

MacGowan Alice, Newberry Perry

The Million-Dollar Suitcase



Alice MacGowan

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CHAPTER I

WORTH GILBERT

On the blank silence that followed my last words, there in the big, dignified room with its Circassian walnut and sound-softening rugs, Dykeman, the oldest director, squalled out as though he had been bitten,

"All there is to tell! But it can't be! It isn't possib – " His voice cracked, split on the word, and the rest came in an agonized squeak, "A man can't just vanish into thin air!"

"A man!" Knapp, the cashier, echoed. "A suitcase full of money – our money – can't vanish into thin air in the course of a few hours."

Feverishly they passed the timeworn phrase back and forth; it would have been ludicrous if it hadn't been so deadly serious. Well, money when you come to think of it, is its very existence to such an institution; it was not to be wondered at that the twelve men around the long table in the directors' room of the Van Ness Avenue Savings Bank found this a life or death matter.

"How much – ?" began heavy-set, heavy-voiced old Anson, down at the lower end, but stuck and got no further. There was a smitten look on every face at the contemplation – a suitcase could hold so unguessably great a sum expressed in terms of cash and securities.

"We'll have the exact amount in a few moments – I've just set them to verifying," President Whipple indicated with a slight backward nod the second and smaller table in the room, where two clerks delved mole-like among piles of securities, among greenbacks and yellowbacks bound round with paper collars, and stacks of coin.

The blinds were down, only the table lamps on, and a gooseneck over where the men counted. It put the place all in shadow, and threw out into bolder relief the faces around that board, gray-white, denatured, all with the financier's curiously unhuman look. The one fairly cheerful countenance in sight was that of A. G. Cummings, the bank's attorney.

For myself, I was only waiting to hear what results those clerks would bring us. So far, Whipple had been quite noncommittal: the extraordinary state of the market – everything so upset that a bank couldn't afford even the suspicion of a loss or irregularity – hinting at something in his mind not evident to the rest of us. I was just rising to go round and ask him quietly if, having reported, I might not be excused to get on the actual work, when the door opened.

I can't say why the young fellow who stood in it should have seemed so foreign to the business in hand; perhaps the carriage of his tall figure, the military abruptness of his movements, the way he swung the door far back against the wall and halted there, looking us over. But I do know that no sooner had Worth Gilbert, lately home from France, crossed the threshold, meeting Whipple's outstretched hand, nodding carelessly to the others, than suddenly every man in the room seemed older, less a man. We were dead ones; he the only live wire in the place.

"Boyne," the president turned quickly to me, "would you mind going over for Captain Gilbert's benefit what you've just said?"

The newcomer had, so far, not made any movement to join the circle at the table. He stood there, chin up, looking straight at us all, but quite through us. At the back of the gaze was a something between weary and fierce that I have noticed in the eyes of so many of our boys home from what they'd witnessed and gone through over there, when forced to bring their attention to the stale, bloodless affairs of civil life. Used to the instant, conclusive fortunes of war, they can hardly handle themselves

when matters hitch and halt upon customs and legalities; the only thing that appeals to them is the big chance, win or lose, and have it over. Such a man doesn't speak the language of the group that was there gathered. Just looking at him, old Dykeman rasped, without further provocation,

"What's Captain Gilbert got to do with the private concerns of this bank?"

As though the words – and their tone – had been a cordial invitation, rather than an offensive challenge, the young man, who had still shown no sign of an intention to come into the meeting at all, walked to the table, drew out a chair and sat down.

"Pardon me, Mr. Dykeman," Cummings' voice had a wire edge on it, "the Hanford block of stock in this bank has, as I think you very well know, passed fully into Gilbert hands to-day."

"Thomas A. Gilbert," Dykeman was sparing of words.

"Captain Worth Gilbert's father," Whipple attempted pacification. "Mr. Gilbert senior was with me till nearly noon, closing up the transfer. He had hardly left when we discovered the shortage. After consultation, Knapp and I got hold of Cummings. We wanted to get you gentlemen here – have the capital of the bank represented, as nearly as we could – and found that Mr. Gilbert had taken the twelve-forty-five train for Santa Ysobel; so, as Captain Gilbert was to be found, we felt that if we got him it would be practically – er – quite the same thing – "

Worth Gilbert had sat in the chair he selected, absolutely indifferent. It was only when Dykeman, hanging to his point, spoke again, that I saw a quick gleam of blue fire come into those hawk eyes under the slant brow. He gave a sort of detached attention as Dykeman sputtered indecently.

"Not the same thing at all! Sons can't always speak for fathers, any more than fathers can always speak for sons. In this case – "

He broke off with his ugly old mouth open. Worth Gilbert, the son of divorced parents, with a childhood that had divided time between a mother in the East and a California father, surveyed the parchment-like countenance leisurely after the crackling old voice was hushed. Finally he grunted inarticulately (I'm sorry I can't find a more imposing word for a returned hero); and answered all objections with,

"I'm here now – and here I stay. What's the excitement?"

"I was just asking Mr. Boyne to tell you," Whipple came in smoothly.

No one else offered any objections. What I repeated, briefly, amounted to this:

Directly after closing time to-day – which was noon, as this was Saturday – Knapp, the cashier of the bank, had discovered a heavy shortage, and it was decided on a quick investigation that Edward Clayte, one of the paying tellers, had walked out with the money in a suitcase. I was immediately called in on what appeared a wide-open trail, with me so close behind Clayte that you'd have said there was nothing to it. I followed him – and the suitcase – to his apartment at the St. Dunstan, found he'd got there at twenty-five minutes to one, and I barely three quarters of an hour after.

"How do you get the exact minute Clayte arrived?" Anson stopped me at this point, "and the positive knowledge that he had the suitcase with him?"

"Clayte asked the time – from the clerk at the desk – as he came in. He put the suitcase down while he set his watch. The clerk saw him pick it up and go into the elevator; Mrs. Griggsby, a woman at work mending carpet on the seventh floor – which is his – saw him come out of the elevator carrying it, and let himself into his room. There the trail ends."

"Ends?" As my voice halted young Gilbert's word came like a bullet. "The trail can't end unless the man was there."

"Or the suitcase," little old Sillsbee quavered, and Worth Gilbert gave him a swift, half-humorous glance.

"Bath and bedroom," I said, "that suite has three windows, seven stories above the ground. I found them all locked – not mere latches – the St. Dunstan has burglar-proof locks. No disturbance in the room; all neat, in place, the door closed with the usual spring lock; and I had to get Mrs. Griggsby

to move, since she was tacking the carpet right at the threshold. Everything was in that room that should have been there – except Clayte and the suitcase."

The babel of complaint and suggestion broke out as I finished, exactly as it had done when I got to this point before: "The Griggsby woman ought to be kept under surveillance"; "The clerk, the house servants ought to be watched," – and so on, and so on. I curtly reiterated my assurance that such routine matters had been promptly and thoroughly attended to. My nerves were getting raw. I'm not so young as I was. This promised to be one of those grinding cases where the detective agency is run through the rollers so many times that it comes out pretty slim in the end, whether that end is failure or success.

The only thing in sight that it didn't make me sick to look at was that silent young fellow sitting there, never opening his trap, giving things a chance to develop, not rushing in on them with the forceps. It was a crazy thing for Whipple to call this meeting – have all these old, scared men on my back before I could take the measure of what I was up against. What, exactly, had the Van Ness Avenue Bank lost? That, and not anything else, was the key for my first moves. And at last a clerk crossed to our table, touched Whipple's arm and presented a sheet of paper.

"I'll read the total, gentlemen." The president stared at the sheet he held, moistened his lips, gulped, gasped, "I – I'd no idea it was so much!" and finished in a changed voice, "nine hundred and eighty seven thousand, two hundred and thirty four dollars."

A deathlike hush. Dykeman's mere look was a call for the ambulance; Anson slumped in his chair; little old Sillsbee sat twisted away so that his face was in shadow, but the knuckles showed bone white where his hand gripped the table top. None of them seemed able to speak; the young voice that broke startlingly on the stillness had the effect of scaring the others, with its tone of nonchalance, rather than reassuring them. Worth Gilbert leaned forward and looked round in my direction with,

"This is beginning to be interesting. What do the police say of it?"

"We've not thought well to notify them yet." Whipple's eye consulted that of his cashier and he broke off. Quietly the clerks got out with the last load of securities; Knapp closed the door carefully behind them, and as he returned to us, Whipple repeated, "I had no idea it was so big," his tone almost pleading as he looked from one to the other. "But I felt from the first that we'd better keep this thing to ourselves. We don't want a run on the bank, and under present financial conditions, almost anything might start one. But – almost a million dollars!"

He seemed unable to go on; none of the other men at the table had anything to offer. It was the silent youngster, the outsider, who spoke again.

"I suppose Clayte was bonded – for what that's worth?"

"Fifteen thousand dollars," Knapp, the cashier, gave the information dully. The sum sounded pitiful beside that which, we were to understand, had traveled out of the bank as currency and unregistered securities in Clayte's suitcase.

"Bonding company will hound him, won't they?" young Gilbert put it bluntly. "Will the Clearing House help you out?" in the tone of one discussing a lost umbrella.

"Not much chance – now." Whipple's face was sickly. "You know as well as I do that we are going to get little help from outside. I want you to all stand by me now – keep this quiet – among ourselves –"

"Among ourselves!" rapped out Kirkpatrick. "Then it leaks – we have a run – and where are you?"

"No, no. Just long enough to give Boyne here a chance to recover our money without publicity – try it out, anyhow."

"Well," said Anson sullenly, "that's what he's paid for. How long is it going to take him?"

I made no attempt to answer that fool question; Cummings spoke for me, lawyer fashion, straddling the question, bringing up the arguments pro and con.

"Your detective asks for publicity to assist his search. You refuse it. Then you've got to be indulgent with him in the matter of time. Understand me, you may be right; I'm not questioning the wisdom of secrecy, though as a lawyer I generally think the sooner you get to the police with a crime the better. You all can see how publicity and a sizable reward offered would give Mr. Boyne a hundred thousand assistants – conscious and unconscious – to help nab Clayte."

"And we'd be a busted bank before you found him," groaned Knapp. "We've got to keep this thing to ourselves. I agree with Whipple."

"It's all we can do," the president repeated.

"Suppose a State bank examiner walks in on you Monday?" demanded the attorney.

"We take that chance – that serious chance," replied Whipple solemnly.

Silence after that again till Cummings spoke.

"Gentlemen, there are here present twelve of the principal stockholders of the bank." He paused a moment to estimate. "The capital is practically represented. Speaking as your legal advisor, I am obliged to say that you should not let the bank take such a risk as Mr. Whipple suggests. You are threatened with a staggering loss, but, after all, a high percent of money lost by defalcations is recovered – made good – wholly or in part."

"Nearly a million dollars!" croaked old Sillsbee.

"Yes, yes, of course," Cummings agreed hastily; "the larger amount's against you. The men who can engineer such a theft are almost as strong as you are. You've got to make every edge cut – use every weapon that's at hand. And most of all, gentlemen, you've got to stand together. No dissensions. As a temporary expedient – to keep the bank sufficiently under cover and still allow Boyne the publicity he needs – replace this money pro rata among yourselves. That wouldn't clean any of you. Announce a small defalcation, such as Clayte's bond would cover, so you could collect there; use all the machinery of the police. Then when Clayte's found, the money recovered, you reimburse yourselves."

"But if he's never found! If it's never recovered?" Knapp asked huskily; he was least able of any man in the room to stand the loss.

"What do you say, Gilbert?" The attorney looked toward the young man, who, all through the discussion, had been staring straight ahead of him. He came round to the lawyer's question like one roused from other thoughts, and agreed shortly.

"Not a bad bet."

"Well – Boyne – " Whipple was giving way an inch at a time.

"It's a peculiar case," I began, then caught myself up with, "All cases are peculiar. The big point here is to get our man before he can get rid of the money. We were close after Clayte; even that locked room in the St. Dunstan needn't have stopped us. If he wasn't in it, he was somewhere not far outside it. He'd had no time to make a real getaway. All I needed to lay hands on him was a good description."

"Description?" echoed Whipple. "Your agency's got descriptions on file – thumb prints – photographs – of every employee of this bank."

"Every one of 'em but Clayte," I said. "When I came to look up the files, there wasn't a thing on him. Don't think I ever laid eyes on the man myself."

A description of Edward Clayte? Every man at the table – even old Sillsbee – sat up and opened his mouth to give one; but Knapp beat them to it, with,

"Clayte's worked in this bank eight years. We all know him. You can get just as many good descriptions as there are people on our payroll or directors in this room – and plenty more at the St. Dunstan, I'll be bound."

"You think so?" I said wearily. "I have not been idle, gentlemen; I have interviewed his associates. Listen to this; it is a composite of the best I've been able to get." I read: "Edward Clayte; height about five feet seven or eight; weight between one hundred and forty and one hundred and fifty pounds; age somewhere around forty; smooth face; medium complexion, fairish; brown hair;

light eyes; apparently commonplace features; dressed neatly in blue business suit, black shoes, black derby hat – "

"Wait a minute," interposed Knapp. "Is that what they gave you at the St. Dunstan – what he was wearing when he came in?"

I nodded.

"Well, I'd have said he had on tan shoes and a fedora. He *did*– or was that yesterday? But aside from that, it's a perfect description; brings the man right up before me."

I heard a chuckle from Worth Gilbert.

"That description," I said, "is gibberish; mere words. Would it bring Clayte up before any one who had never seen him? Ask Captain Gilbert, who doesn't know the man. I say that's a list of the points at which he resembles every third office man you meet on the street. What I want is the points at which he'd differ. You have all known Clayte for years; forget his regularities, and tell me his peculiarities – looks, manners, dress or habits."

There was a long pause, broken finally by Whipple.

"He never smoked," said the bank president.

"Occasionally he did," contradicted Knapp, and the pause continued till I asked,

"Any peculiarities of clothing?"

"Oh, yes," said Whipple. "Very neat. Usually blue serge."

"But sometimes gray," added Knapp, heavily, and old Sillsbee piped in,

"I've seen that feller wear pin-check; I know I have."

I was fed up on clothes.

"How did he brush his hair?" I questioned.

"Smoothed down from a part high on the left," Knapp came back promptly.

"On the right," boomed old Anson from the foot of the table.

"Sometimes – yes – I guess he did," Knapp conceded hesitantly.

"Oh, well then, what color was it? Maybe you can agree better on that."

"Sort of mousy color," Knapp thought.

"O Lord! Mousy colored!" groaned Dykeman under his breath. "Listen to 'em!"

"Well, isn't it?" Knapp was a bit stung.

"House mousy, or field mousy?" Cummings wanted to know.

"Knapp's right enough," Whipple said with dignity. "The man's hair is a medium brown – indeterminate brown." He glanced around the table at the heads of hair under the electric lights. "Something the color of Merrill's," and a director began stroking his hair nervously.

"No, no; darker than Merrill's," broke in Kirkpatrick. "Isn't it, Knapp?"

"Why, I was going to say lighter," admitted the cashier, discouragedly.

"Never mind," I sighed. "Forget the hair. Come on – what color are his eyes?"

"Blue," said Whipple.

"Gray," said Knapp.

"Brown," said Kirkpatrick.

They all spoke in one breath. And as I despairingly laid down my pencil, the last man repeated firmly,

"Brown. But – they might be light brown – or hazel, y'know."

"But, after all, Boyne," Whipple appealed to me, "you've got a fairly accurate description of the man, one that fits him all right."

"Does it? Then he's description proof. No moles, scars or visible marks?" I suggested desperately.

"None." There was a negative shaking of heads.

"No mannerisms? No little tricks, such as a twist of the mouth, a mincing step, or a head carried on one side?"

More shakes of negation from the men who knew Clayte.

"Well, at least you can tell me who are his friends – his intimates?"

Nobody answered.

"He must have friends?" I urged.

"He hasn't," maintained Whipple. "Knapp is as close to him as any man in San Francisco."

The cashier squirmed, but said nothing.

"But outside the bank. Who were his associates?"

"Don't think he had any," from Knapp.

"Relatives?"

"None – I know he hadn't."

"Girls? Lord! Didn't he have a girl?"

"Not a girl."

"No associates – no girl? For the love of Mike, what could such a man intend to do with all that money?" I gasped. "Where did he spend his time when he wasn't in the bank?"

Whipple looked at his cashier for an answer. But Knapp was sitting, head down, in a painful brown study, and the president himself began haltingly.

"Why, he was perhaps the one man in the bank that I knew least about. The truth is he was so unobjectionable in every way, personally unobtrusive, quite unimportant and uninteresting; really – er – un-everything, such a – a – "

"Shadow," Cummings suggested.

"That's the word – shadow – I never thought to inquire where he went till he walked out of here this noon with the bank's money crammed in that suitcase."

"Was the Saturday suitcase a regular thing?" I asked, and Whipple looked bewildered. But Knapp woke up with,

"Oh, yes. For years. Studious fellow. Books to be exchanged at the public library, I think. No – " Knapp spoke heavily. "Come to think of it, guess that was special work. He told me once he was taking some sort of correspondence course."

"Special work!" chuckled Worth Gilbert. "I'll tell the world!"

"Oh, well, give me a description of the suitcase," I hurried.

"Brown. Sole-leather. That's all I ever noticed," from Whipple, a bit stiffly.

"Brass rings and lock, I suppose?"

"Brass or nickel; I don't remember. What'd you say, Knapp?"

"I wouldn't know now, if it was canvas and tin," replied the harried cashier.

"Gentlemen," I said, looking across at the clock, "since half-past two my men have been watching docks, ferries, railroad stations, every garage near the St. Dunstan, the main highways out of town. Seven of them on the job, and in the first hour they made ten arrests, on that description; and every time, sure they had their man. They thought, just as you seem to think, that the bunch of words described something. We're getting nowhere, gentlemen, and time means money here."

CHAPTER II

SIGHT UNSEEN

In the squabble and snatch of argument, given dignity only because it concerned the recovery of near a million dollars, we seemed to have lost Worth Gilbert entirely. He kept his seat, that chair he had taken instantly when old Dykeman seemed to wish to have it denied him; but he sat on it as though it were a lone rock by the sea. I didn't suppose he was hearing what we said any more than he would have heard the mewling of a lot of gulls, when, on a sudden silence, he burst out,

"For heaven's sake, if you men can't decide on anything, sell me the suitcase! I'll buy it, as it is, and clean up the job."

"Sell you – the suitcase – Clayte's suitcase?" They sat up on the edge of their chairs; bewildered, incredulous, hostile. Such a bunch is very like a herd of cattle; anything they don't understand scares them. Even the attorney studied young Gilbert with curious interest. I was mortal glad I hadn't said what was the fact, that with the naming of the enormous sum lost I was certain this was a sizable conspiracy with long-laid plans. They were mistrustful enough as Whipple finally questioned,

"Is this a bona-fide offer, Captain Gilbert?" and Dykeman came in after him.

"A gambler's chance at stolen money – is that what you figure on buying, sir? Is that it?" And heavy-faced Anson asked bluntly,

"Who's to set the price on it? You or us? There's practically a million dollars in that suitcase. It belongs to the bank. If you've got an idea that you can buy up the chance of it for about fifty percent – you're mistaken. We have too much faith in Mr. Boyne and his agency for that. Why, at this moment, one of his men may have laid hands on Clayte, or found the man who planned – "

He stopped with his mouth open. I saw the same suspicion that had taken his breath away grip momentarily every man at the table. A hint of it was in Whipple's voice as he asked, gravely:

"Do you bind yourself to pursue Clayte and bring him, if possible, to justice?"

"Bind myself to nothing. I'll give eight hundred thousand dollars for that suitcase."

He fumbled in his pocket with an interrogative look at Whipple, and, "May I smoke in here?" and lit a cigarette without waiting a reply.

Banking institutions take some pains to keep in their employ no young men who are known to play poker; but a poker face at that board would have acquired more than its share of dignity. As it was, you could see, almost as though written there, the agonizing doubt running riot in their faces as to whether Worth Gilbert was a young hero coming to the bank's rescue, or a con man playing them for suckers. It was Knapp who said at last, huskily,

"I think we should close with Captain Gilbert's offer." The cashier had a considerable family, and I knew his recently bought Pacific Avenue home was not all paid for.

"We might consider it," Whipple glanced doubtfully at his associates. "If everything else fails, this might be a way out of the difficulty for us."

If everything else failed! President Whipple was certainly no poker player. Worth Gilbert gave one swift look about the ring of faces, pushed a brown, muscular left hand out on the table top, glancing at the wrist watch there, and suggested brusquely,

"Think it over. My offer holds for fifteen minutes. Time to get at all the angles of the case. Huh! Gentlemen! I seem to have started something!"

For the directors and stockholders of the Van Ness Avenue Savings Bank were at that moment almost as yappy and snappy as a wolf pack. Dykeman wanted to know about the one hundred and eighty seven thousand odd dollars not covered by Worth's offer – did they lose that? Knapp was urging that Clayte's bond, when they'd collected, would shade the loss; Whipple reminding them that they'd have to spend a good deal – maybe a great deal – on the recovery of the suitcase; money

that Worth Gilbert would have to spend instead if they sold to him; and finally an ugly mutter from somewhere that maybe young Gilbert wouldn't have to spend so very much to recover that suitcase – maybe he wouldn't!

The tall young fellow looked thoughtfully at his watch now and again. Cummings and I chipped into the thickest of the row and convinced them that he meant what he said, not only by his offer, but by its time limit.

"How about publicity, if this goes?" Whipple suddenly interrogated, raising his voice to top the pack-yell. "Even with eight hundred thousand dollars in our vaults, a run's not a thing that does a bank any good. I suppose," stretching up his head to see across his noisy associates, "I suppose, Captain Gilbert, you'll be retaining Boyne's agency? In that case, do you give him the publicity he wants?"

"Course he does!" Dykeman hissed. "Can't you see? Damn fool wants his name in the papers! Rotten story like this – about some lunatic buying a suitcase with a million in it – would ruin any bank if it got into print." Dykeman's breath gave out. "And – it's – it's – just the kind of story the accursed yellow press would eat up. Let it alone, Whipple. Let his damned offer alone. There's a joker in it somewhere."

"There won't be any offer in about three minutes," Cummings quietly reminded them. "If you'd asked my opinion – and giving you opinions is what you pay me a salary for – I'd have said close with him while you can."

Whipple gave me an agonized glance. I nodded affirmatively. He put the question to vote in a breath; the ayes had it, old Dykeman shouting after them in an angry squeak.

"No! No!" and adding as he glared about him, "I'd like to be able to look a newspaper in the face; but never again! Never again!"

I made my way over to Gilbert and stood in front of him.

"You've bought something, boy," I said. "If you mean to keep me on as your detective, you can assure these people that I'll do my darndest to give information to the police and keep it out of the papers. What's happened here won't get any further than this room – through me."

"You're hired, Jerry Boyne." Gilbert slapped me on the back affectionately. After all, he hadn't changed so much in his four years over there; I began to see more than traces of the enthusiastic youngster to whom I used to spin detective yarns in the grill at the St. Francis or on the rocks by the Cliff House. "Sure, we'll keep it out of the papers. Suits me. I'd rather not pose as the fool soon parted from his money."

The remark was apropos; Knapp had feverishly beckoned the lawyer over to a little side desk; they were down at it, the light snapped on, writing, trying to frame up an agreement that would hold water. One by one the others went and looked on nervously as they worked; by the time they'd finished something, everybody'd seen it but Worth; and when it was finally put in his hands, all he seemed to notice was the one point of the time they'd set for payment.

"It'll be quite some stunt to get the amount together by ten o'clock Monday," he said slowly. "There are securities to be converted – "

He paused, and looked up on a queer hush.

"Securities?" croaked Dykeman. "To be converted – ? Oh!"

"Yes," in some surprise. "Or would the bank prefer to have them turned over in their present form?"

Again a strained moment, broken by Whipple's nervous,

"Maybe that would be better," and a quickly suppressed chuckle from Cummings.

The agreement was in duplicate. It gave Worth Gilbert complete ownership of a described sole-leather suitcase and its listed contents, and, as he had demanded, it bound him to nothing save the payment. Cummings said frankly that the transaction was illegal from end to end, and that any assurance as to the bank's ceasing to pursue Clayte would amount to compounding a felony. Yet we all signed solemnly, the lawyer and I as witnesses. A financier's idea of indecency is something

about money which hasn't formerly been done. The directors got sorer and sorer as Worth Gilbert's cheerfulness increased.

"Acts as though it were a damn' crap game," I heard Dykeman muttering to Sillsbee, who came back vacuously.

"Crap? – they say our boys did shoot craps a good deal over there. Well – uh – they were risking their lives."

And that's as near as any of them came, I suppose, to understanding how a weariness of the little interweaving plans of tamed men had pushed Worth Gilbert into carelessly staking his birthright on a chance that might lend interest to life, a hazard big enough to breeze the staleness out of things for him.

We were leaving the bank, Gilbert and I ahead, Cummings right at my boy's shoulder, the others holding back to speak together, (bitterly enough, if I am any guesser) when Worth said suddenly,

"You mentioned in there it's being illegal for the bank to give up the pursuit of Clayte. Seems funny to me, but I suppose you know what you're talking about. Anyhow" – he was lighting another cigarette and he glanced sharply at Cummings across it – "anyhow, they won't waste their money hunting Clayte now, should you say? That's my job. That's where I get my cash back."

"Oh, that's where, is it?" The lawyer's dry tone might have been regarded as humorous. We stood in the deep doorway, hunching coat collars, looking into the foggy street. Worth's interest in life seemed to be freshening moment by moment.

"Yes," he agreed briskly. "I'm going to keep you and Boyne busy for a while. You'll have to show me how to hustle the payment for those Shylocks, and Jerry's got to find the suitcase, so I can eat. But I'll help him."

Cummings stared at the boy.

"Gilbert," he said, "where are you going? – right now, I mean."

"To Boyne's office."

We stepped out to the street where the line of limousines waited for the old fellows inside, my own battleship-gray roadster, pretty well hammered but still a mighty capable machine, far down at the end. As Worth moved with me toward it, the lawyer walked at his elbow.

"Seat for me?" he glanced at the car. "I've a few words of one syllable to say to this young man – council that I ought to get in as early as possible."

I looked at little Pete dozing behind the wheel, and answered,

"Take you all right, if I could drive. But I sprained my thumb on a window lock looking over that room at the St. Dunstan."

"I'll drive." Worth had circled the car with surprising quickness for so large a man. I saw him on the other side, waiting for Pete to get out so he could get in. Curious the intimate, understanding look he gave the monkey as he flipped a coin at him with, "Buy something to burn, kid." Pete's idea of Worth Gilbert would be quite different from that of the directors in there. After all, human beings are only what we see them from our varying angles. Pete slid down, looking back to the last at the tall young fellow who was taking his place at the wheel. Cummings and I got in and we were off.

There in the machine, my new boss driving, Cummings sitting next him, I at the further side, began the keen, cool probe after a truth which to me lay very evidently on the surface. Any one, I would have said, might see with half an eye that Worth Gilbert had bought Clayte's suitcase so that he could get a thrill out of hunting for it. Cummings I knew had in charge all the boy's Pacific Coast holdings; and since his mother's death during the first year of the war, these were large. Worth manifested toward them and the man who spoke to him of them the indifference, almost contempt, of an impatient young soul who in the years just behind him, had often wagered his chance of his morning's coffee against some other fellow's month's pay feeling that he was putting up double.

It seemed the sense of ownership was dulled in one who had seen magnificent properties masterless, or apparently belonging to some limp, bloodstained bundle of flesh that lay in one of the

rooms. In vain Cummings urged the state of the market, repeating with more particularity and force what Whipple had said. The mines were tied up by strike; their stock, while perfectly good, was down to twenty cents on the dollar; to sell now would be madness. Worth only repeated doggedly.

"I've got to have the money – Monday morning – ten o'clock. I don't care what you sell – or hock. Get it."

"See here," the lawyer was puzzled, and therefore unprofessionally out of temper. "Even sacrificing your stuff in the most outrageous manner, I couldn't realize enough – not by ten o'clock Monday. You'll have to go to your father. You can catch the five-five for Santa Ysobel."

I could see Worth choke back a hot-tempered refusal of the suggestion. The funds he'd got to have, even if he went through some humiliation to get them.

"At that," he said slowly, "father wouldn't have any great amount of cash on hand. Say I went to him with the story – and took the cat-hauling he'll give me – should I be much better off?"

"Sure you would." Cummings leaned back. I saw he considered his point made. "Whipple would rather take their own bank stock than anything else. Your father has just acquired a big block of it. Act while there's time. Better go out there and see him now – at once."

"I'll think about it," Worth nodded. "You dig for me what you can and never quit." And he applied himself to the demands of the down-town traffic.

"Well," Cummings said, "drop me at the next corner, please. I've got an engagement with a man here."

Worth swung in and stopped. Cummings left us. As we began to worm a slow way toward my office, I suggested,

"You'll come upstairs with me, and – er – sort of outline a policy? I ought to have any possible information you can give me, so's not to make any more wrong moves than we have to."

"Information?" he echoed, and I hastened to amend,

"I mean whatever notion you've got. Your theory, you know –"

"Not a notion. Not a theory." He shook his head, eyes on the traffic cop. "That's your part."

I sat there somewhat flabbergasted. After all, I hadn't fully believed that the boy had absolutely nothing to go on, that he had bought purely at a whim, put up eight hundred thousand dollars on my skill at running down a criminal. It sort of crumpled me up. I said so. He laughed a little, ran up to the curb at the Phelan building, cut out the engine, set the brake and turned to me with,

"Don't worry. I'm getting what I paid for – or what I'm going to pay for. And I've got to go right after the money. Suppose I meet you, say, at ten o'clock to-night?"

"Suits me."

"At Tait's. Reserve a table, will you, and we'll have supper."

"You're on," I said. "And plenty to do myself meantime." I hopped out on my side.

Worth sat in the roadster, not hurrying himself to follow up Cummings' suggestion – the big boy, non-communicative, incurious, the question of fortune lost or won seeming not to trouble him at all. I skirted the machine and came round to him, demanding,

"With whom do you suppose Cummings' engagement was?"

"Don't know, Jerry, and don't care," looking down at me serenely. "Why should I?" He swung one long leg free and stopped idly, half in the car, half out.

"What if I told you Cummings' engagement was with our friend Dykeman – only Dykeman doesn't know it yet?"

Slowly he brought that dangling foot down to the pavement, followed it with the other, and faced me. Across the blankness of his features shot a joyous gleam; it spread, brightening till he was radiant.

"I get you!" he chortled. "Collusion! They think I'm standing in with Clayte – Oh, boy!"

He threw back his head and roared.

CHAPTER III

A WEDDING PARTY

I looked at my watch; quarter of ten; a little ahead of my appointment. I ordered a telephone extension brought to this corner table I had reserved at Tait's and got in touch with my office; then with the knowledge that any new kink in the case would be reported immediately to me, I relaxed to watch the early supper crowd arrive: Women in picture hats and bare or half-bare shoulders with rich wraps slipping off them; hum of voices; the clatter of silver and china; waiters beginning to wake up and dart about settling new arrivals. And I wondered idly what sort of party would come to sit around one long table across from me specially decorated with pale tinted flowers.

There was a sense of warmth and comfort at my heart. I am a lonely man; the people I take to seem to have a way of passing on in the stream of life – or death – leaving me with a few well-thumbed volumes on a shelf in my rooms for consolation. Walt Whitman, Montaigne, The Bard, two or three other lesser poets, and you've the friends that have stayed by me for thirty years. And so, having met up with Worth Gilbert when he was a youngster, at the time his mother was living in San Francisco to get a residence for her divorce proceedings, having loved the boy and got I am sure some measure of affection in return, it seemed almost too much to ask of fate that he should come back into my days, plunge into such a proposition as this bank robbery, right at my elbow as it were, and make himself my employer – my boss.

I was a subordinate in the agency in those old times when he and I used to chin about the business, and his idea (I always discussed it gravely and respectfully with him) was to grow up and go into partnership with me. Well, we were partners now.

Past ten, nearly five minutes. Where was he? What up to? Would he miss his appointment? No, I caught a glimpse of him at the door getting rid of hat and overcoat, pausing a moment with tall bent head to banter Rose, the little Chinese girl who usually drifted from table to table with cigars and cigarettes. Then he was coming down the room.

A man who takes his own path in life, and will walk it though hell bar the way, never explaining, never extenuating, never excusing his course – something seems to emanate from such a chap that draws all eyes after him in a public place in a look between fear and desire. Sitting there in Tait's, my view of Worth cut off now by a waiter with a high-carried tray, again by people passing to tables for whom he halted, I had a good chance to see the turning of eyeballs that followed him, the furtive glances that snatched at him, or fondled him, or would have probed him; the admiration of the women, the envy of the men, curiously alike in that it was sometimes veiled and half wistful, sometimes very open. Drifters – you see so many of the sort in a restaurant – why wouldn't they hanker after the strength and ruthlessness of a man like Worth? And the poor prunes, how little they knew him! As my friend Walt would say, he wasn't out after any of the old, smooth prizes they cared for. And win or lose he would still be a victor, for all he and his sort demand is freedom, and the joy of the game. So he came on to me.

I noticed, a little startled, as he slumped into his chair with a grunt of greeting, that his cheek was somehow gaunt and pale under the tan; the blue fire of his eyes only smoldered, and I pulled back his chair with,

"You look as if you hadn't had any dinner."

"I haven't." He gave a man-size order for food and turned back from it to listen to me. "I'll be nearer human when I get some grub under my belt."

My report of what had been done on the case since we separated was interrupted by the arrival of our orders, and Worth sailed into a thick, juicy steak while I was still explaining details. The orchestra whanged and blared and jazzed away; the people at the other tables noticed us or busied

themselves noisily with affairs of their own; Worth sat and enjoyed his meal with the air of a man feeding at a solitary country tavern. When he had finished – and he took his time about it – the worn, punished look was gone from his face; his eye was bright, his tone nonchalant, as he lighted a cigarette, remarking,

"I've had one more good dinner. Food's a thing you can depend on; it doesn't rake up your entire past record from the time you squirmed into this world, and tell you what a fool you've always been."

I turned that over in my mind. Did it mean that he'd seen his father and got a calling down? I wanted to know – and was afraid to ask. The fact is I was beginning to wake up to a good many things about my young boss. I was intensely interested in his reactions on people. So far, I'd seen him with strangers. I wished that I might have a chance to observe him among intimates. Old Richardson who founded our agency (and would never knowingly have left me at the head of it, though he did take me in as partner, finally) used to say that the main trouble with me was I studied people instead of cases. Richardson held that all men are equal before the detective, and must be regarded only as queer shaped pieces to be fitted together so as to make out a case. Richardson would have gone as coolly about easing the salt of the earth into the chink labeled "murder" or "embezzlement," as though neither had been human. With me the personal equation always looms big, and of course he was quite right in saying that it's likely to get you all gummed up.

The telephone on the table before me rang. It was Roberts, my secretary, with the word that Foster had lifted the watch from Ocean View, the little town at the neck of the peninsula, where bay and ocean narrow the passageway to one thoroughfare, over which every machine must pass that goes by land from San Francisco. With two operatives, he had been on guard there since three o'clock of the afternoon, holding up blond men in cars, asking questions, taking notes and numbers. Now he reported it was a useless waste of time.

"Order him in," I instructed Roberts.

A far-too-fat entertainer out on the floor was writhing in the pangs of an Hawaiian dance. It took the attention of the crowd. I watched the face of my companion for a moment, then,

"Worth," I said a bit nervously – after all, I nearly had to know – "is your father going to come through?"

"Eh?" He looked at me startled, then put it aside negligently. "Oh, the money? No. I'll leave that up to Cummings." A brief pause. "We'll get a wiggle on us and dig up the suitcase." He lifted his tumbler, stared at it, then unseeingly out across the room, and his lip twitched in a half smile. "I'm sure glad I bought it."

Looking at him, I had no reason to doubt his word. His enjoyment of the situation seemed to grow with every detail I brought up.

It was near eleven when the party came in to take the long, flower-trimmed table. Worth's back was to the room; I saw them over his shoulder, in the lead a tall blonde, very smartly dressed, but not in evening clothes; in severe, exclusive street wear. The man with her, good looking, almost her own type, had that possessive air which seems somehow unmistakable – and there was a look about the half dozen companions after them, as they settled themselves in a great flurry of scraping chairs, that made me murmur with a grin,

"Bet that's a wedding party."

Worth gave them one quick glance, then came round to me with a smile.

"You win. Married at Santa Ysobel this afternoon. Local society event. Whole place standing on its hind legs, taking notice."

So he had been down to the little town to see his father after all. And he wasn't going to talk about it. Oh, well.

"Friends of yours?" I asked perfunctorily, and he gave me a queer look out of the corners of those wicked eyes, repeating in an enjoying drawl.

"Friends? Oh, hardly that. The girl I was to have married, and Bronson Vandeman – the man she has married."

I had wanted to get a more intimate line on the kid – it seemed that here was a chance with a vengeance!

"The rest of the bunch?" I suggested. He took a leisurely survey, and gave them three words:

"Family and accomplices."

"Santa Ysobel people, too, then. Folks you know well?"

"Used to."

"The lady changed her mind while you were across?" I risked the query.

"While I was shedding my blood for my country." He nodded. "Gave me the butt while the Huns were using the bayonet on me."

In the careless jeer, as much at himself as at her, no hint what his present feeling might be toward the fashion plate young female across there. With some fellows, in such a situation, I should have looked for a disposition to duck the encounter; let his old sweetheart's wedding party leave without seeing him; with others I should have discounted a dramatic moment when he would court the meeting. It was impossible to suppose either thing of Worth Gilbert; plain that he simply sat there because he sat there, and would make no move toward the other table unless something in that direction interested him – pleasantly or unpleasantly – which at present nothing seemed to do.

So we smoked, Worth indifferent, I giving all the attention to the people over there: bride and groom; a couple of fair haired girls so like the bride that I guessed them to be sisters; a freckled, impudent looking little flapper I wasn't so sure of; two older men, and an older woman. Then a shifting of figures gave me sight of a face that I hadn't seen before, and I drew in my breath with a whistle.

"Whew! Who's the dark girl? She's a beauty!"

"Dark girl?" Worth had interest enough to lean into the place where I got my view; after he did so he remained to stare. I sat and grinned while he muttered,

"Can't be... I believe it is!"

Something to make him sit up and take notice now. I didn't wonder at his fixed study of the young creature. Not so dressed up as the others – I think she wore what ladies call an evening blouse with a street suit; a brunette, but of a tinting so delicate that she fairly sparkled, she took the shine off those blonde girls. Her small beautifully formed, uncovered head had the living jet of the crow's wing; her great eyes, long-lashed and sumptuously set, showed ebon irises almost obliterating the white. Dark, shining, she was a night with stars, that girl.

"Funny thing," Worth spoke, moving his head to keep in line with that face. "How could she grow up to be like this – a child that wasn't allowed any childhood? Lord, she never even had a doll!"

"Some doll herself now," I smiled.

"Yeh," he assented absently, "she's good looking – but where did she learn to dress like that – and play the game?"

"Where they all learn it." I enjoyed very much seeing him interested. "From her mother, and her sisters, or the other girls."

"Not." He was positive. "Her mother died when she was a baby. Her father wouldn't let her be with other children – treated her like one of the instruments in his laboratory; trained her in her high chair; problems in concentration dumped down into its tray, punishment if she made a failure; God knows what kind of a reward if she succeeded; maybe no more than her bowl of bread and milk. That's the kind of a deal she got when she was a kid. And will you look at her now!"

If he kept up his open staring at the girl, it would be only a matter of time when the wedding party discovered him. I leaned back in my chair to watch, while Worth, full of his subject, spilled over in words.

"Never played with anybody in her life – but me," he said unexpectedly. "They lived next house but one to us; the professor had the rest of the Santa Ysobel youngsters terrorized, backed off the

boards; but I wasn't a steady resident of the burg. I came and went, and when I came, it was playtime for the little girl."

"What was her father? Crank on education?"

"Psychology," Worth said briefly. "International reputation. But he ought to have been hung for the way he brought Bobs up. Listen to this, Jerry. I got off the train one time at Santa Ysobel – can't remember just when, but the kid over there was all shanks and eyes – 'bout ten or eleven, I'd say. Her father had her down at the station doing a stunt for a bunch of professors. That was his notion of a nice, normal development for a small child. There she sat poked up cross-legged on a baggage truck. He'd trained her to sit in that self balanced position so she could make her mind blank without going to sleep. A freight train was hitting a twenty mile clip past the station, and she was adding the numbers on the sides of the box cars, in her mind. It kept those professors on the jump to get the figures down in their notebooks, but she told them the total as the caboose was passing."

"Some stunt," I agreed. "Freight car numbers run up into the ten-thousands." Worth didn't hear me, he was still deep in the past.

"Poor little white-faced kid," he muttered. "I dumped my valises, horned into that bunch, picked her off the truck and carried her away on my shoulder, while the professor yelled at me, and the other ginks were tabbing up their additions. And I damned every one of them, to hell and through it."

"You must have been a popular youth in your home town," I suggested.

"I was," he grinned. "My reason for telling you that story, though, is that I've got an idea about the girl over there – if she hasn't changed too much. I think maybe we might –"

He stood up calmly to study her, and his tall figure instantly drew the attention of everybody in the room. Over at the long table it was the sharp, roving eye of the snub-nosed flapper that spied him first. I saw her give the alarm and begin pushing back her chair to bolt right across and nab him. The sister sitting next stopped her. Judging from the glimpses I had as the party spoke together and leaned to look, it was quite a sensation. But apparently by common consent they left whatever move was to be made to the bride; and to my surprise this move was most unconventional. She got up with an abrupt gesture and started over to our table – alone. This, for a girl of her sort, was going some. I glanced doubtfully at Worth. He shrugged a little.

"Might as well have it over. Her family lives on one side of us, and Brons Vandeman on the other."

And then the bride was with us. She didn't overdo the thing – much; only held out her hand with a slightly pleading air as though half afraid it would be refused. And it was a curious thing to see that pretty, delicate featured, schooled face of hers naïvely drawn in lines of emotion – like a bisque doll registering grief.

Gilbert took the hand, shook it, and looked around with the evident intention of presenting me. I saw by the way the lady gave me her shoulder, pushing in, speaking low, that she didn't want anything of the sort, and quietly dropped back. I barely got a side view of Worth's face, but plainly his calmness was a disappointment to her.

"After these years!" I caught the fringes of what she was saying. "It seems like a dream. To-night – of all times. But you will come over to our table – for a minute anyhow? They're just going to – to drink our health – Oh, Worth!" That last in a sort of impassioned whisper. And all he answered was,

"If I might bring Mr. Boyne with me, Mrs. Vandeman." At her protesting expression, he finished, "Or do I call you Ina, still?"

She gave him a second look of reproach, acknowledging my introduction in that way some women have which assures you they don't intend to know you in the least the next time. We crossed to the table and met the others.

If anybody had asked my opinion, I should have said it was a mistake to go. Our advent in that party – or rather Worth Gilbert's advent – was bound to throw the affair into a sort of consternation. No mistake about that. The bridegroom at the head of the table seemed the only one able to keep

a grip on the situation. He welcomed Worth as though he wanted him, took hold of me with a glad hand, and presented me in such rapid succession to everybody there that I was dizzy. And through it all I had an eye for Worth as he met and disposed of the effusive welcome of the younger Thornhill girls. Either of the twins, as I found them to be, would, I judged, have been more than willing to fill out sister Ina's unexpired term, and the little snub-nosed one, also a sister it seemed, plainly adored him as a hero, sexlessly, as they sometimes can at that age.

While yet he shook hands with the girls, and swapped short replies for long questions, I became conscious of something odd in the air. Plain enough sailing with the young ladies; all the noise with them echoed the bride's, "After all these years." They clattered about whether he looked like his last photograph, and how perfectly delightful it was going to be to have him back in Santa Ysobel again.

But when it came to the chaperone, a Mrs. Dr. Bowman, things were different. No longer young, though still beautiful in what I might call a sort of wasted fashion, with slim wrists and fragile fingers, and a splendid mass of rich, auburn hair, I had been startled, even looking across from our table, by the extreme nervous tension of her face. She looked a neurasthenic; but that was not all; surely her nerves were almost from under control as she sat there, her rich cloak dropped back over her chair, the corners caught up again and fumbled in a twisting, restless hold.

Now, when Worth stood before her appealing eyes, she reached up and clutched his hand in both of hers, staring at him through quick tears, saying something in a low, choking tone, something that I couldn't for the life of me make into the greeting you give even a beloved youngster you haven't seen for several years.

At the moment, I was myself being presented to the lady's husband, a typical top-grade, small town medical man, with a fine bedside manner. His nice, smooth white hands, with which I had watched him feeling the pulse of his supper as though it had been a wealthy patient, released mine; those cold eyes of his, that hid a lot of meaning under heavy lids, came around on his wife. His,

"Laura, control yourself. Where do you think you are?" was like a lash.

It worked perfectly. Of course she would be his patient as well as his wife. Yet I hated the man for it. To me it seemed like the cut of the whip that punishes a sensitive, over excited Irish setter for a fault in the hunting field. Mrs. Bowman quivered, pulled herself together and sat down, but her gaze followed the boy.

She sat there stilled, but not quieted, under her husband's eye, and watched Worth's meeting with the other man, whom I heard the boy call Jim Edwards, and with whom he shook hands, but who met him, as Mrs. Bowman had, as though there had been something recent between them; not like people bridging a long gap of absence.

And this man, tall, thin, the power in his features contradicted by a pair of soft dark eyes, deep-set, looking out at you with an expression of bafflement, defeat – why did he face Worth with the stare of one drenched, drowned in woe? It wasn't his wedding. He hadn't done Worth any dirt in the matter.

And I was wedged in beside the beautiful dark girl, without having been presented to her, without even having had the luck to hear what name Worth used when he spoke to her. At last the flurry of our coming settled down (though I still felt that we were stuck like a sliver into the wedding party, that the whole thing ached from us) and Dr. Bowman proposed the health of the happy couple, his bedside manner going over pretty well, as he informed Vandeman and the rest of us that the bridegroom was a social leader in Santa Ysobel, and that the hope of its best people was to place him and his bride at the head of things there, leading off with the annual Blossom Festival, due in about a fortnight.

Vandeman responded for himself and his bride, appropriately, with what I'd call a sort of acceptable, fabricated geniality. You could see he was the kind that takes such things seriously, one who would go to work to make a success of any social doings he got into, would give what his set called good parties; and he spoke feelingly of the Blossom Festival, which was the great annual event of a little town. If by putting his shoulder to the wheel he could boost that affair into nation-wide

fame and place a garland of rich bloom upon the brow of his fair city, he was willing to take off his neatly tailored coat, roll up his immaculate shirtsleeves and go to it.

There was no time for speech making. The girls wanted to dance; bride and groom were taking the one o'clock train for the south and Coronado. The orchestra swung into "I'll Say She Does."

"Just time for one." Vandeman guided his bride neatly out between the chairs, and they moved away. I turned from watching them to find Worth asking Mrs. Bowman to dance.

"Oh, Worth, *dearest*! I ought to let one of the girls have you, but – "

She looked helplessly up at him; he smiled down into her tense, suffering face, and paid no attention to her objections. As soon as he carried her off, Jim Edwards glumly took out that one of the twins I had at first supposed to be the elder, the remaining Thornhill girls moved on Dr. Bowman and began nagging him to hunt partners for them.

"Drag something up here," prompted the freckled tomboy, "or I'll make you dance with me yourself." She grabbed a coat lapel, and started away with him.

I turned and laughed into the laughing face of the dark girl. I had no idea of her name, yet a haunting resemblance, a something somehow familiar came across to me which I thought for a moment was only the sweet approachableness of her young femininity.

Bowman had found and collared a partner for Ernestine Thornhill, but that was as far as it went. The little one forebore her threat of making him dance with her, came back to her chair and tucked herself in, snuggling up to the girl beside me, getting hold of a hand and looking at me across it. She rejoiced, it seems, in the nickname of Skeet, for by that the other now spoke to her whisperingly, saying it was too bad about the dance.

"That's nothing," Skeet answered promptly. "I'd a lot rather sit here and talk to you – and your gentleman friend – " with a large wink for me – "if you don't mind."

At the humorous, intimate glance which again passed between me and the dark girl, sudden remembrance came to me, and I ejaculated,

"I know you now!"

"Only now?" smiling.

"You've changed a good deal in seven years," I defended myself.

"And you so very little," she was still smiling, "that I had almost a mind to come and shake hands with you when Ina went to speak to Worth."

I remembered then that it was Worth's recognition of her which had brought him to his feet. I told her of it, and the glowing, vivid face was suddenly all rosy. Skeet regarded the manifestation askance, asking jealously,

"When did you see Worth last, Barbie? You weren't still living in Santa Ysobel when he left, were you?"

I sat thinking while the girlish voices talked on. Barbie – the nickname for Barbara. Barbara Wallace; the name jumped at me from a poster; that's where I first saw it. It linked itself up with what Worth had said over there about the forlorn childhood of this beguiling young charmer. Why hadn't I remembered then? I, too, had my recollections of Barbara Wallace. About seven years before, I had first seen her, a slim, dark little thing of twelve or fourteen, very badly dressed in slinky, too-long skirts that whipped around preposterously thin ankles, blue-black hair dragged away from a forehead almost too fine, made into a bundle of some fashion that belonged neither to childhood nor womanhood, her little, pointed face redeemed by a pair of big black eyes with a wonderful inner light, the eyes of this girl glowing here at my left hand.

The father Worth spoke of brusquely as "the professor" was Elman Wallace, to whom all students of advanced psychology are heavily indebted. The year I heard him, and saw the girl, his course of lectures at Stanford University was making quite a stir. I had been one of a bunch of criminologists, detectives and police chiefs who, during a state convention were given a demonstration of the little girl's powers, closing with a sort of rapid pantomime in which I was asked to take part.

A half dozen of us from the audience planned exactly what we were to do. I rushed into the room through one door, holding my straw hat in my left hand, and wiping my brow with a handkerchief with the right. From an opposite door, came two men; one of them fired at me twice with a revolver held in his left hand. I fell, and the second man – the one who wasn't armed – ran to me as I staggered, grabbed my hat, and the two of them went out the door I had entered, while I stumbled through the one by which they had come in. It lasted all told, not half a minute, the idea being for those who looked on to write down what had happened.

Those trained criminologists, supposed to have eyes in their heads, didn't see half that really took place, and saw a-plenty that did not. Most of 'em would have hung the man who snatched my hat. Only one, I remember, noticed that I was shot by a left-handed man. Then the little girl told us what really had occurred, every detail, just as though she had planned it instead of being merely an observer.

"Pardon me," I broke in on the girls. "Miss Wallace, you don't mean to say that you really know me again after seeing me once, seven years ago, in a group of other men at a public performance?"

"Why shouldn't I? You saw me then. You knew me again."

"But you were doing wonderful things. We remember what strikes us as that did me."

She looked at me with a little fading of that glow her face seemed always to hold.

"Most memories are like that," she agreed listlessly. "Mine isn't. It works like a cinema camera; I've only to turn the crank the other way to be looking at any past record."

"But can you – ?" I was beginning, when Skeet stopped me, leaning around her companion, bristling at me like a snub-nosed terrier.

"If you want to make a hit with Barbie, cut out the reminiscences. She does loathe being reminded that she was once an infant phenom."

I glanced at my dark eyed girl; she bent her head affirmatively. She wouldn't have been capable of Skeet's rudeness, but plainly Skeet had not overstated her real feeling. I had hardly begun an apology when the dancers rushed back to the table with the information that there was no more than time to make the Los Angeles train; there was an instant grasping of wraps, hasty good-bys, and the party began breaking up with a bang. Worth went out to the sidewalk with them; I sat tight waiting for him to return, and to my surprise, when he finally did appear, Barbara Wallace was with him.

CHAPTER IV

AN APPARITION

"Don't look so scared!" she said smilingly to me. "I'm only on your hands a few minutes; a package left to be called for."

I had watched them coming back to me at our old table, with its telephone extension, the girl with eyes for no one but Worth, who helped her out of her wrap now with a preoccupied air and,

"Shed the coat, Bobs," adding as he seated her beside him, "The luck of luck that I chanced on you here this evening."

That brought the color into her face; the delicate rose shifted under her translucent skin almost with the effect of light, until that lustrous midnight beauty of hers was as richly glowing as one of those marvellous dark opals of the antipodes.

"Yes," she said softly, with a smile that set two dimples deep in the pink of her cheeks, "wasn't it strange our meeting this way?" Worth wasn't looking at her. He'd signaled a waiter, ordered a pot of black coffee, and was watching its approach. "I didn't go down to the wedding, but Ina herself invited me to come here to-night. I had half a mind not to; then at the last minute I decided I would – and I met you!"

Worth nodded, sat there humped in a brown study while the waiter poured our coffee. The minute the man left us alone, he turned to her with,

"I've got a stunt for you."

"A – a stunt?"

The light failed abruptly in her face; her mouth with its soft, firm molding, its vivid, floral red, like the lips of a child, went down a bit at the clean-cut corners. A small hand fumbled the trimming of her blouse; it was almost as if she laid it over a wounded heart.

"Yes," he nodded. "Jerry's got something in his pocket that'll be pie for you."

She turned to me a look between angry and piteous – the resentment she would not vent on him.

"Is – is Mr. Boyne interested in stunts – such as I used to do?"

"Sure," Worth agreed. "We both are. We –"

"Oh, that was why you wanted me to come back with you?" She had got hold of herself now. She was more poised, but still resentful.

"Bobs," he cut straight across her mood to what he wanted, "Jerry Boyne is going to read you something it took about 'steen blind people to see – and you'll give us the answer." I didn't share his confidence, but I rather admired it as he finished, poisoning the tongs, "One lump, or two?"

Of course I knew what he meant. My hand was already fumbling in my pocket for the description of Clayte. The girl looked as though she wasn't going to answer him; she moved to shove back her chair. Worth's only recognition of her attitude was to put out a hand quietly, touch her arm, not once looking at her, and say in a lowered tone,

"Steady, Bobs." And then, "Did you say one lump or two?"

"None." Her voice was scarcely audible, but I saw she was going to stay; that Worth was to have his way, to get from her the opinion he wanted – whatever that might amount to. And I passed the paper to him, suggesting,

"Let her read it. This is too public a place to be declaiming a thing of the sort."

She hesitated a minute then gave it such a mere flirt of a glance that I hardly thought she'd seen what it was, before she raised inquiring eyes to mine and asked coldly,

"Why shouldn't that be read – shouted every ten minutes by the traffic officer at Market and Kearny? They'd only think he was paging every other man in the Palace Hotel."

I leaned back and chuckled. After a bare glance, this sharp witted girl had hit on exactly what I'd thought of the Clayte description.

"Is that all? May I go now, Worth?" she said, still with that dashed, disappointed look from one of us to the other. "If you'll just put me on a Haight Street car – I won't wait for – " And now she made a definite movement to rise; but again Worth held her by the mere touch of his fingers on her sleeve.

"Wait, Bobs," he said. "There's more."

"More?" Her eyes on Worth's face talked louder than her tongue, but that also gained fluency as he looked back at her and nodded. "Stunts!" she repeated his word bitterly. "I didn't expect you to come back asking me to do stunts. I hated it all so – working out things like a calculating machine!" Her voice sank to a vehement undertone. "Nobody thinking of me as human, with human feelings. I have never – done – one stunt – since my father died."

She didn't weaken. She sat there and looked Worth squarely in the eye, yet there was a kind of big gentleness in her refusal, a freedom from petty resentment, that had in it not so much a girl's hurt vanity as the outspoken complaint of a really grieved heart.

"But, Bobs," Worth smiled at her trouble, about the same careless, good-natured smile he had given little Pete when he flipped him the quarter, "suppose you could possibly save me a hundred thousand dollars a minute?"

"Then it's not just a stunt?" She settled slowly back in her chair.

"Certainly not," I said. "This is business – with me, anyhow. Miss Wallace, why do you think a description like that could be shouted on the street without any one being the wiser?"

"Was it supposed to be a description?" she asked, raising her brows a bit.

"The best we could get from sixteen or eighteen people, most of whom have known the man a long time; some of them for eight years."

"And no one – not one of all these people could differentiate him?"

"I've done my best at questioning them."

She gave me one straight, level look, and I wondered a little at the way those velvety black eyes could saw into a fellow. But she put no query, and I had the cheap satisfaction of knowing that she was convinced I'd overlooked no details in the quiz that went to make up that description. Then she turned to Worth.

"You said I might save you a lot of money. Has the man you're trying here to describe anything to do with money – in large amounts – financial affairs of importance?"

Again the little girl had unconsciously scored with me. To imagine a rabbit like Clayte, alone, swinging such an enormous job was ridiculous. From the first, my mind had been reaching after the others – the big-brained criminals, the planners whose instrument he was. She evidently saw this, but Worth answered her.

"He's quite a financier, Bobs. He walked off with nearly a million cash to-day."

"From you?" with a quick breath.

"I'm the main loser if he gets away with it."

"Tell me about it."

And Worth gave her a concise account of the theft and his own share in the affair. She listened eagerly now, those innocent great eyes growing big with the interest of it. With her there was no blind stumbling over Worth's motive in buying a suitcase sight unseen. I had guessed, but she understood completely and unquestioningly. When he had finished, she said solemnly,

"You know, don't you, that, if you've got your facts right – if these things you've told me are square, even cubes of fact – they prove Clayte among the wonderful men of the world?"

Worth's big brown paw went out and covered her little hand that lay on the table's edge.

"Now we're getting somewhere," he encouraged her. As for me, I merely snorted.

"Wonderful man, my eye! He's got a wonderful gang behind him."

"Oh, you should have told me that you know there is a gang, Mr. Boyne," she said simply. "Of course, then, the result is different."

"Well," I hedged, "there's a gang all right. But suppose there wasn't, how would you find any wonderfulness in a creature as near nothing as this Clayte?"

She sat and thought for a moment, drawing imaginary lines on the table top, finally looking up at me with a narrowing of the lids, a tightening of the lips, which gave an extraordinary look of power to her young feminine face.

"In that case, Clayte would inevitably be one of the wonderful men of the world," she repeated her characterization with the placid, soft obstinacy of falling snow. "Didn't you stop a minute – one little minute, Mr. Boyne – to think it wonderful that a man so devoid of personality as that – " she slanted a slim finger across the description of Clayte – "Didn't you add up in your mind all that you told me about the men disagreeing as to which side he parted his hair on, whether he wore tan shoes or black, a fedora or derby, smoked or didn't, – absolutely nothing left as to peculiarities of face, figure, movement, expression, manner or habit to catch the eye of one single observer among the sixteen or eighteen you questioned – surely you added that up, Mr. Boyne? What result did you get?"

"Nothing," I admitted. "To hear you repeat it, of course it sounds as if the man was a freak. But he wasn't. He was just one of those fellows that are born utterly commonplace, and slide through life without getting any marks put on 'em."

"And is it nothing that this man became a teller in a bank without infringing at all on the circle of his nothingness? Remained so shadowy that neither the president nor cashier can, after eight years' association, tell the color of his hair and eyes? Then add the fact that he is the one clerk in the bank without a filed photograph and description on record with your agency – what result now, Mr. Boyne?"

"A coincidence," I said, rather hastily.

"Don't, please, Mr. Boyne!" her eyes glowed softly as she smiled her mild sarcasm. "Admit that he has ceased to be a freak and becomes a marvel."

"As you put it – " I began, but she cut in on me with,

"I haven't put it yet. Listen." She was smiling still, but it was plain she was thoroughly in earnest. "When this cipher – this nought – this zero – manages to annex to himself a million dollars that doesn't belong to him, his nothingness gains a specific meaning. The zero is an important factor in mathematics. I think we have placed a digit before the long string of ciphers of Clayte's nothingness."

"Nothing and nothing – make nothing." I spoke more brusquely because I was irritated by her logic. "You called the turn when you spoke of him as a zero. There are digits to be added, but they're the gang that planned and helped – and used zero Clayte as their tool. You're talking of those digits, not Clayte."

"I believe Bobs'll find them for you, Jerry – if you'll let her," said Worth.

"Oh, I'll let anybody do anything" – a bit nettled. "I'm ready to have our friend Clayte take his place, with the pyramids and the hanging gardens of Babylon, among the earth's wonders; but you've got to show me."

"All right." Worth gave the girl a look that brought something of that wonderful rose flush fluttering back into her cheeks. "I'm betting on her. Go to it, Bobsie – let him in on your mathematical logic."

"You used the word 'coincidence,' Mr. Boyne." She leaned across toward me, eyes bright, little finger tip marking her points. "Allow one coincidence – that the only description, the only photograph missing from your files are those of the self-effacing Clayte. To-day Clayte has proved to be a thief – "

"In seven figures," Worth threw in, and she smiled at him.

"You would call that another coincidence, Mr. Boyne?"

I nodded, rather unable at the moment to think of a better word to use.

"Two coincidences," she went on, – "we are still in mathematics – you can't add. They run by geometrical progression into the impossible."

The phone rang. While I turned to answer it, my mind was still hunting a comeback to this. The call was from Foster, just in from Ocean View and reporting for instructions. Covering the transmitter with my hand, I told Worth the situation and asked,

"Any suggestions?"

"Not I," he shook his head. I added, a bit sarcastically,

"Or you, Miss Wallace?"

"Yes," she surprised me. "Have your man Foster find three women who have seen Edward Clayte; get from them the color of his hair and eyes; tell him to have them be exact about it."

"Fine! But you know they'll not agree, any more than the other people agreed."

"Oh, yes they will," she laughed at me a little. "Don't you notice that a girl always says a blue-eyed man or a brown-eyed man? That's what she sees when she first meets him, and it sticks in her mind. Girls and women sort out people by types; small differences in color mean something to them."

I didn't keep Foster waiting any longer.

"Hello," I spoke quickly into the transmitter. "Get busy and dig out any women clerks of the bank, stenographers, scrub-women there, or whatever, and ask them particularly as to the exact shade of Clayte's hair and eyes. Get Mrs. Griggsby again at the St. Dunstan. I want at least three women who can give these points exactly. Exactly, understand?"

He did, and I thanked Miss Wallace for her suggestion.

"Now that," I said, "is what I want; a good, practical idea –"

"And it won't be a bit of use in the world to you," she laughed across the table into my eyes. "Why, Mr. Boyne, you've found out already that there are too many Edward Claytes, speaking in physical terms, for you to run one down by description. There are three of him here, within sight of our table right now – and the place isn't crowded."

I grinned in half grudging agreement, and found nothing to say. It was Worth who spoke.

"Like to have you go a step further in this, if you would," and when she shook her head, he went on a bit sharply. "See here, Bobs; you and I used to be pals, didn't we?" She nodded, her look brightening. "Well then, here's the biggest game I've been up against since I crawled out of the trenches and shucked my uniform. I come to you and give you the high-sign – and you throw me down. You don't want to play with me – is that it?"

"Oh, Worth! I do. I do want to play with you," she was almost in tears now. "But you see, I didn't quite understand. I felt as though you were sort of putting me through my paces."

"Sure not," Worth drove it at her like a turbulent urchin. "I'm having the time of my young life with this thing, and I want to take you in on it."

"If – if you fail you lose a lot of money; wasn't that what you said?" she questioned.

"Oh, yes," he nodded, "Nothing in it if there weren't a gamble."

"And if he wins out, he makes quite a respectable pile," I added.

"What I want of you now," he explained, "is to go with us to Clayte's room at the St. Dunstan – the room he disappeared from – look it over and tell us how he got out and where he went."

He made his request light-heartedly; she considered it after the same fashion; it seemed to me all absurdity.

"To-morrow morning – Sunday," she said. "No office to-morrow," she sipped the last of her black coffee slowly. "All the rest of the facts there ever will be about Edward Clayte are in that room – aren't they?" Her voice was musing; she looked straight ahead of her as she finished softly, "What time do we go?"

"Early. Does nine o'clock suit you?" Worth didn't even glance at me as he made this arrangement for us both. "We'd scoot up there now if it wasn't so late."

"I've no doubt you'll find the place carpeted with zeros and hung with noughts and ciphers." I couldn't refrain from joshing her a little. She took it with a smile glanced across the room, looked a little surprised, and half rose with,

"Why, there they are for me now."

I couldn't see anybody that she might mean, except a man who had walked the length of the place talking to the head waiter, and now stood arguing at the corner of what had been Bronson Vandeman's supper table. This man evidently had his attention directed to us, turned, looked, and in the moment of his crossing I saw that it was Cummings. There was not even the usual tight-lipped half smile under that cropped mustache of his.

"Good evening." He looked at our faces, uttering none of the surprise he plainly felt, letting the two words do for greeting to us all, and, as it seemed, to me, an expression of disapproval as well. The young lady replied first.

"Oh, Mr. Cummings, did they send you for me? Where are the others?"

She had come to her feet, and reached for the coat which Worth was holding more as if he meant to keep it than put it on her.

"I left your chaperone waiting in the machine," Cumming's tone and look carried a plain hurry-up. Worth took his time about the coat, and spoke low to the girl while he helped her into it.

"You'll go with us to-morrow morning?"

She gave me one of those adorable smiles that brought the dimples momentarily in her cheeks.

"If Mr. Boyne wants me. He hasn't said yet."

"Do I need to?" I asked. The question seemed reasonable. There she stood, such a very pretty girl, between her two cavaliers who looked at each other with all the traditional hostility that belonged to the situation. She smiled on both, and didn't neglect me. I settled the matter with,

"Worth has your address; we'll call for you in my machine." And I got the idea that Cummings was asking questions about it as he went away holding her arm.

"Do you think the little girl will really be of any use?" I spoke to the back of Worth's head as he continued to stare after them.

"Sure. I know she will." He shoved his crumpled napkin in among the coffee service, and we moved toward the desk. "Sure she will," he repeated. "Wonder where she met Cummings."

CHAPTER V

AT THE ST. DUNSTAN

At the Palace Hotel Sunday morning where I went to pick up Worth before we should call for little Miss Wallace, he met me in high spirits and with an enthusiasm that demanded immediate physical action.

"Heh," I said, "you look fine. Must have slept well."

"Make it rested, and I'll go you," he came back cheerfully.

He'd already been out, going down to the Grant Avenue corner for an assortment of Bay cities papers not to be had at the hotel news-stands, so that he could see whether our canny announcement of Clayte's fifteen thousand dollar defalcation had received discreet attention from the Associated Press.

For my part, our agency had been able to get hold of three women who had seen Clayte and remembered the event; Mrs. Griggsby; a stenographer at the bank; and the woman who sold newspapers at the St. Dunstan corner. Miss Wallace's suggestion had proven itself, for these three agreed with fair exactness, and the description run in the late editions of the city papers was less vague than the others. It gave Clayte's eyes as a pale gray-blue, and his hair as dull brown, eliminating at least all brown-eyed men. Worth asserted warmly,

"That girl's going to be useful to us, Boyne." I couldn't well disagree with him, after using her hint. We were getting out of the elevator on the office floor when he looked at me, grinned boyishly, and added, "What would you say if I told you I was being shadowed?"

"That I thought it very likely," I nodded. "Also I might hazard a guess at whose money is paying for it."

He gave me a quick glance, but asked no questions. I could see he was enjoying his position, up to the hilt, considered the attentions of a trailer as one of its perquisites.

"Keep your eyes open and you'll spot him as we go out," he said as he left the key at the desk.

It was hardly necessary to keep my eyes open to see the lurking figure over beyond the easy-chairs, which started galvanically as we passed through the court, and a moment later came sidling after us. Little Pete had left my machine at the Market Street entrance – Worth was to drive me – and we wheeled away from a disappointed man racing for the taxi line around the corner.

"More power to his legs," Worth said.

"Oh, I don't know," I grunted as we cut into Montgomery, negotiated the corner onto Bush Street's clear way, striking a fair clip at once. "That end of him already works better than the other. How did you get wise?"

"Barbara Wallace telephoned me to look out for him," he smiled, and let my car out another notch once we'd passed the traffic cop at Kearny.

I myself had foreseen the possibility – but only as a possibility – that Dykeman would put a man on Worth's coat-tails, since I knew Dykeman and had been at that bank meeting; yet I had not regarded it as likely enough to warn Worth; and here was this girl phoning him to look out for a trailer. Was this some more of her deductive reasoning, or had Cummings dropped a hint?

She was waiting for us in front of the Haight Street boarding house that served her for a home, and we tucked her between us on the roadster's wide seat. At the St. Dunstan we found my man, left there since the hour of the alarm the day before, and everybody belonging to the management surly and glum. The clerk handed me Clayte's key across the morning papers spread out on his desk. Apartment houses dislike notoriety of this sort, and the St. Dunstan set up to be as rabidly respectable, as chemically pure as any in the city. Well, no use their blaming me; Clayte was their misfortune; they couldn't expect me to keep the matter out of print entirely.

The three of us crowded into the automatic elevator, and I pressed the seventh floor button. The girl's eyes shone under the wisp of veil twisted around a knowing little turban. She liked the taste of the adventure.

"That man came this way – with that suitcase," she breathed, " – maybe set it down right there when he pressed the button – just as Mr. Boyne did now!"

It was a fine morning; the shades had been left up, and Clayte's room when I opened the door was ablaze with sunlight.

"How delightful!" Barbara Wallace stopped on the threshold and looked about her. I expected the scientific investigating to begin; but no – she was all taken up with the beauty of sunlight and view.

The seventh was the top floor. The St. Dunstan stood almost at the summit where Nob Hill slants obliquely to north and east, and Powell Street dizzies down the steep descent to North Beach and the Bay. The girl had run to a window, and was looking out toward the marvelous show of blue-green water and distant Berkeley hills.

"Will you open this window for me, please?" she asked. I stepped to her side, forestalling Worth who was eyeing the room's interior with curiosity.

"You'll notice the burglar-proof sash locks," I said as I manipulated this one. She gave only casual interest, her attention still on the view beyond. The steel latch, fastened to the upper sash, locked into the socket on the lower sash by a lever-catch. "See? I must pull out this little lever before I can push the hasp back with my thumb – so. Now the window may be shoved up," and I illustrated.

"Yes," she nodded; then, "Look at the wisps of fog around Tamalpais's top. Worth, come here and see the violet shadows of the clouds on the bay."

"North wind coming up," agreed Worth, stepping to the farther window.

"It's bringing in the fog," she said; then abruptly, giving me the first hint that little Miss Wallace considered herself on the job, "Will it not latch by itself if you jam it shut hard?"

"It will not." I illustrated with a bang. The latch still remained open. "I must close it by hand." I pushed the hasp into the keeper, and, snap – the lever shot back and it was fast.

"But a window like that couldn't be opened from outside, even without the locking lever," she remarked, gazing again toward the Marin shore.

"A man with the know – a burglar – can open the ordinary window latch in less than a minute," I told her. "With a jimmy pinched between the sash and the sill, a recurring pressure starts the latch back; nothing to hold it. This – unless he cuts the glass – is burglar-proof."

Worth, at her shoulder, now looked down the sheer descent which exaggerated the seven stories of the St. Dunstan; because of its crowning position on the hill and the intersection of streets, we looked over the roofs of the houses before us, far above their chimney tops. I caught his eye and grinned across the girl's head, suggesting,

"Besides, we weren't trying to find how some one could break into this room, but how they could break out. Even if the latches had not been locked, there wouldn't be an answer in these windows – unless Clayte could fly."

"Might have climbed from one window ledge to the next and so made his way to the fire-escape," Worth said, but I shook my head.

"He'd be seen from the windows by the tenants on six floors – and nobody saw him. Might as well take the elevator or the stairs – which he didn't."

But the girl wasn't listening to any of this. Her expression attentive, alert, she was passing her hand around the edge of the glass of either sash, as though she still dwelt on my suggestion of cutting the pane; and as we watched her, she murmured to herself,

"Yes, flying would be a good way." It made me laugh.

And then she turned away from the windows and had no more interest in any of them, going with me all over the rest of the room with rather the air of a person who thought of renting it than a high-brow criminal investigator hunting clues.

"He lived here – years, you say?" I nodded. She slid her hand over the plush cushions of a morris chair, threw back the covers of an iron bed in one corner and felt of the mattress, then went and stood before the bare little dresser. "Why, the place expresses no more personality than a room in a transient hotel!"

"He hadn't any personality," I growled, and got the flicker of a smile from her eye.

"What about those library books he carried in the suitcase?" Worth came in with an echo from the bank meeting.

"Some more bunk," I said morosely. "So far we've not been able to locate him as a patron of any public or private library, and the hotel clerk's sure his mail never contained a correspondence course – in fact, neither here nor at the bank can any one remember his getting any mail. If he ever carried books in that suitcase as Knapp believed, it was several years back."

"Several years back," Miss Wallace repeated low.

"Myself, I've given up the idea of his studying. This crime doesn't look to me like any sudden temptation of a model bank clerk, spending his spare hours over correspondence courses. I rather expect to find him just plain crook."

"Oh, no," the girl objected. "It's too big and too well done to have been planned by a dull, commonplace crook."

"Right you are," I agreed, with restored good humor. "A keen brain planned this, but not Clayte's. There had to be an instrument – and that was Clayte – also, likely, one or more to help in the getaway."

The getaway! That brought us back with a thump to the present moment. Our pretty girl had been all over the shop now, glanced into bathroom, closet and cupboard, noted abandoned hats, clothing and shoes, the electric plate where Clayte got his breakfast coffee and toast, asked without much interest where he ate his other meals, and nodded agreeingly when she found that he'd been only an occasional customer at the neighboring restaurants, never regular, apparently eating here and there down-town. She seemed to get something out of that; what I didn't know.

"You speak of this crime not being committed on impulse," she turned to me at length. "How long ahead should you say he planned it?"

"Or had it planned and prepared for him," I reminded her.

"Well, that, then," she conceded with slight impatience. "How long do you think it might have been planned or prepared for? Years?"

"Hardly that. Not more than a year probably. A gang like this wouldn't hold together on a proposition for many months."

The black brows over those clear, childlike eyes, puckered a bit. I saw she wasn't at all satisfied with what I had said.

"Made all the observations you want to, Bobs?" Worth asked.

"All here. I want to see the roof." She gave us rather a mechanical smile as she silently ticked her points off on her fingers, appealing to me with, "I'm depending upon you for such facts as I have been unable to observe for myself, so if you give me wrong facts – make mistakes – I'll make mistakes in deduction."

There was such confidence in her deductive abilities that a tinge of irony crept into my tones as I replied,

"I'll be very careful what opinions I hold."

"I don't mind the opinions," this astounding young woman took me up gaily. "I never have any of my own, so I don't pay attention to anybody else's. But *do* be careful of your facts!"

"I'll try to," was all I said. Worth cut in with,

"Do you consider the roof another fact, Bobs?"

"I hope to find facts there," she answered promptly.

"Remember," I said, "your theory means another man up there, and you haven't yet –"

"Please, Mr. Boyne, don't take two and two and make five of them at this stage of the game," she checked me hastily, and I left them together while I made a hurried survey of the hall ceilings, looking for the scuttle. There was no hatchway in view, so I started down to the clerk to make inquiry. As I passed Clayte's open door, Miss Wallace seemed to be adjusting her turban before the dresser mirror, while Worth waited impatiently.

"Just a minute," I called. "I'll be right back," and I ducked into the elevator.

CHAPTER VI ON THE ROOF

When I returned with a key and the information that the way to the roof ran through the janitor's tool-room at the far end of the hall, I found my young people already out there. Worth was trying the tool-room door.

"Got the key?" he called. "It's locked."

"Yes." I took my time fitting and turning it. "How did you know this was the room?"

"I didn't," briefly. "Bobs walked out here, and I followed her. She said we'd want into this one." She'd guessed right again! I wheeled on her, ejaculating,

"For the love of Mike! Tell a mere man how you deduced this stairway. Feminine intuition, I suppose."

I hadn't meant to be offensive with that last, but her firm little chin was in the air as she countered,

"Is it a stairway? It might be a ladder, you know."

It was a ladder, an iron ladder, as I found when I ushered them in. My eyes snapped inquiry at her.

"Very simple," she said. Worth was pushing aside pails and boxes to make a better way for her to the ladder's foot. "There wouldn't be a roof scuttle in the rented rooms, so I knew when you called in to tell us there was none in the halls."

"I didn't. I said nothing of the sort." Where was the girl's fine memory that she couldn't recollect a man's words for the little time I'd been gone! "All I said was, 'Just a minute and I'll be back.'"

"Yes, that's all you said to Worth." She glanced at the boy serenely as he waited for her at the ladder's foot. "He's not a trained observer; he doesn't deduce even from what he does observe." There were twinkling lights in her black eyes. "But what your hurried trip to the office said to me was that you'd gone for the key of the room that led to the roof scuttle."

Well, that was reasonable – simple enough, too; but,

"This room? How did you find it?"

She stepped to the open door and placed the tip of a gloved finger on the nicked naught that marked the panels.

"The significant zero again, Mr. Boyne," she laughed. "Here it means the room is not a tenanted one, and is therefore the way to the roof. Shall we go there?"

"Well, young lady," I said as I led her along the trail Worth had cleared, "it must be almost as bad to see everything that way – in minute detail – as to be blind."

"Carry on!" Worth called from the top of the ladder, reaching down to aid the girl. She laughed back at me as she started the short climb.

"Not at all bad! You others seem to me only half awake to what is about you – only half living," and she placed her hand in the strong one held down to her. As Worth passed her through the scuttle to the roof, I saw her glance carelessly at the hooks and staples, the clumsy but adequate arrangement for locking the hatch, and, following her, gave them more careful attention, wondering what she had seen – plenty that I did not, no doubt. They had no tale to tell my eyes.

Once outside, she stopped a minute with Worth to adjust herself to the sharp wind which swept across from the north. Here was a rectangular space surrounded by walls which ran around its four sides to form the coping, unbroken in any spot; a gravel-and-tar roof, almost flat, with the scuttle and a few small, dust covered skylights its only openings, four chimney-tops its sole projections. It was bare of any hiding-place, almost as clear as a tennis court.

We made a solemn tour of inspection; I wasn't greatly interested – how could I be, knowing that between this roof and my fugitive there had been locked windows, and a locked door under reliable human eyes? Still, the lifelong training of the detective kept me estimating the possibilities of a getaway from the roof – if Clayte could have reached it. Worth crossed to where the St. Dunstan fire escape came up from the ground to end below us at a top floor window. I joined him, explaining as we looked down,

"Couldn't have made it that way; not by daylight. In open view all around."

"Think he stayed up here till dark?" Worth suggested, quite as though the possibility of Clayte's coming here at all was settled.

"My men were all over this building – roof to cellar – within the hour. They'd not have overlooked a crack big enough for him to hide in. Put yourself in Clayte's place. Time was the most valuable thing in the world with him right then. If ever he got up to this roof, he'd not waste a minute longer on it than he had to."

"Let's see what's beyond, then," and Worth led the way to the farther end.

The girl didn't come with us. Having been once around the roof coping, looking, it seemed to me, as much at the view as anything else, she now seemed content to settle herself on a little square of planking, a disused scuttle top or something of the sort, in against one of the chimneys where she was sheltered from the wind. Rather to my surprise, I saw her thoughtfully pulling off her gloves, removing her turban, all the time with a curiously disinterested air. I was reminded of what Worth had said the night before about the way her father trained her. Probably she regarded the facts I'd furnished her, or that she'd picked up for herself, much as she used to the problems in concentration her father spread in the high chair tray of her infancy. I turned and left her with them, for Worth was calling me to announce a fact I already knew, that the adjoining building had a roof some fifteen feet below where we stood, and that the man, admitting good gymnastic ability, might have reached it.

"Sure," I said. "But come on. We're wasting time here."

We turned to go, and then stopped, both of us checked instantly by what we saw. The girl was sitting in a strange pose, her feet drawn in to cross beneath her body, slender hands at the length of the arms meeting with interlaced finger-tips before her, the thumbs just touching; shoulders back, chin up, eyes – big enough at any time, now dilated to look twice their size – velvet circles in a white face. Like a Buddha; I'd seen her sit so, years before, an undersized girl doing stunts for her father in a public hall; and even then she'd been in a way impressive. But now, in the fullness of young beauty, her fine head relieved against the empty blue of the sky, the free winds whipping loose flying ends of her dark hair, she held the eye like a miracle.

Sitting here so immovably, she looked to me as though life had slid away from her for the moment, the mechanical action of lungs and heart temporarily suspended, so that mind might work unhindered in that beautiful shell. No, I was wrong. She was breathing; her bosom rose and fell in slow but deep, placid inhalations and exhalations. And the pale face might be from the slower heart-beat, or only because the surface blood had receded to give more of strength to the brain.

The position of head of a Bankers' Security Agency carries with it a certain amount of dignity – a dignity which, since Richardson's death, I have maintained better than I have handled other requirements of the business he left with me. I stood now feeling like a fool. I'd grown gray in the work, and here in my prosperous middle life, a boy's whim and a girl's pretty face had put me in the position of consulting a clairvoyant. Worse, for this was a wild-cat affair, without even the professional standing of establishments to which I knew some of the weak brothers in my line sometimes sneaked for ghostly counsel. If it should leak out, I was done for.

I suppose I sort of groaned, for I felt Worth put a restraining hand on my arm, and heard his soft, "Psst!"

The two of us stood, how long I can't say, something besides the beauty of the young creature, even the dignity of her in this outré situation getting hold of me, so that I was almost reverent when

at last the rigidity of her image-like figure began to relax, the pretty feet in their silk stockings and smart pumps appeared where they belonged, side by side on the edge of the planking, and she looked at us with eyes that slowly gathered their normal expression, and a smile of rare human sweetness.

"It is horrid to see – and I loathe doing it!" She shook her curly dark head like a punished child, and stayed a minute longer, eyes downcast, groping after gloves and hat. "I thought maybe I'd get the answer before you saw me – sitting up like a trained seal!"

"Like a mighty pretty little heathen idol, Bobs," Worth amended.

"Well, it's the only way I can really concentrate – effectively. But this is the first time I've done it since – since father died."

"And never again for me, if that's the way you feel about it." Worth crossed quickly and stood beside her, looking down. She reached a hand to him; her eyes thanked him; but as he helped her to her feet I was struck by a something poised and confident that she seemed to have brought with her out of that strange state in which she had just been.

"Doesn't either of you want to hear the answer?" she asked. Then, without waiting for reply, she started for the scuttle and the ladder, bare headed, carrying her hat. We found her once more adjusting turban and veil before the mirror of Clayte's dresser. She faced around, and announced, smiling steadily across at me,

"Your man Clayte left this room while Mrs. Griggsby was kneeling almost on its threshold – left it by that window over there. He got to the roof by means of a rope and grappling hook. He tied the suitcase to the lower end of the rope, swung it out of the window, went up hand over hand, and pulled the suitcase up after him. That's the answer I got."

It was? Well, it was a beaut! Only Worth Gilbert, standing there giving the proceeding respectability by careful attention and a grave face, brought me down to asking with mild jocularly,

"He did? He did all that? Well, please ma'am, who locked the window after him?"

"He locked the window after himself."

"Oh, say!" I began in exasperation – hadn't I just shown the impractical little creature that those locks couldn't be manipulated from outside?

"Wait. Examine carefully the wooden part of the upper sash, at the lock – again," she urged, but without making any movement to help. "You'll find what we overlooked before; the way he locked the sash from the outside."

I turned to the window and looked where she had said; nothing. I ran my fingers over the painted surface of the wood, outside, opposite the latch, and a queer, chilly feeling went down my spine. I jerked out my knife, opened it and scraped at a tiny inequality.

"There is – is something – " I was beginning, when Worth crowded in at my side and pushed his broad shoulders out the window to get a better view of my operations, then commanded,

"Let me have that knife." He took it from my fingers, dug with its blade, and suddenly from the inside I saw a tiny hole appear in the frame of the sash beside the lock hasp. "Here we are!" He brought his upper half back into the room and held up a wooden plug, painted – dipped in paint – the exact color of the sash. It had concealed a hole; pierced the wood from out to in.

"And she saw that in her trance," I murmured, gaping in amazement at the plug.

I heard her catch her breath, and Worth scowled at me,

"Trance? What do you mean, Boyne? She doesn't go into a trance."

"That – that – whatever she does," I corrected rather helplessly.

"Never mind, Mr. Boyne," said the girl. "It isn't clairvoyance or anything like that, however it looks."

"But I wouldn't have believed any human eyes could have found that thing. I discovered it only by sense of touch – and that after you told me to hunt for it. You saw it when I was showing you the latch, did you?"

"Oh, I didn't see it." She shook her head. "I found it when I was sitting up there on the roof."

"Guessed at it?"

"I never guess." Indignantly. "When I'd cleared my mind of everything else – had concentrated on just the facts that bore on what I wanted to know – how that man with the suitcase got out of the room and left it locked behind him – I deduced the hole in the sash by elimination."

"By elimination?" I echoed. "Show me."

"Simple as two and two," she assented. "Out of the door? No; Mrs. Griggsby; so out of the window. Down? No; you told why; he would be seen; so, up. Ladder? No; too big for one man to handle or to hide; so a rope."

"But the hole in the sash?"

"You showed me the only way to close that lock from the outside. There was no hole in the glass, so there must be in the sash. It was not visible – you had been all over it, and a man of your profession isn't a totally untrained observer – so the hole was plugged. I hadn't seen the plug, so it was concealed by paint – "

I was trying to work a toothpick through the plughole. She offered me a wire hairpin, straightened out, and with it I pushed the hasp into place from outside, saw the lever snap in to hold it fast. I had worked the catch as Clayte had worked it – from outside.

"How did you know it was *this* window?" I asked, forced to agree that she had guessed right as to the sash lock. "There are two more here, either of which – "

"No, please, Mr. Boyne. Look at the angle of the roof that cuts from view any one climbing from this window – not from the others."

We were all leaning in the window now, sticking our heads out, looking down, looking up.

"I can't yet see how you get the rope and hook," I said. "Still seems to me that an outside man posted on the roof to help in the getaway is more likely."

"Maybe. I can't deal with things that are merely likely. It has to be a fact – or nothing – for my use. I know that there wasn't any second man because of the nicks Clayte's grappling hook has left in the cornice up there."

"Nicks!" I said, and stood like a bound boy at a husking, without a word to say for myself. Of course, in this impasse of the locked windows, my men and I had had some excuse for our superficial examination of the roof. Yet that she should have seen what we had passed over – seen it out of the corner of her eye, and be laughing at me – was rather a dose to swallow. She'd got her hair and her hat and veil to her liking, and she prompted us,

"So now you want to get right down stairs – don't you – and go up through that other building to its roof?"

I stared. She had my plan almost before I had made it.

At the St. Dunstan desk where I returned the keys, little Miss Wallace had a question of her own to put to the clerk.

"How long ago was this building reroofed?" she asked with one of her dark, softly glowing smiles.

"Reroofed?" repeated the puzzled clerk, much more civil to her than he had been to me. "I don't know that it ever was. Certainly not in my time, and I've been here all of four years."

"Not in four years? You're sure?"

"Sure of that, yes, miss. But I can find exactly." The fellow behind the desk was rising with an eagerness to be of service to her, when she cut him short with,

"Thank you. Four years would be exact enough for my purpose." And she followed a puzzled detective and, if I may guess, an equally wondering Worth Gilbert out into the street.

CHAPTER VII

THE GOLD NUGGET

The neighbor to the south of the St. Dunstan was the Gold Nugget Hotel, a five story brick building and not at all pretentious as a hostelry. I knew the place mildly, and my police training, even better than such acquaintance as I had with this particular dump, told me what it was. Through the windows we could see guests, Sunday papers littered about them, half smoked cigars in their faces, and hats which had a general tendency to tilt over the right eye. And here suddenly I realized the difference between Miss Barbara Wallace, a scientist's daughter, and some feminine sleuth we might have had with us.

"Take her back to the St. Dunstan, Worth," I suggested. Then, as I saw they were both going to resist, "She can't go in here. I'll wait for you if you like."

"Don't know why we shouldn't let Bobs in on the fun, same as you and me, Jerry." That was the way Worth put it. I took a side glance at his attitude in this affair – that he'd bought and was enjoying an eight hundred thousand dollar frolic, offering to share it with a friend; and saying no more, I wheeled and swung open the door for them. The man at the desk looked at me, calling a quick,

"Hello, Jerry – what's up?"

"Hello, Kite. How'd you come here?"

The Kite as a hotelman was a new one on me. Last I knew of him, he was in the business of making book at the Emeryville track; and I supposed – if I ever thought of him – that he'd followed the ponies south across the border. As I stepped close to the counter, he spoke low, his look one of puzzled and somewhat anxious inquiry.

"Running straight, Jerry. You may ask the Chief. What can I do for you?"

Rather glad of the luck that gave me an old acquaintance to deal with, I told him, described Clayte, Worth and Miss Wallace standing by listening; then asked if Kite had seen him pass through the hotel going out the previous day at some time around one o'clock, carrying a brown, sole leather suitcase.

The readers of the Sunday papers who had been lured from their known standards of good manners into the sending of sundry interested glances in the direction of our sparkling girl, took the cue from the Kite's scowl to bury themselves for good in the voluminous sheets they held, each attending strictly to his own business, as is the etiquette of places like the Gold Nugget.

"About one o'clock, you say?" Kite muttered, frowning, twisted his head around and called down a back passage, "Louie – Oh, Louie!" and when an overalled porter, rather messy, shuffled to the desk, put the low toned query, "D'you see any stranger guy gripping a sole leather shirt-box snoop by out yestiddy, after one, thereabouts?" And I added the information,

"Medium height and weight, blue eyes, light brown hair, smooth face."

Louie looked at me dubiously.

"How big a guy?" he asked.

"Five feet seven or eight; weighs about hundred and forty."

"Blue eyes you say?"

"Light blue – gray blue."

"How was he tucked up?"

"Blue serge suit, black shoes, black derby. Neat, quiet dresser."

Louie's eyes wandered over the guests in the office questioningly. I began to feel impatient. If there was any place in the city where my description of Clayte would differentiate him, make him noticeable by comparison, it was here. Neat, quiet dressers were not dotting this lobby.

"Might be Tim Foley?" he appealed to the Kite, who nodded gravely and chewed his short mustache. "Would he have a big scar on his left cheek?"

"He would not," I said shortly. "He wasn't a guest here, and you don't know him. Get this straight now: a stranger, going through here, out; about one o'clock; carried a suitcase."

"Bulls after him?" Louie asked, and I turned away from him wearily.

"Kite," I said, "let me up to your roof."

"Sure, Jerry." Released, the porter went on to gather up a pile of discarded papers.

"Could he – the man I've described – come through here – through this office and neither you nor Louie see him?" I asked. The Kite brought a box of cigars from under the counter with,

"My treat, gentlemen. Naw, Jerry; sure not – not that kind of a guy. Louie'd 'a' spotted him. Most observing cuss I ever seen."

Miss Wallace, taking all this in, seemed amused. As I turned to lead to the elevator I found that again she wanted a question of her own answered.

"Mr. Kite," she began and I grinned; Kite wasn't the Kite's surname or any part of his name; "Who is the guest here with the upstairs room – on the top floor – has had the same room right along – for five or six years – but doesn't –"

"Go easy, ma'am, please!" Kite's little eyes were popping; he dragged out a handkerchief and fumbled it around his forehead. "I've not been here for any five or six years – no, nor half that time. Since I've been here most of our custom is transient. Nobody don't keep no room five or six years in the Gold Nugget."

"Back up," I smiled at his excitement. "To my certain knowledge Steve Skeels has had a room here longer than that. Hasn't he been with you ever since the place was rebuilt after the earthquake?"

"Steve?" the Kite repeated. "I forgot him. Yeah – he keeps a little room up under the roof."

"Has he had it for as long as four years?" the young lady asked.

"Search me," the Kite shook his head.

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