

**CAROLYN  
WELLS**

THE MYSTERY  
GIRL

Carolyn Wells

**The Mystery Girl**

«Public Domain»

**Wells C.**

The Mystery Girl / C. Wells — «Public Domain»,

# Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	11
CHAPTER III	17
CHAPTER IV	23
CHAPTER V	29
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	32

# Carolyn Wells

## The Mystery Girl

### CHAPTER I

#### A PRESIDENT-ELECT

Quite aside from its natural characteristics, there is an atmosphere about a college town, especially a New England college town, that is unmistakable. It is not so much actively intellectual as passively aware of and satisfied with its own intellectuality.

The beautiful little town of Corinth was no exception; from its tree-shaded village green to the white-columned homes on its outskirts it fairly radiated a satisfied sense of its own superiority.

Not that the people were smug or self-conceited. They merely accepted the fact that the University of Corinth was among the best in the country and that all true Corinthians were both proud and worthy of it.

The village itself was a gem of well-kept streets, roads and houses, and all New England could scarce show a better groomed settlement.

In a way, the students, of course, owned the place, yet there were many families whose claim to prominence lay in another direction.

However, Corinth was by all counts, a college town, and gloried in it.

The University had just passed through the throes and thrills of one of its own presidential elections.

The contest of the candidates had been long, and at last the strife had become bitter. Two factions strove for supremacy, one, the conservative side, adhering to old traditions, the other, the modern spirit, preferring new conditions and progressive enterprise.

Hard waged and hard won, the battle had resulted at last in the election of John Waring, the candidate of the followers of the old school.

Waring was not an old fogey, nor yet a hide-bound or narrow-minded back number. But he did put mental attainment ahead of physical prowess, and he did hold by certain old-fashioned principles and methods, which he and his constituents felt to be the backbone of the old and honored institution.

Wherefore, though his election was an accomplished fact, John Waring had made enemies that seemed likely never to be placated.

But Waring's innate serenity and acquired poise were not disturbed by adverse criticism, he was a man with an eye single to his duty as he saw it. And he accepted the position of responsibility and trust, simply and sincerely with a determination to make his name honored among the list of presidents.

Inauguration, however, would not take place until June, and the months from February on would give him time to accustom himself to his new duties, and to learn much from the retiring president.

Yet it must not be thought that John Waring was unpopular. On the contrary, he was respected and liked by everybody in Corinth. Even the rival faction conceded his ability, his sterling character and his personal charm. And their chagrin and disappointment at his election was far more because of their desire for the other candidate's innovations than of any dislike for John Waring as a man.

Of course, there were some who candidly expressed their disapproval of the new president, but, so far, no real opposition was made, and it was hoped there would be none.

Now, whether because of the exigencies of his new position, or merely because of the irresistible charms of Mrs. Bates, Waring expected to make the lady his wife before his inauguration.

“And a good thing,” his neighbor, Mrs. Adams, observed. “John Waring ought to’ve been somebody’s good-looking husband long ago, but a bachelor president of Corinth is out of all reason! Who’d stand by his side at the receptions, I’d like to know?”

For certain public receptions were dearly loved by the citizens of Corinth, and Mrs. Adams was one of the most reception-loving of all.

As in all college towns, there were various and sundry boarding houses, inns and hotels of all grades, but the boarding house of Mrs. Adams was, without a dissenting voice, acclaimed the most desirable and most homelike.

The good lady’s husband, though known as “Old Salt,” was by no means a seafaring man, nor had he ever been. Instead, he was a leaf on a branch of the Saltonstall family tree, and the irreverent abbreviation had been given him long ago, and had stuck.

“Yes, indeed,” Mrs. Adams asserted, “we’ve never had a bachelor president of Corinth and I hope we never will. Mrs. Bates is a nice sweet-spoken lady, a widow of four years standing, and I do say she’s just the one for Doctor Waring’s wife. She has dignity, and yet she’s mighty human.”

Emily Bates was human. Not very tall, a little inclined to plumpness, with fair hair and laughing blue eyes, she was of a cozy, home-loving sort, and her innate good nature and ready tact were unailing.

At first she had resisted John Waring’s appeal, but he persisted, until she found she really liked the big, wholesome man, and without much difficulty learned to love him.

Waring was distinguished-looking rather than handsome. Tall and well-made, he had a decided air of reserve which he rarely broke through, but which, Emily Bates discovered, could give way to confidences showing depths of sweetness and charm.

The two were happily matched. Waring was forty-two and Mrs. Bates half a dozen years younger. But both seemed younger than their years, and retained their earlier tastes and enthusiasms.

Also both were bound up, heart and soul, in the welfare of the University. Mrs. Bates’ first husband had been one of its prominent professors and its history and traditions were known and loved by the cheery little lady.

Perhaps the only person in Corinth who was not pleased at the approaching nuptials of John Waring and Emily Bates was Mrs. Peyton, Waring’s present housekeeper. For it meant the loss of her position, which she had faithfully filled for ten years or more. And this meant the loss of a good and satisfactory home, not only for herself, but for her daughter Helen, a girl of eighteen, who lived there also.

Not yet had Waring told his housekeeper that she was to be dethroned but she knew the notice would come, – knew, too, that it was delayed only because of John Waring’s disinclination to say or do anything unwelcome to another. And Mrs. Peyton had been his sister’s school friend and had served him well and faithfully. Yet she must go, for the incoming mistress needed no other housekeeper for the establishment than her own efficient, capable self.

It was a very cold February afternoon, and Mrs. Peyton was serving tea in the cheerful living-room. Emily Bates was present; an indulgence she seldom allowed herself, for she was punctilious regarding conventions, and Corinth people, after all, were critical. Though, to be sure, there was no harm in her taking tea in the home so soon to be her own.

The two women were outwardly most courteous, and if there was an underlying hostility it was not observable on the part of either.

“I came today,” Emily Bates said, as she took her tea cup from the Japanese butler who offered it, “because I want to tell you, John, of some rumors I heard in the town. They say there is trouble brewing for you.”

“Trouble brewing is such a picturesque phrase,” Waring said, smiling idly, as he stirred his tea. “One immediately visions Macbeth’s witches, and their trouble brew.”

“You needn’t laugh,” Emily flashed an affectionate smile toward him, “when the phrase is used it often means something.”

“Something vague and indefinite,” suggested Gordon Lockwood, who was Waring’s secretary, and was as one of the family.

“Not necessarily,” Mrs. Bates returned; “more likely something definite, though perhaps not very alarming.”

“Such as what?” asked Waring, “and from what direction? Will the freshmen make me an apple-pie bed, or will the seniors haze me, do you think?”

“Be serious, John,” Mrs. Bates begged. “I tell you there is a movement on foot to stir up dissension. I heard they would contest the election.”

“Oh, they can’t do that,” Lockwood stated; “nor would anybody try. Don’t be alarmed, Mrs. Bates. I’m sure we know all that’s going on, – and I can’t think there’s any ‘trouble brewing’ for Doctor Waring.”

“I’ve heard it, too,” vouchsafed Mrs. Peyton. “It’s not anything definite, but there are rumors and hints, and where there’s smoke, there’s bound to be fire. I wish you’d at least look into it, Doctor.”

“Yes,” agreed Emily Bates, “do look into it, John.”

“But how can I?” Waring smiled. “I can’t go from door to door, saying ‘I’ve come to investigate a rumor,’ can I?”

“Oh, don’t be absurd!” Mrs. Bates’ plump little hands fluttered in protest and then fell quietly to rest in her lap. “You men are so tactless! Now, Mrs. Peyton or I could find out all about it, without any one knowing we were making inquiry.”

“Why don’t you, then?” asked Waring, and Mrs. Peyton gave a pleased smile as the guest bracketed their names.

“I will, if you say so.” Emily spoke gravely. “That is what I wanted to ask you. I didn’t like to take up the matter with any one unless you directly approved.”

“Oh, go ahead, – I see no harm in it.”

“But, Doctor Waring,” put in Lockwood, “is it wise? I fear that if Mrs. Bates takes up this matter she may get in deeper than she means or expects to, and – well, you can’t tell what might turn up.”

“That’s so, Emily. As matters stand, you’d best be careful.”

“Oh, John, how vacillating you are! First, you say go ahead, and then you say stop! I don’t mind your changing your opinions, but I do resent your paying so little attention to the matter. You toss it aside without thought.”

“Doctor Waring thinks very quickly,” said Mrs. Peyton, and Emily gave her a slight stare.

It was hard for the housekeeper to realize that she must inevitably lose her place in his household, and the thought made her a little assertive while she still had opportunity.

“Yes, I know it,” was the reply Emily gave, and went on, addressing herself to the two men.

“Persuade him, Mr. Lockwood. Not of his duty, he never misapprehends that, but of the necessity of looking on this matter as a duty.”

“What a pleader you are, Emily,” and Waring gave her an admiring bow; “I am almost persuaded that my very life is in danger!”

“Oh, you won’t be good!” The blue eyes twinkled but the rosy little mouth took on a mutinous pout. “Well, I warn you, if you don’t look out for yourself, I’m going to look out for you! And that, as Mr. Lockwood hints, may get you into trouble!”

“What a contradictory little person it is! In an effort to get me out of trouble, you admit you will probably get me into trouble. Well, well, if this is during our betrothal days, what will you do after we are married?”

“Oh, then you’ll obey me implicitly,” and the expressive hands indicated with a wide sweep, total subjection.

“You’ll find him not absolutely easy to manage,” Mrs. Peyton declared, and though Emily Bates said no word, she gave a look of superior managing power that brought the housekeeper’s thin lips together in a resentful straight line.

This byplay was unnoticed by large-minded John Waring, but it amused Lockwood, who was an observer of human nature.

Unostentatiously, he watched Mrs. Peyton, as she turned her attention to the tea tray, and noted the air of importance with which she continued her duties as hostess.

“Bring hot toast, Ito,” she said to the well-trained and deferential Japanese. “And a few more lemon slices, – I see another guest coming.”

She smiled out through the window, and a moment later a breezy young chap came into the room.

“Hello, folkses,” he cried; “Hello, Aunt Emily.”

He gave Mrs. Bates an audible kiss on her pretty cheek and bowed with boyish good humor to Mrs. Peyton.

“How do you do, Uncle Doctor?” and “How goes it, Lock?” he went on, as he threw himself, a little sprawingly into an easy chair. “And here’s the fair Helen of Troy.”

He jumped up as Helen Peyton came into the room. “Why, Pinky,” she said, “when did you come?”

“Just now, my girl, as you noted from your oriel lattice, – and came running down to bask in the sunshine of my smiles.”

“Behave yourself, Pinky,” admonished his aunt, as she noted Helen’s quick blush and realized the saucy boy had told the truth.

Pinckney Payne, college freshman, and nephew of Emily Bates, was very fond of Doctor Waring, his English teacher, and as also fond, in his boyish way, of his aunt. But he was no respecter of authority, and, now that his aunt was to be the wife of his favorite professor, also the President-elect of the college, he assumed an absolute familiarity with the whole household.

His nickname was not only an abbreviation, but was descriptive of his exuberant health and invariably red cheeks. For the rest, he was just a rollicking, care-free boy, ring leader in college fun, often punished, but bobbing up serenely again, ready for more mischief.

Helen Peyton adored the irrepressible Pinky, and though he liked her, it was no more than he felt for many others and not so much as he had for a few.

“Tea, Mrs. Peyton? Oh, yes, indeed, thank you. Yes, two lemon and three sugar. And toasts, – and cakies, – oh, what good ones! What a tuck! Alma Mater doesn’t feed us like this! I say, Aunt Emily, after you are married, may I come to tea every day? And bring the fellows?”

“I’ll answer that, – you may,” said John Waring.

“And I’ll revise the answer, – you may, with reservations,” Mrs. Bates supplemented. “Now, Pinky, you’re a dear and a sweet, but you can’t annex this house and all its affairs, just because it’s going to be my home.”

“Don’t want to, Auntie. I only want you to annex me. You’ll keep the same cook we have at present, won’t you?”

He looked solicitously at her, over a large slice of toast and jam he was devouring.

“Maybe and maybe not,” Mrs. Peyton spoke up. “Cooks are not always anxious to be kept.”

“At any rate, we’ll have a cook, Pinky, of some sort,” his aunt assured him, and the boy turned to tease Helen Peyton, who was quite willing to be teased.

“I saw your beau today, Helen,” he said.

“Which one?” she asked placidly.

“Is there a crowd? Well, I mean the Tyler person. Him as hangs out at Old Salt’s. And, by the way, Uncle President, – yes, I am a bit previous on both counts, but you’ll soon have the honor of being both President and my uncle, – by the way, I say, Bob Tyler says there’s something in the wind.”

“A straw to show which way it blows, perhaps,” Waring said.

“Perhaps, sir. But it’s blowing. Tyler says there’s a movement on foot to make things hot for you if you take the Presidential chair with your present intentions.”

“My intentions?”

“Yes, sir; about athletics, and sports in general.”

“And what are my so-called intentions?”

“They say, you mean to cut out sport – ”

“Oh, Pinckney, you know better than that!”

“Well, Doctor Waring, some seem to think that’s what you have in mind. If you’d declare your intentions now, – ”

“Look here, Pinky, don’t you think I’ve enough on my mind in the matter of marrying your aunt, without bringing in other matters till that’s settled.”

“Going to be married soon, Uncle Doc?”

“We are. As soon as your aunt will select a pleasant day for the ceremony. Then, that attended to, I can devote my mind and energies to this other subject. And meanwhile, my boy, if you hear talk about it, don’t make any assertions, – rather, try to hush up the subject.”

“I see, – I see, – and I will, Doctor Waring. You don’t want to bother with those things till you’re a settled down married man! I know just how you feel about it. Important business, this getting married, – I daresay, sir.”

“It is, – and so much so, that I’m going to take the bride-elect off right now, for a little private confab. You must understand that we have much to arrange.”

“Run along, – bless you, my children!” Pinky waved a teacup and a sandwich beneficently toward the pair, as they left the room and went off in the direction of the Doctor’s study.

The house was a large one, with a fine front portico upheld by six enormous fluted columns.

One of the most beautiful of New England doorways led into a wide hall. To the right of this was the drawing-room, not so often used and not so well liked as the more cozy living-room, to the left as one entered, and where the tea-drinking group now sat.

Behind these two rooms and hall, ran a cross hall, with an outer door at the end back of the living-room and a deep and wide window seat at the other end, behind the drawing-room.

Further back, beyond the cross hall, on the living-room side, was the dining-room, and beside it, back of the drawing-room was the Doctor’s study. This was the gem of the whole house. The floor had been sunken to give greater ceiling height, for the room was very large, and of fine proportions. It opened on to the cross hall with wide double doors, and a flight of six or seven steps descended to its rug covered floor.

Opposite the double doors was the great fireplace with high over-mantel of carved stone. Each side of the mantel were windows, high and not large. The main daylight came through a great window on the right of the entrance and also from a long French window that opened like doors on the same side.

This French window, giving on a small porch, and the door that opened into the cross hall of the house were the only doors in the great room, save those on cupboards and bookcases.

On the other side of the room, opposite the French window was a row of four small windows looking into the dining-room. But these were high, and could not be seen through by people on the sunken floor of the study.

The whole room was done in Circassian walnut, and represented the ideal abode of a man of letters. The fireside was flanked with two facing davenports, the wide window seat was piled with cushions. The French window-doors were suitably curtained and the high windows were of truly beautiful stained glass.

The spacious table desk was in the middle of the room, and bookcases, both portable and built in, lined the walls. There were a few good busts and valuable pictures, and the whole effect was one of dignity and repose rather than of elaborate grandeur.

The room was renowned, and all Corinth spoke of it with pride. The students felt it a great occasion that brought them within its walls and the faculty loved nothing better than a session therein.

Casual guests were rarely entertained in the study. Only especial visitors or those worthy of its classic atmosphere found welcome there. Mrs. Peyton or Helen were not expected to use it, and Mrs. Bates had already declared she should respect it as the sanctum of Doctor Waring alone.

The two made their way to the window seat, and as he arranged the soft cushions for her, Waring said, "Don't, Emily, ever feel shut out of this room. As I live now, I've not welcomed the Peytons in here, but my wife is a different proposition."

"I still feel an awe of the place, John, but I may get used to it. Anyway, I'll try, and I do appreciate your willingness to have me in here. Then if you want to be alone, you must put me out."

"I'll probably do that, sometimes, dear, for I have to spend many hours alone. You know, I'm not taking the presidency lightly."

"I know it, you conscientious dear. But, on the other hand, don't be too serious about it. You're just the man for the place, just the character for a College President, and if you try too hard to improve or reconstruct yourself, you'll probably spoil your present perfection."

"Well nothing would spoil *your* present perfection, my Emily. I am too greatly blest, – to have the great honor from the college, – and you, too!"

"Are you happy, John? All happy?"

Waring's deep blue eyes fastened themselves on her face. His brown hair showed only a little gray at the temples, his fine face was not touched deeply by Time's lines, and his clear, wholesome skin glowed with health.

If there was an instant's hesitation before his reply came, it was none the less hearty and sincere. "Yes, my darling, all happy. And you?"

"I am happy, if you are," she returned. "But I can never be happy if there is a shadow of any sort on your heart. Is there, John? Tell me, truly."

"You mean regarding this trouble that I hear is brewing for me?"

"Not only that; I mean in any direction."

"Trouble, Emily! With you in my arms! No, – a thousand times no! Trouble and I are strangers, – so long as I have you!"

## CHAPTER II

### MISS MYSTERY ARRIVES

Anyone who has arrived at the railroad station of a New England village, after dark on a very cold winter night, the train late, no one to meet him, and no place engaged for board and lodging, will know the desolation of such a situation.

New England's small railroad stations are much alike, the crowds that alight from the trains are much alike, the people waiting on the platform for the arriving travelers are much alike, but there came into Corinth one night a passenger who was not at all like the fellow passengers on that belated train. It was a train from New York, due in Corinth at five-forty, but owing to the extreme cold weather, and various untoward freezings occasioned thereby, the delays were many and long and the train drew into the station shortly after seven o'clock.

Tired, hungry and impatient, the travelers crowded out of the train and stamped through the snow to the vehicles awaiting them, or footed it to their nearby homes.

The passenger who was unlike the others stepped down from the car platform, and holding her small suitcase firmly, crossed the track and entered the station waiting room. She went to the ticket window but found there no attendant. Impatiently she tapped her little foot on the old board floor but no one appeared.

"Agent," she called out, rapping with her knuckles on the window shelf, "Agent, – where are you?"

"Who's there? What d'y' want?" growled a surly voice, and a head appeared at the ticket window.

"I want somebody to look after me! I'm alone, and I want a porter, and I want a conveyance and I want some information."

"Oh, you do! Well, I can't supply porters nor yet conveyances; but information I may be able to give you."

"Very well then," and a pair of big, dark eyes seemed to pierce his very brain. "Then tell me where I can find the best accommodations in Corinth."

The now roused agent looked more interestedly at the inquirer.

He saw a mere slip of a girl, young, slender, and very alert of manner. Her dark, grave little face was oval, and her eyes had a strange uncanny way of roving quickly about, and coming suddenly back, greatly disconcerting the stolid ticket agent.

This agent was not unused to girls, – a college town is often invaded by hordes of smart young women, pretty girls and gay hoydens. Many Junes he had sold tickets or given information to hundreds of feminine inquirers but none had ever seemed quite like this one.

"Best accommodations?" he repeated stupidly.

"You heard me, then! About when do you propose to reply?"

Still he gazed at her in silence, running over in his mind the various boarding houses, and finding none he thought she'd like.

"There's a rule of the Railroad Company that questions must be answered the same day they're asked," she said, witheringly, and picking up her suitcase she started for the door, feeling that any one she might find would know more than this dummy.

"Wait, – oh, I say, miss, wait a minute."

"I did," she said coolly, proceeding to the door.

"But, – oh, hold on, – try Old Salt Adams, – you couldn't do better."

"Where is it?" she deigned to pause a moment, and he replied quickly:

"He's right outside, – hurry up out, – you can catch him!"

Here was something she could understand, and she hurried up out, just in time to see an old man with long white beard jump into his sleigh and begin to tuck fur robes about him.

“He sprang to his sleigh, – to his team gave a whistle, – ” she quoted to herself, and then cried out, “Hey, there, Santa Claus, give me a lift?”

“You engaged for our house?” the man called back, and as she shook her head, he gathered up his reins.

“Can’t take any one not engaged,” he called back, “Giddap!”

“Wait, – wait! I command you!” The sharp, clear young voice rang out through the cold winter air, and Old Saltonstall Adams paused to listen.

“Ho, ho,” he chuckled, “you command me, do you? Now, I haven’t been commanded for something like fifty years.”

“Oh, don’t stop to fuss,” the girl exclaimed, angrily. “Don’t you see I’m cold, hungry and very uncomfortable? You have a boarding house, – I want board, – now, you take me in. Do you hear?”

“Sure I hear, but, miss, we’ve only so many rooms and they’re all occupied or engaged.”

“Some are engaged, but as yet unoccupied?” The dark eyes challenged him, and Adams mumbled, – “Well, that’s about it.”

“Very well, I will occupy one until the engager comes along. Let me get in. No, I can manage my suitcase myself. You get my trunk, – here’s the check. Or will you send for that tomorrow?”

“Why wait? Might’s well get it now – if so be you’re bound to bide. ’Fraid to wait in the sleigh alone?”

“I’m afraid of nothing,” was the disdainful answer, and the girl pulled the fur robes up around her as she sat in the middle of the back seat.

Shortly, old Salt returned with the trunk on his shoulder, and put it in the front with himself, and they started.

“Don’t try to talk,” he called back to her, as the horses began a rapid trot. “I can’t hear you against this wind.”

“I’ve no intention of talking,” the girl replied, but the man couldn’t hear her. The wind blew fiercely. It was snowing a little, and the drifts sent feathery clouds through the air. The trees, coated with ice from a recent sleet storm, broke off crackling bits of ice as they passed. The girl looked about, at first curiously, and then timidly, as if frightened by what she saw.

It was not a long ride, and they stopped before a large house, showing comfortably lighted windows and a broad front door that swung open even as the girl was getting down from the sleigh.

“For the land sake!” exclaimed a brisk feminine voice, “this ain’t Letty! Who in the earth have you got here?”

“I don’t know,” Old Salt Adams replied, truthfully. “Take her along, mother, and give her a night’s lodging.”

“But where is Letty? Didn’t she come?”

“Now can’t you see she didn’t come? Do you s’pose I left her at the station? Or dumped her out along the road? No – since you will have it, she didn’t come. She *didn’t* come!”

Old Salt drove on toward the barns, and Mrs. Adams bade the girl go into the house.

The landlady followed, and as she saw the strange guest she gazed at her in frank curiosity.

“You want a room, I s’pose,” she began. “But, I’m sorry to say we haven’t one vacant – ”

“Oh, I’ll take Letty’s. She didn’t come, you see, so I can take her room for tonight.”

“Letty wouldn’t like that.”

“But I would. And I’m here and Letty isn’t. Shall we go right up?”

Picking up her small suitcase, the girl started and then stepped back for the woman to lead the way.

“Not quite so fast —*if* you please. What is your name?”

As the landlady’s tone changed to a sterner inflection, the girl likewise grew dignified.

“My name is Anita Austin,” she said, coldly. “I came here because I was told it was the best house in Corinth.”

“Where are you from?”

“New York City.”

“What address?”

“Plaza Hotel.”

By this time the strange dark eyes had done their work. A steady glance from Anita Austin seemed to compel all the world to do her bidding. At any rate, Mrs. Adams took the suitcase, and without a further word conducted the stranger upstairs.

She took her into an attractive bedroom, presumably made ready for the absent Letty.

“This will do,” Miss Austin said, calmly. “Will you send me up a tray of supper? I don’t want much, and I prefer not to come down to dinner.”

“Land sake, dinner’s over long ago. You want some tea, ’n’ bread, ’n’ butter, ’n’ preserves, ’n’ cake?”

“Yes, thank you, that sounds good. Send it in half an hour.”

To her guest Mrs. Adams showed merely a face of acquiescence, but once outside the door, and released from the spell of those eerie eyes, she remarked to herself, “For the land sake!” with great emphasis.

“Well, what do you know about that!” Old Salt Adams cried, when, after she had started him on his supper, his wife related the episode.

“I can’t make her out,” Mrs. Adams said, thoughtfully. “But I don’t like her. And I won’t keep her. Tomorrow, you take her over to Belton’s.”

“Just as you say. But I thought her kinda interesting looking. You can’t say she isn’t that.”

“Maybe so, to some folks. Not to me. And Letty’ll come tomorrow, so that girl’ll have to get out of the room.”

Meanwhile “that girl” was eagerly peering out of her window.

She tried to discern which were the lights of the college buildings, but through the still lightly falling snow, she could see but little, and after a time, she gave up the effort. She drew her head back into the room just as a tap at the door announced her supper.

“Thank you,” she said to the maid who brought it. “Set it on that stand, please. It looks very nice.”

And then, sitting comfortably in an easy chair, robed in warm dressing gown and slippers, Miss Anita Austin devoted a pleasant half hour to the simple but thoroughly satisfactory meal.

This finished, she wrote some letters. Not many, indeed, but few as they were, the midnight hour struck before she sealed the last envelope and wrote the last address.

Then, prepared for bed, she again looked from the window, and gazed long into the night.

“Corinth,” she whispered, “Oh, Corinth, what do you hold for me? What fortune or misfortune will you bring me? What fortune or misfortune shall I bring to others? Oh, Justice, Justice, what crimes are committed in thy name!”

The next morning Anita appeared in the dining-room at the breakfast hour.

Mrs. Adams scanned her sharply, and looked a little disapprovingly at the short, scant skirt and slim, silken legs of her new boarder.

Anita, her dark eyes scanning her hostess with equal sharpness, seemed to express an equal disapproval of the country-cut gingham and huge white apron.

Not at all obtuse, Mrs. Adams sensed this, and her tone was a little more deferential than she had at first intended to make it.

“Will you sit here, please, Miss Austin?” she indicated a chair next herself.

“No, thank you, I’ll sit by my friend,” and the girl slipped into a vacant chair next Saltonstall Adams.

Old Salt gave a furtive glance at his wife, and suppressed a chuckle at her surprise.

“This is Mr. Tyler’s place,” he said to the usurper, “but I expect he’ll let you have it this once.”

“I mean to have it all the time,” and Anita nodded gravely at her host.

“All the time is this one meal only,” crisply put in Mrs. Adams. “I’m sorry, Miss Austin, but we can’t keep you here. I have no vacant room.”

The entrance of some other people gave Anita a chance to speak in an undertone to Mr. Adams, and she said;

“You’ll let me stay till Letty comes, won’t you? I suppose you are boss in your own house.”

As a matter of fact almost any phrase would have described the man better than “boss in his own house,” but the idea tickled his sense of irony, and he chuckled as he replied, “You bet I am! Here you stay – as long as you want to.”

“You’re my friend, then?” and an appealing glance was shot at him from beneath long, curling lashes, that proved the complete undoing of Saltonstall Adams.

“To the death!” he whispered, in mock dramatic manner.

Anita gave a shiver. “What a way to put it!” she cried. “I mean to live forever, sir!”

“Doubtless,” Old Salt returned, placidly. “You’re a freak – aren’t you?”

“That isn’t a very pretty way of expressing it, but I suppose I am,” and a mutinous look passed over the strange little face.

In repose, the face was oval, serene, and regular of feature. But when the girl smiled or spoke or frowned, changes took place, and the mobile countenance grew soft with laughter or hard with scorn.

And scorn was plainly visible when, a moment later, Adams introduced Robert Tyler, a fellow boarder, to Miss Austin.

She gave him first a conventional glance, then, as he dropped into the chair next hers, and said,

“Only too glad to give up my place to a peach,” she turned on him a flashing glance, that, as he expressed it afterward, “wiped him off the face of the earth.”

Nor could he reinstate himself in her good graces. He tried a penitent attitude, bravado, jocularly and indifference, but one and all failed to engage her interest or even attention. She answered his remarks with calm, curt speeches that left him baffled and uncertain whether he wanted to bow down and worship her, or wring her neck.

Old Salt Adams took this all in, his amusement giving way to curiosity and then to wonder. Who was this person, who looked like a young, very young girl, yet who had all the mental powers of an experienced woman? What was she and what her calling?

The other boarders appeared, those nearest Anita were introduced, and most of them considered her merely a pretty, new guest. Her manners were irreproachable, her demeanor quiet and graceful, yet as Adams covertly watched her, he felt as if he were watching an inactive volcano.

The meal over, he detained her a moment in the dining-room.

“Why are you here, Miss Austin?” he said, courteously; “what is your errand in Corinth?”

“I am an artist,” she said, looking at him with her mysterious intent gaze. “Or, perhaps I should say an art student. I’ve been told that there are beautiful bits of winter scenery available for subjects here, and I want to sketch. Please, Mr. Adams, let me stay here until Letty comes.”

A sudden twinkle in her eye startled the old man, and he said quickly, “How do you know she isn’t coming?”

That, in turn, surprised Anita, but she only smiled, and replied, “I saw a telegram handed to Mrs. Adams at breakfast – and then she looked thoughtfully at me, and – oh, well, I just sort of knew it was to say Letty couldn’t come.”

“You witch! You uncanny thing! If I should take you over to Salem, they’d burn you!”

“I’ll ride over on a broomstick some day, and see if they will,” she returned, gleefully.

And then along came Nemesis, in the person of the landlady.

“I’m sorry, Miss Austin,” she began, but the girl interrupted her.

“Please, Mrs. Adams,” she said, pleadingly, “don’t say any thing to make me sorry, too! Now, you want to say you haven’t any room for me – but that isn’t true; so you don’t know what to say to get rid of me. But – why do you want to get rid of me?”

Esther Adams looked at the girl and that look was her undoing.

Such a pathetic face, such pleading eyes, such a wistful curved mouth, the landlady couldn’t resist, and against her will, against her better judgment, she said, “Well, then, stay, you poor little thing. But you must tell me more about yourself. I don’t know who you are.”

“I don’t know, myself,” the strange girl returned. “Do we, any of us know who we are? We go through this world, strangers to each other – don’t we? And also, strangers to ourselves.” Her eyes took on a faraway, mystical look. “If I find out who I am, I’ll let you know.”

Then a dazzling smile broke over her face, they heard a musical ripple of laughter, and she was gone.

They heard her steps, as she ran upstairs to her room, and the two Adamses looked at each other.

“Daffy,” said Mrs. Adams. “A little touched, poor child. I believe she has run away from home or from her keepers. We’ll hear the truth soon. They’ll be looking for her.”

“Perhaps,” said her husband, doubtfully. “But that isn’t the way I size her up. She’s nobody’s fool, that girl. Wish you’d seen her give Bob Tyler his comeuppance!”

“What’d she say?”

“’Twasn’t what she said, so much as the look she gave him! He almost went through the floor. Well, she says she’s a painter of scenery and landscapes. Let her stay a few days, till I size her up.”

“You size her up!” returned his wife, with good-natured contempt. “If she smiles on you or gives you a bit of taffy-talk, you’ll size her up for an angel! I’m not so sure she isn’t quite the opposite!”

Meanwhile the subject of their discussion was arraying herself for a walk. Equipped with storm boots and fur coat, she set out to inspect Corinth. A jaunty fur cap, with one long, red quill feather gave her still more the appearance of an elf or gnome, and many of the Adams house boarders watched the little figure as she set forth to brave the icy streets.

Apparently she had no fixed plan of procedure, for at each corner, she looked about, and chose her course at random. The snow had ceased during the night, and it was very cold, with a clear sunshiny frostiness in the air that made the olive cheeks red and glowing.

Reaching a bridge, she paused and stood looking over the slight railing into the frozen ravine below.

Long she stood, until passers-by began to stare at her. She was unaware of this, absorbed in her thoughts and oblivious to all about her.

Pinckney Payne, coming along, saw her, and, as he would have expressed it, fell for her at once.

“Don’t do it, sister!” he said, pausing beside her. “Don’t end your young life on this glorious day! Suicide is a mess, at best. Take my advice and cut it out!”

She turned, ready to freeze him with a glance more icy even than the landscape, but his frank, roguish smile disarmed her.

“Freshman?” she said, patronizingly, but it didn’t abash him.

“Yep. Pinckney Payne, if you must know. Commonly called Pinky.”

“I don’t wonder,” and she noticed his red cheeks. “Well, now that you’re properly introduced, tell me some of the buildings. What’s that one?”

“Dormitories. And that,” pointing, “is the church.”

“Really! And that beautiful colonnade one?”

“That’s Doctor Waring’s home. Him as is going to be next Prexy.”

“And that? And that?”

He replied to all her questions, and kept his eyes fastened on her bewitching face. Never had Pinky seen a girl just like this. She looked so young, so merry, and yet her restless, roving eyes seemed full of hidden fire and tempestuous excitement.

“Where you from?” he said, abruptly. “Where you staying?”

“At Mrs. Adams,” she returned, “is it a good house?”

“Best in town. Awful hard to get into. Always full up. Relative of hers?”

“No, just a boarder. I chanced to get a room some one else engaged and couldn’t use.”

“You’re lucky. Met Bob Tyler?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t like him! I see that. Met Gordon Lockwood?”

“No; who’s he?”

“He’s Doctor Waring’s secretary, but he’s mighty worthwhile on his own account. I say, may I come to see you?”

“Thank you, no. I’m not receiving callers – yet.”

“Well, you will be soon – because I’m coming. I say my aunt lives next door to Adams’. May I bring her to call on you?”

“Not yet, please. I’m not settled.”

“Soon’s you say the word, then. My aunt is Mrs. Bates, and she’s a love. She’s going to marry Doctor Waring – so you see we’re the right sort of people.”

“There are no right sort of people,” said the girl, and, turning, she walked away.

## CHAPTER III

### THIRTEEN BUTTONS

Apparently Miss Austin's statement that there were no right sort of people was her own belief, for she made no friends at the Adams house. Nor was this the fault of her fellow-boarders. They were more than willing to be friendly, but their overtures were invariably ignored.

Not rudely, for Miss Austin seemed to be a girl of culture and her manners were correct, but, as one persistent matron expressed it, "you can't get anywhere with her."

She talked to no one at the table, merely answering a direct question if put to her. She retained the seat next Old Salt, seeming to rely on him to protect her from the advances of the others. Not that she needed protection, exactly, for Miss Anita Austin was evidently quite able to take care of herself.

But she was a mystery – and mysteries provoke inquiry.

The house was not a large one, and the two-score boarders, though they would have denied an imputation of curiosity, were exceedingly interested in learning the facts about Miss Mystery, as they had come to call her.

Mrs. Adams was one of the most eager of all to know the truth, but, as he did on rare occasions, Old Salt Adams had set down his foot that the girl was not to be annoyed.

"I don't know who she is or where she hails from," he told his wife, "but as long as she stays here, she's not to be pestered by a lot of gossiping old hens. When she does anything you don't like, send her away; but so long's she's under my roof, she's got to be let alone."

And let alone she was – not so much because of Adams' dictum as because "pestering" did little good.

The girl had a disconcerting way of looking an inquisitor straight in the eyes, and then, with a monosyllabic reply, turning and walking off as if the other did not exist.

"Why," said Miss Bascom, aggrievedly relating her experience, "I just said, politely, 'Are you from New York or where, Miss Austin?' and she turned those big, black eyes on me, and said, 'Where.' Then she turned her back and looked out of the window, as if she had wiped me off the face of the earth!"

"She's too young to act like that," opined Mrs. Welby.

"Oh, she isn't so terribly young," Miss Bascom returned. "She's too experienced to be so very young."

"How do you know she's experienced? What makes you say that?"

"Why," Miss Bascom hesitated for words, "she's – sort of sophisticated – you can see that from her looks. I mean when anything is discussed at the table, she doesn't say a word, but you can tell from her face that she knows all about it – I mean a matter of general interest, don't you know. I don't mean local matters."

"She's an intelligent girl, I know, but that doesn't make her out old. I don't believe she's twenty."

"Oh, she is! Why, she's twenty-five or twenty-seven!"

"Never in the world! I'm going to ask her."

"Ask her!" Miss Bascom laughed. "You'll get well snubbed if you do."

But this prophecy only served to egg Mrs. Welby on, and she took the first occasion to carry out her promise.

She met Anita in the hall, as the girl was about to go out, and smilingly detained her.

"Why so aloof, my dear," she said, playfully. "You rarely give us a chance to entertain you."

As Mrs. Welby was between Anita and the door, the girl was forced to pause. She looked the older woman over, with an appraising glance that was not rude, but merely disinterested.

“No?” she said, with a curious rising inflection, that somehow seemed meant to close the incident.

But Mrs. Welby was not so easily baffled.

“No,” she repeated, smilingly. “And we want to know you better. You’re too young and too pretty not to be a general favorite amongst us. How old are you, my dear child?”

“Just a hundred,” and Miss Austin’s dark eyes were so grave, and seemed to hold such a world of wisdom and experience that Mrs. Welby almost jumped.

Too amazed to reply, she even let the girl get past her, and out of the street door, before she recovered her poise.

“She’s uncanny,” Mrs. Welby declared, when telling Miss Bascom of the interview. “I give you my word, when she said that, she looked a hundred!”

“Looked a hundred! What do you mean?”

“Just that. Her eyes seemed to hold all there is of knowledge, yes – and of evil – ”

“Evil! My goodness!” Miss Bascom rolled this suggestion like a sweet morsel under her tongue.

“Oh – I don’t say there’s anything wrong about the girl – ”

“Well! If her eyes showed depths of evil, I should say there *was* something wrong!”

The episode was repeated from one to another of the exclusive *clientele* of the Adams house, until, by exaggeration and imagination it grew into quite a respectable arraignment of Miss Mystery, and branded her as a doubtful character if not a dangerous one.

Before Miss Austin had been in the house a week, she had definitely settled her status from her own point of view.

Uniformly correct and courteous of manner, she rarely spoke, save when necessary. It was as if she had declared, “I will not talk. If this be mystery, make the most of it.”

Old Salt, apparently, backed her up in this determination, and allowed her to sit next him at table, without addressing her at all.

More, he often took it upon himself to answer a remark or question meant for her and for this he sometimes received a fleeting glance, or a ghost of a smile of approval and appreciation.

But all this was superficial. The Adamses, between themselves, decided that Miss Austin was more deeply mysterious than was shown by her disinclination to make friends. They concluded she was transacting important business of some sort, and that her sketching of the winter scenery, which she did every clear day, was merely a blind.

Though Mrs. Adams resented this, and urged her husband to send the girl packing, Old Salt demurred.

“She’s done no harm as yet,” he said. “She’s a mystery, but not a wrong one, ’s far’s I can make out. Let her alone, mother. I’ve got my eye on her.”

“I’ve got my two eyes on her, and I can see more’n you can. Why, Salt, that girl don’t hardly sleep at all. Night after night, she sits up looking out of the window, over toward the college buildings – ”

“How do you know?”

“I go and listen at her door,” Mrs. Adams admitted, without embarrassment. “I want to know what she’s up to.”

“You can’t see her.”

“No, but I hear her moving around restlessly, and putting the window up and down – and Miss Bascom – her room’s cornerways on the ell, she says she sees her looking out the window late at night ’most every night.”

“Miss Bascom’s a meddling old maid, and I’d put her out of this house before I would the little girl.”

“Of course *you* would! You’re all set up because she makes so much of you – ”

“Oh, come now, Esther, you can’t say that child makes much of me! I wish she would. I’ve taken a fancy to her.”

“Yes, because she’s pretty – in a gipsy, witch-like fashion. What men see in a pair of big black eyes, and a dark, sallow face, I don’t know!”

“Not sallow,” Old Salt said, reflectively; “olive, rather – but not sallow.”

“Oh you!” exclaimed Mrs. Adams, and with that cryptic remark the subject was dropped.

Gordon Lockwood, secretary of John Waring, had a room at the Adams house. But as he took no meals there save his breakfasts, and as he ate those early, he had not yet met Anita Austin.

But one Saturday morning, he chanced to be late, and the two sat at table together.

An astute reader of humanity, Lockwood at once became interested in the girl, and realized that to win her attention he must not be eager or insistent.

He spoke only one or two of the merest commonplaces, until almost at the close of the meal, he said:

“Can I do anything for you, Miss Austin? If you would care to hear any of the College lectures, I can arrange it.”

“Who are the speakers?”

She turned her eyes fully upon him, and Gordon Lockwood marveled at their depth and beauty.

“Tonight,” he replied, “Doctor Waring is to lecture on Egyptian Archaeology. Are you interested in that?”

“Yes,” she said, “very much so. I’d like to go.”

“You certainly may, then. Just use this card.”

He took a card from his pocket, scribbled a line across it, and gave it to her. Without another word, he finished his breakfast, and with a mere courteous bow, he left the room.

Miss Austin’s face took on a more scrutable look than ever.

The card still in her hand, she went up to her room. Unheeding the maid, who was at her duties there, the girl threw herself into a big chair and sat staring at the card.

“The Egyptian Temples,” she said to herself, “Doctor John Waring.”

The maid looked at her curiously as she murmured the words half aloud, but Miss Austin paid no heed.

“Go on with your work, Nora, don’t mind me,” she said, at last, as the chambermaid paused inquiringly in front of her. “I don’t mind your being here until you finish what you have to do. And I wish you’d bring me a Corinth paper, please? There is one, isn’t there?”

“Oh, yes, ma’am. Twice a week.”

Nora disappeared and returned with a paper.

“Mr. Adams says you may have this to keep. It’s the newest one.”

The girl took it and turned to find the College announcements. The Egyptian Lecture was mentioned, and in another column was a short article regarding Doctor Waring and a picture of him.

Long the girl looked at the picture, and when the maid, her tasks completed, left the room, she noticed Miss Austin still staring at the fine face of the President-elect of the University of Corinth.

After a time, she reached for a pair of scissors, and cut out the portrait and the article which it illustrated.

She put the clipping in a portfolio, which she then locked in her trunk, and the picture she placed on her dresser.

That night she went to the lecture. She went alone, for Gordon Lockwood did not reappear and no one else knew of her going.

“Shall I have a key, or will you be up?” she asked of Mrs. Adams, as she left the house.

“Oh, we’ll be up.” The round, shrewd eyes looked at her kindly. “You’re lucky to get a ticket. Doctor Waring’s lectures are crowded.”

“Good night,” said Miss Austin, and went away.

The lecture room was partly filled when she arrived, and her ticket entitled her to a seat near the front.

Being seated, she fell into a brown study, or, at least, sat motionless and apparently in deep thought.

Gordon Lockwood, already there, saw her come in, and after she was in her place, he quietly arose and went across the room, taking a seat directly behind her.

Of this she was quite unaware, and the student of human nature gave himself up to a scrutiny of the stranger.

He saw a little head, its mass of dark, almost black hair surmounted by a small turban shaped hat, of taupe colored velvet, with a curly ostrich tip nestling over one ear.

Not that her ears were visible, for Miss Austin was smartly groomed and her whole effect modish.

She had removed her coat, which she held in her lap. Her frock was taupe colored, of a soft woolen material, ornamented with many small buttons. These tiny buttons formed two rows down her back, from either shoulder to the waist line, and they also formed a border round the sailor collar.

They were, perhaps, Lockwood decided, little balls, rather than buttons, and he idly counted them as he sat watching her.

He hoped she would turn her head a trifle, but she sat as motionless as a human being may.

He marveled at her stillness, and impatiently waited for the lecture to begin that he might note her interest.

At last Doctor Waring appeared on the platform, and as the applause resounded all over the room, Lockwood was almost startled to observe Miss Austin's actions.

She clasped her hands together as if she had received a sudden shock. She – if it hadn't seemed too absurd, – he would have said that she trembled. At any rate she was a little agitated, and it was with an effort that she preserved her calm. No one else noticed her, and Lockwood would not have done so, save for his close watching.

Throughout the lecture, Miss Austin's gaze seemed never to leave the face of the speaker, and Lockwood marveled that Waring himself was not drawn to notice her.

But Waring's calm gaze, though it traveled over the audience, never rested definitely on any one face, and Lockwood concluded he recognized nobody.

"Miss Mystery!" Gordon Lockwood said to himself. "I wonder who and what you are. Probably a complex nature, psychic and imaginative. You think it interesting to come up here and pretend to be a mystery. But you're too young and too innocent to be – I'm not so sure of the innocent, though, – and as to youth, – well, I don't believe you're much older than you look any way. And you're confoundedly pretty – beautiful, rather. You've too much in your face to call it merely pretty. I've never seen such possibilities of character. You're either a deep one or your looks belie you."

Lockwood heard no word of the lecture, nor did he wish to; he had helped in the writing of it, and almost knew it by heart anyway. But he was really intrigued by this mysterious girl, and he determined to get to know her.

He had been told, of course, of the futile attempts of the other boarders to make friends with her, but he had faith in his own attractiveness and in his methods of procedure.

Pinky Payne, too, had told of the interview he had on the bridge. His account of the girl's beauty and charm had first roused Lockwood's interest, and now he was making a study of the whole situation.

Idly he counted the buttons again. There were thirteen across the collar. The vertical rows he could not be sure of as the back of the seat cut off their view.

"Thirteen," he mused; "an unlucky number. And the poor child looks unlucky. There's a sadness in her eyes that must mean something. Yet there's more than sadness, – there's a hint of cruelty, – a possibility of desperate deeds."

And then Lockwood laughed at himself. To romance thus about a girl to whom he had not said half a dozen sentences in his life! Yet he knew he was not mistaken. All that he had read in

Anita Austin's face, he was sure was there. He knew physiognomy, and rarely, if ever, was mistaken in his reading thereof.

After the lecture was over, Miss Austin went home as quickly as possible.

Lockwood would have liked to escort her, but he had to remain to report to Doctor Waring, who might have some orders for him.

There were none, however, and after a short interview with his employer, Gordon Lockwood went home.

As he went softly upstairs to his room in the Adams house, he passed the door of what he knew to be Miss Austin's room. He fancied he heard a stifled sob come from behind that closed door, and instinctively paused to listen a moment.

Yes, he was not mistaken. Another sob followed, quickly suppressed, but he could have no doubt the girl was crying.

For a moment Lockwood was tempted to go back and ask Mrs. Adams to come and tap at the girl's door.

Then he realized that it was not his affair. If the girl was in sorrow or if she wanted to cry for any reason, it was not his place to send someone to intrude upon her. He went on to his own room, but he sat up for a long time thinking over the strange young woman in the house.

He remembered that she had paid undeviating attention to the lecture, quite evidently following the speaker with attention and interest. He remembered every detail of her appearance, her pretty dark hair showing beneath her little velvet toque, – the absurd buttons on the back of her frock.

"That will do, Gordon, old man," he told himself at last. Better let her alone. She's a siren all right, but you know nothing about her, and you've no reason to try to learn more.

And then he heard voices in the hall. Low of tone, but angry of inflection.

"She threw it away!" Miss Austin was saying; "I tell you she threw it away!"

"There, there," came Mrs. Adams' placating voice, "what if she did? It was only a newspaper scrap. She didn't know it was of any value."

"But I want it! Nora has no business to throw away my things! She had no reason to touch it; it was on the dresser – standing up against the mirror frame. What do you suppose she did with it?"

"Never mind it tonight. Tomorrow we will ask her. She's gone to bed."

"But I'm afraid she destroyed it!"

"Probably she did. Don't take on so. What paper was it?"

"The Corinth Gazette."

"The new one?"

"I don't know. The one she brought me this afternoon."

"Well, if she has thrown it away, you can get another copy. What was in it that you want so much?"

"Oh, – nothing special."

"Yes, it was." Mrs. Adams' curiosity was aroused now. "Come, tell me what it was."

"Well, it was only a picture of Doctor Waring, the man who lectured tonight."

"Such a fuss about that! My goodness! Why, you can get a picture of him anywhere."

"But I want it now."

An obstinate note rang in the young voice. Perhaps Miss Austin spoke louder than she meant to, but at any rate, Lockwood heard most of the conversation, and he now opened his door, and said:

"May I offer a photograph? Would you care to have this, Miss Austin?"

The girl looked at him with a white, angry face.

"How dare you!" she cried; "how dare you eavesdrop and listen to a conversation not meant for your ears? Don't speak to me!"

She drew up her slender figure and looked like a wrathful pixie defying a giant. For Lockwood was a big man, and loomed far above the slight, dainty figure of Miss Mystery.

He smiled good-naturedly as he said, “Now don’t get wrathful. I don’t mean any harm. But you wanted a picture of Doctor Waring, and I’ve several of them. You see, I’m his secretary.”

“Oh, – are you! His private secretary?”

“Yes – his confidential one, – though he has few confidences. He’s a public man and his life is an open book.”

“Oh, it is!” The girl had recovered her poise, and with it her ability to be sarcastic. “Known to all men, I suppose?”

“Known to all men,” repeated Lockwood, thinking far more of the girl he was speaking to than of what he was saying.

For, again he had fallen under the spell of her strange personality. He watched her, fascinated, as she reached out for the picture and almost snatched at it in her eagerness.

Mrs. Adams yawned behind her plump hand.

“Now you’ve got your picture, go to bed, child,” she said with a kind, motherly smile. “I’ll come in and unhook you, shall I?”

Obediently, and without a word of good night to Lockwood, Anita turned and went into her room, followed by Mrs. Adams. The good lady offered no disinterested service. She wanted to know why Miss Austin wanted that picture so much. But she didn’t find out. After being of such help as she could, the landlady found herself pleasantly but definitely dismissed. Outside the door, however, she turned and reopened it. Miss Mystery, unnoticing the intruder, was covering the photograph with many and passionate kisses.

## CHAPTER IV

### A BROKEN TEACUP

“I’ll tell her you’re here, but I’m noways sure she’ll see you.”

Mrs. Adams stood, her hand on the doorknob, as she looked doubtfully at Emily Bates and her nephew.

“Why not?” asked Mrs. Bates, in astonishment, and Pinky echoed, “Why not, Mrs. Adams?”

“She’s queer.” Mrs. Adams came back into the room, closed the door, and spoke softly. “That’s what she is, Mrs. Bates, queer. I can’t make her out. She’s been here more’n a week now, and I do say she gets queerer every day. Won’t make friends with anybody, – won’t speak at all at the table, – never comes and sits with us of an afternoon or evening, – just keeps to herself. Now, that ain’t natural for a young girl.”

“How old is she?”

“Nobody knows. She looks like nineteen or twenty, but she has the ways of a woman of forty, – as far’s having her own way’s concerned. Then again, she’ll pet the cat or smile up at Mr. Adams like a child. I can’t make her out at all. The boarders are all fearfully curious – that’s one reason I take her part. They’re a snoopy lot, and I make them let her alone.”

“You like her, then?”

“You can’t help liking her, – yet she is exasperating. You ask her a question, and she stares at you and walks off. Not really rude, – but just as if you weren’t there! Well, I’ll tell her you’re here, anyway.”

It was only by his extraordinary powers of persuasion that Pinky Payne had won his aunt’s consent to make this call, and, being Sunday afternoon, the recognized at-home day in Corinth, they had gone to the Adams house unannounced, and asked for Miss Austin.

Upstairs, Mrs. Adams tapped at the girl’s door.

It was opened slowly, – it would seem, grudgingly, – and Anita looked out inquiringly.

“Callers for you, Miss Austin,” the landlady said, cheerily.

“For me? I know no one.”

“Oh, now, you come on down. It’s Mrs. Bates, and her nephew, Pinky Payne. They’re our best people – ”

“What makes you think I want to see your best people?”

“I don’t say you do, but they want to see you, – and – oh, pshaw, now, be a little sociable. It won’t hurt you.”

“Please say to Mrs. Bates that I have no desire to form new acquaintances, and I beg to be excused from appearing.”

“But do you know who she is? She’s the lady that’s going to marry Doctor Waring, the new President. And Pinckney Payne, her cousin, is a mighty nice boy.”

Mrs. Adams thought she detected an expression of wavering on the girl’s face, and she followed up her advantage.

“Yes, he’s an awfully nice chap and just about your age, I should judge.”

“I’ll go down,” said Miss Austin, briefly, and Mrs. Adams indulged in a sly smile of satisfaction.

“It’s Pinky that fetched her,” she thought to herself. “Young folks are young folks, the world over.”

Triumphantly, Mrs. Adams ushered Anita into the small parlor.

“Mrs. Bates,” she said, “and Mr. Payne, – Miss Austin.”

Then she left them, for Esther Adams had strict notions of her duties as a boarding-house landlady.

“Mrs. Bates?” Anita said, going to her and taking her hand.

“Yes, Miss Austin, – I am very glad to know you.”

But the words ceased suddenly as Emily Bates looked into the girl’s eyes. Such a depth of sorrow was there, such unmistakable tragedy and a hint of fear. What could it all mean? Surely this was a strange girl.

“We have never met before, have we?” Mrs. Bates said, – almost involuntarily, for the girl’s gaze was too intent to be given to a stranger.

“No,” Anita said, recovering her poise steadily but slowly, – “not that I remember.”

“We have,” burst forth the irrepressible Pinky. “I say, Miss Austin, please realize that I’m here as well as my more celebrated aunt! Don’t you remember the morning I met you on the bridge, – and you were just about to throw yourself over the parapet?”

“Oh, no, I wasn’t,” and a delightful smile lighted the dark little face. The lips were very scarlet, but it was unmistakably Nature’s own red, and as they parted over even and pearly teeth, the smile transformed Miss Austin into a real beauty.

It disappeared quickly, however, and Pinky Payne thenceforward made it his earnest endeavor to bring it back as often as possible.

“Of course you weren’t,” agreed Mrs. Bates, “don’t pay any attention to that foolish boy.”

“I’m a very nice boy, if I am foolish,” Pinky declared, but Miss Austin vaguely ignored him, and kept her intent gaze fixed on Emily Bates.

“We thought perhaps you would go with us over to Doctor Waring’s for tea,” Mrs. Bates said, after an interval of aimless chat. “It would, I am sure be a pleasant experience for you. Wouldn’t you like it?”

“Doctor Waring’s?” repeated Anita, her voice low and tense, as if the idea was of more importance than it seemed.

“Yes; I may take you, for the Doctor is my fiance, – we are to be married next month.”

“No!” cried the girl, with such a sharp intonation that Mrs. Bates was startled.

“Sure they are,” put in Pinky, anxious to cover up any eccentricity on the part of this girl in whom he took an increasing interest. “They’re as blissful as two young turtle-doves. Come on, Miss Austin, let’s go over there. It’s a duck of a house to go to, and jolly good people there. The view from the study window is worth going miles to see. You’re an artist, – yes?”

“I sketch some,” was the brief reply.

“All right; if you can find a prettier spot to sketch on this terrestrial globe than the picture by the Waring study window, I’ll buy it for you! Toddle up and get your hat.”

His gay good nature was infectious and Anita smiled again as she went for her hat and coat.

The walk was but a short one, and when they entered the Waring home they found a cheery group having tea in the pleasant living room.

Doctor Waring was not present and Mrs. Peyton was pouring tea, while Helen and Robert Tyler served it. The capable Ito had always Sunday afternoon for his holiday, and while Nogi, the Japanese second man, was willing enough, his training was incomplete, and his blunders frequent. He was a new servant, and though old Ito had hopes of educating him, Mrs. Peyton was doubtful about it. However, she thought, soon the responsibilities of the Waring menage would be hers no longer, and she resolved to get along with the inexperienced Nogi while she remained.

Mrs. Peyton was very regretful at the coming change of affairs.

She had looked upon John Waring as a confirmed bachelor, and had not expected he would ever marry. Now, she declared, he was marrying only because he thought it wiser for a College President to have a wife as a part of his domestic outfit.

Helen disagreed with her mother about this. She said Doctor Waring had begun to take a personal interest in the attractive Mrs. Bates before he had any idea of becoming President of the University.

But it didn't matter. The wedding was imminent, and Mrs. Peyton had received due notice that her services would be no longer needed.

It was a blow to her, and it had made her depressed and disconsolate. Also, a little resentful, even spiteful toward Emily Bates.

The housekeeper greeted Miss Austin with a cold smile, and then disregarded her utterly.

Helen was frankly curious, and met the newcomer with full intention of finding out all about her.

For Helen Peyton had heard of Miss Mystery from her friend and admirer, Robert Tyler, who, however, did not report that the girl had snubbed him more than once.

One or two other guests were present and, having been told of Mrs. Bates' arrival Doctor Waring and his secretary came from the study and joined the others at tea.

With a welcoming smile, John Waring greeted his fiancée, and then Mrs. Bates turned to the girl she had brought.

"Miss Austin," she said, "let me present Doctor Waring. John, – Miss Anita Austin."

At that very moment Helen Peyton offered Waring a cup of tea, and he was in the act of taking it from her hand when Mrs. Bates made the introduction.

The cup and saucer fell to the floor with a crash, and those nearest saw the Doctor's face blanch suddenly white, and his hand clench on a nearby chair.

But with a sudden, desperate effort he pulled himself together, and gave a little laugh, as he directed Nogi to remove the wrecked teacup.

"Pick up the four corners, and carry it all off at once," he ordered, pointing to the small rug on which the cup had fallen, and Nogi, a little clumsily, obeyed.

"Pardon the awkwardness, Miss Austin," he said, turning to smile at the girl, but even as he did so, his voice trembled, and he turned hastily away.

"What is it, John?" asked Emily Bates, going to his side. "Are you ill?"

"No, – no, dear; it's – it's all right. That foolish teacup upset my nerves. I'll go off by myself for a few moments."

Somewhat abruptly, he left the room and went back to his study.

Listening intently, Mrs. Bates heard him lock the door on the inside.

"I'm sorry," she said, turning to Anita, "but I know you'll forgive Doctor Waring. He is under so much strain at present, and a foolish accident, like the broken teacup, is enough to give him a nervous shock."

"I know," said the girl, sympathetically. "He must be very busy and absorbed."

She spoke, as she often did, in a perfunctory way, as if not interested in what she was saying. Her glance wandered and she bit her red lower lip, as if nervous herself. Yet she was exceedingly quiet and calm of demeanor, and her graceful attitudes betokened only a courteous if disinterested guest.

Gordon Lockwood immediately followed his chief and tapped at the locked study door.

"All right, Lockwood," Waring recognized the knock. "I don't want you now. I'll reappear shortly. Go back to the tea room."

Willingly, Lockwood went back, hoping to have a chance for conversation with Miss Mystery.

She was chatting gayly with Helen Peyton, Pinky and Mrs. Tyler.

To Lockwood's surprise, Miss Austin was really gay and merry and quite held her own in the chaff and repartee.

Yet as Lockwood noted her more closely, his quick perception told him her gayety was forced.

The secretary's ability to read human nature was almost uncanny, and he truly believed the girl was making merry only by reason of her firm determination to do so.

Why? He wondered.

Gordon Lockwood was a rare type of man. He was possessed of the most impassive face, the most immobile countenance imaginable. He never allowed himself to show the slightest excitement or even interest. This habit, acquired purposely at first, had grown upon him until it was second

nature. He would not admit anything could move him, could stir his poise or disturb his equanimity. He heard the most gratifying or the most exasperating news with equal attention and equal lack of surprise or enthusiasm.

Yet, though this may sound unattractive, so great was Lockwood's personality, so responsive and receptive his real nature beneath his outer calm, that all who really knew him liked him and trusted him.

Waring depended on him in every respect. He was more than a secretary to his employer. He was counselor and friend as well.

And Waring appreciated this, and rated Lockwood high in his esteem and affection.

Of course, with his insight, Gordon Lockwood could not be blind to the fact that both Mrs. Peyton and her daughter would be pleased if he could fall a victim to the charms of the fair Helen. Nor could he evade the conviction that Mrs. Peyton herself had entertained hopes of becoming mistress of the Waring home, until the advent of Emily Bates had spoiled her chances.

But these things were merely self-evident facts, and affected in no way the two men concerned.

The Peytons were treated with pleasant regard for both, and that ended the matter so far as they were concerned.

The subject had never been alluded to by Waring or Lockwood, but each understood, and when the Doctor's marriage took place, that would automatically end the Peytons' incumbency.

And now, Gordon Lockwood smiled patronizingly at himself, as he was forced to admit an unreasonable, inexplicable interest in a slip of a girl with a dark, eerie little face and a manner grave and gay to extremes.

For Anita was positively laughing at some foolishness of Pinky Payne's. Still, Lockwood concluded, watching her narrowly, yet unobserved, she was laughing immoderately. She was laughing for some reason other than merriment. It verged on hysterical, he decided, and wondered why.

He joined the group of young people, and in his quiet but effective way, he said:

"You've had enough foolery for the moment, Miss Austin, – come and talk to me."

And to the girl's amazement, he took her hand and led her to a davenport on the other side of the room.

"There," he said, as he arranged a pillow or two, "is that right?"

"Yes," she said, and lapsed into silence.

She sat, looking off into vacancy, and Lockwood studied her. Then he said, softly:

"It's too bad, isn't it?"

"Yes," Anita sighed, and then suddenly; "what do you mean? What's too bad?"

"Whatever it is that troubles you." The deep blue eyes met her own, but there was no sign of response or acquiescence on the girl's face.

"Good-by," she said, rising quickly, "I must go."

"Oh, no, – don't go," cried Pinky, overhearing. "Why, you've only just come."

"Yes, I must go," said Miss Mystery, decidedly. "Good afternoon, Mrs. Bates, and thank you for bringing me. Good afternoon, Mrs. Peyton."

Including all the others in a general bow of farewell, the strange girl went to the front door, and paused for the attendant Nogi to open it.

Door-tending the assistant butler understood, and he punctiliously waited until Miss Austin had buttoned her gloves and had given an adjusting pat to her veil, after a fleeting glance in the hall mirror.

Then he opened the door with an obsequious air, and closed it behind her departing figure.

But it was immediately flung open again by Pinky Payne, who ran through it and after the girl.

"Wait a minute, Miss Austin. How fast you walk! I'm going home with you."

"Please not," she said, indifferently, scarcely glancing at him.

"Yep. Gotto. Getting near dusk, and you might be kidnapped. Needn't talk if you don't want to."

"I never want to talk!" was the surprising and crisply spoken retort.

“Well, didn’t I say you needn’t! Don’t get wrathy – don’t ’ee, don’t ’ee – now, – as my old Scotch nurse used to say.”

But Miss Mystery gave him no look, although she allowed him to fall into step beside her, and the two walked rapidly along.

“How’d you like the looks of the Doctor?” Pinky asked, hoping to induce conversation.

“I scarcely saw him.”

“Oh, you saw him, – though you had small chance to get to know him. Perfect old brick, but a little on edge of late. Approaching matrimony, I suppose. Did you notice his ruby stickpin?”

“Yes; it didn’t seem to suit him at all.”

“No; he’s a conservative dresser. But that pin, – it’s a famous gem, – was given him by his own class, – I mean his graduating class, but long after they graduated, and he had to promise to wear it once a week, so he usually gets into it on Sundays. It’s a corking stone!”

“Yes,” said Miss Austin.

On reaching the Adams house, the girl said a quick good-by, and Pinky Payne found himself at liberty to go in and see the other members of the household, or to go home, for Miss Austin disappeared into the hall and up the staircase with the rapidity of a dissolving view.

Young Payne turned away and strolled slowly back to the Waring home, wondering what it was about the disagreeable young woman that made him pay any attention to her at all.

He found her the topic of discussion when he arrived.

“Of all rude people,” Mrs. Peyton declared, “she was certainly the worst!”

“She was!” Helen agreed. “I couldn’t make her out at all. And I don’t call her pretty, either.”

“I do,” observed Emily Bates. “I call her very pretty, – and possessed of great charm.”

“Charm!” scoffed Helen; “I can’t see it.”

“She isn’t rude,” Pinky defended the absent. “I’m sure, Mrs. Peyton, she made her adieux most politely. Why should she have stayed longer? She didn’t know any of us, – and, perhaps she doesn’t like any of us.”

“That’s it,” Gordon Lockwood stated. “She doesn’t like us, – I’m sure of that. Well, why should she, if she doesn’t want to?”

“Why shouldn’t she?” countered Tyler. “She’s so terribly superior, – I can’t bear her. She acts as if she owned the earth, yet nobody knows who she is, or anything about her.”

“Are we entitled to?” asked Lockwood. “Why should we inquire into her identity or history further than she chooses to enlighten us?”

“Where is Miss Austin?” asked Doctor Waring, returning, quite composed and calm.

“She went home,” informed Mrs. Bates. “Are you all right, John?”

“Oh, yes, dear. I wasn’t ill, or anything like that. The awkward accident touched my nerves, and I wanted to run away and hide.”

He smiled whimsically, looking like a naughty schoolboy, and Emily Bates took his hand and drew him down to a seat beside her.

“What made you drop it, John?” she said, with a direct look into his eyes.

He hesitated a moment, and his own glance wandered, then he said, “I don’t know, Emily; I suppose it was a sudden physical contraction of the muscles of my hand – and I couldn’t control it.”

Mrs. Bates didn’t look satisfied, but she did not pursue the subject. Then the discussion of Anita was resumed.

“How did you like her looks, Doctor Waring?” Helen Peyton asked.

“I scarcely saw her,” was the quiet reply. “Did you all admire her?”

“Some of us did.” Mrs. Bates answered; “I do, for one. Did you ever see her before, John?”

Doctor Waring stared at the question.

“Never,” he declared. “How could I have done so?”

“I don’t know, I’m sure,” Mrs. Bates laughed. “I just had a sort of an impression – ”

“No, dear, I never saw the girl before in my life,” Waring reasserted.

“And you need never want to see her again,” Robert Tyler informed him. “She’s sulky, silly and supercilious. She’s a mystery, they say, but I say she merely wants to be thought a mystery to make a little sensation. I can’t abide that sort.”

Helen Peyton heard this with undisguised satisfaction, for she had quite enough girls in her life to be jealous and envious of, without adding another to the list. Also, she especially wanted to retain the admiration of Robert Tyler, and was glad to know it was not newly endangered.

“Miss Austin is very beautiful,” Gordon Lockwood declared, in his usual way of summing up a discussion and announcing his own opinion as final. “Also, she is a mystery. I live in the same boarding house – ”

“So do I,” put in Tyler, “and she snubs us both.”

“She hasn’t snubbed me,” said Lockwood, simply.

“Never mind, Oscar, she will!” returned Tyler, and then laughed immoderately at his own would-be wit.

## CHAPTER V

### THE TRAGEDY

That same Sunday evening the Waring household dined alone. Oftener than not there were guests, but tonight there were only the two Peytons, Lockwood and John Waring himself.

Ito, the butler, had holiday Sunday afternoon and evening, and Nogi, the second and less experienced man, was trying his best to satisfy the exactions of Mrs. Peyton as to his service at table.

Helen Peyton was in a talkative mood and commented volubly on the caller of the afternoon, Miss Austin.

She met little response, for her mother was absorbed in the training of the Japanese, and the two men seemed indisposed to pursue the subject.

“Don’t you think she’s odd looking?” Helen asked, of Doctor Waring.

“Odd looking,” he repeated; “I don’t know. I didn’t notice her especially. She seemed to me a rather distinguished type.”

“Distinguished is the word,” agreed Lockwood. “What about the lecture tomorrow night, Doctor? Will Fessenden take care of it?”

“No; I must lecture myself tomorrow night. I’m sorry, for I’m busy with that book revision. However, I’ll look up some data this evening, and I shall be ready for it.”

“Of course you will,” laughed Mrs. Peyton. “You were never caught unready for anything!”

“But it means some work,” Waring added, as he rose from the table.

He went into the study, followed by Lockwood, whose experience made him aware of what books his chief would need, and he began at once to take them from the shelves.

“Right,” Waring said, looking over the armful of volumes Lockwood placed on the desk and seating himself in the swivel chair.

“Bring me Marcus Aurelius, too, please, and Martial.”

“The classic touch,” Lockwood smiled.

“Yes, it adds dignity, if one is a bit shy of material,” Waring admitted, good-naturedly. “That’s all, Lockwood. You may go, if you like.”

“No, sir. I’ll stay until eleven or so. I’m pretty busy with the reports, and, too, some one may call whom I can take care of.”

“Good chap you are, Lockwood. I appreciate it. Very well, then, don’t bother me unless absolutely necessary.”

The secretary left the room and closed the study door behind him.

This door gave on to the end of the cross hall, and the hall ended then, in a roomy window seat, and also held a book rack and table; altogether a comfortable and useful nook, frequently occupied by Gordon Lockwood. The window looked out on the beautiful lake view, as did the great study window, and it also commanded a view of the highroad on which stood, not far away, the Adams boarding-house.

Lockwood lodged there, as being more convenient, but most of his waking hours were spent in his employer’s home. A perfect secretary he had proved himself to be, for his prescience amounted almost to clairvoyance, and his imperturbability was exceedingly useful in keeping troublesome people or things away from John Waring.

So, he determined to stay on guard, lest a chance caller should come to disturb the Doctor at his work.

But Lockwood’s own work was somewhat neglected. Try as he would to concentrate upon it, he could not entirely dismiss from his mind a certain mysterious little face, whose meaning eluded

him. For once, Gordon Lockwood, reader of faces, was baffled. He couldn't classify the girl who was both rude and charming, both cruel and pathetic.

For cruelty was what this expert read in the knowing eyes and firm little mouth of Miss Mystery. And because of this indubitable element in her nature, he deemed her pathetic. Which shows how much she interested him.

At any rate he thought about her while his work waited. And, then, he thought of other things – for he had troubles of his own, had this supercilious young man. And troubles which galled him the more, that they were sordid – money troubles, in fact. His whole nature revolted at the mere thought of mercenary considerations, but if one is short of funds one must recognize the condition, distasteful though it be.

At nine-thirty, Nogi came with a tray bearing water and glasses. Under the watchful eye of Mrs. Peyton the Japanese tapped at the study door and, in response to the master's bidding, went in with his tray. He left it punctiliously on the table directed, and with his characteristic bow, departed again.

At ten-thirty, Mrs. Peyton and Helen went upstairs to their rooms, the housekeeper having given Nogi strict and definite instructions, which included his remaining on duty until the master should also retire.

And the night wore on.

A clear, cold night, with a late-rising moon, past the full, but still with its great yellow disk nearly round.

It shone down on what seemed like fairyland, for the sleet storm that had covered the trees with a coating of ice, and had fringed eaves and fences with icicles, had ceased, and left the glittering landscape frozen and sparkling in the still, cold air.

And when, some hours later, the sun rose on the same chill scene its rays made no perceptible impression on the cold and the mercury stayed down at its lowest winter record.

And so even the stolid Japanese Ito, shivered, and his yellow teeth chattered as he knocked at Mrs. Peyton's door in the early dawn of Monday morning.

"What is it?" she cried, springing from her bed to unbolt her door.

"Grave news, madam," and the Oriental bowed before her.

"What has happened? Tell me, Ito."

"I am not sure, madam – but, the master – "

"Yes, what about Doctor Waring?"

"He is – he is asleep in his study."

"Asleep in his study! Ito, what do you mean?"

"That, madam. His bed is unslept in. His room door ajar. I looked in the study – through from the dining-room – he is there by his desk – "

"Asleep, Ito – you said asleep!"

"Yes – madam – but – I do not know. And Nogi – he is gone."

"Gone! Where to?"

"That also, I do not know. Will madam come and look?"

"No; I will not! I know something has happened! I knew something would happen! Ito, he is not asleep – he is – "

"Don't say it, madam. We do not know."

"Find out! Go in and speak to him."

"But the door is locked. I tried it."

"Locked! The study door locked, and Doctor Waring still in there? How do you know?"

"I peeped from the dining-room window – and I could see him, leaning down on his desk."

"From the dining-room window! What do you mean?"

"The small little inside windows. Madam knows?"

The study had been added to the Waring house after the house had been built for some years. Wherefore, the dining-room, previously with a lake view from its windows, was cut off from that view. But, the windows, three small, square ones, remained, and so, looked into the new study.

However, the study, a higher ceiling being desired, had its floor sunken six feet or more, which brought the windows far too high to see through from the study side, but one could look through them from the dining-room. The original sashes had been replaced by beautiful stained glass, opaque save for a few tiny transparent bits through which a persistent and curious-minded person might discern some parts of the study.

The stained glass sashes were immovable, and were there more as a decoration than for utility's sake.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.