

WELLS CAROLYN

VICKY VAN

Carolyn Wells

Vicky Van

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Содержание

| | |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| CHAPTER I | 5 |
| CHAPTER II | 10 |
| CHAPTER III | 15 |
| CHAPTER IV | 20 |
| CHAPTER V | 25 |
| CHAPTER VI | 30 |
| Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. | 32 |

Carolyn Wells

Vicky Van

CHAPTER I

VICKY VAN

Victoria Van Allen was the name she signed to her letters and to her cheques, but Vicky Van, as her friends called her, was signed all over her captivating personality, from the top of her dainty, tossing head to the tips of her dainty, dancing feet.

I liked her from the first, and if her "small and earlies" were said to be so called because they were timed by the small and early numerals on the clock dial, and if her "little" bridge games kept in active circulation a goodly share of our country's legal tender, those things are not crimes.

I lived in one of the polite sections of New York City, up among the East Sixties, and at the insistence of my sister and aunt, who lived with me, our home was near enough the great boulevard to be designated by that enviable phrase, "Just off Fifth Avenue." We were on the north side of the street, and, nearer to the Avenue, on the south side, was the home of Vicky Van.

Before I knew the girl, I saw her a few times, at long intervals, on the steps of her house, or entering her little car, and half-consciously I noted her charm and her evident zest of life.

Later, when a club friend offered to take me there to call, I accepted gladly, and as I have said, I liked her from the first.

And yet, I never said much about her to my sister. I am, in a way, responsible for Winnie, and too, she's too young to go where they play Bridge for money. Little faddly prize bags or gift-shop novelties are her stakes.

Also, Aunt Lucy, who helps me look after Win, wouldn't quite understand the atmosphere at Vicky's. Not exactly Bohemian—and yet, I suppose it did represent one compartment of that handy-box of a term. But I'm going to tell you, right now, about a party I went to there, and you can see for yourself what Vicky Van was like.

"How late you're going out," said Winnie, as I slithered into my topcoat. "It's after eleven."

"Little girls mustn't make comments on big brothers," I smiled back at her. Win was nineteen and I had attained the mature age of twenty-seven. We were orphans and spinster Aunt Lucy did her best to be a parent to us; and we got on smoothly enough, for none of us had the temperament that rouses friction in the home.

"Across the street?" Aunt Lucy guessed, raising her aristocratic eyebrows a hair's breadth.

"Yes," I returned, the least bit irritated at the implication of that hairbreadth raise. "Steele will be over there and I want to see him—"

This time the said eyebrows went up frankly in amusement, and the kind blue eyes beamed as she said, "All right, Chet, run along."

Though I was Chester Calhoun, the junior partner of the law firm of Bradbury and Calhoun, and held myself in due and consequent respect, I didn't mind Aunt Lucy's calling me Chet, or even, as she sometimes did, Chetty. A man puts up with those things from the women of his household. As to Winnie, she called me anything that came handy, from Lord Chesterton to Chessy-Cat.

I patted Aunt Lucy on her soft old shoulder and Winnie on her hard young head, and was off.

True, I did expect to see Steele at Vicky Van's—he was the club chap who had introduced me there—but as Aunt Lucy had so cleverly suspected, he was not my sole reason for going. A bigger reason was that I always had a good time there, the sort of a good time I liked.

I crossed the street diagonally, in defiance of much good advice I have heard and read against such a proceeding. But at eleven o'clock at night the traffic in those upper side streets is not sufficient to endanger life or limb, and I reached Vicky Van's house in safety.

It was a very small house, and it was the one nearest to the Fifth Avenue corner, though the long side of the first house on that block of the Avenue lay between.

The windows on each floor were brilliantly lighted, and I mounted the long flight of stone steps sure of a merry welcome and a jolly time.

I was admitted by a maid whom I already knew well enough to say "Evening, Julie," as I passed her, and in another moment, I was in the long, narrow living-room and was a part of the gay group there.

"Angel child!" exclaimed Vicky Van herself, dancing toward me, "did he come to see his little ole friend?" and laying her two hands in mine for an instant, she considered me sufficiently welcomed, and danced off again. She was a will o' the wisp, always tantalizing a man with a hope of special attention, and then flying away to another guest, only to treat him in the same way.

I looked after her, a slim, graceful thing, vibrant with the joy of living, smiling in sheer gayety of heart, and pretty as a picture.

Her black hair was arranged in the newest style, that covered her ears with soft loops and exposed the shape of her trim little head. It was banded with a jeweled fillet, or whatever they call those Oriental things they wear, and her big eyes with their long, dark lashes, her pink cheeks and curved scarlet lips seemed to say, "the world owes me a living and I'm going to collect."

Not as a matter of financial obligation, be it understood.

Vicky Van had money enough and though nothing about her home was ostentatious or over ornate, it was quietly and in the best of taste luxurious.

But I was describing Vicky herself. Her gown, the skirt part of it, was a sort of mazy maize-colored thin stuff, rather short and rather full, that swirled as she moved, and fluttered when she danced. The bodice part, was of heavily gold-spangled material, and a kind of overskirt arrangement was a lot of long gold fringe made of beads. Instead of a yoke, there were shoulder straps of these same beads, and the sleeves weren't there.

And yet, that costume was all right. Why, it was a rig I'd be glad to see Winnie in, when she gets older, and if I've made it sound rather—er—gay and festive, it's my bungling way of describing it, and also, because Vicky's personality would add gayety and festivity to any raiment.

Her little feet wore goldy slippers, and a lot of ribbons criss-crossed over her ankles, and on the top of each slipper was a gilt butterfly that fluttered.

Yet with all this bewildering effect of frivolity, the first term I'd make use of in describing Vick's character would be Touch-me-not. I believe there's a flower called that—*noli me tangere*—or some such name. Well, that's Vicky Van. She'd laugh and jest with you, and then if you said anything by way of a personal compliment or flirtatious foolery, she was off and away from your side, like a thistle-down in a summer breeze. She was a witch, a madcap, but she had her own way in everything, and her friends did her will without question.

Her setting, too, just suited her. Her living room was one of those very narrow, very deep rooms so often seen in the New York side streets. It was done up in French gray and rose, as was the dictum of the moment. On the rose-brocaded walls were few pictures, but just the right ones. Gray enameled furniture and deep window-seats with rose-colored cushions provided resting-places, and soft rose-shaded lights gave a mild glow of illumination.

Flowers were everywhere. Great bowls of roses, jars of pink carnations and occasionally a vase of pink orchids were on mantel, low bookcases or piano. And sometimes the odor of a cigarette or a burning pastille of Oriental fragrance, added to the Bohemian effect which is, oftener than not, discernible by the sense of smell.

Vicky herself, detested perfumes or odors of any kind, save fresh flowers all about. Indeed, she detested Bohemianism, when it meant unconventional dress or manners or loud-voiced jests or songs.

Her house was dainty, correct and artistic, and yet, I knew its atmosphere would not please my Aunt Lucy, or be just the right place for Winnie.

Many of the guests I knew. Cassie Weldon was a concert singer and Ariadne Gale an artist of some prominence, both socially and in her art circle. Jim Ferris and Bailey Mason were actors of a good sort, and Bert Garrison, a member of one of my best clubs, was a fast rising architect. Steele hadn't come yet.

Two tables of bridge were playing in the back part of the room, and in the rest of the rather limited space several couples were dancing.

"Mayn't we open the doors to the dining room, Vicky?" called out one of the card players. "The calorics of this room must be about ninety in the shade."

"Open them a little way," returned Miss Van Allen. "But not wide, for there's a surprise supper and I don't want you to see it yet."

They set the double doors a few inches ajar and went on with their game. The dining room, as I knew, was a wide room that ran all across the house behind both living-room and hall. It was beautifully decorated in pale green and silver, and often Vicky Van would have a "surprise supper," at which the favors or entertainers would be well worth waiting for.

Having greeted many whom I knew, I looked about for further speech with my hostess.

"She's upstairs in the music room," said Cassie Weldon, seeing and interpreting my questing glance.

"Thank you, lady, for those kind words," I called back over my shoulder, and went upstairs.

The front room on the second floor was dubbed the "music room," Vicky said, because there was a banjo in it. Sometimes the guests brought more banjos and a concert of glees and college songs would ensue. But more often, as to-night, it was a little haven of rest and peace from the laughter and jest below stairs.

It was an exquisite white and gold room, and here, too, as I entered, pale pink shades dimmed the lights to a soft radiance that seemed like a breaking dawn.

Vicky sat enthroned on a white divan, her feet crossed on a gold-embroidered white satin foot-cushion. In front of her sat three or four of her guests all laughing and chatting.

"But he vowed he was going to get here somehow," Mrs. Reeves was saying.

"What's his name?" asked Vicky, though in a voice of little interest.

"Somers," returned Mrs. Reeves.

"Never heard of him. Did you, Mr. Calhoun?" and Vicky Van looked up at me as I entered.

"No; Miss Van Allen. Who is he?"

"I don't know and I don't care. Only as Mrs. Reeves says he is coming here tonight, I'd like to know something about him."

"Coming here! A man you don't know?" I drew up a chair to join the group. "How can he?"

"Mr. Steele is going to bring him," said Mrs. Reeves. "He says—Norman Steele says, that Mr. Somers is a first-class all-around chap, and no end of fun. Says he's a millionaire."

"What's a millionaire more or less to me?" laughed Vicky. "I choose my friends for their lovely character, not for their wealth."

"Yes, you've selected all of us for that, dear," agreed Mrs. Reeves, "but this Somers gentleman may be amiable, too."

Mrs. Reeves was a solid, sensible sort of person, who acted as ballast for the volatile Vicky, and sometimes reprimanded her in a mild way.

"I love the child," she had said to me once, "and she is a little brick. But once in a while I have to tell her a few things for the good of the community. She takes it all like an angel."

"Well, I don't care," Vicky went on, "Norman Steele has no right to bring anybody here whom he hasn't asked me about. If I don't like him, I shall ask some of you nice, amiable men to get me a long plank, and we'll put it out of a window, and make him walk it. Shall we?"

We all agreed to do this, or to tar and feather and ride on a rail any gentleman who might in any way be so unfortunate as to fall one iota short of Vicky Van's requirements.

"And now," said Vicky, "if you'll all please go downstairs, except Mrs. Reeves and Mr. Garrison and my own sweet self, I'll be orfly obliged to you."

The sweeping gesture with which she sought to dismiss us was a wave of her white arms and a smile of her red lips, and I, for one, found it impossible to obey. I started with the rest, and then after the gay crowd were part way down stairs I turned back.

"Please, mayn't I join your little class, if I'll be very good?" I begged. "I don't want Bert Garrison to be left alone at the mercy of two such sirens."

Miss Van Allen hesitated. Her pink-tipped forefinger rested a moment on her curved lip. "Yes," she said, nodding her head. "Yes, stay, Mr. Calhoun. You may be a help. Are you any good at getting theatre boxes after they're all sold?"

"That's my profession," I returned. "I learned it from a correspondence school. Where's the theatre? Lead me to it!"

"It's the Metropolis Theatre," she replied. "And I want to have a party there to-morrow night, and I want two boxes, and this awful, dreadful, bad Mr. Garrison says they're all sold, and I can't get any! What can you do about it?"

"Oh, I'll fix it. I'll go to the people who bought the boxes you want, and—I don't know what I'll say to them, exactly—but I'll fix up such a yarn that they'll beg me to take the boxes off their hands."

"Oh, will you, really?" and the dazzling smile she gave me would have repaid a much greater Herculean task than I had undertaken. And, of course, I hadn't meant it, but when she thought I did, I couldn't go back on my word.

"I'll do my best, Miss Van Allen," I said, seriously, "and if I can't possibly turn the trick, I'll—well, I'll buy the Metropolitan Opera House, and put on a show of my own."

"No," she laughed, "you needn't do that. But if you try and fail—why, we'll just have a little party here, a sort of consolation party, and—oh, let's have some private theatricals. Wouldn't that be fun!"

"More fun than the original program?" I asked quickly, hoping to be let off my promise.

"No, sir!" she cried, "decidedly not! I want especially to have that theatre party and supper afterward at the Britz. Now you do all you can, won't you?"

I promised to do all I could, and I had a partial hope I could get what she wanted by hook or crook, and then, as she heard a specially favorite fox-trot being dashed off on the piano downstairs, she sprang from her seat, and kicking the satin cushion aside, asked me to dance. In a moment we were whirling around the music room to the zipping music, and Mrs. Reeve and Garrison followed in our steps.

Vicky danced with a natural born talent that is quite unlike anything acquired by lessons. I had no need to guide her, she divined my lead, and swayed in any direction, even as I was about to indicate it. I had never danced with anyone who danced so well, and I was profuse in my thanks and praise.

"I love it," she said simply, as she patted the gold fringes of her gown into place. "I adore dancing, and you are one of the best partners I have ever had. Come, let us go down and cut into a Bridge game. We'll just about have time before supper."

Pirouetting before me, she led the way, and we went down the long steep stairs.

A shout greeted her appearance in the doorway.

"Oh, Vicky, we have missed you! Come over here and listen to Ted's latest old joke!"

"No, come over here and hear this awful gossip Ariadne is telling for solemn truth. It's the very worst taradiddle she ever got off!"

"Here's a place, Vicky Van, a nice cosy corner, 'tween Jim and me.
Come on, Ladygirl."

"No, thanks, everybody. I'm going to cut in at this table. May I? Am I a nuisance?"

"A Vicky-nuisance! They ain't no such animal!" and Bailey Mason rose to give her his chair.

"No," said she, "I want you to stay, Mr. Mason. 'Cause why, I want to play wiz you. Cassie, you give me your place, won't you, Ducky-Daddles? and you go and flirt with Mr. Calhoun. He knows the very newest flirts! Go, give him a tryout."

Vicky Van settled herself into her seat with the happy little sigh of the bridge lover, who sits down with three good players, and in another moment she was breathlessly looking over her hand. "Without," she said, triumphantly, and knowing she'd say no word more to me for the present, I walked away with Cassie Weldon.

And Cassie was good fun. She took me to the piano, and with the soft pedal down, she showed me a new little tone picture she had made up, which was both picturesque and funny.

"You'd better go into vaudeville!" I exclaimed, as she finished, "your talent is wasted on the concert platform."

"That's what Vicky tells me," she returned. "Sometimes I believe I will try it, just for fun."

"You'll find it such fun, you'll stay in for earnest," I assured her, for she had shown a bit of inventive genius that I felt sure would make good in a little musical turn.

CHAPTER II

MR. SOMERS

It was nearly midnight when Steele came, and with him was a man I had never seen before, and whom I assumed to be the Mr. Somers I had heard about.

And it was. As Steele entered, he cast his eye around for Vicky, and saw her at the bridge table down at the end of the room. Her back was toward us, and she was so absorbed in the game she did not look round, if, indeed, she heard the noise of their arrival.

The two men stopped near the group I was with and Steele introduced Mr. Somers.

A little curiously I looked at him, and saw a large, self-satisfied looking man wearing an expansive smile and expensive apparel. Clothes the very best procurable, jewelry just inside the limits of good taste—he bore himself like a gentleman, yet there was an unmistakable air of ostentatious wealth that repelled me. A second look made me think Mr. Somers had dined either late or twice, but his greetings were courteous and genial and his manner sociable, if a little patronizing. He seemed a stranger to all present, and his eye roved about for the charming hostess Steele had told him of.

"We'll reach Miss Van Allen presently." Steele laughed, in answer to the glance, "if, indeed, we dare interrupt her game. Let's make progress slowly."

"No hurry," returned Somers, affably, beaming on Cassie Weldon and meeting Ariadne Gale's receptive smile. "I'm anchored here for the moment. Miss Weldon? Ah, yes, I've heard you sing. Voice like a lark—like a lark."

Clearly, Somers was not much of a purveyor of small talk. I sized him up for a lumbering oldster, who wanted to be playful but didn't quite know how.

He had rather an austere face, yet there was a gleam in his eye that belied the austerity. His cheeks were fat and red, his nose prominent, and he was clean shaven, save for a thick white mustache, that drooped slightly on either side of a full-lipped mouth. His hair was white, his eyes dark and deep-set, and he could easily be called a handsome man. He was surely fifty, and perhaps more. Had it not been for a certain effusiveness in his speech, I could have liked him, but he seemed to me to lack sincerity.

However, I am not one to judge harshly or hastily, and I met him half way, and even helped him in his efforts at gay affability.

"You've never been here before?" I asked; "Good old Steele to bring you to-night."

"No, never before," and he glanced around appreciatively, "but I shall, I hope, come often. Charming little nest; charming ladies!" a bow included those nearest.

"Yes, indeed," babbled Ariadne, "fair women and brave men."

"Brave, yes," agreed Somers, "to dare the glances of such bright eyes. I must protect my heart!" He clasped his fat hands pretty near where his heart was situated, and grinned with delight as Ariadne also "protected" her heart.

"Ah," he cried, "two hearts in danger! I feel sure we shall be friends, if only because misery loves company."

"Is it really misery with you?" and Ariadne's sympathy was so evidently profound, that Cassie Weldon and I walked away.

"I'll give Ariad her innings," said the vivacious Miss Weldon, "and I'll make up to the Somers kid later. Where'd Vicky pick him up?"

"She doesn't know him at all. Norman Steele brought him unbeknownst."

"No! Why, Vick doesn't allow that sort of thing."

"So I'm told. Any way, Steele did it."

"Well, Vicky's such a good-natured darling, maybe she won't mind for once. She won't, if she likes the little stranger. He's well-meaning, at any rate."

"So's Ariadne. From her smile, I think she well means to sell him her latest 'Autumn In The Adirondacks,' or 'Lady With A Handbag'."

"Now, don't be mean!" but Cassie laughed. "And I don't blame her if she does. Poor Ad paints above the heads of the public, so if this is a high-up Publican, she'd better make sales while the sun shines."

"What's her work like?"

"You can see more of it in this house than anywhere else. Vicky is so fond of Ariadne and so sorry her pictures don't sell better, that she buys a lot herself."

"Does Miss Gale know Miss Van Allen does it out of—"

"Don't say charity! No, they're really good stuff, and Vicky buys 'em for Christmas gifts and bridge prizes."

"Does she ever play for prizes? I thought she liked a bit of a stake, now."

"Yes, at evening parties. But, often we have a dove game of an afternoon, with prizes and pink tea. Vicky Van isn't a gay doll, you know. She's—sometimes, she's positively domestic. I wish she had a nice husband and some little kiddies."

"Why hasn't she?"

"Give it up. She's never seen any man she loved, I s'pose."

"Perhaps she'll love this Somers person."

"Heaven forbid! Nothing less than a crown prince would suit Vicky Van."

Look, she's turning to meet him. Won't he be bowled over!"

I turned, and though there were several people between us, I caught a glimpse of Somers' face as he was presented to Miss Van Allen. He was bowled over. His eyes beamed with admiration and he bowed low as he raised to his lips the dainty, bejeweled hand.

Vicky, apparently, did not welcome this old-time greeting, and she drew away her hand, saying, "not allowed. Naughty man! Express proper compunction, or you can't sit next me at supper!"

"Forgive me," begged Somers. "I'm sorry! I'll never do it again—until after I sit next you at supper!"

"More brains than I thought," I said to Cassie, who nodded, and then

Vicky Van rose from her chair.

"Take my place for a moment, Mr. Somers," she said, standing before him. "I—" she dropped her eyes adorably, "I must see about the arrangement of seats at the supper table." With a merry laugh, she ran from the room, and through the long hall to the dining-room.

Somers dropped into her vacant chair, and continued the Bridge game with the air of one who knows how to play.

In less than five minutes Vicky was back. "No, keep the hand," she said, as he rose. "I've played long enough. And supper will be ready shortly."

"Finish the rubber,—I insist" Somers returned, and as he determinedly stood behind the chair, Vicky, perforce, sat down.

He continued to stand behind her chair, watching her play. Vicky was too sure of her game to be rattled at his close scrutiny, but it seemed to me her shoulders shrugged a little impatiently, as he criticized or commended her plays.

She had thrown a light scarf of gauze or tulle around when she was out of the room, and being the same color as her gown, it made her seem more than ever like an houri. She smiled up into Somers' face, and then, coyly, her long lashes fell on her pink cheeks. Evidently, she had concluded to bewitch the newcomer, and she was making good.

I drew nearer, principally because I liked to look at her. She was a live wire to-night! She looked roguish, and she made most brilliant plays, tossing down her cards with gay little gestures, and doing trick shuffles with her twinkling fingers.

"You could have had that last trick, if you'd played for it," Somers said, as the rubber finished.

"I know it," Vicky conceded. "I saw, just too late, that I was getting the lead into the wrong hand."

"Well, don't ever do that again," he said, lightly, "never again."

As he said the last word, he laid his finger tips on her shoulder. It was the veriest touch, the shoulder was swathed in the transparent tulle, but still, it roused Vicky. She glanced up at him, and I looked at him, too. But Somers was not in flirtatious mood. He said, "I beg your pardon," in most correct fashion. Had he then, touched her inadvertently? It didn't seem so, but his speech assured it.

Vicky jumped up from the table, and ignoring Somers, ran out to the hall, saying something about looking after the surprise for the supper. To my surprise, Somers followed her, not hastily, but rather deliberately, and, quelling an absurd impulse to go, too, I turned to Norman Steele, who stood near.

"Who's this Somers?" I asked him, rather abruptly. "Is he all right?"

"You bet," said Steele, smiling. "He's a top-notch."

"In what respects?"

"Every and all."

"You've known him long?"

"Yes. I tell you Cal, he's all right. Forget it. What's the surprise for supper? Do you know?"

"Of course not. It wouldn't be a surprise if we all knew of it."

"Well, Vicky's surprises are always great fun. Why the grouch, old man? Can't you chirrup?"

"Oh, I'm all right," and I felt annoyed that he read in my face that I was put out. But I didn't like the looks of Somers, and I couldn't say so to the man who had brought him there.

"Oh, please! Oh, *please!*" shouted a hoarse, strange voice, and one scarcely to be heard above the hum of gay voices and peals of gay laughter, "oh, *somebody*, please!"

I looked across the room, and in the wide hall doorway stood a man, who was quite evidently a waiter. He was white-faced and staring-eyed, and he fairly hung on to a portiere for support, as he repeated his agonized plea.

"What is it?" said Mrs. Reeves, as everybody else stared at the man.

"What do you want?" She stepped toward him, and we all turned to look.

"Not you—no, Madame. Some man, please—some doctor. Is there one here?"

"Some of the servants ill?" asked Mrs. Reeves, kindly. "Doctor Remson, will you come?"

The pleasant-faced capable-looking woman paused only until Doctor Remson joined her, and the two went into the hall, the waiter following slowly.

In a moment I heard a shriek, a wild scream. Partly curiosity and partly a foreboding of harm to Vicky Van, made me rush forward.

Mrs. Reeves had screamed, and I ran the length of the hall to the dining room. There I saw Somers on the floor, and Remson bending over him.

"He's killed! He's stabbed!" cried Mrs. Reeves, clutching at my arm as I reached her. "Oh, what shall we do?"

She stood just in the dining-room doorway, which was at the end of the long hall, as in most city houses. The room was but dimly lighted, the table candles not yet burning.

"Keep the people back!" I shouted, as those in the living-room pressed out into the hall. "Steele, keep those girls back!"

There was an awful commotion. The men urged the women back, but curiosity and horror made them surge forward in irresistible force.

"Shut the door," whispered Remson. "This man is dead. It's an awful situation. Shut that door!"

Somehow, I managed to get the door closed between the dining-room and hall. On the inside were Remson, Mrs. Reeves, who wouldn't budge, and myself. Outside in the hall was a crowd of hysterical women and frightened men.

"Are you sure?" I asked, in a low voice, going nearer to the doctor and looking at Somers' fast-glazing eyes.

"Sure. He was stabbed straight to the heart with—see—a small, sharp knife."

Her hands over her eyes, but peering through her fingers, Mrs. Reeves drew near. "Not really," she moaned. "Oh, not really dead! Can't we do anything for him?"

"No," said Remson, rising to his feet, from his kneeling position.

"He's dead, I tell you. Who did it?"

"That waiter—" I began, and then stopped. Looking in from a door opposite the hall door, probably one that led to a butler's pantry or kitchen, were half a dozen white-faced waiters.

"Come in here," said Remson; "not all of you. Which is chief?"

"I am, sir," and a head waiter came into the room. "What has happened?"

"A man has been killed," said the doctor, shortly. "Who are you? Who are you all? House servants?"

"No sir," said the chief. "We're caterer's men. From Frascini's. I'm Luigi. We are here to serve supper."

"What do you know of this?"

"Nothing, sir," and the Italian looked truthful, though scared.

"Haven't you been in and out of the dining-room all evening?"

"Yes, sir. Setting the table, and such. But now it's all ready, and I was waiting Miss Van Allen's word to serve it."

"Where is Miss Van Allen?" I broke in.

"I—I don't know, sir," Luigi hesitated, and Doctor Remson interrupted.

"We mustn't ask these questions, Mr. Calhoun. We must call the police."

"The police!" cried Mrs. Reeves, "oh no! no! don't do that."

"It is my duty," said the doctor, firmly. "And no one must enter or leave this room until an officer arrives. You waiters, stay there in that pantry. Close those doors to the other room, Mr. Calhoun, please. Mrs. Reeves, I'm sorry, but I must ask you to stay here—"

"I won't do it!" declared the lady. "You're not an officer of the law."

"I'll stay in the house, but not in this room."

She stalked out into the hall, and Doctor Remson went at once to the telephone and called up headquarters.

The guests in the living room, hearing this, flew into a panic.

Of course, it was no longer possible, nor, as I could see, desirable to keep them in ignorance of what had happened.

After calling the police, Doctor Remson returned to his post just inside the dining-room door. He answered questions patiently, at first, but after being nearly driven crazy by the frantic women, he said, sharply, "You may all do just as you like. I've no authority here, except that the ethics of my profession dictate. That does not extend to jurisdiction over the guests present. But I advise you as a matter of common decency to stay here until this affair is investigated."

But they didn't. Many of them hastily gathered up their wraps and went out of the house as quickly as possible.

Cassie Weldon came to me in her distress.

"I must go, Mr. Calhoun," she said. "Don't you think I may? Why, it would interfere greatly with my work to have it known that I was mixed up in a—"

"You're not mixed up in it, Miss Weldon." I began to speak a little sternly, but the look in her eyes aroused my sympathy. "Well, go on," I said, "I suppose you will testify if called on. Everybody knows where to find you."

"Yes," she said, slowly, "but I hope I won't be called on. Why, it might spoil my whole career."

She slipped out of the door, in the wake of some other departing guests. After all, I thought, it couldn't matter much. Few, if any, of them were implicated, and they could all be found at their homes.

And yet, I had a vague idea that we ought all to stay.

"I shall remain and face the music," I heard Mrs. Reeves saying. "Where *is* Vicky? Do you suppose she knows about this? I'm going up in the music room to see if she's there. You know, with all the excitement down here, those upstairs may know nothing of it."

"I shall remain, too" said Ariadne Gale. "Why should anyone kill Mr. Somers? Did the caterer's people do it? What an awful thing! Will it be in the papers?"

"*Will* it!" said Garrison, who was standing near. "Reporters may be here any minute. Must be here as soon as the police come. Where is Miss Van Allen?"

"I don't know," and Ariadne began to cry.

"Stop that," said Mrs. Reeves, gruffly, but not unkindly. "Stay if you want to, Ariadne, but behave like a sensible woman, not a silly schoolgirl. This is an awful tragedy, of some sort."

"What do you mean, of some sort?" asked Miss Gale.

"I mean we don't know what revelations are yet to come. Where's Norman Steele? Where's the man who brought this Somers here?"

Sure enough, where was Steele? I had forgotten all about him. And it was he who had introduced Somers to the Van Allen house, and no one else present, so far as I knew, was previously acquainted with the man now lying dead the other side of that closed door.

I looked over the people who had stayed. Only a handful—perhaps half a dozen.

And then I wondered if I'd better go home myself. Not for my own sake, in any way; indeed, I preferred to remain, but I thought of Aunt Lucy and Win. Ought I to bring on them any shadow of trouble or opprobrium that might result from my presence in that house at that time? Would it not be better to go while I could do so? For, once the police took charge, I knew I should be called on to testify in public. And even as I debated with myself, the police arrived.

CHAPTER III

THE WAITER'S STORY

Doctor Remson's police call had been imperative, and Inspector Mason came in with two men.

"What's this? What's wrong here?" the big burly inspector said, as he faced the few of us who had remained.

"Come in here, inspector," said the doctor, from the dining-room door.

And from that moment the whole aspect of the house seemed to change.

No longer a gay little bijou residence, it became a court of justice.

One of the men was stationed at the street door and one at the area door below. Headquarters was notified of details. The coroner was summoned, and we were all for the moment under detention.

"Where is Miss Van Allen? Where is the lady of the house?" asked

Mason. "Where are the servants? Who is in charge here?"

Was ever a string of questions so impossible of answers!

Doctor Remson told the main facts, but he was reticent. I, too, hesitated to say much, for the case was strange indeed.

Mrs. Reeves looked gravely concerned, but said nothing.

Ariadne Gale began to babble. That girl didn't know how to be quiet.

"I guess Miss Van Allen is upstairs," she volunteered. "She was in the dining-room, but she isn't here now, so she must be upstairs. Shall I go and see?"

"No!" thundered the inspector. "Stay where you are. Search the house,

Breen. I'll cover the street door."

The man he called Breen went upstairs on the jump, and Mason continued. "Tell the story, one of you. Who is this man? Who killed him?"

As he talked, the inspector was examining Somers' body, making rapid notes in a little book, keeping his eye on the door, and darting quick glances at each of us, as he tried to grasp the situation.

I looked at Bert Garrison, who was perhaps the most favored of Miss Van Allen's friends, but he shook his head, so I threw myself into the breach.

"Inspector," I said, "that man's name is Somers. Further than that I know nothing. He is a stranger to all of us, and he came to this house to-night for the first time in his life."

"How'd he happen to come? Friend of Miss Van Allen?"

"He met her to-night for the first time. He came here with—" I paused. It was so hard to know what to do. Steele had gone home, ought I to implicate him?

"Go on—came here with whom? The truth, now."

"I usually speak the truth" I returned, shortly. "He came with Mr.

Norman Steele."

"Where is Mr. Steele?"

"He has gone. There were a great many people here, and, naturally, some of them went away when this tragedy was discovered."

"Humph! Then, of course, the guilty party escaped. But we are getting nowhere. Does nobody know anything of this man, but his name?"

Nobody did; but Ariadne piped up, "He was a delightful man. He told me he was a great patron of art, and often bought pictures."

Paying little heed to her, the inspector was endeavoring to learn from the dead man's property something more about him.

"No letters or papers," he said, disappointedly, as he turned out the pockets. "Not unusual—in evening togs—but not even a card or anything personal—looks queer—"

"Look in his watch," said Ariadne, bristling with importance.

Giving her a keen glance, the inspector followed her suggestion. In the back of the case was a picture of a coquettish face, undoubtedly that of an actress. It was not carefully fastened in, but roughly cut out and pressed in with ragged edges.

"Temporary," grunted the inspector, "and recently stuck in. Some chicken he took out to supper. He's a club man, you say?"

"Yes, Mr. Steele said so, and also vouched for his worth and character." I resented the inspector's attitude. Though I knew nothing of Somers, and didn't altogether like him, yet, I saw no reason to think ill of the dead, until circumstances warranted it.

Further search brought a thick roll of money, some loose silver, a key-ring with seven or eight keys, eyeglasses in a silver case, handkerchiefs, a gold pencil, a knife, and such trifles as any man might have in his pockets, but no directly identifying piece of property.

R. S. was embroidered in tiny white letters on the handkerchiefs, and a monogram R. S. was on his seal ring.

His jewelry, which was costly, the inspector did not touch. There were magnificent pearl studs, a watch fob, set with a black opal and pearl cufflinks. Examination of his hat showed the pierced letters R. S., but nothing gave clue to his Christian name.

"Somers," said the inspector, musingly. "What club does he belong to?"

"I don't know," I replied. "Mr. Steele belongs to several, but Mr. Somers does not belong to any that I do. At least, I've never seen him at any."

"Call in the servants. Let's find out something about this household."

As no one else moved to do it, I stepped to the door of the butler's pantry, and summoned the head waiter of the caterer.

"Where are the house servants?" I asked him.

"There aren't any, sir," he replied, looking shudderingly at the grisly form on the floor.

"No servants? In a house of this type! What do you mean?"

"That's true," said Mrs. Reeves, breaking her silence, at last. "Miss Van Allen has a very capable woman, who is housekeeper and ladies' maid in one. But when guests are here, the suppers are served from the caterer's."

"Then call the housekeeper. And where is Miss Van Allen herself?"

"She's not in the house," said the policeman Breen, returning from his search.

"Not in the house!" cried Mrs. Reeves. "Where is she?"

"I've been all over—every room—every floor. She isn't in the house.

There's nobody upstairs at all."

"No housekeeper or maid?" demanded Mason. "Then they've got away!

Here, waiter, tell me all you know of this thing."

The Italian Luigi came forward, shaking with terror, and wringing his fingers nervously.

"I d—don't know anything about it," he began, but Mason interrupted,

"You do! You know all about it! Did you kill this man?"

"No! Dio mio! No! a thousand no's!"

"Then, unless you wish to be suspected of it, tell all you know."

A commotion at the door heralded the coroner's arrival, also a detective and a couple of plain clothes men. Clearly, here was a mysterious case.

The coroner at once took matters in his own hands. Inspector Mason told him all that had been learned so far, and though Coroner Fenn seemed to think matters had been pretty well bungled, he made no comment and proceeded with the inquiries.

"Sure there's nobody upstairs?" he asked Breen.

"Positive. I looked in every nook and cranny. I've raked the whole house, but the basement and kitchen part."

"Go down there, then, and then go back and search upstairs again. Somebody may be hiding. Who here knows Miss Van Allen the most intimately?"

"Perhaps I do," said Mrs. Reeves. "Or Miss Gale. We are both her warm friends."

"I'm also her friend," volunteered Bert Garrison. "And I can guarantee that if Miss Van Allen has fled from this house it was out of sheer fright. She never saw this man until to-night. He was a stranger to us all."

"Where's the housekeeper?" went on Fenn.

"I think she must be somewhere about," said Mrs. Reeves. "Perhaps in the kitchen. Julie is an all round capable woman. When there are no guests she prepares Miss Van Allen's meals herself. When company is present the caterer always is employed."

"And there are no other servants?"

"Not permanent ones," replied Mrs. Reeves. "I believe the laundress and chore boy come by the day, also cleaning women and such. But I know that Miss Van Allen has no resident servant besides the maid Julie."

"This woman must be found," snapped the coroner. "But we must first of all identify the body. Mason, call up the principal clubs on the telephone, and locate R. Somers. Also find Mr. Norman Steele. Now, Luigi, let's have your story."

The trembling waiter stammered incoherently, and said little of moment.

"Look here," said Fenn, bluntly, "is that your knife sticking in him? I mean, is it one belonging to Frascini's service? Don't touch it, but look at it, you can tell."

Luigi leaned over the dead man. "Yes, it is one of our boning knives," he said. "We always bring our own hardware."

"Well, then, if you want to clear yourself and your men of doubt, tell all you know."

"I know this," and Luigi braced himself to the ordeal. "I was waiting in the pantry for Miss Van Allen to send me word to serve supper, and I peeped in the dining-room now and then to see if it was time. I heard, presently, Miss Van Allen's voice, also a man's voice. I didn't want to intrude, so waited for a summons. After a moment or two I heard a little scream, and heard somebody or something fall. I had no thought of anything wrong, but thought the guests were unusually—er—riotous."

"Are Miss Van Allen's guests inclined to be riotous?"

"No, sir, oh, no," asseverated the man, while Mrs. Reeves and Ariadne looked indignant. "And for that reason, I felt a little curious, so I pushed the door ajar and peeped in."

"What did you see?"

"I saw," Luigi paused so long that I feared he was going to collapse. But the coroner eyed him sternly, and he went on. "I saw Miss Van Allen standing, looking down at this—this gentleman on the floor, and making as if to pull out the knife. I could scarcely believe my eyes, and I watched her. She didn't pull the knife, but she straightened up, looked around, glanced down at her gown, which—which was stained with blood—and then—she ran out into the hall."

"Where did she go?"

"I don't know. I couldn't see, as the door was but on a crack. Then I thought I ought to go into the dining-room, and I did. I looked at the gentleman, and I didn't know what to do. So I went into the hall, to the parlor door, and called for help, for a doctor or somebody. And then they all came out here. That's all I know."

Luigi's nerve gave way, and he sank into a chair with a sob. Fenn looked at him, and considerably left him alone for the time.

"Can this be true?" he said, turning to us. "Can you suspect Miss Van Allen of this crime?"

"No!" cried Bert Garrison and the women, at once. And, "No!" said I. "I am positive Miss Van Allen did not know Mr. Somers and could not have killed an utter stranger—on no provocation whatever."

"You do not know what provocation she may have had," suggested Fenn.

"Now, look here, Mr. Coroner," said Mrs. Reeves very decidedly, "I won't have Miss Van Allen spoken of in any such way. I assume you mean that this man, though a stranger, might have said or done something to annoy or offend Miss Van Allen. Well, if he had done so, Victoria Van Allen never would have killed him! She is the gentlest, most gay and light-hearted girl, and though she never tolerates any rudeness or familiarity, the idea of her killing a man is too absurd. You might as well suspect a dove or a butterfly of crime!"

"That's right, Mr. Coroner," said Garrison. "That waiter's story is an hallucination of some sort—if it isn't a deliberate falsification. Miss Van Allen is a dainty, happy creature, and to connect her with anything like this *is* absurd!"

"That's to be found out, Mr. Garrison. Why did Miss Van Allen run away?"

"I don't admit that she did run away—in the sense of flight. If she were frightened at this thing—if she saw it—she may have run out of the door in hysterics or in a panic of terror. But she the perpetrator! Never!"

"Never!" echoed Mrs. Reeves. "The poor child! If she did come out here—and saw this awful sight—why, I think it would unhinge her mind!"

"Who is Miss Van Allen?" asked Fenn. "What is her occupation?"

"She hasn't an occupation," said Mrs. Reeves. "She is a young lady of independent fortune. As to her people or immediate relatives, I know nothing at all. I've known her a year or so, and as she never referred to such matters I never inquired. But she's a thorough little gentlewoman, and I'll defend her against any slander to my utmost powers."

"And so will I," said Miss Gale. "I'm sure of her fineness of character, and lovely nature—"

"But these opinions, ladies, don't help our inquiries," interrupted

Fenn. "What can you men tell us? What I want first, is to identify this body, or, rather to learn more of R. Somers, and to find Miss Van Allen. I can't hold an inquest until these points are cleared up.

Mason, have you found out anything?"

"No," said the inspector, returning from his long telephone quest. "I called up four clubs. Norman Steele belongs to three of them, but this man doesn't seem to belong to any. That is, there are Somerses and even R. Somerses, but they all have middle names, and, too, their description doesn't fit this Somers."

"Then Mr. Steele misrepresented him. Did you get Steele, Mason?"

"No, he wasn't at any of the clubs. I found his residence, a bachelor apartment house, but he isn't there, either."

"Find Steele; find Miss Van Allen; find the maid, what's her name—Julia?"

"Julie, she was always called," said Mrs. Reeves. "If Miss Van Allen went away, I've no doubt Julie went with her. She is a most devoted caretaker of her mistress."

"An oldish woman?"

"No. Perhaps between thirty-five and forty."

"What's she look like?"

"Describe her, Ariadne, you're an artist."

"Julie," said Miss Gale, "is a good sort. She's medium-sized, she has brown hair and rather hazel eyes. She wears glasses, and she stoops a little in her walk. She has perfect training and correct manners, and she is a model servant, but she gives the impression of watching over Miss Van Allen, whatever else she may be engaged in at the same time."

"Wears black?"

"No; usually gray gowns, or sometimes white. Inconspicuous aprons and no cap. She's not quite a menial, but yet, not entirely a housekeeper."

"English?"

"English speaking, if that's what you mean. But I think she's an American. Don't you, Mrs Reeves?"

"American? Yes, of course."

CHAPTER IV

SOMERS' REAL NAME

Detective Lowney, who had come with the coroner, had said little but had listened to all. Occasionally he would dart from the room, and return a few moments later, scribbling in his notebook. He was an alert little man, with beady black eyes and a stubby black mustache.

"I want a few words with that caterer's man," he said, suddenly, "and then they'd better clear away this supper business and go home."

We all turned to look at the table. It stood in the end of the dining-room that was back of the living-room. The sideboard was at the opposite end, back of the hall, and it was directly in front of the sideboard that Somers' body lay.

Lowney turned on more light, and a thrill went through us at the incongruity of that gay table and the tragedy so near it. As always at Vicky Van's parties, the appointments were dainty and elaborate. Flowers decorated the table; lace, silver, and glass were of finest quality; and in the centre was the contrivance known as a "Jack Horner Pie."

"That was to be the surprise," said Mrs. Reeves. "I knew about it."

The pie is full of lovely trinkets and little jokes on the guests."

"I thought those things were for children's parties," observed Fenn, looking with interest at the gorgeous confection.

"They're really for birthdays," said Mrs. Reeves, "and to-day is Vicky's birthday. That was part of her surprise. She didn't want it known, lest the guests should bring gifts. She's like a child, Vicky is, just as happy over a birthday party as a little girl would be."

"What does Miss Van Allen look like?" asked the detective.

"She's pretty," replied Mrs. Reeves, "awfully pretty, but not a raving beauty. Black hair, and bright, fresh coloring—"

"How was she dressed? Giddy clothes?"

"In an evening gown," returned Mrs. Reeves, who resented the detective's off-hand manner. "A beautiful French gown, of tulle and gold trimmings."

"Low-necked, and all that? Jewels?"

"Yes," I said, as Mrs. Reeves disdained to answer. "Full evening costume, and a necklace and earrings of amber set in gold."

"Well, what I'm getting at is," said Lowney, "a woman dressed like that couldn't go very far in the streets without being noticed. We'll surely be able to trace Miss Van Allen. Where would she be likely to go?"

"I don't know," said Mrs. Reeves. "She wouldn't go to my home, I live 'way down in Washington Square."

"Nor to mine," chirped Ariadne, "it's over on the west side."

"I don't believe she left the house," declared the coroner.

"Tell us again, Luigi," asked Lowney, "just where did the lady seem to go, when you saw her leave this room?"

"I can't say, sir. I was looking through a small opening, as I pushed the door ajar, and I was so amazed at what I saw, that I was sort of paralyzed and didn't dare open the door further."

"Go back to the pantry," commanded Fenn, "and look in, just as you did."

The waiter retreated to the post he had held, and setting the door a few inches ajar, proved that he could see body by the sideboard, but could not command a view of the hall.

"Now, I'll represent Miss Van Allen," and Lowney stood over the body of Somers. "Is this the place?"

"A little farther to the right, sir," and Luigi's earnestness and good faith were unmistakable. "Yes, sir, just there."

"Now, I walk out into the hall. Is this the way she went?"

"Yes, sir, the same."

Lowney went from the dining-room to the hall, and it was clear that his further progress could not be seen by the peeping waiter.

"You see, Fenn," the detective went on, "from here, in the back of this long hall, Miss Van Allen could have left the house by two ways. She could have gone out at the front door, passing the parlor, or, she could have gone down these basement stairs, which are just under the stairs to the second story. Then she could have gone out by the front area door, which would give her access to the street. She could have caught up a cloak as she went."

"Or," said Fenn, musingly, "she could have run upstairs. The staircase is so far back in the hall, that the guests in the parlor would not have seen her. This is a very deep house, you see."

It was true. The stairs began so far back in the long hall, that Vicky could easily have slipped upstairs after leaving the dining-room, without being seen by any of us in the living-room, unless we were in its doorway, looking out. Was anybody? So many guests had left, that this point could not be revealed.

"I didn't see her," declared Mrs. Reeves, "and I don't believe she was in the dining-room at all. I don't care what that waiter says!"

"Oh, yes, Madame," reiterated Luigi. "It was Miss Van Allen. I know her well. Often she comes to Frascini's, and always I take her orders. She came even this afternoon, to make sure the great cake—the Jack Horner, was all right. And she approved it, ah, she clapped her hands at sight of it. We all do our best for Miss Van Allen, she is a lovely lady."

"Miss Van Allen is one of your regular customers?"

"One of our best. Very often we serve her, and always she orders our finest wares."

"You provide everything?"

"Everything. Candles, flowers, decorations—all"

"And she pays her bills?"

"Most promptly."

"By cheque?"

"Yes, sir."

"And there are no servants here but the maid Julie?"

"I have often seen others. But I fancy they do not live in the house. Madame Julie superintends and directs us always. Miss Van Allen leaves much to her. She is most capable."

"When did you see this woman, this Julie, last?"

"A short time before—before that happened." Luigi looked toward the body. "She was in and out of the pantries all the evening. She admitted the guests, she acted as ladies' maid, and she arranged the favors in the pie. It was, I should say, ten minutes or so since she was last in the pantry, when I peeped in at the door."

"Where was Julie then?"

"I don't know. I did not see her. Perhaps upstairs, or maybe in the front of the hall, waiting to bring me word to serve supper."

"Tell me something distinctive about this maid's appearance. Was she good-looking?"

"Yes, a good-looking woman. But nothing especial about her. She had many gold fillings in her teeth—"

"That's something," and Lowney noted it with satisfaction. "Go on."

But Luigi seemed to know nothing else that differentiated Julie from her sisters in service, and Lowney changed his questions.

"How could Miss Van Allen get that knife of yours?" he asked.

"I don't know, sir. It was, I suppose, in the pantry, with our other knives."

"What is its use?"

"It is a boning knife, but doubtless one of our men used it in cutting celery for salad, or some such purpose."

"Ask them."

Inquiry showed that a man, named Palma, had used the knife for making a salad, and had left it in the butler's pantry an hour or so before the crime was committed. Any one could have taken the knife without its being missed, as the salad had been completed and put aside.

"In that case, Miss Van Allen must have secured the knife some little time before it was used, as Luigi was in the pantry just previously," observed Fenn. "That shows premeditation. It wasn't done with a weapon picked up at the moment."

"Then it couldn't have been done by Miss Van Allen!" exclaimed Mrs. Reeves triumphantly, "for Vicky had no reason to premeditate killing a man she had never seen before."

"Vicky didn't do it," wailed Ariadne. "I know she didn't."

"She must be found," said Lowney. "But she will be found. If she's innocent, she will return herself. If guilty, we must find her. And we will. A householder cannot drop out of existence unnoticed by any one. Does she own this house?"

"I think so," said Mrs. Reeves. "I'm not positive, but it's my impression that she does. Vicky Van never boasts or talks of her money or of herself. But I know she gives a good deal in charity, and is always ready to subscribe to philanthropic causes. I tell you she is not the criminal, and I don't believe she ever left this house in the middle of the night in evening dress! That child is scared to death, and is hiding—in the attic or somewhere."

"Suppose, Mrs. Reeves," said the coroner, "you go with Mr. Lowney, and look over the house again. Search the bedrooms and store-rooms."

"I will," and Mrs. Reeves seemed to welcome an opportunity to help. She was a good-hearted woman, and a staunch friend of Vicky Van. I was glad she was on hand to stand up for the girl, for I confess things looked, to me, pretty dubious.

"Come along, too, Mr. Calhoun," said Mrs. Reeves. "There's no telling what we may find. Perhaps there's further—tragedy."

I knew what was in her mind. That if Vicky had done the thing, she might have, in an agony of remorse, taken her own life.

Thrilled with this new fear, I followed Lowney and Mrs. Reeves. We went downstairs first. We examined all the basement rooms and the small, city back yard. There was no sign of Vicky Van or of Julie, and next we came back to the first floor, hunted that, and then on upstairs. The music room was soon searched, and I fell back as the others went into Vicky's bedroom.

"Come on, Mr. Calhoun," said Lowney, "we must make a thorough job of it this time."

The bedroom was, it seemed to me, like a fairy dream. Furniture of white enameled wicker, with pink satin cushions. Everywhere the most exquisite appointments of silver, crystal and embroidered fabrics, and a bed fit for a princess. It seemed profanation for the little detective to poke and pry around in wardrobes and cupboards, though I knew it must be done. He was not only looking for Vicky, but noting anything that might bear on her disappearance.

But there was no clue. Everything was in order, and all just as a well-bred, refined woman would have her belongings.

The bedroom was over the dining-room, and back of this, over the pantry extension, was Vicky Van's dressing-room.

This was a bijou boudoir, and dressing-table, chiffonier, robe-chests, and jewel-caskets were all in keeping with the personality of their owner. The walls were panelled in pale rose color, and a few fine pictures were in absolute harmony. A long mirror was in a Florentine gilt frame, and a *chaise longue*, by a reading table, bespoke hours of ease.

Ruthlessly, Lowney pried into everything, ran his arm among the gowns hanging in the wardrobe, and looked into the carved chests.

Again no clue. The perfect order everywhere, showed, perhaps, preparation for guests, but nothing indicated flight or hiding. The dressing-table boxes held some bits of jewelry but nothing of really great value. An escritoire was full of letters and papers, and this, Lowney locked, and put the key in his pocket.

"If it's all right," he said, "there's no harm done. And if the lady doesn't show up, we must examine the stuff."

On we went to the third floor of the house. The rooms here were unused, save one that was evidently Julie's. The furnishings, though simple, were attractive, and showed a thoughtful mistress and an appreciative maid. Everything was in order. Several uniforms of black and of gray were in the cupboard, and several white aprons and one white dress. There were books, and a work-basket and such things as betokened the life of a sedate, busy woman.

We left no room, no cupboard unopened. No hall or loft unsearched. We looked in, under and behind every piece of furniture, and came, at last, to the unescapable conclusion that wherever Vicky Van might be, she was not in her own house.

Downstairs we went, and found Coroner Fenn and Inspector Mason in the hall. They had let Doctor Remson go home, also Garrison and Miss Gale. The waiters, too, had been sent off.

"You people can go, if you like," Fenn said, to Mrs. Reeves and myself. "I'll take your addresses, and you can expect to be called on as witnesses. If we ever get anything to witness! I never saw such a case! No criminal to arrest, and nobody knows the victim! He must be from out of town. We'll nail Mr. Steele to-morrow, and begin to get somewhere. Also we'll look up Miss Van Allen's credits and business acquaintances. A woman can't have lived two years in a house like this, and not have somebody know her antecedents and relatives. I suppose Mr. Steele brought his friend here, and then, when this thing happened he was scared and lit out."

"Maybe Steele did the killing," suggested Lowney.

"No," disagreed Fenn. "I believe that Dago waiter's yarn. I cross-questioned him a lot before I let him go, and I'm sure he's telling what he saw. I'll see Frascini's head man to-morrow—or, I suppose it's to-morrow now—hello, who's that?"

Another policeman came in at the street door.

"What's up?" he said, looking about in amazement. "You here, Mr.

Fenn? Lowney? What's doing?"

It was Patrolman Ferrall, the officer on the beat.

"Where you been?" asked the coroner. "Don't you know what has happened?"

"No; ever since midnight I been handling a crowd at a fire a couple blocks away. This is Miss Van Allen's house."

"Sure it is, and a friend of hers named Somers has been bumped off."

"What? Killed?"

"That's it. What do you know of Miss Van Allen?"

"Nothing, except that she lives here. Quiet young lady. Nothin' to be said about her. Who's the man?"

"Don't know, except named Somers. R. Somers."

"Never heard of him. Where's Miss Van Allen?"

"Skipped."

"What! That little thoroughbred can't be mixed up in a shootin'!"

"He isn't shot. Stabbed. With a kitchen knife."

"Let's see him."

The coroner and Ferrall went toward the dining room, and, on an irresistible impulse of curiosity, I followed.

"Him!" exclaimed Ferrall, as he caught sight of the dead man's features. "That ain't no Somers. That's Randolph Schuyler."

"What!"

"Sure it is. Schuyler, the millionaire. Lives on Fifth Avenue, not far down from here. Who killed him?"

"But look here. Are you sure this is Randolph Schuyler?"

"Sure? Of course I'm sure. His house is on my beat. I see him often, goin' in or comin' out."

"Well, then we *have* got a big case on our hands! Mason!"

The inspector could scarcely believe Ferrall's statement, but realized that the policeman must know.

"Whew!" he said, trying to think of a dozen things at once. "Then Steele knew him, and introduced him as Somers on purpose. No wonder the clubs didn't know of R. Somers! R. S. on his handkerchiefs and all that. He used a false name 'cause he didn't want it known that Randolph Schuyler came to see Miss Van Allen! Oh, here's a mess! Where's that girl? Why did she kill him?"

"She didn't!" Mrs. Reeves began to cry. "She didn't know it *was* Mr. Schuyler. She doesn't *know* Mr. Schuyler. I'm sure she doesn't, because we were making lists for bazar patrons and she said she would ask only people she knew, and we tried to find somebody who knew Randolph Schuyler, to ask him, but we didn't know anybody who was acquainted with him at all. Oh, it can't be the rich Schuyler! Why would he come here?"

"We must get hold of Mr. Steele as soon as possible," said Fenn, excitedly. "Breen, call up his home address again, and if he isn't there, go there and stick till he comes. Now, for some one to identify this body. Call up the Schuyler house—no, better go around there. Where is it, Ferrall?"

"Go straight out to the Avenue, and turn down. It's No.—only part of a block down. Who's going?"

"You go, Lowney," said Fenn. "Mason, will you go?"

"Yes, of course. Come on, Lowney."

The coroner gave Mrs. Reeves and myself permission to go home, and I was glad to go. But Mrs. Reeves declared her intention of staying the night, what was left of it, in Miss Van Allen's house.

"It's too late for me to go down alone," she said, in her sensible way. "And, too, I'd rather be here, in case—in case Miss Van Allen comes home. I'm her friend, and I know she'd like me to stay."

CHAPTER V

THE SCHUYLER HOUSEHOLD

As for me, I began to collect my senses after the shock of learning the true identity of the dead man. Though I had never met him, Randolph Schuyler was a client and friend of my partner, Charles Bradbury, and I suddenly felt a sort of personal responsibility of action.

For one thing, I disliked the idea of Mr. Schuyler's wife and family receiving the first tidings of the tragedy from the police. It seemed to me a friend ought to break the news, if possible.

I said as much to Coroner Fenn, and he agreed.

"That's so," he said. "It'll be an awful errand. In the middle of the night, too. If you're acquainted, suppose you go there with the boys, Mr. Calhoun."

"I'm not personally acquainted, but Mr. Schuyler is my partner's client, though there's been little business of his with our firm of late. But, as a matter of humanity, I'll go, if you say so, and be of any help I can."

"Go, by all means. Probably they'll be glad of your advice and assistance in many ways."

I dreaded the errand, yet I thought if the police had had to go and tell Winnie and Aunt Lucy any such awful news, how glad they'd be to have somebody present of their own world, even of their own neighborhood. So I went.

As we had been told, the Schuyler house was only a few doors below the Avenue corner. Even as Mason rang the bell, I was thinking how strange that a man should go to a house where he desired to conceal his own name, when it was so near his own dwelling.

And yet, I knew, too, that the houses on Fifth Avenue are as far removed from houses just off the Avenue, as if they were in a different town.

Mason's ring was answered by a keen-eyed man of imperturbable countenance.

"What's wanted?" he said, gazing calmly at the policemen.

"Where is Mr. Schuyler?" asked the inspector, in a matter-of-fact way.

"He's out," said the man, respectfully enough, but of no mind to be loquacious.

"Where?"

"I don't know. He went to his club after dinner, and has not yet returned."

"Are you his valet?"

"Yes, I wait up for him. He comes in with his key. I've no idea when he will return."

"Is his wife at home?"

"Yes, Mrs. Schuyler is at home." Clearly, this man was answering questions only because he recognized the authority that asked them. But he volunteered no information.

"Who else is in the family? Children?"

"No, Mr. Schuyler has no children. His two sisters are here, and Mrs. Schuyler. That is all."

"They are all in bed?"

"Yes, sir. Has anything happened to Mr. Schuyler?"

"Yes, there has. Mr. Schuyler is dead."

"Dead!" The imperturbable calm gave way, and the valet became nervously excited. "What do you mean? Where is he? Shall I go to him?"

"We will come in," said Lowney, for until now, we had stood outside.

"Then we will tell you. Are any of the other servants about?"

"No, sir, they are all in bed."

"Then—what is your name?"

"Cooper, sir."

"Then, Cooper, call the butler, or whoever is in general charge. And—summon Mrs. Schuyler."

"I'll call Jepson, he's the butler, sir. And I'll call Mrs. Schuyler's maid, Tibbetts, if she's in. And the maid, Hester, who waits on the Misses Schuyler. Shall I?"

"Yes, get things started. Get Jepson as soon as you can."

"This is an awful affair," said Mason, as Cooper went off. We were in the hall, a great apartment more like a room, save that a broad staircase curved up at one side. The furnishings were magnificent, but in a taste heavily ornate and a little old-fashioned. There were carved and upholstered benches, but none of us cared to sit. The tension was too great.

"Keep your eyes open, Lowney," he went on. "There's lots to be picked up from servants, before they're really on their guard. Get all you can about Mr. Schuyler's evening habits from the man, Cooper. But go easy with the ladies. It's hard enough for them at best."

The valet reappeared with Jepson. This butler was of the accepted type, portly and important, but the staggering news Cooper had evidently told him, had made him a man among men.

"What's this?" he said, gravely. "The master dead? Apoplexy?"

"No, Jepson. Mr. Schuyler was killed by some one. We don't know who did it."

"Killed! Murdered! My God!" The butler spoke in a strong, low voice with no hint of dramatic effect. "How will Mrs. Schuyler bear it?"

"How shall we tell her, Jepson?" Mason showed a consultant air, for the butler was so evidently a man of judgment and sense.

"We must waken her maid, and let her rouse Mrs. Schuyler. Then the other ladies, Mr. Schuyler's sisters, we must *call* them."

"Yes, Jepson, do all those things, as quickly as you can."

But the wait seemed interminable.

At last the butler came back, and asked us up to the library, the front room on the floor above. Here a footman was lighting a fire on the hearth, for the house had the chill of the small hours.

First came the two sisters. These ladies, though not elderly, were middle-aged, and perhaps, a few years older than their brother. They were austere and prim, of aristocratic features and patrician air.

But they were almost hysterical in their excitement. A distressed maid hovered behind them with sal volatile. The ladies were fully attired, but caps on their heads and woolly wraps flung round them bore witness to hasty dressing.

"What is it?" cried Miss Rhoda, the younger of the two. "What has happened to Randolph?"

I introduced myself to them. I told them, as gently as I could, the bare facts, deeming it wise to make no prevarication.

So raptly did they listen and so earnestly did I try to omit horrible details, and yet tell the truth, that I did not hear Mrs. Schuyler enter the room. But she did come in, and heard also, the story as I told it.

"Can it not be," I heard a soft voice behind me say, "can it not yet be there is some mistake? Who says that man is my husband?"

I turned to see the white face and clenched hands of Randolph Schuyler's widow. She was holding herself together, and trying to get a gleam of hope from uncertainty.

If I had felt pity and sorrow for her before I saw her, it was doubly poignant now.

Ruth Schuyler was one of those gentle, appealing women, helplessly feminine in emergency. Her frightened, grief-stricken eyes looked out of a small, pale face, and her bloodless lips quivered as she caught them between her teeth in an effort to preserve her self-control.

"I am Chester Calhoun," I said, and she bowed in acknowledgment. "I am junior partner in the firm of Bradbury and Calhoun. Mr. Bradbury is one of your husband's lawyers and also a friend, so, as circumstances brought it about, I came here, with Inspector Mason, to tell you—to tell you—"

Mrs. Schuyler sank into a seat. Still with that air of determination to be calm, she gripped the chair arms and said, "I heard you tell Miss Schuyler that Randolph has been killed. I ask you, may it not be some one else? Why should he be at a house where people called him by a name not his own?"

She had heard, then, all I had told the older ladies. For Mrs. Schuyler was not old. She must be, I thought at once, years younger than her husband. Perhaps a second wife. I was glad she had heard, for it saved repeating the awful narrative.

"He has not been identified, Mrs. Schuyler," I said, "except by the policeman of this precinct, who declares he knows him well."

I was glad to give her this tiny loophole of possibility of mistaken identity, and she eagerly grasped at it.

"You must make sure," she said, looking at Inspector Mason.

"I'm afraid there's no room for doubt, ma'am, but I'm about to send the man, the valet, over to see him. Do you wish any one else to go—from the house?"

Mrs. Schuyler shuddered. "Don't ask me to go," she said, piteously.

"For I can't think it is really Mr. Schuyler—and if it should be—"

"Oh, no ma'am, you needn't go. None of the family, I should say."

Mason looked at the elder ladies.

"No, no," cried Miss Sarah, "we couldn't think of it! But let Jepson go. He is a most reliable man."

"Yes," said Mrs. Schuyler, "send Cooper and Jepson both. Oh, go quickly—I cannot bear this suspense!" She turned to me, as the two men who had been hovering in the doorway, came in to take Mason's orders. "I thank you, Mr. Calhoun. It was truly kind of you to come. Tibbetts, get me a wrap, please."

This was Mrs. Schuyler's own maid, who went on the errand at once. More servants had gathered; one or two footmen, a silly French parlor-maid or waitress, and from downstairs I heard the hushed voices of others.

Tibbetts returned, and laid a fleecy white shawl about her mistress' shoulders. Mrs. Schuyler wore a house dress of dull blue. Her hair of an ash-blond hue, was coiled on top of her head; and to my surprise, when I noticed it, she wore a string of large pearls round her throat, and on her hands were two rings, each set with an enormous pearl.

I must have been awkward enough to glance at the pearls, for Mrs. Schuyler remarked, "I dressed so hastily, I kept on my pearls. I wear them at night sometimes, to preserve their luster."

Then she apparently forgot them, for without self-consciousness she turned to the detective and began asking questions. Nervously she inquired concerning minutest details, and I surmised that side by side with her grief at the tragedy was a very human and feminine dismay at the thought of her husband, stabbed to death in another woman's house!

"Who is Miss Van Allen?" she asked over and over again, unsatisfied with the scant information Lowney could give.

"And she lives near here? Just down the side street? Who *is* she?"

"I don't think she is anyone you ever heard of," I said to her. "She is a pleasant young woman, and so far as I know, all that is correct and proper."

"Then why would she have Randolph Schuyler visiting her?" flashed the retort. "Is that correct and proper?"

"It may be so," I said, for I felt a sort of loyalty to Vicky Van. "You see, she was not acquainted with Mr. Schuyler until this evening."

"Why did he go there, then?"

"Steele brought him—Norman Steele."

"I don't know any Mr. Steele."

I began to think that Randolph Schuyler had possessed many acquaintances of whom his wife knew nothing, and I concluded to see Bradbury before I revealed any more of Schuyler's affairs.

And then, Lowney began adroitly to put questions instead of answering them.

He inquired concerning Mr. Schuyler's habits and pursuits, his recreations and his social life.

All three of the women gave responses to these queries, and I learned many things.

First, that Randolph Schuyler was one manner of man at home and another abroad. The household, it was plain to be seen, was one of most conservative customs and rigidly straightbacked in its conventions.

Mrs. Schuyler was not a second wife. She had been married about seven years, and had lived the last five of them in the house we were now in. She was much younger than her husband, and he had, I could see, kept her from all knowledge of or participation in his Bohemian tastes. They were the sort of people who have a box at the opera and are patrons of the best and most exclusive functions of the highest society. Mrs. Schuyler, after the first shock, recovered her poise, and though now and then a tremor shook her slight frame, she bore herself with dignity and calm.

The two maiden ladies also grew quieter, but we all nervously awaited the return of the butler. At last he came.

"It's the master, Madame," he said, simply, to his mistress as he entered the room. "He is dead."

The deferential gravity of his tone impressed me anew with the man's worth, and I felt that the stricken wife had a tower of strength in the faithful servitor.

"I left Cooper there, Madame," he went on. "They—they will not bring Mr. Schuyler home tonight. In the morning, perhaps. And now, Madame, will you not go to rest? I will be at the service of these gentlemen."

It seemed cruel to torture them further that night, and the three ladies were dismissed by Lowney, and, attended by their maids, they left us.

"Now, Jepson," Lowney began, "tell us all you know about Mr.

Schuyler's doings. I daresay you know as much as the valet does. Was

Mr. Schuyler as a man of the world, different from his life in this house?"

Jepson looked perturbed. "That's not for me to say, sir."

"Oh, yes, it is, my man. The law asks you, and it is for you to tell all you know."

"Well, then," and the butler weighed his words, "my master was always most strict of habit in his home. The ladies are very reserved, and abide by rules and standards, that are, if I may say so, out of date to-day. But, though Mr. Schuyler was by no means a gay man or a member of any fast set, yet I have reason to think, sir, that at times he might go to places where he would not take Mrs. Schuyler, and where he would not wish Mrs. Schuyler to know he had been himself."

"That's enough," said Lowney. "I've got his number. Now, Jepson, had your master any enemies, that you know of?"

"Not that I know of. But I know nothing of Mr. Schuyler's affairs. I see him go out of an evening, and I may notice that he comes in very late, but as to his friends or enemies, I know nothing at all. I am not one to pry, sir, and my master has always trusted me. I have endeavored not to betray that trust."

This might have sounded pharisaical in a man of less sincerity of speech. But Jepson's clear, straightforward eyes forbade any doubt of his honesty and truth.

Again I was glad that Mrs. Schuyler had this staunch helper at her side, for I foresaw troublous times in store for her.

"And you never heard of this Miss Van Allen? Never was in her house before?"

"Never, sir. I know nothing of the houses on the side blocks." I winced at this. "Of course, I know the people who come to this house, but there is among them no Miss Van Allen."

"Rather not!" I thought to myself. And then I sighed at the memory of

Vicky Van. Had she killed this millionaire? And if so, why?

I was sure Vicky had never met Randolph Schuyler before that evening. I had seen their meeting, and it was too surely the glance of stranger to stranger that had passed between them, to make a previous acquaintance possible. Vicky had been charming to him, as she always was to every one, but she showed no special interest, and if she did really kill him, it was some unguessable motive that prompted the deed.

I thought it over. Schuyler, at the club, dined and wined, had perhaps heard Norman Steele extol the charms of Vicky Van. Interested, he had asked to be taken to Vicky's house, but, as it was so near his own, a sense of precaution led him to adopt another name.

Then the inexplicable sequel!

And the mysterious disappearance of Vicky herself.

Though, of course, the girl would return. As Mrs. Reeves had said, doubtless she had witnessed the crime, and, scared out of her wits, had run away. Her return would clear up the matter.

Then the waiter's story?

Well, there was much to be done. And, as I suddenly bethought me, it was time I, myself went home!

As I passed Vicky Van's house, on my way home, I saw lights pretty much all over it, and was strongly tempted to go in. But common sense told me I needed rest, and not only did I have many matters to attend to on the morrow, but I had to tell the story to Aunt Lucy and Winnie!

That, of itself, would require some thought and tactful management, for I was not willing to have them condemn Vicky Van entirely, and yet, I could think of no argument to put forth for the girl's innocence.

Time alone must tell.

CHAPTER VI

VICKY'S WAYS

"Ches-ter Cal-houn! Get up this minute! There's a reporter downstairs! A reporter!"

My sleepy eyes opened to find Winnie pounding my shoulder as it humped beneath the blanket.

"Hey? What?" I grunted, trying to collect my perceptions.

"A reporter!" If Winnie had said a Bengal tiger, she couldn't have looked more terrified.

"Great Scott! Win—I remember! Clear out, I'll be down in a minute."

I dressed in record time and went downstairs in three leaps.

In the library, I found Aunt Lucy, wearing an expression that she might have shown if the garbage man had asked her to a dance.

But Winnie was eagerly drinking in the story poured forth by the said reporter, who was quite evidently enjoying his audience.

"Oh, Chet, this is Mr. Bemis of *The Meteor*. He's telling us all about the—you know—what happened."

Winnie was too timid to say the word *murder*, and I was sorry she had to hear the awful tale from any one but myself. However, there was no help for it now, and I joined the group and did all I could to bring Aunt Lucy's eyebrows and nose down to their accustomed levels.

But it *was* an awful story, make the best of it, and the truth had to be told.

"It is appalling," conceded Aunt Lucy, at length, "but the most regrettable circumstance, to my mind, is your connection with it all, Chester."

"Now, Auntie, have a little heart for poor Mrs. Schuyler, and those old lady sisters. Also for the man himself—"

"Oh, I have, Chet. I'm not inhuman. But those things are in the papers every day, and while one feels a general sympathy, it can't be personal if one doesn't know the people. But, for you to be mixed up in such matters—"

"I wasn't mixed up in it, Aunt Lucy, except as I chose to mix myself. And I've no doubt I should have gotten into it anyway. Mr. Bradbury will have a lot to do with it, I'm sure. I'm no better than he to mix in."

"In a business way, yes. But you were there socially—where a murder was committed—"

Aunt Lucy could have shown no more horror of it all, if I had been the convicted criminal.

"And, I'm glad I was!" I cried, losing patience a little. "If I can be of any help to the Schuyler people or to Miss Van Allen, I shall be willing to do all I can."

"But Miss Van Allen is the—the murderer!" and Aunt Lucy whispered the word.

"Don't say that!" I cried sharply. "You don't know it at all, and there's no reason to condemn the girl—"

I paused. Bemis was taking in my every word with a canny understanding of what I said, and also of what I didn't say.

"Where do your suspicions tend, Mr. Calhoun?" he said smoothly.

"Frankly, Mr. Bemis, I don't know. I am an acquaintance of Miss Van Allen and I cannot reconcile the idea of crime with her happy, gentle nature. Nor can I see any reason to suspect the waiter who first told of the matter. But might not some person, some enemy of Mr. Schuyler, have been secreted in the house—"

"A plausible theory," agreed Bemis, "even an obvious one, but almost no chance of it. I've seen the caterer's people, and they were in charge of the basement rooms and the dining-room all the evening. Unless it were one of the guests at the party, I think no intruder could have gotten in."

"Well," I returned, uneasily, for I wished he would go, "it isn't up to us to invent theories or to defend them. I will answer your necessary questions, but pardon me, if I remind you that I am a busy man and I haven't yet had my breakfast."

Bemis took the hint, and after a string of definite and pertinent questions, he left.

Winnie tried to detain him, but my curt courtesy made it difficult for him to linger.

"Oh, Chessy," cried my sister, as soon as Bemis had gone, "it's awful,

I know, but *isn't* it exciting?"

"Hush, Winnie," reproved Aunt Lucy. "A girl of your age should know nothing of these things, and I want you to put it out of your mind. You can be of no help, and I do not want your nerves disturbed by the harrowing details."

"That's all right, Aunt Lucy," I put in, "but this is going to be a celebrated case, and Winnie can't be kept in ignorance of its developments. Now be a good sort, Auntie—accept the inevitable. Try to realize that I must do what seems to me my duty, and if that brings us more or less into the limelight of publicity, it is a pity, but it can't be helped."

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