

Wells Carolyn

The Diamond Pin



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CHAPTER I

A CERTAIN DATE

"Well, go to church then, and I hope to goodness you'll come back in a more spiritual frame of mind! Though how you can feel spiritual in that flibbertigibbet dress is more than I know! An actress, indeed! No mummies' masks have ever blotted the scutcheon of my family tree. The Clydes were decent, God-fearing people, and I don't propose, Miss, that you shall disgrace the name."

Ursula Pell shook her good-looking gray head and glowered at her pretty niece, who was getting into a comfortable though not elaborate motor car.

"I know you didn't propose it, Aunt Ursula," returned the smiling girl, "I thought up the scheme myself, and I decline to let you have credit of its origin."

"Discredit, you mean," and Mrs. Pell sniffed haughtily. "Here's some money for the contribution plate. Iris; see that you put it in, and don't appropriate it yourself."

The slender, aristocratic old hand, half covered by a falling lace frill, dropped a coin into Iris' out-held palm, and the girl perceived it was one cent.

She looked at her aunt in amazement, for Mrs. Pell was a millionaire; then, thinking better of her impulse to voice an indignant protest, Iris got into the car. Immediately, she saw a dollar bill on the seat beside her and she knew that was for the contribution plate, and the penny was a joke of her aunt's.

For Ursula Pell had a queer twist in her fertile old brain that made her enjoy the temporary discomfiture of her friends, whenever she was able to bring it about. To see anyone chagrined, nonplused, or made suddenly to feel ridiculous, was to Mrs. Pell an occasion of sheer delight.

To do her justice, her whimsical tricks usually ended in the gratification of the victim in some way, as now, when Iris, thinking her aunt had given her a penny for the collection, found the dollar ready for that worthy cause. But such things are irritating, and were particularly so to Iris Clyde, whose sense of humor was of a different trend.

In fact, Iris' whole nature was different from her aunt's, and therein lay most of the difficulties of their living together. For there were difficulties. The erratic, emphatic, dogmatic old lady could not sympathize with the high-strung, high-spirited young girl, and as a result there was more friction than should be in any well-regulated family.

And Mrs. Pell had a decided penchant for practical jokes – than which there is nothing more abominable. But members of Mrs. Pell's household put up with these because if they didn't they automatically ceased to be members of Mrs. Pell's household.

One member had made this change. A nephew, Winston Bannard, had resented his aunt's gift of a trick cigar, which blew up and sent fine sawdust into his eyes and nose, and her follow-up of a box of Perfectos was insufficient to keep him longer in the uncertain atmosphere of her otherwise pleasant country home.

And now, Iris Clyde had announced her intention of leaving the old roof also. Her pretext was that she wanted to become an actress, and that was true, but had Mrs Pell been more companionable and easy to live with, Iris would have curbed her histrionic ambitions. Nor is it beyond the possibilities that Iris chose the despised profession, because she knew it would enrage her aunt to think of a Clyde going into the depths of ignominy which the stage represented to Mrs. Pell.

For Iris Clyde at twenty-two had quite as strong a will and inflexible a determination as her aunt at sixty-two, and though they oftenest ran parallel, yet when they criss-crossed, neither was ready to yield the fraction of a point for the sake of peace in the family.

And it was after one of their most heated discussions, after a duel of words that flicked with sarcasm and rasped with innuendo, that Iris, cool and pretty in her summer costume, started for church, leaving Mrs. Pell, irate and still nervously quivering from her own angry tirade.

Iris smiled and waved the bill at her aunt as the car started, and then suddenly looked aghast and leaned over the side of the car as if she had dropped the dollar. But the car sped on, and Iris waved frantically, pointing to the spot where she had seemed to drop the bill, and motioning her aunt to go out there and get it.

This Mrs. Pell promptly did, only to be rewarded by a ringing laugh from Iris and a wave of the bill in the girl's hand, as the car slid through the gates and out of sight.

"Silly thing!" grumbled Ursula Pell, returning to the piazza where she had been sitting. But she smiled at the way her niece had paid her back in her own coin, if a dollar bill can be considered coin.

This, then, was the way the members of the Pell household were expected to conduct themselves. Nor was it only the family, but the servants also were frequent butts for the misplaced hilarity of their mistress.

One cook left because of a tiny mouse imprisoned in her workbasket; one first-class gardener couldn't stand a scarecrow made in a ridiculous caricature of himself; and one small scullery maid objected to unexpected and startling "Boos!" from dark corners.

But servants could always be replaced, and so, for that matter, could relatives, for Mrs. Pell had many kinsfolk, and her wealth would prove a strong magnet to most of them.

Indeed, as outsiders often exclaimed, why mind a harmless joke now and then? Which was all very well – for the outsiders. But it is far from pleasant to live in continual expectation of salt in one's tea or cotton in one's croquettes.

So Winston had picked up his law books and sought refuge in New York City and Iris, after a year's further endurance, was thinking seriously of following suit.

And yet, Ursula Pell was most kind, generous and indulgent. Iris had been with her for ten years, and as a child or a very young girl, she had not minded her aunt's idiosyncrasy, had, indeed, rather enjoyed the foolish tricks. But, of late, they had bored her, and their constant recurrence so wore on her nerves that she wanted to go away and order her life for herself. The stage attracted her, though not insisently. She planned to live in bachelor apartments with a girl chum who was an artist, and hoped to find congenial occupation of some kind. She rather harped on the actress proposition because it so thoroughly annoyed her aunt, and matters between them had now come to such a pass, that they teased each other in any and every way possible. This was entirely Mrs. Pell's fault, for if she hadn't had her peculiar trait of practical joking, Iris never would have dreamed of teasing her.

On the whole, they were good friends, and often a few days would pass in perfect harmony by reason of Ursula not being moved by her imp of the perverse to cut up any silly prank. Then, Iris would drink from a glass of water, to find it had been tinctured with asafetida, or brush her hair and then learn that some drops of glue had been put on the bristles of her hairbrush.

Anger or sulks at these performances were just what Mrs. Pell wanted, so Iris roared with laughter and pretended to think it all very funny, whereupon Mrs. Pell did the sulking, and Iris scored.

So it was not, perhaps, surprising that the girl concluded to leave her aunt's home and shift for herself. It would, she knew, probably mean disinheritance; but after all money is not everything, and as the old lady grew older, her pranks became more and more an intolerable nuisance.

And Iris wanted to go out into the world and meet people. The neighbors in the small town of Berrien, where they lived, were uninteresting, and there were few visitors from the outside world. Though less than fifteen miles from New York, Iris rarely invited her friends to visit her because of

the probability that her aunt would play some absurd trick on them. This had happened so many times, even though Mrs. Pell had promised that it should not occur, that Iris had resolved never to try it again.

The best friends and advisers of the girl were Mr. Bowen, the rector, and his wife. The two were also friends of Mrs. Pell, and perhaps out of respect for his cloth, the old lady never played tricks on the Bowens. It was their habit to dine every Sunday at Pellbrook, and the occasion was always the pleasantest of the whole week.

The farm was a large one, about a mile from the village, and included old-fashioned orchards and hayfields as well as more modern greenhouses and gardens. There was a lovely brook, a sunny slope of hillside, and a delightful grove of maples, and added to these a long-distance view of hazy hills that made Pellbrook one of the most attractive country places for many miles around.

Ursula Pell sat on her verandah quite contentedly gazing over the landscape and thinking about her multitudinous affairs.

"I s'pose I oughtn't to tease that child," she thought, smiling at the recollection; "I don't know what I'd do, if she should leave me! Win went, but, land! you can't keep a young man down! A girl, now, 's different. I guess I'll take Iris to New York next winter and let her have a little fling. I'll pretend I'm going alone, and leave her here to keep the house, and then I'll take her too! She'll be so surprised!"

The old lady's eyes twinkled and she fairly reveled in the joke she would play on her niece. And, not to do her an injustice, she meant no harm. She really thought only of the girl's glad surprise at learning she was to go, and gave no heed to the misery that might be caused by the previous disappointment.

A woman came out from the house to ask directions for dinner.

"Yes, Polly," said Ursula Pell, "the Bowens will dine here as usual. Dinner at one-thirty, sharp, as the rector has to leave at three, to attend some meeting or other. Pity they had to have it on Sunday."

There was some discussion of the menu and then Polly, the old cook, shuffled away, and again Ursula Pell sat alone.

"An actress!" she ruminated, "my little Iris an actress! Well, I guess not! But I can persuade her out of that foolishness, I'll bet! Why, if I can't do it any other way, I'll take her traveling, – I'll – why, I'll give her her inheritance now, and let her amuse herself being an heiress before I'm dead and gone. Why should I wait for that, any way? Suppose I give her the pin at once – I'd do it to-day, I believe, while the notion's on me, if I only had it here. I can get it from Mr. Chapin in a few days, and then – well, then, Iris would have something to interest her! I wonder how she'd like a whole king's ransom of jewels! She's like a princess herself. And, then, too, that girl ought to marry, and marry well. I suppose I ought to have been thinking about this before. I must talk to the Bowens – of course, there's no one in Berrien – I did think one time Win might fall in love with her, but then he went away, and now he never comes up here any more. I wonder if Iris cares especially for Win. She never says anything about him, but that's no sign, one way or the other. I'd like her to marry Roger Downing, but she snubs him unmercifully. And he is a little countrified. With Iris' beauty and the fortune I shall leave her, she could marry anybody on earth! I believe I'll take her traveling a bit, say, to California, and then spend the winter in New York and give the girl a chance. And I must quit teasing her. But I do love to see that surprised look when I play some outlandish trick on her!"

The old lady's eyes assumed a vixenish expression and her smile widened till it was a sly, almost diabolical grin. Quite evidently she was even then planning some new and particularly disagreeable joke on Iris.

At length she rose and went into the house to write in her diary. Ursula Pell was of most methodical habits, and a daily journal was regularly kept.

The main part of the house was four square, a wide hall running straight through the center, with doors front and back. On the left, as one entered, the big living room was in front, and behind it a smaller sitting room, which was Mrs. Pell's own. Not that anyone was unwelcome there, but it held

many of her treasures and individual belongings, and served as her study or office, for the transaction of the various business matters in which she was involved. Frequently her lawyer was closeted with her here for long confabs, for Ursula Pell was greatly given to the pleasurable entertainment of changing her will.

She had made more wills than Lawyer Chapin could count, and each in turn was duly drawn up and witnessed and the previous one destroyed. Her diary usually served to record the changes she proposed making, and when the time was ripe for a new will, the diary was requisitioned for direction as to the testamentary document.

The wealth of Ursula Pell was enormous, far more so than one would suppose from the simplicity of her household appointments. This was not due to miserliness, but to her simple tastes and her frugal early life. Her fortune was the bequest of her husband, who, now dead more than twenty years, had amassed a great deal of money which he had invested almost entirely in precious stones. It was his theory and belief that stocks and bonds were uncertain, whereas gems were always valuable. His collection included some world-famous diamonds and rubies, and a set of emeralds that were historic.

But nobody, save Ursula Pell herself, knew where these stones were. Whether in safe deposit or hidden on her own property, she had never given so much as a hint to her family or her lawyer. James Chapin knew his eccentric old client better than to inquire concerning the whereabouts of her treasure, and made and remade the wills disposing of it, without comment. A few of the smaller gems Mrs. Pell had given to Iris and to young Bannard, and some, smaller still, to more distant relatives; but the bulk of the collection had never been seen by the present generation.

She often told Iris that it should all be hers eventually, but Iris didn't seriously bank on the promise, for she knew her erratic aunt might quite conceivably will the jewels to some distant cousin, in a moment of pique at her niece.

For Iris was not diplomatic. Never had she catered to her aunt's whims or wishes with a selfish motive. She honestly tried to live peaceably with Mrs. Pell, but of late she had begun to believe that impossible, and was planning to go away.

As usual on Sunday morning, Ursula Pell had her house to herself.

Her modest establishment consisted of only four servants, who engaged additional help as their duties required. Purdy, the old gardener, was the husband of Polly, the cook; Agnes, the waitress, also served as ladies' maid when occasion called for it. Campbell, the chauffeur, completed the ménage, and all other workers, and there were a good many, were employed by the day, and did not live at Pellbrook.

Mrs. Pell rarely went to church, and on Sunday mornings Campbell took Iris to the village. Agnes accompanied them, as she, too, attended the Episcopal service.

Purdy and his wife drove an old horse and still older buckboard to a small church nearby, which better suited their type of piety.

Polly was a marvel of efficiency and managed cleverly to go to meeting without in any way delaying or interfering with her preparations for the Sunday dinner. Indeed, Ursula Pell would have no one around her who was not efficient. Waste and waste motion were equally taboo in that household.

The mistress of the place made her customary round of the kitchen quarters, and, finding everything in its usual satisfactory condition, returned to her own sitting room, and took her diary from her desk.

At half-past twelve the Purdys returned, and at one o'clock the motor car brought its load from the village.

"Well, well, Mr. Bowen, how do you do?" the hostess greeted them as they arrived. "And dear Mrs. Bowen, come right in and lay off your bonnet."

The wide hall, with its tables, chairs and mirrors offered ample accommodations for hats and wraps, and soon the party were seated on the front part of the broad verandah that encircled three sides of the house.

Mr. Bowen was stout and jolly and his slim shadow of a wife acted as a sort of Greek chorus, agreeing with and echoing his remarks and opinions.

Conversation was in a gay and bantering key, and Mrs. Pell was in high good humor. Indeed, she seemed nervously excited and a little hysterical, but this was not entirely unusual, and her guests fitted their mood to hers.

A chance remark led to mention of Mrs. Pell's great fortune of jewels, and Mr. Bowen declared that he fully expected she would bequeath them all to his church to be made into a wonderful chalice.

"Not a bad idea," exclaimed Ursula Pell; "and one I've never thought of! I'll get Mr. Chapin over here to-morrow to change my will."

"Who will be the loser?" asked the rector. "To whom are they willed at present?"

"That's telling," and Mrs. Pell smiled mysteriously.

"Don't forget you've promised me the wonderful diamond pin, auntie," said Iris, bristling up a little.

"What diamond pin?" asked Mrs. Bowen, curiously.

"Oh, for years, Aunt Ursula has promised me a marvelous diamond pin, the most valuable of her whole collection – haven't you, auntie?"

"Yes, Iris," and Mrs. Pell nodded her head, "that pin is certainly the most valuable thing I possess."

"It must be a marvel, then," said Mr. Bowen, his eyes opening wide, "for I've heard great tales of the Pell collection. I thought they were all unset jewels."

"Most of them are," Mrs. Pell spoke carelessly, "but the pin I shall leave to Iris –"

At that moment dinner was announced, and the group went to the dining room. This large and pleasant room was in front on the right, and back of it were the pantries and kitchens. A long rear extension provided the servants' quarters, which were numerous and roomy. The house was comfortable rather than pretentious, and though the village folk wondered why so rich a woman continued to live in such an old-fashioned home, those who knew her well realized that the place exactly met Ursula Pell's requirements.

The dinner was in harmony with the atmosphere of the home. Plentiful, well-cooked food there was, but no attempt at elaborate confections or any great formality of service.

One concession to modernity was a small dish of stuffed dates at each cover, and of these Mrs. Pell spoke in scornful tones.

"Some of Iris' foolishness," she observed. "She wants all sorts of knick-knacks that she considers stylish!"

"I don't at all, auntie," denied the girl, flushing with annoyance, "but when you ate those dates at Mrs. Graham's the other day, you enjoyed them so much I thought I'd make some. She gave me her recipe, and I think they're very nice."

"I do, too," agreed Mrs. Bowen, eating a date appreciatively, and feeling sorry for Iris' discomfiture. For though many girls might not mind such disapproval, Iris was of a sensitive nature, and cringed beneath her aunt's sharp words.

In an endeavor to cover her embarrassment, she picked up a date from her own portion and bit off the end.

From the fruit spurted a stream of jet black ink, which stained Iris' lips, offended her palate, and spilling on her pretty white frock, utterly ruined the dainty chiffon and lace.

She comprehended instantly. Her aunt, to annoy her, had managed to conceal ink in one of the dates, and place it where Iris would naturally pick it up first.

With an angry exclamation the girl left the table and ran upstairs.

CHAPTER II

THE LOCKED ROOM

Ursula Pell leaned back in her chair and shrieked with laughter.

"She *will* have stuffed dates and fancy fixin's, will she?" she cried; "I just guess she's had enough of those fallals now!"

"It quite spoiled her pretty frock," said Mrs. Bowen, timidly remonstrant.

"That's nothing, I'll buy her another. Oh, I did that pretty cleverly, I can tell you! I took a little capsule, a long, thin one, and I filled it with ink, just as you'd fill a fountain pen. Oh, oh! Iris *was* so mad! She never suspected at all; and she bit into that date – oh! oh! wasn't it funny!"

"I don't think it was," began Mrs. Bowen, but her husband lifted his eyebrows at her, and she said no more.

Though a clergyman, Alexander Bowen was not above mercenary impulses, and the mere reference, whether it had been meant or not, to a jeweled chalice made him unwilling to disapprove of anything such an influential hostess might do or say.

"Iris owes so much to her aunt," the rector said smilingly, "of course she takes such little jests in good part."

"She'd better," and Ursula Pell nodded her head; "if she knows which side her bread is buttered, she'll kiss the hand that strikes her."

"If it doesn't strike too hard," put in Mrs. Bowen, unable to resist some slight comment.

But again her husband frowned at her to keep silent, and the subject was dropped.

It was fully a quarter of an hour before Iris returned, her face red from scrubbing and still showing dark traces of the ink on chin and cheek. She wore a plain little frock of white dimity, and smiled as she resumed her seat at the table.

"Now, Aunt Ursula," she said, "if you've any more ink to spill, spill it on this dress, and not on one of my best ones."

"Fiddlestrings, Iris, I'll give you a new dress – I'll give you two. It was well worth it, to see you bite into that date! My! you looked so funny! And you look funny yet! There's ink marks all over your face!"

Mrs. Pell shook with most irritating laughter, and Iris flushed with annoyance.

"I know it, auntie; but I couldn't get them off."

"Never mind, it'll wear off in a few days. And meantime, you can wrap it up in a blotter!"

Again the speaker chuckled heartily at her own wit, and the rector joined her, while Mrs. Bowen with difficulty achieved a smile.

She was sorry for Iris, for this sort of jesting offended the girl more than it would most people, and the kind-hearted woman knew it. But, afraid of her husband's disapproval, she said nothing, and smiled, at his unspoken behest.

Nor was Iris herself entirely forgiving. One could easily see that her calmly pleasant expression covered a deeper feeling of resentment and exasperation. She had the appearance of having reached her limit, and though outwardly serene was indubitably angry.

Her pretty face, ludicrous because of the indelible smears of ink, was pale and strained, and her deep brown eyes smoldered with repressed rage. For Iris Clyde was far from meek. Her nature was, first of all, a just one, and, to a degree, retaliatory, even revengeful.

"Oh, I see your eyes snapping, Iris," exclaimed her aunt, delighted at the girl's annoyance, "I'll bet you'll get even with me for this!"

"Indeed I will, Aunt Ursula," and Iris' lips set in a straight line of determination, which, in conjunction with the ink stains, sent Mrs. Pell off into further peals of hilarity.

"Be careful, Iris," cautioned Mr. Bowen, himself wary, "if you get even with your aunt, she may leave the diamond pin to me instead of to you."

"Nixie," returned Iris saucily, "you've promised that particular diamond pin to me, haven't you, Auntie?"

"I certainly have, Iris. However often I change my will, that pin is always designated as your inheritance."

"Where is it?" asked Mr. Bowen, curiously; "may I not see it?"

"It is in a box in my lawyer's safe, at this moment," replied Mrs. Pell. "Mr. Chapin has instructions to hand the box over to Iris after my departure from this life, which I suppose you'd like to expedite, eh, Iris?"

"Well, I wouldn't go so far as to poison you," Iris smiled, "but I confess I felt almost murderous when I ran up to my room just now and looked in the mirror!"

"I don't wonder!" exclaimed Mrs. Bowen, unable to stifle her feelings longer.

"Tut! tut!" cried the rector, "what talk for Christian people!"

"Oh, they don't mean it," said Mrs. Pell, "you must take our chaff in good part, Mr. Bowen."

Dinner over, the Bowens almost immediately departed, and Iris, catching sight of her disfigured face in a mirror, turned angrily to her aunt.

"I won't stand it!" she exclaimed. "This is the last time I shall let you serve me in this fashion. I'm going to New York to-morrow, and I hope I shall never see you again!"

"Now, dearie, don't be too hard on your old auntie. It was only a joke, you know. I'll get you another frock – "

"It isn't only the frock, Aunt Ursula, it's this horrid state of things generally. Why, I never dare pick up a thing, or touch a thing – without the chance of some fool stunt making trouble for me!"

"Now, now, I will try not to do it any more. But, don't talk about going away. If you do, I'll cut you out of my will entirely."

"I don't care. That would be better than living in a trick house! Look at my face! It will be days before these stains wear off! You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Aunt Ursula!"

The old lady looked roguishly penitent, like a naughty child.

"Oh, fiddle-de-dee, you can get them off with whatcha-call-it soap. But I hope you won't! They make you look like a clown in a circus!"

Mrs. Pell's laughter had that peculiarly irritating quality that belongs to practical jokers, and Iris' sensitive nature was stung to the core.

"Oh, I hate you," she cried, "you are a fiend in human shape!" and without another word she ran upstairs to her own room.

Ursula Pell looked a little chagrined, then burst into laughter at the remembrance of Iris' face as she denounced her, and then her expression suddenly changed to one of pain, and she walked slowly to her own sitting room, went in and closed the door behind her.

It was part of the Sunday afternoon routine that Mrs. Pell should go to this room directly after dinner, and it was understood that she was not to be disturbed unless callers came.

A little later, Polly was in the dining-room arranging the sideboard, when she heard Mrs. Pell's voice. It was an agonized scream, not loud, but as one greatly frightened. The woman ran through the hall and living room to the closed door of the sitting room. Then she clearly heard her mistress calling for help.

But the door was locked on the inside, and Polly could not open it.

"Help! Thieves!" came in terrified accents, and then the voice died away to a troubled groaning; only to rise in a shrill shriek of "Help! Quickly!" and then again the moans and sighs of one in agony.

Frantically Polly hurried to the kitchen and called her husband.

"One of her damfool jokes," muttered the old man, as he shuffled toward the door of the locked room. "She's locked herself in, and she wants to get us all stirred up, thinkin' she's been attacked by thugs, an' in a minute she'll be laughin' at us."

"I don't think so," said Polly, dubiously, for she well knew her mistress' ways, "them yells was too natural."

Old Purdy listened, his ear against the door. "I can hear her rustlin' about a little," he said, "an' – there, that was a faint moan – mebbe she's been took with a spell or suthin'."

"Let's get the door open, anyway," begged Polly. "If it's a joke, I'll stand for it, but I'll bet you something's happened."

"What could happen, unless she's had a stroke, an' if that's it, she wouldn't be a callin' out 'Thieves!' Didn't you say she said that?"

"Yes, as plain as day!"

"Then that proves she's foolin' us! How could there be thieves in there, an' the door locked?"

"Well, get it open. I'm plumb scared," and Polly's round face was pale with fright.

"But I can't. Do you want me to break it in? We'd get what for in earnest if I done that!"

"Run around and look in the windows," suggested Polly, "and I'm going to call Miss Iris. I jest know something's wrong, this time."

"What is it?" asked Iris, responding to the summons, "what was that noise I heard?"

"Mrs. Pell screamed out, Miss Iris, and when I went to see what was the matter, I found the door locked, and we can't get in."

"She screamed?" said Iris. "Perhaps it's just one of her jokes."

"That's what Purdy thinks, but it didn't sound so to me. It sounded like she was in mortal danger. Here's Purdy now. Well?"

"I can't see in the windows," was his retort, "the shades is all pulled down, 'count o' the sun. She always has 'em so afternoons. And you well know, nobody could get in them windows, or out of 'em."

Ursula Pell's sitting room was also her storehouse of many treasures. Collections of curios and coins left by her husband, additional objects of value, bought by herself, made the room almost a museum; and, in addition, her desk contained money and important papers. Wherefore, she had had the windows secured by a strong steel lattice work, that made ingress impossible to marauders. Two windows faced south and two west, and there was but one door, that into the living room.

This being locked, the room was inaccessible, and the drawn shades prevented even a glimpse of the interior. The windows were open, but the shades inside the steel gratings were not to be reached.

There was no sound now from the room, and the listeners stood, looking at one another, uncertain what to do next.

"Of course it's a joke," surmised Purdy, "but even so, it's our duty to get into that room. If so be's we get laughed at for our pains, it won't be anything outa the common; and if Mrs. Pell has had a stroke – or anything has happened to her, we must see about it."

"How will you get in?" asked Iris, looking frightened.

"Bust the door down," said Purdy, succinctly. "I'll have to get Campbell to help. While I'm gone after him, you try to persuade Mrs. Pell to come out – if she's just trickin' us."

The old man went off, and Polly began to speak through the closed door.

"Let us in, Mrs. Pell," she urged. "Do, now, or Purdy'll spoil this good door. Now what's the sense o' that, if you're only a foolin'? Open the door – please do –"

But no response of any sort was made. The stillness was tragic, yet there was the possibility, even the likelihood, that the tricky mistress of the house would only laugh at them when they had forced an entrance.

"Of course it's her foolishness," said Agnes, who had joined the group. She spoke in a whisper, not wanting to brave a reprimand for impertinence. "What does she care for having a new door made, if she can get us all soured up over nothing at all?"

Iris said nothing. Only a faint, almost imperceptible tinge remained of the ink stains on her face. She had used vigorous measures, and had succeeded in removing most of the disfigurement.

Campbell returned with Purdy.

"Ah, now, Mis' Pell, come out o' there," he wheedled, "do now! It's a sin and a shame to bust in this here heavy door. Likewise it ain't no easy matter nohow. I'm not sure me and Purdy can do it. Please, Missis, unlock the door and save us all a lot of trouble."

But no sound came in answer.

"Let's all be awful still," suggested Purdy, "for quite a time, an' see if she don't make some move."

Accordingly each and every one of them scarcely breathed and the silence was intense.

"I can't hear a sound," said Campbell, at last, his ear against the keyhole, which was nearly filled by its own key. "I can't hear her breathing. You sure she's in there?"

"Of course," said Polly. "Didn't I hear her screamin'? I tell you we *got* to get in. Joke or no joke, we got to!"

"You're right," and Campbell looked serious. "I got ears like a hawk, and I bet I'd hear her breathing if she was in there. Come on, Purdy."

The door was thick and heavy, but the lock was a simple one, not a bolt, and the efforts of the two men splintered the jamb and released the door.

The sight revealed was overwhelming. The women screamed and the men stood aghast.

On the floor lay the body of Ursula Pell, and a glance was sufficient to see that she was dead. Her face was covered with blood and a small pool of it had formed near her head. Her clothing was torn and disordered, and the whole room was in a state of chaos. A table was overturned, and the beautiful lamp that had been on it, lay in shattered bits on the floor. A heavy-handed poker, belonging to the fire set, was lying near Mrs. Pell's head, and the contents of her writing-desk were scattered in mad confusion on chairs and on the floor. A secret cupboard above the mantel, really a small concealed safe, was flung open, and was empty. An empty pocket-book lay on one chair, and an empty handbag on another.

But these details were lost sight of in the attention paid to Mrs. Pell herself.

"She's dead! she's dead!" wailed Polly. "It wasn't a joke of hers – it was really robbers. She called out 'Thieves!' and 'Help!' several times. Oh, if I'd got you men in sooner!"

"But, good land, Polly!" cried Campbell, "what do you mean by thieves? How *could* anybody get in here with the door locked? Or, if he was in, how could he get out?"

"Maybe he's here now!" and Polly gazed wildly about.

"We'll soon see!" and Campbell searched the entire room. It was not difficult, for there were no alcoves or cupboards, the furniture was mostly curio cabinets, treasure tables, a few chairs and a couch. Campbell looked under the couch, and behind the window curtains, but no intruder was found.

"Mighty curious," said old Purdy, scratching his head; "how in blazes could she scream murder and thieves, when there wasn't no one in here? And how could anyone be in here with her, and get out, leavin' that 'ere door locked behind him?"

"She was murdered all right!" declared Campbell, "look at them bruises on her neck! See, her dress is tore open at the throat! What kind o' villain could 'a' done that? Gosh, it's fierce!"

Iris came timidly forward to look at the awful sight. Unable to bear it, she turned and sank on the couch, completely unnerved.

"Get a doctor, shall I?" asked Campbell, who was the most composed of them all.

"What for?" asked Purdy. "She's dead as a door nail, poor soul! But yes, I s'pose it's the proper thing. An' we oughta get the crowner, an' not touch nothin' till he comes."

"The coroner!" Iris' eyes stared at him. "What for?"

"Well, you see, Miss Iris, it's custom'ry when they's a murder – "

"But she couldn't have been murdered! Impossible! Who could have done it? It's – it's an accident."

"I wish I could think so, Miss Iris," and Purdy's honest old face was very grave, "but you look around. See, there's been robbery, – look at that there empty pocket-book an' empty bag! An' the way she's been – hit! Why, see them marks on her chest! She's fair black an' blue! And her skirt's tore – "

"Good Lord!" cried Polly, "her pocket's tore out! She always had a big pocket inside each dress skirt, and this one's been – why it's been cut out!"

There could be no doubt that the old lady had been fearfully attacked. Nor could there be any doubt of robbery. The ransacked desk, the open safe, the cut-out pocket, added to the state of the body itself, left no room for theories of accident or self-destruction.

"Holler for the doctor," commanded Purdy, instinctively taking the helm. "You telephone him, Campbell, and then he'll see about the coroner – or whoever he wants. And I think we'd oughter call up Mr. Bowen, what say, Miss Iris?"

"Mr. Bowen – why?"

"Oh, I dunno; it seems sorter decent, that's all."

"Very well, do so."

"I – I suppose I ought to telephone to Mr. Bannard – "

"Sure you ought to. But let's get the people up here first, then you can get long distance to New York afterward."

Once over the first shock of horror, Purdy's sense of responsibility asserted itself, and he was thoughtful and efficient.

"All of you go outa this room," he directed, "I'll take charge of it till the police get here. This is a mighty strange case, an' I can't see any light as to how it could 'a' happened. But it did happen – poor Mis' Pell is done for, an' I'll stand guard over her body till somebody with more authority gets here. You, Agnes, be ready to wait on the door, and Polly, you look after Miss Iris. Campbell, you telephone like I told you – "

Submissively they all obeyed him. Iris, with an effort, rose from the couch and went out to the living room. There, she sat in a big chair, and stared at nothing, until Polly, watching, became alarmed.

"Be ca'm, now, Miss Iris, do be ca'm," she urged, stupidly.

"Hush up, Polly, I am calm. Don't say such foolish things. You know I'm not the sort to faint or fly into hysterics."

"I know you ain't, Miss Iris, but you're so still and queer like – "

"Who wouldn't be? Polly, explain it. What happened to Aunt Ursula – do *you* think?"

"Miss Iris, they ain't no explanation. I'm a quick thinker, I am, and I tell you, there ain't no way that murderer – for there sure was a murderer – could 'a' got in that room or got out, with that door locked."

"Then she killed herself?"

"No, she couldn't possibly 'a' done that. You know yourself, she couldn't. When she screamed 'Thieves!' the thieves was there. Now, how did they get away? They ain't no secret way in an' out, that I know. I've lived in this house too many years to be fooled about its buildin'. It's a mystery, that's what it is, a mystery."

"Will it ever be solved?" and Iris looked at old Polly as if inquiring of a sibyl.

"Land, child, how do I know? I ain't no seer. I s'pose some of those smart detectives can make it out, but it's beyond me!"

"Oh, Polly, they won't have detectives, will they?"

"Sure they will, Miss Iris; they'll have to."

"Now, I'm through with the telephone," said Campbell, reappearing. "Shall I get New York for you, Miss?"

"No," said Iris, rising, "I'll get the call myself."

CHAPTER III

THE EVIDENCE OF THE CHECKBOOK

Winston Bannard's apartments in New York were comfortable though not luxurious. The Caxton Annex catered to young bachelors who were not millionaires but who liked to live pleasantly, and Bannard had been contentedly ensconced there ever since he had left his aunt's home.

He had always been glad he had made the move, for the city life was far more to his liking than the village ways of Berrien, and if his law practice could not be called enormous, it was growing and he had developed some real ability.

Of late he had fallen in with a crowd of men much richer than himself, and association with them had led to extravagance in the matter of cards for high stakes, motors of high cost, and high living generally.

The high cost of living is undeniable, and Bannard not infrequently found himself in financial difficulties of more or less depth and importance.

As he entered his rooms Sunday evening about seven, he found a telegram and a telephone notice from the hotel office. The latter merely informed him that Berrien, Connecticut, had called him at four o'clock. The telegram read:

"For Heaven's sake come up here at once. Aunt Ursula is dead."

It was signed Iris, and Bannard read it, standing by the window to catch the gleams of fading daylight. Then he sank into a chair, and read it over again, though he now knew it by rote.

He was not at all stunned. His alert mind traveled quickly from one thought to another, and for ten minutes his tense, strained position, his set jaw and his occasionally winking eyes betokened successive cogitations on matters of vital importance.

Then he jumped up, looked at his watch, consulted a time-table, and, not waiting for an elevator, ran down the stairs through that atmosphere of Sunday afternoon quiet, which is perhaps nowhere more noticeable than in a city hotel.

A taxicab, a barely caught train, and before nine o'clock Winston Bannard was at the Berrien railroad station.

Campbell was there to meet him, and as they drove to the house Bannard sat beside the chauffeur that he might learn details of the tragedy.

"But I don't understand, Campbell," Bannard said, "how could she be murdered, alone in her room, with the door locked? Did she – didn't she – kill herself?"

But the chauffeur was close-mouthed. "I don't know, Mr. Bannard," he returned, "it's all mighty queer, and the detective told me not to gossip or chatter about it at all."

"But, my stars! man, it isn't gossip to tell *me* all there is to tell."

"But there's nothing to tell. The bare facts you know – I've told you those; as to the rest, the police or Miss Iris must tell you."

"You're right," agreed Bannard. "I'm glad you are not inclined to guess or surmise. There must be some explanation, of course. How about the windows?"

"Well, you know those windows, Mr. Bannard. They're as securely barred as the ones in the bank, and more so. Ever since Mrs. Pell took that room for her treasure room, about eight or ten years ago, they've been protected by steel lattice work and that's untouched. That settles the windows, and there's only the one door, and that Purdy and I broke open. Now, that's all I know about it."

Bannard relapsed into silence, and Campbell didn't speak again until they reached the house.

"Oh, I'm so glad you've come!" was the first greeting to the young man as he entered the hall at Pellbrook. It was spoken by Mrs. Bowen, who had been with Iris ever since she was summoned by telephone, that afternoon. "It's all so dreadful, – the doctors are examining the body now – and the

coroner is here – and two detectives – and Iris is so queer – " the poor little lady quite broke down, in her relief at having some one to share her responsibility.

"Isn't Mr. Bowen here?" Bannard said, as he followed her into the living-room.

"No, he had to attend service, he'll come after church. Here is Iris."

The girl did not rise at Bannard's approach, but sat, looking up at him, her face full of inquiry.

"Where have you been?" she demanded; "why didn't you come sooner? I telegraphed at four o'clock – I telephoned first, but they said – they said you were out."

"I was; I only came in at seven, and then I found your messages, and I caught the first train possible."

"It doesn't matter," said Iris, wearily. "There's nothing you can do – nothing anybody can do. Oh, Win, it's horrible!"

"Of course it is, Iris. But I'm so in the dark. Tell me all about it."

"Oh, I can't. I can't seem to talk about it. Mrs. Bowen will tell you."

The little lady told all she knew, and then, one of the detectives appeared to question Bannard. He explained his presence and told who he was and then asked to go into his aunt's sitting room.

"Not just now," said the man, whose name was Hughes, "the doctors are busy in there, with the coroner."

"Why so late," asked Bannard; "what have they been doing all the afternoon?"

"Doctor Littell came at once," explained Mrs. Bowen, "he's her own doctor, you know. But that coroner, Doctor Timken, never got here till this evening. Why, here's Mr. Chapin!"

Charles Chapin, who was Mrs. Pell's lawyer, entered, and also Mr. Bowen, so there was quite a group in waiting when the doctors came out of the closed room.

"It's the strangest case imaginable," said Coroner Timken, his face white and terrified. "There's not the least possibility of suicide – and yet there's no explanation for a murder."

"Why do you say that?" asked Chapin, who had heard little of the details.

"The body is terribly injured. There are livid bruises on her chest, shoulders and upper arms. There are marks on her wrists, as if she had been bound by ropes, and similar marks on her ankles."

"Incredible!" cried Mr. Chapin. "Bound?"

"The marks can mean nothing else. They are as if cords had been tightly drawn, and on one ankle the stocking is slightly stained with blood."

"What?" exclaimed Mrs. Bowen.

"Yes, and the flesh beneath the stain is abraded round the ankle, and the skin broken. The other ankle shows slight marks of the cord, but it did not cut into the flesh on that side. Her wrists, too, show red marks and indentations, as of cords. It is inexplicable."

"But the bruises?" pursued Mr. Chapin, "and the awful wound on her face?"

"There is no doubt that she was attacked for the purpose of robbery. Moreover, the thief was looking for something in particular. It is clear that he stole money or valuables, but the state of the desk and safe prove a desperate hunt for some paper or article of special value. Also the pocket, cut and torn from the skirt, proves a determination to secure the treasure. As we reconstruct the crime, the intruder intimidated Mrs. Pell by threats and by physical violence; tied her while search was made through her room; and then, in a rage of disappointment, flung the old lady to the floor, where she hit her head on a sharp-pointed brass knob of the fender. This penetrated her temple and caused her death. These things are facts; also the state of the room, the overturned table and chairs, the broken lamp, the ransacked desk and safe – all these are facts; but what theory can account for the disappearance of the murderer from the locked room?"

There was no answer until Detective Hughes said, "I've always been told that the more mysterious and insoluble a crime seems to be, the easier it is to solve it."

"You have, eh?" returned the coroner; "then get busy on this one. It's beyond me. Why, that woman's wrist is sprained, if not broken, she has some internal injuries and she was suffering from

shock and fright. The attack was diabolical! It may be that the murder was unpremeditated, but the mauling and bruising of the old lady was the work of a strong man and a hardened wretch."

"Why didn't she scream sooner?" asked Hughes, who was listening intently. He had been detailed on other duties while his confrères investigated the scene of the crime.

"Gagged, probably," answered Timken. "There are slight marks at the corners of her mouth which indicate a gag was used, for a time at least. How long was it," he said abruptly, turning to Iris, "that your aunt was in that room alone? I mean alone, so far as you knew?"

"I don't know; I was up in my own room all the time after dinner, and – I don't know what time it was when they called me – I seem to have lost all track of time – "

"Don't bother the girl," said Mrs. Bowen. "Polly, you tell about the time."

The servants were in and out of the room, now clustered at the doorway, now hurrying off on errands and back again.

"It musta been about ha' past three when I heard her scream," said Polly, "or maybe a bit earlier, but not much. I was in the dining room, settin' the sideboard to rights after dinner, and I heard her holler."

"And you went to the door at once?"

"Yes; just 's quick 's I could. But the door was locked – "

"Was that usual?"

"Yes, sir, she often locks it when she takes a nap Sunday afternoons. And then I went and called Purdy, and we couldn't get in."

"Yes, I know about the barred windows and so on. Did you hear any further sounds from Mrs. Pell?"

"Some; sorta movin' around an' faint moanin's. But the truth is – we thought she was a foolin' us."

"Fooling you?"

"Yes, sir. Mrs. Pell, she was great for jokin'. Many's the time she's hollered, 'Help! Polly!' and when I'd get there, she'd laugh fit to kill at me. She was that way, sir. She was always foolin' us."

"Is this true?" asked Timken, turning to the others.

They all corroborated Polly's statements. Even Chapin, the lawyer, told of jests and tricks his wealthy client had played on him, and Winston Bannard declared he had suffered so much from his aunt's whims that he had been forced to move away.

"And you, Miss Clyde, did she so tease you?"

"Indeed she did," said Iris. "I think I was her favorite victim. Scarcely a day passed that she did not annoy and distress me by some practical joke. You know about the ink, this noon – " she turned to Mrs. Bowen.

"Yes," said that lady, but she looked grave and thoughtful.

"But surely," pursued the coroner, "one could tell the difference between the screams of a victim in mortal agony, and those of a jest!"

"No, sir," and Polly shook her head. "Mrs. Pell was that clever, she'd make you think she'd been hurt awful, when she was just trickin' you. But, any ways, sir, me an' Purdy we did all we could, and we couldn't get in. Then Campbell, he come, and helped to break down the door – "

"And you're sure the murderer couldn't have slipped through as you opened the door?"

"Not a chance!" spoke up Campbell. "We smashed it open, the lock just splintered out of the jamb, as you can see for yourself, and we were all gathered in a clump on this side. No, sir, the room was quiet as death – and empty, save for Mrs. Pell, herself."

"And she was dead, then?"

"Yes, sir," asseverated Purdy, solemnly. "I ain't no doctor, but I made sure she was dead. She'd died within a minute or so, she was most as warm as in life, and the blood was still a flowin' from her head where she was struck."

"Did you move anything in the room?"

"No, sir, only so much as was necessary to get around. The table that was upset had a 'lectric lamp on it, which had a long danglin' green cord, 'cause it was put in after the reg'lar wirin' was done. I coiled up that 'ere cord, and picked up the pieces of broken glass, so's we could step around. But I left the bag and pocket-book and all, just where they was flung. And the litter from the desk, all over the floor, I didn't touch that, neither – nor I didn't touch the body."

Purdy's voice faltered and his old eyes filled with tears.

"You did well," commended the coroner, nodding his head kindly at him, "just one more question. Was Mrs. Pell in her usual good spirits yesterday? Did she do anything or say anything that seemed out of the ordinary?"

"No," and Purdy shook his head. "I don't think so, do you, Polly?"

"Not that I noticed," said his wife. "She cut up an awful trick on Miss Iris, but that wasn't to say unusual."

"What was it?" and the coroner listened to an account of the date with ink in it. The story was told by Mrs. Bowen, as Iris refused to talk at all.

"A pretty mean trick," was the coroner's opinion. "Didn't you resent it, Miss Clyde?"

"She did not," spoke up the rector, in a decided way. "Miss Clyde is a young woman of too much sense and also of too much affection for her dear aunt, to resent a good-humored jest – "

"Good-humored jest!" exclaimed Hughes. "Going some! a jest like that – spoilin' a young girl's pretty Sunday frock – "

"Never mind, Hughes," reproved Timken, "we're not judging Mrs. Pell's conduct now. This is an investigation, a preliminary inquiry, rather, but not a judgment seat. Miss Clyde, I must ask that you answer me a few questions. You left your aunt's presence directly after your guests had departed?"

"Within a few moments of their leaving."

"She was then in her usual health and good spirits?"

"So far as I know."

"Any conversation passed between you?"

"Only a little."

"Amicable?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Friendly – affectionate – not quarrelsome."

"It was not exactly affectionate, as I told her I was displeased at her spoiling my gown."

"Ah. And what did she say?"

"That she would buy me another."

"Did that content you?"

"I wasn't discontented. I was annoyed at her unkind trick, and I told her so. That is all."

"Of course that is all," again interrupted Mr. Bowen. "I can answer for the cordial relationship between aunt and niece and I can vouch for the fact that these merry jests didn't really stir up dissension between these two estimable people. Why, only to-day, Mrs. Pell was dilating on the wonderful legacies she meant to bestow on Miss Clyde. She also referred to a jeweled chalice for my church, but I am sure these remarks were in no way prompted by any thought of immediate death. On the contrary, she was in gayer spirits than I have ever seen her."

"I think she was over-excited," said Mrs. Bowen, thoughtfully. "Don't you, Iris? She was giggling in an almost hysterical manner, it seemed to me."

"I didn't notice," said Iris, wearily. "Aunt Ursula was a creature of moods. She was grave or gay without apparent reason. I put up with her silly jokes usually, but to-day's performance seemed unnecessary and unkind. However, it doesn't matter now."

"No," declared Winston Bannard, "and it does no good to rake over the old lady's queer ways. We all know about her habit of playing tricks, and I, for one, don't wonder that Polly thought she

screamed out to trick somebody. Nor does it matter. If Polly hadn't thought that, she couldn't have done any more than she did do to get into that room as soon as possible. Could she, now?"

"No," agreed the coroner. "Nor does it really affect our problem of how the murder was committed."

"Let me have a look into that room," said Bannard, suddenly.

"You a detective?" asked Timken.

"Not a bit of it, but I want to see its condition."

"Come on in," said the other. "They've put Mrs. Pell's body on the couch, but, except for that, nothing's been touched."

Hughes went in with Bannard and the coroner, and the three men were joined by Lawyer Chapin.

Silently they took in the details. The still figure on the couch, with face solemnly covered, seemed to make conversation undesirable.

Hughes alertly moved about peering at things but touching almost nothing. Bannard and Mr. Chapin stood motionless gazing at the evidences of crime.

"Got a cigarette?" whispered Hughes to Bannard and mechanically the young man took out his case and offered it. The detective took one and then continued his minute examination of the room and its appointments.

At last he sat down in front of the desk and began to look through such papers as remained in place. There were many pigeonholes and compartments, which held small memorandum books and old letters and stationery.

Hughes opened and closed several books, and then suddenly turned to Bannard with this question.

"You haven't been up here to-day, have you, Mr. Bannard? I mean, before you came up this evening."

"N-no, certainly not," was the answer, and the man looked decidedly annoyed. "What are you getting at, Mr. Hughes?"

"Oh, nothing. Where have you been all day, Mr. Bannard?"

"In New York city."

"Not been out of it?"

"I went out this morning for a bicycle ride, my favorite form of exercise. Am I being quizzed?"

"You are. You state that you were not up here, in this room, this afternoon, about three o'clock?"

"I certainly do affirm that! Why?"

"Because I observe here on the desk a half-smoked cigarette of the same kind you just gave me."

"And you think that is incriminating evidence! A little far-fetched, Mr. Hughes."

"Also, on this chair is a New York paper of to-day's date, and not the one that is usually taken in this house."

"Indeed!" but Winston Bannard had turned pale.

"And," continued Hughes, holding up a check-book, "this last stub in Mrs. Pell's check-book shows that she made out to *you to-day*, a check for five thousand dollars!"

"What!" cried Mr. Chapin.

"Yes, sir, a check stub, in Mrs. Pell's own writing, dated *to-day*! Where is that check, Mr. Winston Bannard, and when did you get it? And why did you kill your aunt afterward? What were you searching this room for? Come, sir, speak up!"

CHAPTER IV

TIMKEN AND HIS INQUIRIES

"You must be out of your mind, Mr. Hughes," said Bannard; but, as a matter of fact, he looked more as if he himself were demented. His face wore a wild, frightened expression, and his fingers twitched nervously, as he picked at the edge of his coat. "Of course, I haven't been up here to-day, before I came this evening. That *New York Herald* was never in my possession. Because I live in New York City, I'm not the only one who reads the 'Herald.'"

"But your aunt subscribed only to *The Times*. Where did that 'Herald' come from?"

"I'm sure I don't know. It must have been left here by somebody – I suppose – "

"And this half-burnt cigarette, of the same brand as those you have in your pocket case?"

"Other men smoke those, too, I assume."

"Well, then, the check, which this stub shows to have been drawn to-day to you. Where is that?"

"Not in my possession. If my aunt made that out to me it was doubtless for a present and she may have sent it to me in a letter; in which case it will reach my city address to-morrow morning, or she may have put it somewhere up here for safe keeping."

"All most unlikely," said Mr. Chapin, shaking his head. "Did Mrs. Pell send any letters to the post-office to-day, does any one know?"

Campbell was called, and he said that his mistress had given him a number of letters to mail when he took Miss Clyde to church that morning.

"Was one of them directed to Mr. Bannard," asked Hughes.

"How should I know?" said the chauffeur, turning red.

"Oh, it's no crime to glance at the addresses on envelopes," said Hughes, encouragingly. "Curiosity may not be an admirable trait, but it isn't against the law. And it will help us a lot if you can answer my question."

"Then, no, sir, there wasn't," and Campbell looked ashamed but positive.

"And there was no other chance for Mrs. Pell to mail a letter to-day?" went on Hughes.

"No, sir; none of us has been to the village since, and the post-office closes at noon on Sunday anyhow."

"All that proves nothing," said Bannard, impatiently. "If my aunt drew that check to me it is probably still in this room somewhere, and if not it is quite likely she destroyed it, in a sudden change of mind. She has done that before, in my very presence. You know, Mr. Chapin, how uncertain her decisions are."

"That's true," the lawyer agreed, "I've drawn up papers for her often, only to have her tear them up before my very eyes, and demand a document of exactly opposite intent."

"So, you see," insisted Bannard, who had regained his composure, "that check means nothing, the New York newspaper is not incriminating and the cigarette is not enough to prove my guilty presence at the time of this crime. Unless the police force of Berrien can do better than that, I suggest getting a worthwhile detective from the city."

Hughes looked angrily at the speaker, but said nothing.

"That is not a bad suggestion," said Chapin. "This is a big crime and a most mysterious one. It involves the large fortune of Mrs. Pell, which, I happen to know, was mostly invested in jewels. These gems she has so secretly and securely hidden that even I have not the remotest idea where they are. Is it not conceivable that they were in that wall-safe, and have been stolen by the murderer?"

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Hughes. "I didn't know she kept her fortune here!"

"Nor do I know it," returned Chapin. "But, doubtless, something of value was in that safe, now empty, and I only surmise that it may have been her great collection of precious stones."

"Have you her will?" asked Bannard, abruptly.

"Yes, her latest one," replied Chapin. "You know she made a new one on the average of once a month or so."

"Who inherits?"

"I don't know. A box, bequeathed to Miss Clyde and a – something similar to you, probably contain her principal bequests. This house, however, she has left to another relative, and there are other bequests. I do not deny the will is that of an eccentric woman, as will be shown at its reading, in due time."

"That's all right," broke in the coroner, "but what I'm interested in is catching the murderer."

"And solving the mystery of his getting in," supplemented Hughes.

"She might have let him in," assumed Timken.

"All right, but how did he get out?"

"That's the mystery," mused Chapin. "I can see no light on that question, whatever, can you, Winston?"

"No," said Bannard, shortly. "There's no secret entrance to this room, of that I'm positive. And with the windows barred, and those people at the door, as it was broken open, there seems no explanation."

"Oh, pshaw," said Timken, "that's all for future consideration. The lady couldn't have killed herself. Somebody got in and the same somebody got out. It's up to the detectives to find out how. If a human being could do it, and did do it, another human being can find out how. But let us get at the possible criminal. Motive is the first consideration."

"The heirs are always looked upon as having motive," said Lawyer Chapin, "but, in this case, I feel sure the principal heirs are Miss Clyde and Mr. Bannard, and I cannot suspect either of them."

"Iris – ridiculous!" exclaimed Bannard. "For Heaven's sake, don't drag her name in!"

"Where is Miss Clyde's bedroom?" asked Hughes, suddenly.

"Directly above this room," returned Bannard. "Are you going to suggest that she came down here by a concealed staircase, and maltreated her aunt in this ferocious manner? Mr. Hughes, do confine yourself to theories that at least have a slight claim to common sense!"

And yet, when the coroner held his inquest next day, more than one who listened to the evidence leaned toward the suggestion of Iris Clyde's possible connection with the crime.

The girl's own manner was against her, or rather against her chance of gaining the sympathies of the audience.

The inquest was held in Pellbrook. The big living room was filled with interested listeners, who also crowded the hall, and drifted into the dining room. The room where Mrs. Pell had died was closed to all, but curiosity-seekers hovered around it outside, and inspected the steel protected windows, and discoursed wisely of secret passages and concealed exits.

As the one known to have last spoken with her aunt, Iris was closely questioned. But her replies were of no help in getting at the truth. She admitted that she and her aunt quarreled often, and agreed that that was the real reason she had decided to go to New York to live.

But her answers were curt, even angry at times, and her manner was haughty and resentful.

Great emphasis was laid by the coroner on the tenor of the last words that passed between Iris and her aunt.

The girl admitted that they were quarrelsome words, but declared she did not remember exactly what had been said.

Something in the expression of the maid, Agnes, caught the eye of the coroner, and he suddenly turned to her, saying, "Did you overhear this conversation?"

Taken aback by the unexpected question, Agnes stammered, "Yes, sir, I did."

"Where were you?"

"In the dining room, clearing the table."

"Where was Miss Clyde?"

"In the hall, just about to go upstairs."

"And Mrs. Pell?"

"In the hall, by the living-room door."

"Why were they in the hall?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Bowen had just left, and the ladies had said good-bye to them at the front door, and then they stood talking to each other a few moments."

"What were they talking about?"

Agnes hesitated, but on further insistence of the coroner she said, "Miss Iris was complaining to Mrs. Pell about her habit of playing tricks."

"Was Miss Clyde angry at her aunt?"

"She sounded so."

"Certainly I was," broke in Iris. "I had stood that foolishness just as long as I could – "

"You are not the witness, for the moment, Miss Clyde," said the coroner, severely. "Agnes, what did Mrs. Pell say to her niece in response to her chiding?"

"She only laughed, and said that Miss Iris looked like a circus clown."

"Then what did Miss Clyde say?"

"She said that Mrs. Pell was a fiend in human shape and that she hated her. Then she ran upstairs and went into her own room and slammed the door."

"Have you any reason to think, Agnes, that there is any secret mode of connection between Mrs. Pell's sitting room and Miss Clyde's bedroom, directly above it?"

"Why, no, sir, I never heard of such a thing."

"Absurd!" broke in Winston Bannard, "utterly absurd. If there were such a thing, it could certainly be discovered by your expert detectives."

"There isn't any," declared Hughes, positively. "I've sounded the walls and examined the floor and ceiling, and there's not a chance of it. The way the murderer got out of that locked room is a profound mystery, but it won't be solved by means of a secret entrance."

"Yet what other possibility can be suggested?" went on Timken, thoughtfully. "And the connection needn't be directly with Miss Clyde's room. Suppose there is a sliding wall panel, or an exit to the cellar, in some way."

"But there isn't," insisted Hughes. "I'm not altogether ignorant of architecture, and there is no such thing in any part of that room. Moreover, how could any outsider come to the house, get in, and get into that room, without any member of the household seeing his approach? The two women servants were in the house, but Campbell, the chauffeur, and Purdy, the gardener, were out of doors, and could have seen anyone who came in at the gate."

"Might not the intruder have entered while the family was at dinner, and concealed himself in Mrs. Pell's sitting room, until she went in there after dinner?"

"Possibly," agreed Hughes, "but, in that case, how did the intruder get out?"

And that was the sticking-point with every theory. No one could think of or imagine any way to account for the exit of the criminal. Mrs. Pell had undoubtedly been murdered. Her injuries were not self-inflicted. She had been brutally maltreated by a strong, angry person, before the final blow had killed her. The overturned table, and the ransacked room, the empty pocket-book and handbag were the work of a desperate thief, and it really seemed absurd to connect the name of Iris Clyde with such conditions. More plausible was the theory of Bannard's guilt, but, again, how did he get away?

"There is a possibility of locking a door from the outside," said Coroner Timken.

"I've thought of that," returned Hughes, "but it wasn't done in this case. I've tried to lock that door from outside, with a pair of nippers, and the lock is such that it can't be done. And, too, Polly heard Mrs. Pell's screams at the moment of her murder – the criminal couldn't have run out, and

locked the door outside, and gone through this room without having been seen by someone. You were in the dining room, Polly?"

"Yes, sir, and I ran right in here; there was no time for anybody to get away without my seeing him."

The facts, as testified to, were so clear cut and definite, that there seemed little to probe into. It was a deadlock. Mrs. Pell had been robbed and murdered. Apparently there was no way in which this could have been done, and yet it had been done. The two who could be said to have a motive were Iris Clyde and Winston Bannard. It might even be said that they had opportunity, yet it was clearly shown that they could not have escaped unseen.

Bannard was further questioned as to his movements on Sunday.

He declared that he had risen late, and had gone for a bicycle ride, a recreation of which he was fond.

"Where did you ride?" asked Timken.

"Up Broadway and on along its continuation as far as Red Fox Inn."

"That's about half way up here!"

"I know it. I stopped there for luncheon, about noon, and after that I returned to New York."

"You lunched at the Inn at noon?"

"Shortly after twelve, I think it was. The Inn people will verify this."

"They know you?"

"Not personally, but doubtless the waiter who served me will remember my presence."

"And, after luncheon, you returned to the city?"

"I did."

"Reaching your home at what time?"

"Oh, I didn't go to my rooms until about twilight. It was a lovely day, and I came home slowly, stopping here and there when I passed a bit of woods or a pleasant spot to rest. I often spend a day in the open."

"You had your newspaper with you?"

"I did."

"What one?"

"The 'Herald.'" But even as Bannard said the words, he caught himself, and looked positively frightened.

"Ah, yes. There is even now a 'Herald' of yesterday's date in Mrs. Pell's sitting room."

"But that isn't mine. That – that one isn't unfolded – I mean, it hasn't been unfolded. You can see that by its condition. Mine, I read through, and refolded it untidily, even inside out."

"Fine talk!" said Timken, with a slight sneer. "But it doesn't get you anywhere. That New York paper, that cigarette end, and that check stub seem to me to need pretty strict accounting for. Your explanations are glib, but a little thin. I don't see how you got out of the room, or Miss Clyde either; but that consideration would apply equally to any other intruder. And we have no other direction in which to look for the person who robbed Mrs. Pell."

"Leave Miss Clyde's name out," said Bannard, shortly. "If you want to suspect me, go ahead, but it's too absurd to fasten it on a woman."

"Perhaps you both know more than you've told – "

"I don't!" declared Iris, her eyes snapping at the implication. "I was angry at my aunt. I've told you the truth about that, but I didn't kill her. Nor did her nephew. Because we are her probable heirs does not mean that we're her murderers!"

"Your protestation doesn't carry much weight," said Timken, coldly. "We're after proofs, and we'll get them yet. Mr. Bowen, will you take the stand?"

The rector somewhat ponderously acquiesced, and the coroner put some questions to him, which like the preceding queries brought little new light on the mystery.

But one statement roused a slight wave of suspicion toward Iris Clyde. This was the assertion that Mrs. Pell had said she would call her lawyer to her the next day, to change her will.

"With what intent?" asked Timken.

"She promised that she would have all her jewels set into a chalice, and present it to me for my church."

"Oh, she didn't mean that, Mr. Bowen," Iris exclaimed.

"Why didn't she? She said it, and I have no reason to think she was not sincere."

"She may have meant it when she said it," put in Lawyer Chapin, "but she was likely to change her mind before she changed her will."

"That's mere supposition on your part," objected Mr. Bowen.

"But I know my late client better than you do. She changed her will frequently, but her fortune was always left to her relatives, not to any institution or charity."

"She said that she had never thought of it before," Mr. Bowen related, "but that she considered it a fine idea."

"Oh, then you proposed it?" said Timken.

"Yes, I did," replied the clergyman, "I suggested it half jestingly, but when Mrs. Pell acquiesced with evident gladness, I certainly hoped she would put at least part of her fortune into such a good cause."

"You heard this discussion, Miss Clyde?" asked the coroner.

"Of course I did; it occurred at the dinner table."

"And were you not afraid your aunt would make good her promise?"

"She didn't really promise – "

"Afraid then that she would carry out the minister's suggestion."

"I didn't really think much about it. If you mean, did I kill her to prevent such a possibility, I answer I certainly did not!"

And so the futile inquiry went on. Nobody could offer any evidence that pointed toward a solution of the mysterious murder. Nobody could fasten the crime on anyone, or even hint a suggestion of which way to look for the criminal.

Sam Torrey, a brother of Agnes, the maid, testified that he had seen a strange man prowling round the Pell house Sunday morning, but as the lad was reputed to be of a defective mind, and as the tragedy occurred on Sunday afternoon, little attention was paid to him.

Roger Downing, a young man of the village, said he saw a stranger near Pellbrook about noon. But this, too, meant nothing.

No testimony mentioned a stranger or any intruder near the Pell place in the afternoon. The Bowens had left the house at about three, and Polly heard her mistress scream less than half an hour later. No one could fix the time exactly, but it was assumed to be about twenty or twenty-five minutes past the hour.

This meant, the coroner pointed out, that the murderer acted rapidly; for to upset the room as he had done, while the mistress of the house was bound and gagged, watching him; then afterward – as Timken reconstructed the crime – to torture the poor woman in his efforts to find the jewels or whatever he was after; and then, in a final frenzy of hatred, to dash her to the floor and kill her by knocking her head on the point of the fender, all meant the desperate, speedy work of a double-dyed villain. As to his immediate disappearance, which took place between the time when he dashed her to the floor and when Purdy broke in the door, the coroner was unable to offer any explanation whatever.

CHAPTER V

DOWNING'S EVIDENCE

And so the case went to the coroner's jury. And after some discussion they returned the inevitable verdict of murder by person or persons unknown. Some of them preferred the phrase, "causes unknown." But others pointed out that the physical causes of Mrs. Pell's death were only too evident; the question was: Who was the perpetrator of the ghastly deed?

And so the foreman somewhat importantly announced that the deceased met her death at the hands of persons unknown, and in most mysterious and inexplicable circumstances, but recommended that every possible effort be made to trace any connection that might exist between the tragedy and the heirs to the fortune of the deceased.

A distinct murmur of disapproval sounded through the room, yet there were those who wagged assenting heads.

The inquest had been a haphazard affair in some ways. Berrien was possessed of only a limited police force, and its head, Inspector Clare, was a man whose knowledge of police matters consisted of an education beyond his intelligence. Moreover, the case itself was so weirdly tragic, so out of all reason or belief, that the whole force was at its wits' end. The bluecoats at the doors of Pellbrook were as interested in the village gossip as the villagers themselves. And though entrance was made difficult, most of the influential members of the community were assembled to hear the inquiry into this strange matter.

There were so few material witnesses, those who were questioned knew so little, and, more than all, the mystery of the murder in the locked room was so baffling, that there was, of course, no possibility of other than an open verdict.

"It's all very well," said the inspector, pompously, "to bring in that verdict. Yes, that's all very well. But the murderers must be found. A crime like this must not go unpunished. It's mysterious, of course, but the truth must be ferreted out. We're only at the beginning. There is much to be learned beside the meager evidence we have already collected."

The mass of people had broken up into small groups, all of whom were confabbing with energy. There were several strangers present, for the startling details of the case, as reported in the city papers, had brought a number of curious visitors from the metropolis.

One of these, a quiet-mannered, middle-aged man, edged nearer to where the inspector was talking to Bannard and Iris Clyde. Hughes was listening, also Mr. Bowen and Mr. Chapin.

"It's this way," the inspector was saying, in his unpolished manner of speech, "we've got her alive at three, talking to her niece, and we've got her dying at half-past three, and calling for help. Between these two stated times, the murderer attacked her, manhandled her pretty severely and flung her down to her death, besides ransacking the room, and stealing nobody knows what or how much. Seems to me a remarkable affair like that ought to be easier to get at than a simple everyday robbery."

"It ought to be, I think, too," said the stranger, in a mild, pleasant voice. "May I ask how you're going about it?"

"Who are you, sir?" asked Clare. "You got any right here? A reporter?"

"No, not a reporter. An humble citizen of New York city, not connected with the police force in any way. But I'm interested in this mystery, and I judge you have in mind some definite plan to work on."

Mollified, even flattered at the man's evident faith in him, the inspector replied, "Yes, sir, yes, I may say I have. Perhaps not for immediate disclosure, no, not that, but I have a pretty strong belief that we'll yet round up the villains – "

"You assume more than one person, then?"

"I think so, yes, I may say I think so. But that's of little moment. If we can run down the clues we have, if we can follow their pointing fingers, we shall know the criminal, and learn whether or not he had accomplices in his vile work."

"Quite so," and with a smile and a nod, the stranger drifted away.

Another man came near, then, and frankly introduced himself as Joe Young, from a nearby town, saying he wanted to be allowed to examine the wall-safe said to have been rifled by the murderer.

"My father built that safe," he explained his interest, "and I think it might lead to some further enlightenment."

Detective Hughes accompanied Young to the closed room that had been Mrs. Pell's sanctum, and they entered alone.

"Don't touch things," cautioned Hughes. "I've not really had a chance yet to go over the place with a fine tooth comb. They've taken the poor lady's body away, but otherwise nothing's been touched –"

"Oh, I won't touch anything," agreed Young, "but I couldn't help a sort of a notion that my father might have built more than a safe – he was a skilful carpenter and joiner, and Mrs. Pell was a tricky woman. I mean by that, she was mighty fond of tricking people and she easily could have had a secret cupboard, or even an entrance from somewhere behind that safe."

But no amount of searching could discover the slightest possibility of such a thing. The open safe was an ordinary, built-in-the-wall affair, not large enough to suggest an entrance for a person. Nor was there any secret compartment behind it or anything other than showed on the surface. The door, when closed, had been covered by a picture, which had been taken down and flung on the floor. The safe was absolutely empty, and no one knew what it had contained.

Young was decidedly disappointed. "I had no personal motive in looking this thing up," he said, "I only hoped that my knowledge of my father's clever work might lead to some discovery that would prove helpful to you detectives or to the family. But it's plain to be seen there's no hocus-pocus about this thing. It's as simple a safe as I ever saw. Nothing, in fact, but a concealed cupboard with a combination lock. Wonder who opened it? The murderer?"

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