She played nervously with her handkerchief before addressing her again.

"Where is your father now?" she inquired.

"He returned to Washington," Lucille sighed. "I presume he is at the office."

A troubled look crossed Mrs. Hull's face. "He spends too much time there," she said. "Julian is no longer a young man. I cannot help but think, as much as I like Gerald Armstrong, that he shirks his obligations to your father, Lucille."

"Please, mother, no criticism of Gerald," Lucille laid a warning finger across her mother's lips.

Mrs. Hull stared at her daughter in silence. Mother love sharpened her usually abstracted gaze, and she saw with a dull ache in her heart the dark circles under Lucille's handsome eyes and the paleness of her usually rosy cheeks. Impulsively she leaned forward and threw her arms about the girl.

"Is all well between you and Gerald?" she asked wistfully.

"Yes, mother," but Lucille looked elsewhere than into her mother's kindly eyes as she withdrew from her embrace. "Here comes Cousin Belle. Pull yourself together."

Mrs. Meredith's unexpected appearance through the north door took away what little wits Mrs. Hull had remaining to her. She stood in awe of her husband's cousin, a feeling which she had never been able to conquer in the passing years and which had always prevented any degree of intimacy.

"I saw your arrival some time ago, Claire," said Mrs. Meredith, with a perfunctory kiss on both cheeks. "And I waited in the library for you."

"My dear, I was so out of breath," Mrs. Hull shook her head pathetically. "When you reach my age and, eh, circumference, you will understand, Belle, that I had to rest in the nearest chair."

Mrs. Meredith prided herself on her figure, and her smile at Mrs. Hull's remark was pitying.

"Julian should engage a chauffeur and permit you the use of his car," she stated. "Come inside, Claire, and remove your coat and hat. You must stay to dinner."

"Oh, I couldn't—"

"But you must." Mrs. Meredith's tone held just the right shade of cordiality,

and Mrs. Hull looked hopelessly at her quick-witted daughter. But Lucille failed her by taking Mrs. Meredith's side.

"Do stay, mother," she urged, slipping her arm about her waist as they walked through the north door, through the reception hall and into the library. "It will be so nice to have you."

But Mrs. Hull did not accept the chair her daughter led her to; instead she turned and faced Mrs. Meredith with simple dignity.

"Lucille has just told me of what transpired after Cousin John's will was read this afternoon," she began. "Do you think it proper that Lucille and I remain as guests at Ten Acres?"

A swift change passed over Mrs. Meredith's handsome face, but one that neither of her guests could interpret. Advancing she laid her hand for an instant on Mrs. Hull's ample shoulder.

"Whatever is done about the probating of John's will, will be decided by our lawyers," she said. "If the will is contested, it will be a friendly suit in law. Personally I believe that Julian will reconsider and withdraw his hot-tempered threat. You know, Claire, that he is a creature of impulse."

Whatever reply Mrs. Hull would have made was checked by the entrance of Anne. She was a favorite with Mrs. Hull, and the latter kissed her with tender warmth.

"You don't look a bit well, Anne," she announced, with customary candor, holding the girl at arm's length. "Why don't you send her away for a change, Belle? This atmosphere of gloom," looking about the somber room, "is enough to depress the stoutest heart."

Anne smiled as she pressed her hand, then turned to her mother.

"Sam Hollister has just telephoned Herman that neither he nor Doctor Curtis will be here for dinner," she said.

"Indeed!" Mrs. Meredith raised her eyebrows in displeasure. "And where have they gone?"

"I don't know, mother."

Mrs. Meredith selected her favorite chair. "Switch on the lights, Anne," she directed. "We might as well make ourselves comfortable until dinner time."

Two hours later Anne slipped away from the dining room, and telephoned to the garage. A few words to Damason sufficed and she went to the hall closet and took down her sport coat. The dinner had been shorter than usual and, for which Anne was devoutly thankful, had passed off more cheerfully than other meals

since the death of her uncle. Gerald Armstrong had appeared just before dinner was announced, looking extremely well groomed in his evening clothes. Mrs. Hull attributed his conversational powers to her presence, but Herman might have contributed another reason for his sudden loquaciousness had he told of an empty cocktail shaker reposing in Armstrong's bedroom.

All day long Anne's head had ached with a dull throbbing pain which made her long for forgetfulness—oblivion, even. A desire to be by herself, to get out in the air possessed her, and snatching the first opportunity she had stolen away, hoping that her absence would not be noticed until she had gotten into her roadster and driven off.

She opened the front door cautiously and hurried down the veranda steps and along the driveway toward the lodge. A taxicab turned in at the lodge gates and deposited a passenger and then drove off. But Anne's attention was centered on her car parked close to the central driveway, and she did not observe a man walking slowly toward her. Her foot was on the running board when a hand was laid on her shoulder.

"Anne!" Gerald Armstrong's hot breath was unpleasantly close to her face. "Where are you going?"

"For a drive."

"Then I'll go with you," and his dictatorial manner sent a chill down her spine.

"Hop in."

She was in her place in an instant, her foot on the starter, but the engine was cold. Another second and Armstrong would be by her side. Why hadn't she told Damason to leave the engine running?

In her haste Anne had switched on her headlights and in their glare she saw a man approaching. He walked with assured tread, his cane tapping time to his footsteps, his sightless eyes looking full at the headlights. Anne stopped her engine and turned to Armstrong standing on the running board.

"My fiance, Doctor Curtis, is going with me," she said. "Kindly step down and make room for him." Leaning out of the car, she called: "David!"

At sound of his name in her clear, soft tones Curtis felt his heart leap and was conscious of an accelerated pulse as he increased his footsteps. It was the first time she had ever called him "David." For the first time in his life he liked his given name!

"What is it—Anne?" he asked. "Where are you?"

“Keep to the right,” she exclaimed. “I am in my car waiting for you.” She breathed more easily as Curtis, touching the fender, passed down the side of the car and stopped by Armstrong.

“You win, doctor.” Armstrong laughed tolerantly, keeping his voice pleasant with an effort. “If you had been a second later, I’d have gone with Anne. I’ll explain to your mother, Anne. By-by.” And with a jaunty wave of his hand, he sauntered back to the house.

Curtis placed his hand on the open door and swung inside the car. He had no key to the situation, but Anne had called him—that was enough. Anne’s foot was on the accelerator as he slammed the door; the next second the gears slipped into place and the powerful roadster started down the driveway and made the turn into the Rockville Pike. Not until then did Anne break her silence.

“I had such a headache,” she said. “And it was so stuffy in the house I stole away, and—and—”

“I came along.” Curtis laughed happily. “Thank God!”

Anne shot a half shy, half merry glance at him. She had been so long immersed in bitter, unhappy thoughts that nature could stand no more. Suddenly she gave way to unrestrained laughter.

“Oh!” she gasped, when she could make herself intelligible between gusts of merriment. “If you had seen Gerald’s face! You came *just* at the right moment.”

“Thank you—”

“It is I who should thank you for rescuing me from an intolerable situation.” She had sobered as quickly as she had given way to irresistible mirth. “I have a great deal to thank you for.”

“Don’t!” Curtis laid his hand for an instant on hers. “I am happiest when at your service.” His voice deepened with feeling. “I hope that you believe me.”

“I do,” she said, and Curtis’ face lighted with a tender smile and his heart pounded with unusual vigor against his ribs. He was too happy to say more, and for a while they sped down the turnpike in silence.

Once and again she stole a glance at her silent companion, noting with critical eyes his broad shoulders and deep chest. He had taken off his hat and the breeze waved his naturally curly hair out of its severely smooth lines. The stern repression which generally characterized his features had relaxed in his enjoyment of the drive. He looked almost boyish in the dim light from the dash lamp. There was that about Curtis which inspired confidence in young and old, and Anne’s heart sang more lightly as she drove the car at slower speed through

Rockville and swung into the road leading to Frederick, Maryland.

“Do you care where we go?” she asked. “Or do you want to return?”

“I should say not,” with honest vehemence. “Keep right ahead. It’s a fine road.”

“And there are not many cars out to-night for a wonder.” Anne bent forward and switched on the big lights. “No stars are visible. I shouldn’t wonder if we had a storm.”

As they reached open country Anne pressed down on the accelerator and the car raced ahead. They passed several other motorists and then Anne saw that she had a clear stretch of road before them. The car tore onward, gathering speed for the next hill. As they reached the crest she saw that the ground dipped suddenly in a steep incline and she pressed down on the brake. Instead of checking speed, the roadster gathered momentum. Involuntarily a low cry escaped Anne as the car lurched sideways, then righting itself, swept down the steep hill at breakneck speed.

“What is it?” demanded Curtis quickly.

“The brakes won’t work,” she panted, tugging at the hand brake. “I’ve lost control—”

“Go into second,” he shouted. He heard the noise of the shifting gears as he set the hand brake. Leaning over he grasped the wheel. “I’ll hold it steady; you guide.” He raised his voice. “Is there anything ahead?”

“No.” Her fingers closed over his hands and he swung the car in the direction she indicated, holding it with powerful grip straight in the center of the road. She felt their terrific speed lessen as the car reached the bottom of the steep grade and struck the level, and she shut off the engine. The roadster coasted along for some distance and she caught sight of a fork in the road ahead.

“Turn to the right,” she gasped. “We’ll park in the gutter.” As the car came to a standstill Anne dropped limply back in her seat. Curtis’ voice sounded miles away and there were dancing sparks in front of her eyes.

“There is a box of ammonia vaporoles in the right-hand pocket,” she stammered weakly as her head drooped forward. “I am so ashamed—” her voice died away entirely.

The box was tucked at the bottom of the leather pocket in the door, and Curtis had some difficulty in finding it. With one of the little ampules crushed in his hand, he bent over Anne and held it so that the fumes reached her. She was still only partly conscious when he lowered his hand to unfasten the high collar of

her sport coat. As he dragged it back his signet ring caught in a fine gold chain which she wore around her neck and tucked under the front of her low-cut gown.

As Curtis strove to disengage his ring the chain swung back and its pendant struck his hand. It was a key. Instinctively his fingers traced the slightly raised lettering, "Yale," and then slipped down the key. Mechanically he counted each notch and groove. Curtis drew in his breath sharply. The key was identically the same as the one marked "duplicate" in Meredith's safe deposit box. How came it to be in Anne's possession?

A long-drawn sigh from Anne aroused Curtis. Without taking thought, he pressed back the catch of the chain and released the key. As he secreted it carefully in his pocket he slipped the chain inside Anne's gown again.

"Do you feel better?" he asked, as Anne raised her head.

"Yes." She struggled upright. "It was silly of me to faint. I am mortified—"

"You need not be," quickly. "It was a ghastly run down that hill. It won't be possible to drive this car back. Do you know where we are?"

"We have passed Gaithersburg," she replied. "There is a farmhouse back in the field there. We have stopped almost in front of its gate—"

"Don't get out," exclaimed Curtis, as she half rose. She sank back again, conscious that her knees were shaking under her. "I can make my way to the house and will either telephone to Rockville for a car to run us back, or get one of the inmates of this farmhouse to take us to Washington. They probably have a car."

"But what about my roadster?"

"I'll call up the nearest service station and get them to send a trouble wagon for it," he said, stepping out of the car. "Don't worry, I won't be long."

Anne watched him make his way slowly across the long grass to the fence. "Keep to the right," she called, and he waved his hand to indicate that he heard and understood. She was still watching him when a car, coming from Rockville, dashed past and took the turn to the left.

The house was fully a quarter of a mile from the road and Curtis walked with care. Anne stared after him anxiously until the darkness hid him from view, then turned around in her seat—to find a masked man standing on her running board.

Anne stared at him in paralyzed silence. Slowly his right hand came into view and a revolver touched her breast.

"Make no noise," he commanded, and his voice had a terrifying sound coming from behind the black cloth which dropped below his chin. "Give me that key."

“The key!”

“The *key*!” with stern emphasis. “Be quick or I’ll—” And the revolver pressed against her side.

Mechanically Anne dragged out her gold chain. It hung suspended in her hand in the light from the dash lamp. Anne gazed at the empty ring of the safety catch, where the key had been fastened, as if hypnotized.

“It’s—gone—*gone*!” And the horror in her eyes as she raised them to the masked man was more convincing even than her words.

Raised voices coming down the walk from the farmhouse aroused the masked man from his contemplation of Anne and the empty chain. As silently as he had come, he vanished into the night.

Curtis’ hail met with no response and climbing into the car, assisted by the farmer and his son, he found that Anne had fainted again.

CHAPTER XVI

A CRY IN THE NIGHT

“Why doesn’t God create an insect to destroy weeds,” mused Mrs. Meredith. Albeit not given to expressing her emotions aloud, she had acquired the habit of airing her wrath when alone by a sort of audible conversation under her breath which, unsuspected by her, Susanne had often utilized, thereby acquiring much desirable information quite unknown to her mistress.

“Susanne!” Mrs. Meredith raised her voice and her maid came out of Anne’s room and into the boudoir.

“Madame, you called?”

“Which bedroom have you given to Mrs. Hull for the night?”

“The pink bedroom, madame; across the corridor from that of Doctaire Curtis,” explained Susanne, smoothing out a fold in her pretty apron.

“Oh, very well.” Mrs. Meredith consulted her watch. “It is late, Susanne; I have everything I wish, so do not wait for me. Good night.”

“Good night, madame.” Susanne turned at the door. “I hope you sleep, madame.”

Mrs. Meredith looked up sharply in time to catch a glimpse of the French maid’s trim figure in its becoming black gown as Susanne whisked through the hall door, closing it after her. Crossing the boudoir, she entered her daughter’s bedroom. Anne, on the point of switching off the reading lamp, left it lighted as her mother approached the bed.

“Now, Anne,” Mrs. Meredith seated herself on the nearest chair, “we are alone, and you can tell me in detail about this escapade of yours.”

“Escapade?” Anne sat bolt upright. “What a word, mother.”

“Does it not fit the occasion?” smoothly, meeting Anne’s indignant glance with unperturbed equanimity. “You slip away without a word to me, drive for miles in the country, just escape a serious accident, leave your car broken on the

roadside, and come home close upon midnight in a farm truck. I might well add the adjective 'indiscreet' before escapade." Anne's small hands closed spasmodically over the bedclothes as she dragged them closer to her.

"You forget that I was not alone, mother," with emphasis. "Doctor Curtis, my fiance, was with me." Mrs. Meredith gazed at her daughter in silence for a minute. "You still persist in carrying out this bargain marriage?" she asked, bitingly.

Anne flushed scarlet. "Kindly recollect, mother, that the bargain was not of my seeking," she replied. "And you were its strongest advocate."

Mrs. Meredith's gaze strayed from Anne to a photograph standing in a silver frame on her dressing table. It was an excellent likeness of her brother-in-law, John Meredith. Mrs. Meredith hastily averted her eyes.

"Have you recovered entirely from your fright, Anne?" she asked more kindly. At the unexpected change of topic Anne relaxed against her pillows. Was it possible that her mother did not care to pursue a conversation which, in her present mood, might lead to an open quarrel?

"I am better, thank you," she responded. "Doctor Curtis did everything in the world for me. But for his presence of mind when the brakes on the car would not work, I would have been killed."

Mrs. Meredith blanched. "I am very grateful to Doctor Curtis," she spoke with more feeling than usual. "I fear that I have misjudged him."

Anne eyed her mother inquiringly. What did such a *volte face* portend? They sat in silence for over two minutes, then Mrs. Meredith rose and, leaning down, kissed Anne.

"To-morrow morning," she stated, "I will send a note to the society editors of the local newspapers and ask them to announce your engagement to Doctor Curtis. Good night, Anne; pleasant dreams." And she went to her bedroom to undress feeling that her whole duty to herself, to Anne, and to society in general had been admirably performed.

Downstairs in the library David Curtis hung up the telephone receiver with growing impatience. It was the sixth time he had tried to get Doctor Leonard McLane on the telephone. He was most anxious to speak to McLane, but the latter had been called to Baltimore to perform an operation, so had reported McLane's servant, and had not returned. Curtis did not like to leave word for McLane to ring him up, owing to the lateness of the hour. The telephone bell might disturb the inmates of the household. He had not seen McLane since the discovery of the discolored scalpel concealed among the ferns in the reception

hall. Much had transpired since then, and Curtis was in a fever to discuss the new events with his level-headed friend. In McLane's judgment and advice he could place implicit confidence.

Anne's condition troubled him. Upon reaching home in the farmer's small truck, he had persuaded her to go immediately to bed and had given Susanne a sedative to administer when she was undressed.

Anne had not told him of her encounter with the masked man, and Curtis had concluded that her second fainting spell had been caused by nerves frayed to the breaking point.

As Curtis reached the table, standing by the entrance to the library, on which he had laid his cigarette case and box of matches, he heard the front door open and a startled exclamation in a girl's voice, and then a man's heavier bass.

"Good gracious, Lucille, where have you been at this time of night?" asked Sam Hollister, stopping on his way from the circular staircase to the library.

Lucille closed the front door softly and placed her finger to her lips. "Not so loud, Sam," she said cautiously. "I don't want to awaken any one. I couldn't sleep, and so went out for a walk about the grounds."

Hollister eyed her in concern. Lucille's beauty was enhanced by her pretty evening gown and graceful wrap, which she had partly thrown back, disclosing her perfectly shaped neck and throat.

"See here, Lucille," he said, going closer to her, "I've wanted very much to see you; to tell you how badly I feel about this will business."

"It is not your fault, Sam—"

"I know. But to deprive you of anything—" His voice shook with a depth of feeling which surprised Curtis, an unwilling listener to their conversation. "I wish to God I could find that codicil giving you the million dollars, even though it would put the final barrier between us."

"Sam!"

"I've asked you a dozen times to marry me." Hollister made a brave attempt to smile humorously, but the look of passionate love and sorrow in his eyes told a story of self-effacement and dogged devotion to an ideal. "I know that I am not much to look at, and while I'm not poor, I am not a millionaire. Just the same, Lucille, I'd give my life to serve you—to save you from pain."

"Sam!" Lucille's eyelids were wet with unshed tears as she laid her hand on the little lawyer's.

"You are the best and truest friend—"

“And nothing else.” Hollister sighed forlornly. “There, I won’t detain you, Lucille. You look utterly weary. Go to bed, dear.” He turned away quickly, fearing he might say more, and thereby missed her quick, furtive glance at him as she ran softly up the staircase.

Curtis was sitting at the telephone stand when Hollister appeared in the library.

“I couldn’t find you in your bedroom, Curtis,” explained Hollister, drawing up a chair. “I thought perhaps that you might be here, so came down. I hope you are not in a hurry to go to bed.”

“No.”

“Good.” Hollister drew his chair close to Curtis and took several papers out of his pocket. Selecting a telegram he opened it. “I wired a friend of mine in Chicago, whose word I could rely on, and asked for information regarding Frank Elliott.”

“And what was the reply?”

Hollister held up the telegram and read it aloud. “Elliott, promoter. Has good financial backing and an assured income of fifteen thousand dollars a year. A man of integrity and standing in his community. Member of Stock Exchange and University Club.” He lowered the telegram and let his glasses dangle from their cord. “That gives Elliott a clean bill of health.”

“Apparently so,” agreed Curtis, cautiously. “Do you think your friend could furnish you with a photograph or personal description of Elliott?” Hollister looked questioningly at his companion. “You doubt our visitor’s identity?”

“On general principles I doubt anybody who lays claim to one hundred thousand dollars,” retorted Curtis. “Frankly, how did Elliott strike you?”

“I liked his appearance,” promptly. “He was well dressed and looked what he claims to be, a prosperous business man, and obviously a gentleman.”

“Of what age?”

“Around forty-five, I should judge offhand.” Hollister tipped his chair back into a comfortable position. “We’ll be in a deuce of a quandary if we can’t produce that one hundred thousand dollars. Where in the name of God did John Meredith tuck it away?”

“And who in heaven’s name murdered Meredith!” ejaculated Curtis, with equal fervor. He hesitated a perceptible moment. “My acquaintance with Meredith was very slight—I never saw the man,” with a fleeting smile. “Do you think he appropriated that money to his own use?”

“Good God, no!” Hollister’s voice denoted shocked surprise. “John was the soul of honor in every relation of life.”

“Then,” Curtis drew a long breath, “it is up to us to locate the money and keep his memory stainless.”

“And locate his murderer,” added Hollister solemnly.

Curtis moved restlessly. “Did Frank Elliott give you further evidence to prove his statement regarding the ownership of that one hundred thousand dollars?” he asked.

“No. He is returning on Thursday and promised to bring several men with him to substantiate his statement,” replied the lawyer.

“Did he tell you their names?”

“No.” Observing Curtis’ dissatisfied frown, Hollister added hastily: “You must take into consideration that Elliott is in an embarrassing position.”

“How so?”

“He stated that that money is owned by certain men who pooled their funds to fight prohibition,” Hollister spoke more slowly. “In other words, they are trying to defeat the dry laws, and that is illegal. He and his friends can’t go to the courts to claim that money without getting themselves involved in trouble with the Federal Government.”

Curtis whistled softly. “So that is it,” he commented. “Suppose you ring up Western Union and send a night letter to your Chicago friend, Hollister, asking for a description of Frank Elliott and his present whereabouts.”

The lawyer pursed up his lips. “Oh, well, if you insist—” He shrugged his shoulders and went with reluctance to the telephone. It took him ten minutes to get his despatch taken down by a sleepy operator, and when he hung up the receiver he was not in the best of tempers.

“I’m off to bed,” he stated ungraciously. “Coming, Curtis?”

“In a moment, I want to send a call.” Curtis hitched his chair closer to the instrument stand and reached for the telephone. “Don’t wait for me, Hollister, I’ll come along shortly.”

The lawyer wandered over to the smoking table and helped himself to several cigars. Then he turned back and faced the blind surgeon.

“See here, Curtis,” he began, “don’t run off with the idea that I propose to give up a hundred thousand dollars to Elliott or any man without incontestable proof that it belongs to him. I am not an utter fool.” Not waiting for a rejoinder, he stalked from the library, taking no pains to walk softly.

Curtis paused in the act of calling "Central" and replaced the telephone receiver. What had caused Hollister's sudden outburst of temper? The lawyer's conversation with Lucille Hull, which he had inadvertently overheard, was the first inkling that he, Curtis, had had that Hollister was in love with her. Evidently he was an unsuccessful suitor of long standing, judging from what he had said to Lucille. Could it be that Hollister had stolen the codicil to Meredith's will so that Lucille would not inherit the million dollars and thus, as Hollister himself had expressed it, "place another barrier between them"? Bah! the idea was absurd, and Curtis smiled to himself, but the smile vanished at the thought that Hollister knew of the codicil and knew of its whereabouts on Sunday night. Who could say that he had not returned to Meredith's bedroom, engaged Meredith in conversation and stolen the papers—and murdered Meredith.

Curtis shook his head. Hollister was not the type of man to indulge in bloodshed, whatever the incentive; nor had nature cast him for the role of a Don Quixote.

Putting out his hand, Curtis lifted the receiver and gave McLane's telephone number to "Central." A half-awake servant took his message to have McLane call him first thing in the morning, and giving up all hope of talking with his friend that night, Curtis sought his bedroom. As he passed down the corridor leading to his room, he heard some one move just ahead of him and an alarmed exclamation in a woman's voice, followed by his name in a lower key.

"I am sorry I frightened you, Miss Hull," he said apologetically.

"It is Mrs. Hull, not Lucille, doctor." As she spoke Mrs. Hull peeped out from the alcove where she had retreated at his unexpected appearance. The alcove was shallow and Mrs. Hull, as she gathered her dressing gown about her, was thankful that she faced a blind man.

"Can you tell me, doctor, where I can find an outside telephone?"

"There is one in the library," replied Curtis. "Can I send a message for you?"

"No, thank you. I'll get Lucille." Mrs. Hull glanced nervously about. "You will think me absurd, doctor, but my husband was not well to-day. He was to call for me after dinner this evening, but he did not come, and it became so late that finally Lucille persuaded me to stay here all night."

"Very rightly, Mrs. Hull," responded Curtis sympathetically. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Oh, no! I couldn't sleep thinking about Colonel Hull." She spoke spasmodically in short, nervous jerks. "He has a new car and is so imprudent. I will get Lucille to call up our home and talk with her father. Don't let me detain

you. Good night.” And she stepped past him down the corridor on her way to her daughter’s bedroom as Curtis turned toward his door.

Curtis wasted little time in undressing. He was about to get into bed when a thought occurred to him. Going over to the chair where he had cast his suit, he took out the key which Anne had worn on the gold chain and put it inside the pocket of the jacket of his pajamas, fastening the flap with a safety pin. Then he climbed into bed. He had not troubled to switch on the electric light. Moving in perpetual darkness he had finally broken himself of the habit of pressing the button when entering a room at night.

The night seemed endlessly long to Curtis as he twisted and turned on his pillows, in sleepless unrest. He could not dismiss Anne from his thoughts. Was the key which he had taken from her Meredith’s? If so, how had it come into her possession? And what possible bearing could the key have on Meredith’s murder?

Bitterly Curtis regretted his lack of opportunity to question Anne about the key on their homeward journey in the farm truck. The presence of the farmer prevented anything like a private conversation, and immediately upon their arrival at Ten Acres Anne had been surrounded by her mother, Mrs. Hull, and Lucille, and hurried to her bedroom.

It was approaching two o’clock when Curtis finally dropped off into dreamless slumber, lulled to sleep by the soft breeze blowing through his open windows.

Nearly an hour later he awoke with a start. What had aroused him? Suddenly he caught a faint sound made by a padded footfall. Some one was moving about in his room. Curtis lay still, every faculty awake, his nerves tingling. By an effort of will only he kept his sightless eyes closed. Had the intruder switched on the electric light? If so, he was at an even greater disadvantage. At least in a darkened room he and the intruder would have an equal chance. A rustle of papers on his desk by the north window came to him with startling distinctness. He could not lie there like a bump on a log and be robbed—

Throwing back the covers he gathered himself for a spring. Clearing the footboard he landed in the center of the room and dashed in the direction of the window. Something brushed by him as he reached the window sill and he clutched at it frantically. His fingers closed over a hand—a tiny hand.

A hoarse cry broke from Curtis and he almost loosened his grasp, then his grip tightened as his wits returned, and he pulled back—and lost his balance.

A piercing scream of such anguished intensity that it chilled the blood in the

hearer's veins rang through the night, and echoed and reechoed in Curtis' ears as he staggered to his knees—a severed hand in his grasp.

With his heart pounding like a mill race Curtis touched the captured hand at the wrist where it had been severed. His fingers encountered hair—*hair?*—no, fur.

Curtis' overcharged nerves gave way to a gurgling, choking laugh, and he sank down on the floor. It was no human hand that he held—it was a monkey's paw.

An incessant pounding on his door aroused Curtis. Stopping at his bureau, he picked up a handkerchief and wrapped the monkey's paw in it and thrust it inside the drawer. When he opened the hall door he found several excited servants facing him.

"If *Monsieur* pleases," gasped Susanne, Gretchen's terrified face peering over her shoulder. "What is it?"

"A nightmare," he responded. "I am sorry. Good night."

CHAPTER XVII

UNDER LOCK AND KEY

David Curtis rose from his seat by the window and stretched his cramped muscles. He had sat in the same position for what seemed to him interminable hours, waiting in watchful silence for the return of his mysterious visitor. But the remainder of the night had proved uneventful. The servants were astir early and he heard doors and windows being opened on the lower floor as they went about their work. He had about completed dressing when a knock sounded on his door, and he crossed the room and, turning the key, threw it open.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Fernando, with your breakfast, honorable sir.” The Filipino set the tray on the chair and, removing some magazines and books from a small table, put it in front of the window and then arranged the tray. Turning about he saw Curtis struggling to tie his cravat and went to assist him. “I get your cane, sir. The table—it is this way,” and he walked solicitously across the room with Curtis and pulled back his chair before the improvised breakfast table.

Curtis ate half-heartedly; he had little appetite. “You may pour out another cup of coffee,” he said, “and then you need not wait. But first,” his voice deepened, “why did you tell me you were Fernando?”

“I—I—” The Filipino, taken completely by surprise, came to a stammering halt.

“Just so, Damason.” Curtis smiled grimly. “Why are you masquerading as your twin brother?”

“He sick,” Damason passed one moist hand uneasily over the other. “I take his place; it is all the same.” He cast a quick, suspicious glance at Curtis. “How you know?”

“By your height,” calmly. “You will recollect that I rested my hand on your shoulder when you tied my cravat. Your brother must be two inches shorter than you. Your voices, however, are identical. Is Fernando very ill?”

“Oh, no, sir. He what you call,” hunting about for a word, “sick to his stomach. He drink soda and be all right.”

“If I can do anything, let me know. I am a physician.”

“Thanks, honorable sir.” Damason bowed low. “If you want anything, please ring, sir, and I come.”

“Very well, Damason,” and the Filipino started for the door just as it opened and admitted Leonard McLane.

“It’s Leonard, Dave; I came right up,” he said, nodding to Damason as the chauffeur slipped into the hall, closing the door behind him. “What is it, old man?” laying his hand on Curtis’ shoulder to keep him in his seat. “Don’t rise. I found your urgent message about three this morning and came over as soon as I decently could and not awaken the household.” He gazed keenly at Curtis, and asked in concern: “Has anything of importance happened? You look as if you had had a night of it.”

“I had,” laconically. “Sit down, Leonard. I want your advice.”

McLane listened enthralled as Curtis rapidly told of the arrival of Frank Elliott and the latter’s claim to the one hundred thousand dollars, of the duplicate key in the safe deposit box, of his drive to Frederick in Anne’s car and finding a similar key hanging on her gold chain.

“Here is the key.” As he spoke, Curtis drew it out of his pocket and exhibited it.

“And you don’t know what this key unlocks?” asked McLane.

“No. But it must be of some importance or Anne would not carry it on her person, nor Meredith have its duplicate in a safe deposit box,” replied Curtis doggedly. “And I am commencing to believe that when we find what this key opens we will have gone a long way in solving the problem of who killed Meredith and why.”

“I agree with you,” declared McLane, with heartening vigor. “Is that all that transpired?”

“No. I was awakened early this morning by a monkey—”

“In this room?”

“Yes. And just as I got a firm grip on its hand—I can’t call it a paw—and tried to drag the beast back inside the window, the hand was severed from the body and left in my grasp.”

McLane half rose in his seat and then sank back. “You are kidding me!” he exclaimed.

Curtis left his chair and went over to his bureau. When he came back to the window he unwrapped a bloodstained handkerchief and displayed its contents.

“Are you convinced?” he asked. “Look at the window sill and tell me what you see.”

McLane bent over the sill and studied it in silence. “There is a streak of blood and a mark on the stone ledge where a sharp blade struck. It must have been driven with terrific force.”

“By whom?”

McLane leaned far out of the window and scanned the brick walls. “Some one must have been crouching on this balcony just outside your window, Dave,” he said.

“Sure—the man who hadn’t the courage to steal into my room, but had to send a poor dumb beast to do his dirty work,” declared Curtis savagely.

McLane straightened up. “I had almost forgotten,” he exclaimed. “I saw an impression of a hand on your counterpane yesterday. At first glance I thought it was a child’s soiled hand.”

“That proves the monkey has made other visits to my bedroom,” broke in Curtis grimly. “With what object, I wonder—”

“To steal—”

“What?”

McLane shrugged his shoulders. “I’ll answer that later—when I know,” he added dryly. “I wasn’t entirely convinced that it was a child’s hand which I had seen on the counterpane, so I came back to your room, Dave, just before leaving the house, only to find that the counterpane had been changed in our absence.”

Curtis whistled softly. “I’ll be everlastingly blessed!” he ejaculated. “Well, we have one clue to go upon which will enable us to identify the person so interested in my room,” he spoke with renewed energy. “And that is the monkey. People who possess monkeys in this vicinity are not numerous. We should have little difficulty in locating the owner of my midnight visitor.”

“I can tell you the owner’s name now—”

“You can?” Curtis was quick to detect the odd inflection in McLane’s voice.

“Who is it?”

“Anne Meredith.”

The answer was unexpected. Curtis drew in his breath sharply.

“Are you sure?” he demanded. “Think, Leonard, what you are implying—”

McLane nodded. "Her uncle, John Meredith, gave a marmosette to Anne for Christmas. It is a wonderfully intelligent little beast. Anne called it her thinking machine."

"I never heard of it—"

"How many days have you been here?" quickly. "I came last Friday," stopping to count; "this is Wednesday morning, four days in all."

"And John Meredith was killed on Sunday night," put in McLane. "It is hardly surprising that you are not familiar with everything about Ten Acres and its inmates."

"I've found it a house of mystery," groaned Curtis. "Where does Anne keep her monkey?"

"Fernando, the Filipino, takes care of it for her—"

Curtis rose. "So that is it!" His face cleared.

"And Fernando is ill this morning. Go, Leonard, and find out if the monkey is still alive and—if its paw is missing. If it is, swear out a warrant for Fernando's arrest—"

"On what grounds?"

"As a housebreaker," grimly. "That will hold him, for the time being. Hurry, Leonard." He pushed his friend impatiently toward the door and into the corridor. They had reached the head of the circular staircase when Gretchen intercepted them.

"Doctor McLane," she called timidly, and the two men halted. "Plees come and see Mees Lucille."

"Is she ill?" inquired McLane, observing Curtis' impatient frown at the interruption to their plans.

Gretchen bowed her head and McLane, looking at her closely, saw that she was crying.

"Which is Miss Lucille's bedroom?" he asked. Gretchen pointed dumbly down the left hand corridor. "Stay here, Dave, and I'll return as quickly as possible."

As Curtis rested his hand on the banisters he caught a faint sob on his right as Gretchen buried her face in her apron.

"What is it?" he asked kindly. "What distresses you, Gretchen?"

"Mees Lucille," she stammered. "She got the bad news on the phone."

"What news?" quickly.

“Her father was hurt las’ night in his car.” Gretchen drew a sobbing breath. “Mees Lucille fear to tell her mother. Poor Mees Lucille!”

Curtis’ kind heart was touch by her genuine grief. “Perhaps Miss Lucille is unduly alarmed,” he suggested. “Her father may not be seriously hurt.” Gretchen looked unconvinced. “It was what you call a ‘bad smash,’” she repeated the words almost as if she had learned them by rote. “I feel so because we come togedder from my country, and she is my dear young Mees.”

Curtis had a retentive memory. Where had he heard Gretchen use that phrase before in the same agitated tones? Before he could question her further she had darted down the corridor toward Lucille’s bedroom. He lingered by the staircase for over five minutes, then becoming restive, turned and paced up and down the hall, each turn taking him a little further from the staircase. He paused abruptly before a closed door and touched the knob somewhat doubtfully—a piece of twine still hung from it.

His memory had not been at fault in the location of John Meredith’s bedroom. He swung open the door and stepped inside.

“*Mon Dieu!*” Susanne’s excited exclamation made him pause. “*Mon Dieu, Monsieur le Docteur!*” She pulled herself together and lowered her voice to its normal tone. “You haf—haf—” She reached out her hand to clutch the door as she got to her knees, but Curtis had swung the door to again. As he did so his hand brushed against the inside knob—from the key in the lock was suspended a wig.

“Is this yours?” he asked politely, concealing his astonishment and also his inclination to laugh.

“But yes, *monsieur*.” Susanne passed him and disengaged her property from the key, caught between the hair and the pretty cap she always wore. “Some time ago, *monsieur*, I had the fever, and my hair lef’ me.” Her nimble fingers replaced the wig and cap. “*Monsieur* will do me a kindness by not speaking of my misfortune.”

“Of course, Susanne, I will say nothing.”

“*Merci, monsieur*,” and waiting for no more, Susanne hurried off, in her haste never observing a small object hopping along the hall. She had not entirely closed the door and through the narrow opening it passed into John Meredith’s bedroom.

Curtis rested on his cane in deep thought. His brief conversation with the French maid had given him time to wonder at her presence in Meredith’s bedroom. What was she doing there? And above all, why was she on her knees?

If she had not been on her knees how had her wig become caught in the key of the door? He had obviously swung the door against her as he entered. If she had been directly in front of the door he could not have opened it without using some force.

Curtis walked to the door and grasping the inside knob pulled it slowly open, as he did so walking in the direction it swung. It brought him against the right wall of the bedroom. Susanne must have been kneeling there when he entered. Curtis stood where he was and pushed the door to. Not until he heard the click of the latch did he move. Tucking his cane under his arm he moved his hands back and forth over the high mahogany panels with which the room was wainscoted. What had interested Mrs. Meredith's French maid might prove of interest to him! He worked his way to the corner by the door, then, undiscouraged by his lack of success, covered the ground again slowly, feeling each panel as he went along. He had traversed some distance down the room when he paused to push a chair out of his way.

"Watch your step!" The hoarse warning came just under his lifted foot and he swayed back in startled surprise. His hand struck the wainscoting a resounding blow; he distinguished a faint buzzing sound, and a panel swung toward him. Curtis clutched it in time to regain his balance. He heard a flutter of wings and a bird alighted on his shoulder.

"Pretty Poll, pretty Poll!" The parrot preened its feathers, then its softer tones grew shrill. "Anne—you devil—I've caught you!"

Curtis scratched the parrot's head. "I'll wring your neck, Ruffles," he muttered, "some day—perhaps."

The parrot's chuckle carried a hint of diabolic mirth as it fluttered down to the floor and hopped across to its old quarters. From that vantage point the bird eyed Curtis as he turned his attention to the open panel and the steel door which, when closed, it cleverly concealed.

Curtis' first care was to locate the spring which he had accidentally struck, so that he might be able to open the panel again. His diligent search was rewarded by finding a section where the panels joined. The spring was a clever piece of mechanism, and Curtis made sure that he could operate it before turning his attention to the steel door. He ran his fingers lightly over its surface and found the small keyhole. Taking out the key which he had removed from Anne's gold chain the night before, he inserted it in the lock—a turn of his wrist and the door opened slowly.

It was some seconds before Curtis put his hand inside the compartment. He

touched a number of packages lying one upon another. Taking up one he removed the rubber band and fingered the bank notes before returning them to their safe hiding place. Drawing up his chair, Curtis seated himself and went deliberately through the contents of John Meredith's secret compartment.

Ten minutes later Curtis closed the door of the bedroom, taking the precaution to lock it and pocket the key. There was no suggestion of hesitancy in the blind surgeon's movements—it was a man virile, fearless and resourceful who walked quietly down the corridor toward the servants' wing of the house.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE POLICE WARRANT

Susanne was some little time in repairing the ravages which rage and surprise had made in Mrs. Meredith's complexion.

"That will do, Susanne." Mrs. Meredith rose before her dressing table. "Tell Miss Anne that I am waiting for her."

Susanne started at her stern tone; the French maid's nerves were not under their usual excellent control. Before she could execute the order Anne appeared in the doorway.

"What is it, mother?" she asked. "Why did you send me word to dress at once?"

Mrs. Meredith paused to pick up a half sheet of note paper which she had tossed on her breakfast tray twenty minutes before.

"This is from Coroner Penfield," she explained. "He has had the effrontery to demand your presence and mine in the library—at once."

Anne shrank back toward the boudoir, with a quick hunted look behind her. It seemed to Susanne's observant eyes that she sought shelter—

"Why does Coroner Penfield wish to see us?" asked Anne.

"Heaven knows!" with a contemptuous shrug of her shoulders. "He states in his note that Inspector Mitchell is with him."

Anne drew a long breath. "Suppose we go down at once, mother," she said. "Anything is better than—than—suspense."

"Very well." Mrs. Meredith picked up a scented handkerchief. "Close my door, Susanne, and see that no one enters the room. Come, Anne."

As Mrs. Meredith and Anne crossed the reception hall on their way to the library they encountered Mrs. Hull just coming out of the dining room. She had never taken kindly to having breakfast served in her bedroom and, with Sam Hollister for company, had just completed that meal.

“Where away so early in the morning, Belle?” she asked, as her cousin paused to greet her. “I don’t recall having seen you up and dressed at this hour since our acquaintance.”

“You would not see me now but for an impertinent message from Coroner Penfield,” answered Mrs. Meredith tartly. “He and Inspector Mitchell are waiting in the library to interview Anne—”

Anne shivered involuntarily. All the way along the upper corridor and down the staircase she had longed for a word of sympathy, of encouragement, of understanding from her mother. If she could only feel that she was not utterly alone, the coming interview would lose half its terrors! Just a word, just a glance, a loving touch. She laid her hand on her mother’s arm, only to have it withdrawn as Mrs. Meredith moved to one side. She had been rebuffed.

Mrs. Hull saw the incident and divined its significance as she met Anne’s tragic eyes. Hot resentment conquered every other feeling. She slipped her arm about the young girl’s waist and held her closely to her.

“I’ve always wanted to know a coroner,” she stated calmly, meeting Mrs. Meredith’s displeased frown with unruffled composure. “I guess I’ll go in with you and Anne. Come, dearie,” and she supplemented her remarks with a kiss, which Anne returned with fervor, unconscious that her cheek was wet with a tear.

“Damason”—Anne had caught sight of the chauffeur as he came into the reception hall from the pantry—“ask Doctor Curtis to come at once to the library. Suppose we go on, mother, and not keep Coroner Penfield waiting any longer,” and with Mrs. Hull’s motherly arm still about her, Anne followed Mrs. Meredith into the presence of the two men.

Anne’s clear voice reached David Curtis as he paused in the act of closing the front door, a grinning Western Union messenger boy waiting on the veranda, cap in hand, for the generous tip which he saw in the blind surgeon’s fingers. The next second he had darted down the steps, a silver dollar reposing in his pocket, while Curtis turned toward the library. He had taken but a few steps in that direction when Sam Hollister’s voice brought him to a halt.

“Hello, Curtis!” he said, both manner and voice subdued. “This is frightful about Colonel Hull—a bad smash.”

“Has his wife been told?”

“I imagine not. We ate breakfast together and she said nothing.” Hollister polished his bald head with his handkerchief. “Her devotion to Julian Hull is akin to that of a dumb animal. I am glad that she did not see the morning paper.

Damason, here, handed it to me just as she left the dining-room.” Curtis turned his sightless eyes inquiringly in the direction of the dining-room.

“Damason?” he asked, and the Filipino, hovering in the background, came a step nearer.

“Yes, honorable doctor.”

“Where is Mr. Gerald Armstrong?”

“Asleep, honorable sir.”

“What—and with this story abroad?” Hollister raised the morning newspaper with its glaring headlines before tossing it to one side.

“Please, sir, it is the cock’s tail,” ventured Damason. “He drink many. You like I try and wake Mr. Armstrong?”

“Yes. Tell him to come to the library, and, Damason,” sternly, “you come with him.” The Filipino bowed humbly, then, turning, took the circular staircase two steps at a time, in his blind haste nearly colliding with Lucille Hull and Leonard McLane as they walked down the corridor in earnest conversation.

Inside the library Mrs. Meredith was regarding Coroner Penfield thoughtfully through gold-rimmed lorgnettes.

“If I am correct, and I think I am,” she stated coldly, “the next hearing of this inquest is scheduled for to-morrow. Why then should my daughter and I be subjected to further questioning to-day?”

“Because, madam, evidence of vital importance has been found,” responded Penfield sternly. “Inspector Mitchell has a most unpleasant duty to perform.”

Mitchell stepped forward with marked reluctance. His gaze rested on Anne’s white face, and as he noted her youth his heart smote him—his dealings with criminals had not made him callous to human suffering.

“Anne Meredith,” he began, without preface, “in the name of the law I arrest you for the murder of your uncle, John Meredith.”

Twice Anne essayed to speak, and twice her voice failed her. Mrs. Hull’s gasping sob came faintly to her; she was more conscious of her mother’s stony silence.

“What are your grounds for so preposterous a charge?” Anne asked, and her voice sounded oddly in her own ears.

“You will learn them in due time,” responded Mitchell, extending the police warrant with its imposing seal. “I warn you that anything you say may be used against you.”

“So?” Anne faced him proudly, her eyes flashing with indignation. “You decline to tell me on what you base your charge and in the next breath warn me that anything that I may say in my own defense will be used against me. Is it fair, is it honorable to handicap me at every turn?”

“It is neither fair nor required by the law,” broke in a stern voice back of her, and Anne turned with a low cry of relief as Curtis stepped forward and confronted Inspector Mitchell. Behind him appeared Sam Hollister, his hands gripping a telegram which, in his agitation, he had failed to read.

“Come, come, Mitchell, you must not heckle my client,” the lawyer announced. “Keep within the law.”

“I am strictly within my rights,” declared Mitchell, his anger rising. “I—”

“Just a second.” Curtis held up his hand, and turned to Coroner Penfield. “In simple justice to Miss Meredith and to prevent a serious error on the part of the police, I insist that Inspector Mitchell tell us his reasons for securing the warrant for Miss Meredith’s arrest.”

“Reasons?” snapped Mitchell, before Penfield could answer. “There are reasons a-plenty. First, motive—destroying a codicil to her uncle’s will in which he revoked a bequest to her of a million dollars; second, opportunity—she was seen in his bedroom late Sunday night by Herman, the butler, who overheard their quarrel; third, her talk with the man outside the chambermaid’s window, I’ll do it to-night; fourth, the parrot’s repetition of Meredith’s exclamation: ‘Anne—I’ve caught you—you devil.’” Mitchell paused and eyed Anne, then looked hastily away—her ghastly face disturbed him.

“Fifth—the weapon,” he went on. “You slipped up there, badly.”

“I aided you in finding the weapon,” put in Anne. “Was that the act of a guilty person?”

“It was excellent camouflage,” retorted Mitchell. “And it might have succeeded if you hadn’t miscalculated the direction the scalpel would fall when dropped through the banisters, and thus secreted it in the wrong fern box.” He returned the warrant to his pocket. “What clinched the case against you, Miss Meredith, was finding your fingerprints on the knife.”

Like an animal at bay Anne faced her accuser. No one spoke. Mrs. Meredith sat with face averted, one hand opening and closing spasmodically on her scented handkerchief. Mrs. Hull, unconscious of the tears running down her cheeks, was breathing with difficulty, oblivious that her daughter, with Leonard McLane, had joined the group.

“And if the court requires further proof,” went on Mitchell’s relentless voice, “a lock of your hair was wound around the button on Meredith’s pajamas jacket when we found his dead body in the hall.” Curtis advanced to Anne’s side. “I was the first to find Meredith’s body,” he stated. “I also discovered, while Hollister was telephoning for the coroner, that some hairs were caught on the button over Meredith’s heart. These hairs I removed.” Paying no attention to Mitchell’s surprised ejaculation, he added: “They were white.”

“Say, you *are* dippy!” Mitchell’s contempt was plain. “Where are the hairs?”

“Gone,” briefly. “Stolen out of my pocketbook.”

“What are you giving us?” roughly. “Stuff and nonsense?”

“No,” Curtis smiled; his object had been attained—he had succeeded in diverting attention from Anne to himself. “You have been so keen in tracing the crime to Miss Meredith that you have blundered badly—”

“What!” Mitchell’s eyes blazed with wrath.

“Here, there’s no use listening to you—”

“Oh, yes, there is.” Curtis spoke more rapidly and his manner grew stern. “In handling this case, Mitchell, you have failed to study one factor—the character of the murdered man. John Meredith had a warm heart, a peppery temper, and a confiding disposition. It made him a prey to a dastardly conspiracy—”

A shout in the hall interrupted him. A second later the portières were dragged aside and Gerald Armstrong lurched into the library. At his back came Damason, while Gretchen and Susanne, lured from their work on the second floor by the disturbance, stopped just outside the library and peered through the wide opening left by Armstrong’s impetuous handling of the handsome portières.

Armstrong’s bloodshot eyes darted about the room. Catching sight of Curtis, he sprang toward him.

“What do you want, Curtis?” he demanded, with a foul oath, regardless of the women present.

“Gerald!” Anne pressed her fingers over her ears. Paying not the slightest attention to her, Armstrong stopped directly in front of the blind surgeon.

“Answer my question,” he ordered. “What do you want?”

“Armstrong,” Curtis’ calm tone was in marked contrast to that of the infuriated man before him, “you have twice stated that you were not at Ten Acres when Meredith died. Were you here when he was *murdered*?”

Armstrong shifted his gaze from Anne to the blind surgeon, from there his eyes wandered to Lucille, standing terrified by Leonard McLane’s side.

“What are you driving at?” he demanded roughly.

“This—” Curtis rested his weight on his cane, leaving his right hand free. “Meredith lived for over five minutes after being stabbed in the throat. You had ample time to be out of the house before he died.”

As if hypnotized, Armstrong regarded the sightless man before him. The entrance of Detective Sergeant Brown through one of the French windows failed to arouse him. As Brown drew closer Anne saw a small brown object huddled in his left arm.

“Jocko!” she cried. At her familiar voice the monkey raised its head and made a feeble attempt to spring toward her. “Why, he’s ill—injured—” seeing the bloody stump which the monkey carried pressed to its breast. “How did he lose his paw?”

“It was cut off last night, Anne,” began Curtis, “by the man who sent the monkey into my room to steal—a key.”

Anne’s violent start went unobserved by Inspector Mitchell. His eyes had happened to be fixed on Mrs. Meredith and he saw her crimson and then turn deadly white. It was the first time she had shown emotion since entering the library.

Detective Sergeant Brown put the monkey down in an armchair, and Anne moved impulsively forward and sat by it, for the moment her own agonizing situation forgotten in her pity for the evident suffering of her little pet.

The Sergeant addressed Curtis while facing his superior officer.

“I found the monkey in the grove of trees down beyond, where you suggested he might be, sir,” he said. “And I found the bolo knife—”

Galvanized into life, Armstrong turned and glared at Brown.

“You’re a damned liar!” he cried. “The knife belongs to Fernando—”

“Who loaned it to *you*.” Curtis’ voice cut the air like a whiplash. “It was you, Armstrong, who knew that John Meredith had drawn out one hundred thousand dollars in cash to invest in certain securities; it was you who took advantage of another’s misfortune; you, contemptible hound that you are, made a woman your cat’s-paw—” He wheeled around. “Mitchell, bring Gretchen here.”

The grim earnestness of his tone called for prompt unquestioned obedience, and Mitchell swung around to find Susanne pushing the pretty Dutch girl into the room. In her terror Gretchen sat down on the nearest chair and Brown, with instant forethought, wheeled the chair and its occupant forward.

“Here she is, Doctor Curtis,” he announced. “Right forninst ye.”

“Gretchen,” Curtis spoke more kindly, “at the inquest you testified that the voice of the woman under your window on Sunday night was that of your ‘young Mees.’ Coroner Penfield took it for granted that you referred to your employer, Miss Anne Meredith. This time we require a spoken answer; do not nod your head, as you did before. Did you mean by ‘young Mees,’ Miss Anne or Miss Lucille Hull?” Gretchen’s terrified gaze swept the room. “I—I—” she faltered. “It was—God help me—it was—” she gulped a sob. “It was Mees Lucille.”

Curtis broke the pause as he faced toward the door. “Is Miss Hull present?”

“Yes.” Lucille controlled her voice admirably, but Doctor McLane noted with growing alarm her ghastly, twitching features. “What is it, Doctor Curtis?”

“Are you engaged to marry Gerald Armstrong?” Lucille carefully refrained from looking at her mother.

“I was,” she admitted, “once.”

“Lucille!” Armstrong had turned livid. “You aren’t deserting me? He can’t prove anything. He only knows—”

“That John Meredith was murdered by your accomplice—” Curtis stepped in the direction from which Lucille’s voice came. He had almost reached her side when a figure barred his progress.

“One moment, Doctor. I stabbed John Meredith,” and Mrs. Hull laid her hand in his.

CHAPTER XIX

OUT OF THE MAZE

Inspector Mitchell gazed at Mrs. Hull as if he thought her demented.

"You! *You* killed John Meredith!" he gasped, as the others listened in petrified silence.

"Yes." Mrs. Hull unconsciously tightened her grasp on David Curtis' hand. His firm clasp helped her to keep her self-control. "But I did not *intentionally* stab him. It was an accident."

Lucille walked unsteadily over to her mother. "Dearest," she stammered. "You must be mad!" Then as she caught Mrs. Hull's pathetic, pleading eyes, she turned in sudden frenzy to Coroner Penfield. "I tell you she is mad—mad, and unaccountable for what she is saying."

"Hush, Lucille, be quiet, dear." Mrs. Hull turned in appeal to Leonard McLane. "Calm her, doctor, until I finish what I have to say."

McLane led the unstrung, half frantic girl out of the library, the startled servants making way for them. As they reached the door Gerald Armstrong tried to stop Lucille, but on meeting her look of loathing he cowered back and covered his face with his shaking hands.

Sam Hollister, recovering somewhat from his stupor, brought up a chair for Mrs. Hull.

"Sit down," he said. "You look utterly spent"

With murmured thanks she sank down just as Anne approached and, dropping on her knees, put her arms around Mrs. Hull.

"Excuse me, Coroner Penfield." Mrs. Hull had some difficulty in controlling her voice, as she blinked away the tears which persisted in filling her eyes and half blinding her. "And you also, Inspector Mitchell. Have a little patience and I will tell you my unhappy story of Sunday night, and then go with you." She sighed deeply.

“My husband has met with financial reverses during the past two months,” she went on. “I knew something of his affairs, but he did not take me entirely into his confidence. It was about midnight on Sunday, Julian had retired early and I was about to go upstairs, when Gerald came to see me and told me that their firm was virtually ruined. He suggested that I see John Meredith and ask his aid.

“I am a home body, and starting again at the bottom, with a small house, little money and no servants held no particular terrors for me, but as I thought of my husband and his pride in his business integrity; Lucille, accustomed to every luxury, and her social ambitions; and of the people who had trusted my husband and who might be ruined through his bankruptcy, I pocketed my pride and told Gerald that I would see John.” Mrs. Hull paused, then continued more slowly:

“Gerald said that I must go to Ten Acres immediately, in spite of the hour; that unless he had a check for fifty thousand dollars, or its equivalent in cash, the firm could not open its doors on Monday morning.” Again Mrs. Hull sighed. “I believed him and he brought me out in his car. It was after midnight and Gerald admitted me into the house through the north door, to which he had a latch key. He would not come upstairs, but told me that he had tied a piece of twine to John’s door knob so that I could make no mistake in the room.”

“But why all this secrecy?” demanded Mitchell. “Why didn’t you telephone and make an appointment for the next morning?”

“Because I knew that my husband and John were not on good terms,” she responded. “They had had a dispute a week before. I was not sure that my husband would approve of my asking a favor of John, nor was I at all sure that John would see me if I asked for an appointment. I knew John’s habit of reading in bed half the night.” She hesitated and looked at Penfield. “May I have a glass of water?”

There was a pause as Damason dashed out of the room, to return an instant later, goblet in hand. Mrs. Hull drank thirstily, then, returning the empty glass, she laid her hand on Anne’s shoulder as the girl knelt beside her.

“I found John Meredith sitting up in bed, with a dressing gown thrown over his shoulders, reading. My unexpected appearance astounded him. He heard what I had to say very patiently, then slipping his hand under his pillow, drew out a key.

“‘I have about one hundred thousand dollars in cash in my safe here,’ he said. ‘I intended to reinvest it, but will gladly accommodate Julian with a loan to tide him over. Will fifty thousand be sufficient?’” Mrs. Hull paused, overcome by emotion, and the others waited in silence for her to continue.

“In my nervousness, while explaining my errand to John, I had picked up a sharp knife which lay on the open book by his side, and which he had evidently used to cut its leaves.” Mrs. Hull stopped, her eyes darkened in horror, as in imagination she lived the scene over again. “I have a malady of the heart, and the suspense and John’s generous promise of financial aid proved too great a tax. My head swam, I felt myself reeling forward—I had remained standing—and threw out my left hand, in which I still grasped the knife. John looked up, jerked back his head and held up his hands to catch me. I swayed toward him, my left hand swept downward and the knife slashed his throat.” Mrs. Hull broke down utterly. When she looked up Curtis was holding a glass to her lips.

“Drink this,” he coaxed, and she obediently swallowed the powerful stimulant.

“I am almost through my story, gentlemen,” she gasped. “The horror of what I had done brought me to my senses and I fled from the room, intending to get assistance. I ran down the hall, made the wrong turning, and becoming completely confused went down the back stairs and from there into the reception hall. I still carried the knife. In a revulsion of feeling I threw it in one of the fern boxes and going to the north door, slipped outside and over to Gerald’s motor, parked near the entrance to Ten Acres.”

“Was Armstrong waiting in the car for you?” asked Curtis quickly.

“No. I had just strength enough to climb into the car and then I must have fainted,” answered Mrs. Hull. “When I came to myself we were almost home. Julian was in his room sound asleep and no one heard me.” With an effort she got to her feet and loosened Anne’s tender clasp. “That is all,” she stated. “But please do not think me utterly despicable—I never knew until just now that Anne was suspected of killing her uncle, or I would have given myself up to the police.”

“Cousin Claire, it was an accident,” declared Anne loyally. “Surely, Inspector Mitchell, you cannot charge Mrs. Hull with murder?”

Mitchell shook his head. “Mrs. Hull must come with me to Headquarters and tell her story to the authorities. There’s manslaughter to consider—”

“Wait!” Curtis’ imperative tones interrupted the inspector. “Before you proceed further—” In his earnestness Curtis drew a step nearer and stumbled over a footstool. He involuntarily flung out his hand and caught hold of the person standing by him. “Mrs. Hull, the wound which you accidentally inflicted did not cause John Meredith’s death.”

A cry broke from Mrs. Hull and she swayed on her feet, while the others in the

room gazed at the blind surgeon in stupefied silence.

“I assisted at the post-mortem examination,” continued Curtis, speaking with slow distinctness. “My fingers are my eyes and they detected a superficial downward gash on Meredith’s throat just above the point where the larger blood vessels were severed.”

Mrs. Hull hung on his words, her agonized expression giving place to one of dawning hope.

“I didn’t kill John—thank God! Oh, thank God!” she gasped. “Doctor, you mean—?”

“That when you fled in terrified horror from the bedroom pursued by Meredith, he was followed by a witness of the scene. This witness,” Curtis turned his head slowly, his sightless eyes sweeping the room, “caught up with Meredith as the latter fell, half unconscious, at the head of the staircase, and bending down cut Meredith’s throat.”

In the tense silence Anne heard her mother’s sudden intake of breath. Turning slightly she saw that Mrs. Meredith sat watching Curtis in deadly fascination, unconscious apparently that her fingers were twitching convulsively about her scented handkerchief. Inspector Mitchell’s aggressive voice brought Anne’s attention back to the others.

“Who was this witness?” he demanded.

“The man who planned the interview—Gerald Armstrong.”

As his name was pronounced Armstrong strove to wrench his wrist from Curtis’ iron grasp.

“You lie, d—mn you; you lie!” he stammered, through lips grown white and shaking. “You have no proof—”

“Tut! your face gives you away,” declared Mitchell, pointing to Armstrong’s convulsed features as the latter cowered back at his approach. “Let go, Doctor Curtis.”

Slowly Curtis released his hold. “Your pulse betrayed your emotion, Armstrong, when I announced that I knew there were *two* wounds on Meredith’s throat,” he stated. “Believing yourself entirely safe from suspicion after Mrs. Hull’s confession, the shock was more than your nerves could stand.”

“It’s a lie—a lie—” Armstrong reiterated through dry lips as his hunted gaze swept the room. His sudden dash for the library window was blocked by Detective Sergeant Brown and the uplifted razor was knocked from his hand. A minute more and he stood staring stupidly at a pair of handcuffs dangling from

his wrists.

“A handy weapon,” exclaimed Brown, picking it up. “So the razor did the trick as far as Meredith was concerned, eh, Armstrong?”

A snarling curse was Armstrong’s only answer as he collapsed in a chair.

Before Curtis could speak, Anne turned and faced Coroner Penfield.

“I did go to Uncle John’s room late Sunday night,” she said. “Mother had told me of his plan to have me marry Doctor Curtis.” She avoided looking at Curtis. “And I went to ask him to reconsider. At first Uncle John was very bitter and said many harsh things,” she hesitated and colored painfully as she met her mother’s unfriendly glance. “Years ago when they first went into business, my father and Uncle John were junior partners in the firm of ‘Turner and Waterman’ stockbrokers—”

An exclamation from Curtis interrupted her. “The firm failed,” he said, “and my father, Dan Curtis, who had intrusted his financial affairs to it, went down in the crash. He committed suicide—”

“So Uncle John told me,” admitted Anne softly. “He said my father as well as he had never gotten over his tragic death. They tried vainly to locate your mother and aid her financially, but she—”

“Returned to her parents in Canada,” interjected Curtis. “I was brought up in the wilds of the far Northwest and taught by the trappers not to depend upon sight alone, but to use my hearing and my reasoning faculties to gauge my sense of direction. It has proved invaluable training for my present condition,” touching his sightless eyes. “Shortly after my mother’s death I went to McGill Institute and worked my way through college. The rest of my career you already know.”

“Uncle John learned of your parentage and went at once to Walter Reed Hospital,” went on Anne. “He took an instant liking to you and invited you here.” Again Anne’s white cheeks crimsoned. “He hit upon the plan of our marriage as an act of restitution.”

“Very thoughtful of him,” remarked Mrs. Meredith dryly, feeling that she had been in the background quite long enough. Her sensations at the rapid progress of events had been beyond speech. “Continue your story, Anne.”

“I left Uncle John in anger.” Anne’s voice was slightly husky, the emotional strain was telling upon her. “But I could not sleep. I felt that I must tell him that I agreed to his plan.” She bit her lip and partly turned her back on Curtis. “As I got to his room I met Uncle John and his ghastly appearance horrified me.

Staggering past me, he thrust a key into my hand, saying in a whisper: 'Keep this, Anne.' But in pronouncing my name his voice rose, as he added: 'I've caught you, you devil.' Ruffles, the parrot, took up his cry as Uncle John disappeared up the dimly lighted corridor. Completely dazed by the situation, I hesitated, then started to follow him, when a handkerchief was thrust under my nose and I was carried into Uncle John's bedroom—"

"By Gerald Armstrong," stated Curtis. He turned in the direction of the silent figure hunched in a chair. "Why did you use Anne's handkerchief to chloroform her?"

Armstrong stirred and glanced up in sullen rage. His evident intention of not answering was changed by Brown's peremptory tug at the handcuffs.

"The handkerchief, as well as Meredith's razor, was lying by a bottle of chloroform on Meredith's bureau near the window by which I entered," he admitted, squirming about in his seat so as to avoid Mrs. Hull's gaze. "I thought Anne had seen me in her uncle's bedroom. As she lost consciousness I raced down the hall and caught Meredith"—he sucked in his breath and a shudder shook him—"never mind the details. I got back to the bedroom—"

"And chloroformed the parrot also?" asked Curtis.

"Yes. I was afraid the infernal bird would awaken the household. I had overheard Mrs. Hull's interview with Meredith, having slipped up the back stairs to my bedroom and from there along the balcony to Meredith's open window. I heard him speak of the money in the safe and went in to get the key of his secret compartment as he staggered into the hall, evidently in pursuit of Mrs. Hull. It came to me in a flash that if I took the money Mrs. Hull would be suspected, and, God! how I needed money!" His voice rose and cracked. "I knew our firm was going to the wall and with one hundred thousand dollars in cash I could get out of the country. I searched Meredith's body"—another shudder shook Armstrong and he drew his coat sleeve across his forehead to wipe away the beads of moisture—"then I searched his bedroom. Where did you conceal the key, Anne?"

"In the cuff of my dressing gown," answered Anne. "When I regained consciousness my one idea was to follow Uncle John, and I went down the corridor and found his body." She looked at Penfield. "I did catch my hair in that button, trying to find out if Uncle John was alive. And later you caught me trying to remove the hair."

"Why didn't you take me into your confidence?" asked Penfield, and at his tone of kindly solicitude Anne's eyes filled with tears.

“I was afraid,” she admitted. “I realized that you suspected me of killing Uncle John and I did not know how to clear myself.”

“One more question,” and Penfield closed his notebook. “How did your fingerprints get on the scalpel?”

“I found the knife under the ferns and laid it back,” she explained. “I thought that Uncle John had gone out of his mind and killed himself and concluded he had thrown the knife through the banisters.”

Penfield rose and buttoned his sack coat. “I must congratulate you, Doctor Curtis, upon your clever handling of this case,” he said. “But for you Mrs. Hull would be under arrest, charged with a most heinous crime.”

Curtis could not see Mrs. Hull’s look of passionate gratitude.

“How can I express myself!” she began incoherently. “The mental anguish I have endured believing that I caused John’s death—Doctor, how can I thank you?”

“Don’t please!” Curtis begged in embarrassment. “I never suspected you. But I did think your daughter, Lucille, had been incited to rob Meredith and was guilty of the greater crime also. I had been told by Meredith that her engagement to Armstrong was an affair of long standing. He also told me that there were rumors in the city of the firm of ‘Hull and Armstrong’ being under financial stress, and that he was morally certain, although without proof, that it had been Armstrong’s crooked methods which threatened to swamp Colonel Hull.” Curtis paused and cleared his throat.

“When you told of having stabbed Meredith,” he continued, “I realized that such a gash, while it would bleed profusely, was not necessarily fatal, and my thoughts turned to Armstrong. He could have witnessed the scene unknown to you.” Curtis paused again. “I knew that he was standing here by me, and under pretense of keeping my balance, I held my fingers over his pulse as I tried out my theory.”

“Clever work, Doctor!” declared Inspector Mitchell admiringly. “But what put you on Miss Lucille Hull’s trail?”

“Gretchen’s statement to me this morning that Lucille was her ‘young Mees,’ and my recollection of the maid’s behavior at the inquest. Mrs. Hull’s voice is sometimes similar in intonation to that of her daughter, which accounts for Gretchen’s mistake in the identity of the woman under her window,” replied Curtis. “But it was Susanne who gave me a clue to the whereabouts of Meredith’s carefully concealed safe. I would like to speak to Susanne.”

“*Monsieur*, I am here.” And Susanne, who had been hovering in the back of the room, came forward.

“Why were you in Mr. Meredith’s bedroom?” asked Curtis. “And why were you on your knees?”

“If it please *Monsieur*,” began Susanne, twisting her apron in some embarrassment as she met Mrs. Meredith’s stern glance, “I heard *Madame* Meredith talk much to herself about a key and *Monsieur* John’s wealth being under lock and key in his room. So, *Monsieur*, I went early this morning to his old bedroom to look for zat key—to return it to *Madame*” with calm assurance. “And I search on my knees for eet.”

“I had the key until last night,” admitted Anne.

“When I took it from you—” broke in Curtis.

“You!” But Anne’s exclamation was drowned in a deeper cry from Armstrong.

“So you beat me to it!” he cried. “I followed Anne’s car, hoping for a chance to get it from her.”

“You were the masked man?” Light burst upon Anne as Curtis turned his head questioningly from one to the other.

“Yes. I drove by and parked my car on the left fork of the road when I saw you had stopped,” explained Armstrong. “I improvised a mask out of the lining of my coat. I suspected, Curtis, that Anne had given you the key, and was putting up a game of bluff when she claimed it was missing; so I used the monkey to see if you were awake before I entered your bedroom last night. You got a strangle hold on his paw, Curtis, and I took the only way of getting him free,” with an ugly glance at Jocko, sitting curled up in comparative comfort in the big armchair.

“Did you have the monkey in my room yesterday, Armstrong?”

“*Non, Monsieur*, it was I,” broke in Susanne. “I had carried him from *Mademoiselle* Anne’s bedroom. Jocko does not like ze parrot. He escape me down the corridor and run in your room. Before I get him he soil your counterpane and later I change it.” Leonard McLane, who had entered the library unobserved some moments before, smiled involuntarily.

“So much for that mystery,” he exclaimed. “What about the white hairs around the button on Meredith’s jacket, Curtis?”

“I saw Fernando an hour ago,” answered the blind surgeon. “He confessed that he had lied as to their color and stole them from my wallet, thinking to protect Anne. He admitted that you, Armstrong, cut the string from my door

knob and intimidated him into lying about it. Fernando is not a courageous soul! He overheard your conversation with Jim Nolan, the notorious confidence man, alias Frank Elliott."

Armstrong rose with such abruptness that he overturned his chair.

"I'm going," he announced.

"With me," and Detective Sergeant Brown was by his side, revolver in hand. Armstrong blanched and bit his lip. With shoulders sagging and head bent he accompanied Inspector Mitchell and Brown from the library. Escorted by the two men and Coroner Penfield, he slunk through the reception hall and out of the house, Susanne and Damason, their curiosity still unsatisfied, in their wake. Mrs. Hull, at a whispered word from McLane, also hurried from the room.

Curtis turned and took several restless steps up and down. He still had a most unpleasant duty to perform.

"Mrs. Meredith," he began, pausing near her, "did you turn out the light in the corridor on Sunday night just after I discovered John Meredith's dead body?"

"I did," answered Anne, before her mother could reply. "I had some insane notion, after I found poor Uncle John, that I must slip back to my bedroom unseen, so I turned off the light. I met mother just at the entrance of our boudoir."

"Wait, Anne, I have a confession to make." Nothing could be more suave and apparently tranquil than Mrs. Meredith's voice and manner. It had just occurred to her astute mind that the blind surgeon might be a person to propitiate. She saw Anne's face of distress, Curtis' slight, cynical smile, and met Leonard McLane's questioning glance with supreme audacity. "I saw Doctor Curtis and Sam leave John's bedroom and rush down the corridor. Much surprised by their conduct, I entered my brother-in-law's bedroom. On the bed I saw several papers. I took the prenuptial agreement, Anne, that I might safeguard your interests—"

Anne turned deadly white. "Mother!"

"It is safely put away," she went on, paying not the slightest attention to Anne. "When it is required I will produce it."

"And the codicil to Meredith's will," stated Curtis swiftly. "You have that also—denial is useless," as she attempted to speak. "Both documents must be given to Hollister to-day, madam. If you wish I will hand them to him with the one hundred thousand dollars in cash, the inference being that they were placed in the safe by Meredith."

"Very well, I will give them to you, on condition—"

“No conditions, madam,” with stern emphasis. “I have no intention of pressing the subject further. So far as you are concerned, it will never be mentioned by me.”

“Nor by me,” was the audacious retort, as Mrs. Meredith swept by Curtis and left the room.

McLane broke the ensuing pause by walking over to the chair and lifting Jocko in his arms. “I’ll take care of this little fellow, Anne,” he said. “Lucille is resting quietly in her room with her mother and Gretchen is looking after her. Colonel Hull’s injury in his motor accident last night comprised a broken arm and a collar bone. I’ll see you both later,” and he discreetly vanished.

Curtis fumbled with his cane in unhappy silence. He had solved the problem surrounding John Meredith’s mysterious death, but like many another gratified desire it brought a bitter pang to his heart. He was in honor bound to release Anne from her promise to marry him. But how could he leave with his passionate love for her untold? Love had made no count of the hours of their short acquaintance. Anne had crept into his heart to be enshrined forever. Was it obligatory that he leave her in silence? The minutes lengthened as pride warred fiercely with love.

“Anne,” he stopped suddenly before where she sat, watching him with deep attention, “I cannot in honor hold you to your promise. Your uncle’s plan that we marry as an act of restitution was unjust to you. I honor you highly, I esteem your friendship—” He kept his voice calm by an effort of will. “Without a career, I feel that I have no right to ask you to share your life with me. I am not worthy—”

Worthy? Could mortal man be so blind? Was this calm, kindly friendship to be all that he could offer her starving heart? Her lonely childhood, her mother’s cruel neglect had reached their culmination. Was this man, who had protected her in her hour of need, who had won her heart by his chivalry and courage in the face of adversity, to pass out of her life? She raised her eyes, and had Curtis been able to read their longing appeal, his stubborn pride would have yielded.

Anne rose slowly to her feet and rested both hands upon his shoulders.

“Dave,” she whispered, with lips that trembled even as she smiled, “I can’t release you from your promise, because—” she faltered, “because—”

He was holding her in close embrace. At last barriers of false pride were set aside.

“My dear, dear Anne,” he stammered. “Tell me, sweetheart, because—”

“I love you,” and Anne, glancing shyly upward into his transfigured face, knew that she had reached her happy haven at last.

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