

Bonner Geraldine

The Girl at Central



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I

Poor Sylvia Hesketh! Even now, after this long time, I can't think of it without a shudder, without a comeback of the horror of those days after the murder. You remember it – the Hesketh mystery? And mystery it surely was, baffling, as it did, the police and the populace of the whole state. For who could guess why a girl like that, rich, beautiful, without a care or an enemy, should be done to death as she was. Think of it – at five o'clock sitting with her mother taking tea in the library at Mapleshade and that same night found dead – murdered – by the side of a lonesome country road, a hundred and eighteen miles away.

It's the story of this that I'm going to tell here, and as you'll get a good deal of me before I'm through, I'd better, right now at the start, introduce myself.

I'm Molly Morgenthau, day operator in the telephone exchange at Longwood, New Jersey, twenty-three years old, dark, slim, and as for my looks – well, put them down as "medium" and let it go at that. My name's Morgenthau because my father was a Polish Jew – a piece worker on pants – but my two front names, Mary McKenna, are after my mother, who was from County Galway, Ireland. I was raised in an East Side tenement, but I went steady to the Grammar school and through the High and I'm not throwing bouquets at myself when I say I made a good record. That's how I come to be nervy enough to write this story – but you'll see for yourself. Only just keep in mind that I'm more at home in front of a switchboard than at a desk.

I've supported myself since I was sixteen, my father dying then, and my mother – God rest her blessed memory! – two years later. First I was in a department store and then in the Telephone Company. I haven't a relation in the country and if I had I wouldn't have asked a nickel off them. I'm that kind, independent and – but that's enough about me.

Now for you to rightly get what I'm going to tell I'll have to begin with a description of Longwood village and the country round about. I've made a sort of diagram – it isn't drawn to scale but it gives the general effect, all right – and with that and what I'll describe you can get an idea of the lay of the land, which you have to have to understand things.

Longwood's in New Jersey, a real picturesque village of a thousand inhabitants. It's a little over an hour from New York by the main line and here and there round it are country places, mostly fine ones owned by rich people. There are some farms too, and along the railway and the turnpike are other villages. My exchange is the central office for a good radius of country, taking in Azalea, twenty-five miles above us on the main line, and running its wires out in a big circle to the scattered houses and the crossroad settlements. It's on Main Street, opposite the station, and from my chair at the switchboard I can see the platform and the trains as they come down from Cherry Junction or up from New York. It's sixty miles from Longwood to the Junction where you get the branch line that goes off to the North, stopping at other stations, mostly for the farm people, and where, when you get to Hazelmere, you can connect with an express for Philadelphia. Also you can keep right on from the Junction and get to Philadelphia that way, which is easier, having no changes and better trains.

When I was first transferred from New York – it's over two years now – I thought I'd die of the lonesomeness of it. At night, looking out of my window – I lived over Galway's Elite Millinery Parlors on Lincoln Street – across those miles and miles of country with a few lights dotted here and there, I felt like I was cast on a desert island. After a while I got used to it and that first spring when the woods began to get a faint greenish look and I'd wake up and hear birds twittering in the elms

along the street – hold on! I'm getting sidetracked. It's going to be hard at first to keep myself out, but just be patient, I'll do it better as I go along.

The county turnpike goes through Longwood, and then sweeps away over the open country between the estates and the farms and now and then a village – Huntley, Latourette, Corona – strung out along it like beads on a string. A hundred and fifty miles off it reaches Bloomington, a big town with hotels and factories and a jail. About twenty miles before it gets to Bloomington it crosses the branch line near Cresset's Farm. There's a little sort of station there – just an open shed – called Cresset's Crossing, built for the Cresset Farm people, who own a good deal of land in that vicinity. Not far from Cresset's Crossing, about a half mile apart, the Riven Rock Road from the Junction and the Firehill Road from Jack Reddy's estate run into the turnpike.

This is the place, I guess, where I'd better tell about Jack Reddy, who was such an important figure in the Hesketh mystery and who – I get red now when I write it – was such an important figure to me.

A good ways back – about the time of the Revolution – the Reddy family owned most of the country round here. Bit by bit they sold it off till in old Mr. Reddy's time – Jack's father – all they had left was the Firehill property and Hochalaga Lake, a big body of water, back in the hills beyond Huntley. Firehill is an old-fashioned, stone house, built by Mr. Reddy's grandfather. It got its name from a grove of maples on the top of a mound that in the autumn used to turn red and orange and look like the hillock was in a blaze. The name, they say, came from the Indian days and so did Hochalaga, though what that stands for I don't know. The Reddys had had lots of offers for the lake but never would sell it. They had a sort of little shack there and before Jack's time, when there were no automobiles, used to make horseback excursions to Hochalaga and stay for a few days. After the old people died and Jack came into the property everybody thought he'd sell the lake – several parties were after it for a summer resort – but he refused them all, had the shack built over into an up-to-date bungalow, and through the summer would have guests down from town, spending week-ends out there.

Now I'm telling everything truthful, for that's what I set out to do, and if you think I'm a fool you're welcome to and no back talk from me – but I was crazy about Jack Reddy. Not that he ever gave me cause; he's not that kind and neither am I. And let me say right here that there's not a soul ever knew it, he least of all. I guess no one would have been more surprised than the owner of Firehill if he'd known that the Longwood telephone girl most had heart failure every time he passed the window of the Exchange.

I will say, to excuse myself, that there's few girls who wouldn't have put their hats straight and walked their prettiest when they saw him coming. Gee – he was a good looker! Like those advertisements for collars and shirts you see in the back of the magazines – you know the ones. But it wasn't that that got me. It was his ways, always polite, never fresh. If he'd meet me in the street he'd raise his hat as if I was the Queen of Sheba. And there wasn't any hanging round my switchboard and asking me to make dates for dinner in town. He was always jolly, but – a girl in a telephone exchange gets to know a lot – he was always a gentleman.

He lived at Firehill – forty miles from Longwood – with two old servants, David Gilsey and his wife, who'd been with his mother and just doted on him. But everybody liked him. There wasn't but one criticism I ever heard passed on him and that was that he had a violent temper. Casey, his chauffeur, told a story in the village of how one day, when they were passing a farm, they saw an Italian laborer prod a horse with a pitchfork. Before he knew, Mr. Reddy was out of the car and over the fence and mashing the life out of that dago. It took Casey and the farmer to pull him off and they thought the dago'd be killed before they could.

There was talk in Longwood that he hadn't much money – much, the way the Reddys had always had it – and was going to study law for a living. But he must have had some, for he kept up

the house, and had two motors, one just a common roadster and the other a long gray racing car that he'd let out on the turnpike till he was twice arrested and once ran over a dog.

My, how well I got to know that car! When I first came I only saw it at long intervals. Then – just as if luck was on my side – I began to see it oftener and oftener, slowing down as it came along Main Street, swinging round the corner, jouncing across the tracks, and dropping out of sight behind the houses at the head of Maple Lane.

"What's bringing Jack Reddy in this long way so often?" people would say at first.

Then, after a while, when they'd see the gray car, they'd look sly at each other and wink.

There's one good thing about having a crush on a party that's never thought any more about you than if you were the peg he hangs his hat on – it doesn't hurt so bad when he falls in love with his own kind of girl.

And that brings me – as if I was in the gray car speeding down Maple Lane – to Mapleshade and the Fowlers and Sylvia Hesketh.

II

About a mile from Longwood, standing among ancient, beautiful trees, is Mapleshade, Dr. Dan Fowler's place.

It was once a farmhouse, over a century old, but two and a half years ago when Dr. Fowler bought it he fixed it all up, raised the roof, built on a servants' wing and a piazza with columns and turned the farm buildings into a garage. Artists and such people say it's the prettiest place in this part of the State, and it certainly is a picture, especially in summer, with the lawns mown close as velvet and the flower-beds like bits of carpet laid out to air.

The Doctor bought a big bit of land with it – I don't know how many hundred acres – so the house, though it's not far from the village, is kind of secluded and shut away. You get to it by Maple Lane, a little winding road that runs between trees caught together with wild grape and Virginia creeper. In summer they're like green walls all draped over with the vines and in winter they turn into a rustling gray hedge, woven so close it's hard to see through. About ten minutes' walk from the gate of Mapleshade there's a pine that was struck by lightning and stands up black and bare.

When the house was finished the Doctor, who was a bachelor, married Mrs. Hesketh, a widow lady accounted rich, and he and she came there as bride and groom with her daughter, Sylvia Hesketh. I hadn't come yet, but from what I've heard, there was gossip about them from the start. What I can say from my own experience is that I'd hardly got my grip unpacked when I began to hear of the folks at Mapleshade.

They lived in great style with a housekeeper, a butler and a French maid for the ladies. In the garage were three automobiles, Mrs. Fowler's limousine, the Doctor's car and a dandy little roadster that belonged to Miss Sylvia. Neither she nor the Doctor bothered much with the chauffeur. They left him to take Mrs. Fowler round and drove themselves, the joke going that if Miss Sylvia ever went broke she could qualify for a chauffeur's job.

After a while the story came out that it wasn't Mrs. Fowler who was so rich but Miss Hesketh. The late Mr. Hesketh had only left his wife a small fortune, willing the rest – millions, it was said – to his daughter. She was a minor – nineteen – and the trustees of the estate allowed her a lot of money for her maintenance, thirty thousand a year they had it in Longwood.

In spite of the grand way they lived there wasn't much company at Mapleshade. Anne Hennessey, the housekeeper, told me Mrs. Fowler was so dead in love with her husband she didn't want the bother of entertaining people. And the Doctor liked a quiet life. He'd been a celebrated surgeon in New York but had retired only for consultations and special cases now and again. He was very good to the people round about, and would come in and help when our little Dr. Pease, or Dr. Graham, at the Junction, were up against something serious. I'll never forget when Mick Donahue, the station agent's boy, got run over by Freight No. 22. But I'm sidetracked again. Anyhow, the Doctor amputated the leg and little Mick's stumping round on a wooden pin almost as good as ever.

But even so they weren't liked much. They held their heads very high, Mrs. Fowler driving through the village like it was Fifth Avenue, sending the chauffeur into the shops and not at all affable to the tradespeople. The Doctor wouldn't trouble to give you so much as a nod, just stride along looking straight ahead. When the story got about that he'd lost most of the money he'd made doctoring I didn't bear any resentment, seeing it was worry that made him that way.

But Miss Sylvia was made on a different measure. My, but she was a winner! Even after I knew what brought Jack Reddy in from Firehill so often I couldn't be set against her. Jealous I might be of a girl like myself, but not of one who was the queen bee of the hive.

She was a beauty from the ground up – a blonde with hair like corn silk that she wore in a loose, fluffy knot with little curly ends hanging on her neck. Her face was pure pink and white, the only dark thing in it her big brown eyes, that were as clear and soft as a baby's. And she was a great

dresser, always the latest novelty, and looking prettier in each one. Mrs. Galway'd say to me, with her nose caught up, scornful,

"To my mind it's not refined to advertise your wealth on your back."

But I didn't worry, knowing Mrs. Galway'd have advertised hers if she'd had the wealth or a decent shaped back to advertise it on, which she hadn't, being round-shouldered.

There was none of the haughty ways of her parents about Miss Sylvia. When she'd come into the exchange to send a call (a thing that puzzled me first but I soon caught on) she'd always stop and have a pleasant word with me. On bright afternoons I'd see her pass on horseback, straight as an arrow, with a man's hat on her golden hair. She'd always have a smile for everyone, touching her hat brim real sporty with the end of her whip. Even when she was in her motor, speeding down Main Street, she'd give you a hail as jolly as if she was your college chum.

Sometimes she'd be alone but generally there was a man along. There were a lot of them hanging round her, which was natural, seeing she had everything to draw them like a candle drawing moths. They'd come and go from town and now and then stay over Sunday at the Longwood Inn – it's a swell little place done up in the Colonial style – and you'd see them riding and walking with her, very devoted. At first everybody thought her parents were agreeable to all the attention she was getting. It wasn't till the Mapleshade servants began to talk too much that we heard the Fowlers, especially the Doctor, didn't like it.

I hadn't known her long before I began to notice something that interested me. A telephone girl sees so many people and hears such a lot of confidential things on the wire, that she gets to know more than most about what I suppose you'd call human nature. It's a study that's always attracted me and in Miss Sylvia's case there was a double attraction – I was curious about her for myself and I was curious about her because of Jack Reddy.

What I noticed was that she was so different with men to what she was with women – affable to both, but it was another kind of affability. I've seen considerably many girls trying to throw their harpoons into men and doing it too, but they were in the booby class beside Miss Sylvia. She was what the novelists call a coquette, but she was that dainty and sly about it that I don't believe any of the victims knew it. It wasn't what she said, either; more the way she looked and the soft, sweet manner she had, as if she thought more of the chap she was talking to than anybody else in the world. She'd be that way to one in my exchange and the next day I'd see her just the same with another in the drugstore.

It made me uneasy. Even if the man you love doesn't love you, you don't want to see him fooled. But I said nothing – I'm the close sort – and it wasn't till I came to be friends with Anne Hennessey that I heard the inside facts about the family at Mapleshade.

Anne Hennessey was a Canadian and a fine girl. She was a lady and had a lady's job – seventy-five a month and her own bathroom – and being the real thing she didn't put on any airs, but when she liked me made right up to me and we soon were pals. After work hours I'd sometimes go up to her at Mapleshade or she'd come down to me over the Elite.

I remember it was in my room one spring evening – me lying on the bed and Anne sitting by the open window – that she began to talk about the Fowlers. She was not one to carry tales, but I could see she had something on her mind and for the first time she loosened up. I was picking over a box of chocolates and I didn't give her a hint how keen I was to hear, acting like the candies had the best part of my attention. She began by saying the Doctor and Miss Sylvia didn't get on well.

"That's just like a novel," I answered, "the heroine's stepfather's always her natural enemy."

"He's not that in this case," said Anne – she speaks English fine, like the teachers in the High – "I'm sure he means well by her, but they can't get on at all, they're always quarreling."

"There's many a gilded home hides a tragedy. What do they fight about?"

"Things she does he disapproves of. She's very spoiled and self-willed. No one's ever controlled her and she resents it from him."

"What's he disapprove of?"

Anne didn't answer right off, looking thoughtful out of the window. Then she said slow as if she was considering her words:

"I'm going to tell you, Molly, because I know you're no gossip and can be trusted, and the truth is, I'm worried. I don't like the situation up at Mapleshade."

I swung my feet on to the floor and sat up on the edge of the bed, nibbling at a chocolate almond.

"Here's where I get dumb," I said, sort of casual to encourage her.

"Sylvia Hesketh's a girl that needs a strong hand over her and there's no one has it. Her father's dead, her mother – poor Mrs. Fowler's only a grown-up baby ready to say black is white if her husband wants her to – and Dr. Fowler's trying to do it and he's going about it all wrong. You see," she said, turning to me very serious, "it's not only that she's head-strong and extravagant but she's an incorrigible flirt."

"Is there a place in the back of the book where you can find out what incorrigible means?" I said.

Anne smiled, but not as if she felt like it.

"Uncontrollable, irrepressible. Her mother – Mrs. Fowler's ready to tell me anything and everything – says she's always been like that. And, of course, with her looks and her fortune the men are around her like flies round honey."

"Why does the Doctor mind that?"

"I suppose he wouldn't mind if they just came to Mapleshade or Longwood. But – that's what the quarreling's about – he's found out that she meets them in town, goes to lunch and the matinée with them."

"Excuse me, but I've left my etiquette book on the piano. What's wrong about going to the matinée or to lunch?"

"Nothing's really wrong. Mind you, Molly, I know Sylvia through and through and there's no harm in her – it's just the bringing-up and the spoiling and the admiration. But, of course, in her position, a girl doesn't go about that way without a chaperone. The Doctor's perfectly right to object."

I was looking down, pretending to hunt over the box.

"Who does she go with?" I said.

"Oh, there are several. A man named Carisbrook – " I'd seen him often, a swell guy in white spats and a high hat – "and a young lawyer called Dunham and Ben Robinson, a Canadian like me. People see her with them and tell the doctor and there's a row."

I looked into the box as careful as if I was searching for a diamond.

"Ain't Mr. Reddy one of the happy family?" I asked. "Ah, here's the last almond!"

"Oh, of course, young Reddy. I think it would be a good thing if she married him. Everybody says he's a fine fellow, and I tell you now, Molly, with Sylvia so willful and the doctor so domineering and Mrs. Fowler being pulled to pieces between them, things at Mapleshade can't go on long the way they are."

That was in May. At the end of June the Fowlers went to Bar Harbor with all their outfit for the summer. After that Jack Reddy didn't come into Longwood much. I heard that he was spending a good deal of his time at the bungalow at Hochalaga Lake, and I did see him a few times meeting his company at the train – he had some week-end parties out there – and bringing them back in the gray car.

At the end of September the Fowlers came home. It was great weather, clear and crisp, with the feel of frost in the air. Most everybody was out of doors and I saw Sylvia often, sometimes on horseback, sometimes driving her motor. She was prettier than ever for the change and seemed like she couldn't stay in the house. I'd see her riding toward home in the red light of the sunset, and as I walked back from work her car often would flash past me, speeding through the early dark toward Maple Lane.

Anne said they'd had a fairly peaceful summer and she hoped they were going to get on better. There had only been one row – that was about a man who was up at Bar Harbor and had met Sylvia and paid her a good deal of attention. The Doctor had been very angry as he disapproved of the man – Cokesbury was his name.

"Cokesbury!" I cut in surprised – we were in Anne's room that evening – "why, he belongs round here."

Anne had heard that and wanted to know what I knew about him, which I'll write down in this place as it seems to fit in and has to be told somewhere.

When I first came to Longwood, Mr. and Mrs. Cokesbury were living on their estate, Cokesbury Lodge, about twenty-five miles from us, near Azalea. They had been in France for a year previous to that, then come back and taken up their residence in Mr. Cokesbury's country seat, and it was shortly after that Mrs. Cokesbury died there, leaving three children. For a while the widower stayed on with nurses and governesses to look after the poor motherless kids. Then, the eldest boy taking sick and nearly dying, he decided to send them to his wife's parents, who had wanted them since Mrs. Cokesbury's death.

So the establishment at the Lodge was broken up and Mr. Cokesbury went to live in town. There were rumors that the house was to be sold, but in the spring Sands, the Pullman conductor, told me that Mr. Cokesbury had been down several times, staying over Sunday and had said he had given up the idea of selling the place. He told Sands he couldn't get his price for it and what was the sense of selling at a loss, especially when he could come out there and get a breath of country air when he was scorched up with the city heat?

I'd passed the house one day in August when I was on an auto ride with some friends. It was a big, rambling place with a lot of dismal-looking pines around it, about five miles from Azalea and with no near neighbors. Mr. Cokesbury only kept one car – he'd had several when his wife was there – and used to drive himself down from the Lodge to the station, leave his car in the Azalea garage, and drive himself back the next time he came. He had no servants or caretaker, which he didn't need, as, after Mrs. Cokesbury's death, all the valuable things had been taken out of the house and sent to town for storage.

It gave me a jar to hear that Sylvia Hesketh – who, in my mind, was as good as engaged to Jack Reddy – would have anything to do with him. I'd never seen him, but I'd heard a lot that wasn't to his credit. He hadn't been good to his wife – everybody said she was a real lady – but was the gay, wild kind, and not young, either. Anne said he was forty if he was a day. When I asked her what Sylvia could see in an old gink like that, she just shrugged up her shoulders and said, who could tell – Sylvia was made that way. She was like some woman whose name I can't remember who sat on a rock and sang to the sailors till they got crazy and jumped into the water.

My head was full of these things one glorious afternoon toward the end of October when – it being my holiday – I started out for a walk through the woods. The woods cover the hills behind the village and they're grand, miles and miles of them. But wait! There was a little thing that happened, by the way, that's worth telling, for it gave me a premonition – is that the word? Or, maybe, I'd better say connected up with what was in my mind.

I was walking slow down Main Street when opposite the postoffice I saw all the loafers and most of the tradespeople lined up in a ring staring at a bunch of those dago acrobats that go about the State all summer doing stunts on a bit of carpet. I'd seen them often – chaps in dirty pink tights walking on their hands and rolling round in knots – and I wouldn't have stopped but I got a glimpse of little Mick Donahue stumping round the outside trying to squeeze in and trying not to cry because he couldn't. So I stopped and hoisted him up for a good view, telling the men in front to break a way for the kid to see.

There was a dago scraping on a fiddle and while the acrobats were performing on their carpet, a big bear with a little, brown, shriveled-up man holding it by a chain, was dancing. And when I got

my first look at that bear, in spite of all my worry I burst out laughing, for, dancing away there solemn and slow, it was the dead image of Dr. Fowler.

You'd have laughed yourself if you'd seen it – that is, if you'd known the Doctor. There was something so like him in its expression – sort of gloomy and thoughtful – and its little eyes set up high in its head and looking angry at the crowd as if it despised them. When its master jerked the chain and shouted something in a foreign lingo it hitched up its lip like it was trying to smile, and that sideways grin, as if it didn't feel at all pleasant, was just the way the Doctor'd smile when he came into the Exchange and gave me a number.

It fascinated me and I stood staring with little Mick sitting on my arm, just loving it all, his dirty little fist clasped round a penny. Then the music stopped and one of the acrobats came round with a hat and little Mick gave a great sigh as if he was coming out of a dream. "If you hadn't come, Molly, I'd have missed it," he said, looking into my face in that sweet wistful way sickly kids have, "and it's the last time they'll be round this year."

I kissed him and put him down and told the men as I squeezed out to keep him in the front or they'd hear from me. Then I walked off toward the woods thinking.

It was a funny idea I'd got into my head. I'd once read in a paper that when people looked like animals they resembled the animals in their dispositions – and I was wondering was Dr. Fowler like a bear, grouchy and when you crossed him savage. Maybe it was because I'd been so worried, but it gave me a kind of chill. My thoughts went back to Mapleshade and I got one of those queer glimpses (like a curtain was lifted for a second and you could see things in the future) of trouble there – something dark – I don't know how to explain it, but it was as if I got a new line on the Doctor, as if the bear had made me see through the surface clear into him.

I tried to shake it off for I wanted to enjoy my afternoon in the woods. They are beautiful at that season, the trees full of colored leaves, and all quiet except for the rustlings of little animals round the roots. There's a road that winds along under the branches, and trails, soft under foot with fallen leaves and moss, that you can follow for miles.

I was coming down one of these, making no more noise than the squirrels, when just before it crossed the road I saw something and stopped. There, sitting side by side on a log, were Sylvia Hesketh and a man. Close to them, run off to the side, was a motor and near it tied to a tree a horse with a lady's saddle. Sylvia was in her riding dress, looking a picture, her eyes on the ground and slapping softly with her whip on the side of her boot. The man was leaning toward her, talking low and earnest and staring hard into her face.

To my knowledge I'd never seen him before, and it gave me a start – me saying, surprised to myself, "Hullo! here's another one?" He was a big, powerful chap, with a square, healthy looking face and wide shoulders on him like a prize fighter. He was dressed in a loose coat and knickerbockers and as he talked he had his hands spread out, one on each knee, great brown hands with hair on them. I was close enough to see that, but he was speaking so low and I was so scared that they'd see me and think I was spying, that I didn't hear what he was saying. The only one that saw me was the horse. It looked up sudden with its ears pricked, staring surprised with its soft gentle eyes.

I stole away like a robber, not making a speck of noise. All the joy I'd been taking in the walk under the colored leaves was gone. I felt kind of shriveled up inside – the way you feel when someone you love is sick. I couldn't bear to think that Jack Reddy was giving his heart to a girl who'd meet another man out in the woods and listen to him so coy and yet so interested.

As far as I can remember, that was a little over a month from the fatal day. All the rest of October and through the first part of November things went along quiet and peaceful. And then, suddenly, everything came together – quick like a blow.

III

For two days it had been raining, heavy straight rain. From my window at Galway's I could see the fields round the village full of pools and zigzags of water as if they'd been covered with a shiny gray veil that was suddenly pulled off and had caught in the stubble and been torn to rags. Saturday morning the weather broke. But the sky was still overcast and the air had that sort of warm, muggy breathlessness that comes after rain. That was November the twentieth.

It was eleven o'clock and I was sitting at the switchboard looking out at the streets, all puddles and ruts, when I got a call from the Dalzells' – a place near the Junction – for Mapleshade.

Now you needn't get preachy and tell me it's against the rules to listen – suspension and maybe discharge. I know that better than most. Didn't the roof over my head and the food in my mouth depend on me doing my work according to orders? But the fact is that at this time I was keyed up so high I'd got past being cautious. When a call came for Mapleshade I *listened*, listened hard, with all my ears. What did I expect to hear? I don't know exactly. It might have been Jack Reddy and it might have been Sylvia – oh, never mind what it was – just say I was curious and let it go at that.

So I lifted up the cam and took in the conversation.

It was a woman's voice – Mrs. Dalzell's, I knew it well – and Dr. Fowler's. Hers was trembly and excited:

"Oh, Dr. Fowler, is that you? It's Mrs. Dalzell, yes, near the Junction. My husband's very sick. We've had Dr. Graham and he says it's appendicitis and there ought to be an operation – now, as soon as possible. *Do you hear me?*"

Then Dr. Fowler, very calm and polite:

"Perfectly, madam."

"Oh, I'm so glad – I've been so *terribly* worried. It's so unexpected. Mr. Dalzell's never had so much as a *cramp* before and now – "

"Just wait a minute, Mrs. Dalzell," came the Doctor. "Let me understand. Graham recommends an operation, you say?"

"Yes, Dr. Fowler, as soon as possible; something awful may happen if it's not done. And Dr. Graham suggested you if you'd be so kind. I know it's a favor but I *must* have the best for my husband. *Won't* you come? Please, to oblige me."

Dr. Fowler asked some questions which I needn't put down and said he'd come and if necessary operate. Then they talked about the best way for him to get there, the Doctor wanting to know if the main line to the Junction wouldn't be the quickest. But Mrs. Dalzell said she'd been consulting the time tables and there'd be no train from Longwood to the Junction before two and if he wouldn't mind and would come in his auto by the Firehill Road he'd get there several hours sooner. He agreed to that and it wasn't fifteen minutes after he'd hung up that I saw him swing past my window in his car, driving himself.

Later on in the afternoon I got another call from the Dalzells' for Mapleshade and heard the Doctor tell Mrs. Fowler that the operation had been a serious one and that he would stay there for the night and probably all the next day.

Before that second call, about two hours after the first one, there came another message for Mapleshade that before a week was out was in most every paper in the country and that lifted me right into the middle of the Hesketh mystery.

It was near one o'clock, an hour when work's slack round Longwood, everybody being either at their dinner or getting ready for it. The call was from a public pay station and was in a man's voice – a voice I didn't know, but that, because of my curiosity, I listened to as sharp as if it was my lover's asking me to marry him.

The man wanted to see Miss Sylvia and, after a short wait, I heard her answer, very gay and cordial and evidently knowing him at once without any questions. If she'd said one word to show who he was things afterward would have been very different, but there wasn't a single phrase that you could identify him by – all anyone could have caught was that they seemed to know each other very well.

He began by telling her it was a long time since he'd seen her and wanting to know if she'd come to town on Monday and take lunch with him at Sherry's and afterward go to a concert.

"Monday," she said very slow and soft, "the day after to-morrow? No, I can't make any engagement for Monday."

"Why not?" he asked.

She didn't answer right off and when she did, though her voice was so sweet, there was something sly and secret about it.

"I've something else to do."

"Can't you postpone it?"

She laughed at that, a little soft laugh that came bubbling through her words:

"No, I'm afraid not."

"Must be something very interesting."

"Um – maybe so."

"You're very mysterious – can't I be told what it is?"

"Why should you be told?"

That riled him, I could hear it in his voice.

"As a friend, or if I don't come under that head, as a fellow who's got the frosty mit and wants to know why."

"I don't think that's any reason. I have no engagement with you and I have with – someone else."

"Just tell me one thing – is it a man or a woman?"

She began to laugh again, and if I'd been the man at the other end of the wire that laugh would have made me wild.

"Which do you think?" she asked.

"I don't think, I *know*," and *I* knew that he was mad.

"Well, if you know," she said as sweet as pie, "I needn't tell you any more. I'll say good-bye."

"No," he shouted, "don't hang up – wait. What do you want to torment me for?" Then he got sort of coaxing, "It isn't kind to treat a fellow this way. Can't you tell me who it is?"

"No, that's a secret. You can't know a thing till I choose to tell you and I don't choose now."

"If I come over Sunday afternoon will you see me?"

"What time?"

"Any time you say – I'm your humble slave, as you know."

"I'm going out about seven."

"Where?"

"That's another secret."

I think a child listening to that conversation would have seen he was getting madder every minute and yet he was so afraid she'd cut him off that he had to keep it under and talk pleasant.

"Look here," he said, "I've something I want to say to you awfully. If I run over in my car and get there round six-thirty, can you see me for a few minutes?"

She didn't answer at once. Then she said slow as if she was undecided:

"Not at the house."

"I didn't mean at the house. Say in Maple Lane, by the gate. I won't keep you more than five or ten minutes."

"Six-thirty's rather late."

"Well, any time you say."

"Can't you be there exactly at six-fifteen?"

"If that's a condition."

"It is. If you're late you won't find me. I'll be gone" – she began to laugh again – "taking my secret with me."

"I'll be there on the dot."

"Very well, then, you can come – at the gate just as the clock marks one quarter after six. And, maybe, if you're good, I'll tell you the secret. Good-bye until then – try not to be too curious. It's a bad habit and I've seen signs of it in you lately. Good-bye."

Before he could say another word she'd disconnected.

I leaned back in my chair thinking it over. What was she up to? What was the secret? And who was the man? "Run over in his car" – that looked like someone from one of the big estates. How many of them *had* she buzzing round her?

And then, for all I was so downhearted, I couldn't help smiling to think of those two supposing they were talking so secluded and an East Side tenement girl taking it all in. Little did I guess then that me breaking the rules that way, instead of destroying me was going to – But that doesn't come in here.

And now I come to Sunday the twenty-first, a date I'll never forget.

It seemed to me afterward that Nature knew of the tragedy and prepared for it. The weather was duller and grayer than it had been on Saturday, not a breath of air stirring and the sky all mottled over with clouds, dark and heavy looking. A full moon was due and as I went to the Exchange I thought of the sweethearts that had dates to walk out in the moonlight and how disappointed they'd be.

Things weren't cheerful at the Exchange either. I found Minnie Trail, the night operator, as white as a ghost, saying she felt as if one of her sick headaches was coming on and if it did would I stay on over time? I knew those headaches – they ran along sometimes till eight or nine. I told her to go right home to bed and I'd hold the fort till she was able to relieve me. We often did turns like that, one for the other. It's one of the advantages of being in a small country office – no one picks on you for acting human.

About ten I had a call from Anne Hennessey. "Have you got anything on for this evening, Molly?"

"I have not. This is Longwood, not gay Paree."

"Then I'll come round to Galways, about seven and we'll go to the Gilt Edge for supper. I want to talk to you."

The Gilt Edge Lunch was where I took my meals, a nice clean little joint close to the office. But I didn't know when I'd get my supper that night, so I called back:

"That's all right, sister, but come to the Exchange. Minnie's head's on the blink and I'll stay on here late. Anything up?"

"Yes. I don't want to talk about it over the wire. There's been another row here – yesterday morning. It's horrible; I can't stand it. I'll tell you more this evening. So long."

I put my elbows on the table and sat forward thinking. If you'd asked me a year ago what I wanted most in the world I'd have said money. But I'd learnt considerable since then. "Money don't do it," I said to myself. "Look at the Fowlers with their jewels and their millions scrapping till even the housekeeper on a fancy salary with a private bath can't stand it."

And there came up in my mind the memory of the East Side tenement where I was raised. I thought of my poor father, most killed with work, and my mother eking things out, doing housecleaning and never a hard word to each other or to me.

The night settled down early, black, dark and very still. At seven Anne Hennessey came in and sat down by the radiator, which was making queer noises with the heat coming up. Supper time's like dinner – few calls – so I turned round in my chair, ready for a good talk, and asked about the trouble at Mapleshade.

"Oh, it was another quarrel yesterday morning at breakfast and with Harper, the butler, hearing every word. He said it was the worst they'd ever had. He's a self-respecting, high-class servant and was shocked."

"Sylvia and the Doctor again?"

"Yes, and poor Mrs. Fowler crying behind the coffee pot."

"The same old subject?"

"Oh, of course. It's young Reddy this time. Sylvia's been out a good deal this autumn in her car; several times she's been gone nearly the whole day. When the Doctor questioned her she'd either be evasive or sulky. On Friday someone told him they'd seen her far up on the turnpike with Jack Reddy in his racer."

I fired up, I couldn't help it.

"Why should he be mad about that? Isn't Mr. Reddy good enough for her?"

"I think he is. I told you before I thought the best thing she could do would be to marry him. But –" she looked round to see that no one was coming in – "don't say a word of what I'm going to tell you. I have no right to repeat what I hear as an employee but I'm worried and don't know what's the best thing to do. Mrs. Fowler has as good as told me that her husband's lost all his money and it's Sylvia's that's running Mapleshade. And what I think is that the Doctor doesn't want her to marry *anyone*. It isn't her he minds losing; it's thirty thousand a year."

"But when she comes of age she can do what she wants and if he makes it so disagreeable she won't want to live there."

"That's two years off yet. He may recoup himself in that time."

"Oh, I see. But he can't do any good by fighting with her."

"Molly, you're a wise little woman. *Of course* he can't, but he doesn't know it. He treats that hot-headed, high-spirited girl like a child of five. Mark my words, there's going to be trouble at Mapleshade."

I thought of the telephone message I'd overheard the day before and it came to me suddenly what "the secret" might be. Could Sylvia have been planning to run away? I didn't say anything – it's natural to me and you get trained along those lines in the telephone business – and I sat turning it over in my mind as Anne went on.

"I'd leave to-morrow only I'm so sorry for Mrs. Fowler. She's as helpless as a baby and seems to cling to me. The other day she told me about her first marriage – how her husband didn't care for her but was crazy about Sylvia – that's why he left her almost all his money."

I wasn't listening much, still thinking about "the secret." If she *was* running away was she going alone or with Jack Reddy? My eyes were fixed on the window and I saw, without noticing particular, the down train from the city draw into the station, and then Jim Donahue run along the platform swinging a lantern. As if I was in a dream I could hear Anne:

"I call it an unjust will – only two hundred thousand dollars to his wife and five millions to his daughter. But if Sylvia dies first, all the money goes back to Mrs. Fowler."

The train pulled out, snorting like a big animal. Jim disappeared, then presently I saw him open the depot door and come slouching across the street. I knew he was headed for the Exchange, thinking Minnie Trail was there, he being a widower with a crush on Minnie.

He came in and, after he'd got over the shock of seeing me, turned to Anne and said:

"I just been putting your young lady on the train."

Anne gave a start and stared at him.

"Miss Sylvia?" she said.

"That's her," said Jim, warming his coat tails at the radiator.

I could see Anne was awful surprised and was trying to hide it.

"Who was she with?" she asked.

"No one. She went up alone and said she was going to be away for a few days. Where's she going?"

Anne gave me a look that said, "Keep your mouth shut," and turned quiet and innocent to Jim. "Just for a visit to friends. She's always visiting people in New York and Philadelphia."

Jim stayed round a while gabbing with us, and then went back to the station. When the door shut on him we stared at each other with our eyes as round as marbles.

"Oh, Molly," Anne said, almost in a whisper, "it's just what I've been afraid of."

"You think she's lighting out?"

"Yes – don't you see, the Doctor being at the Dalzells' has given her the chance."

"Where would she go to?"

"How do I know? Heaven send she hasn't done anything foolish. But this morning she sent Virginie, that French woman, up to the village for something – on Sunday when all the shops are shut. The housemaid told me they'd been trying to find out what it was and Virginie wouldn't tell. Oh, dear, *could* she have gone off with someone?"

We were talking it over in low voices when a call came. It was from Mapleshade to the Dalzells'. As I made the connection I whispered to Anne what it was and she whispered back, "Listen."

I did. It was from Mrs. Fowler, all breathless and almost crying. She asked for the Doctor and when he came burst out:

"Oh, Dan, something's happened – something dreadful. Sylvia's run away."

I could hear the Doctor's voice, small and distant but quite clear:

"Go slow now, Connie, it's hard to hear you. Did you say *Sylvia'd run away*?"

Then Mrs. Fowler said, trying to speak slower:

"Yes, with Jack Reddy. We've been hunting for her and we've just found a letter from him in her desk. Do you hear – her desk, in the top drawer? It told her to meet him at seven in the Lane and go with him in his car to Bloomington."

"Bloomington? That's a hundred and fifty miles off."

"I can't help how far off it is. That's where the letter said he was going to take her. It said they'd go by the turnpike to Bloomington and be married there. And we can't find Virginie – they've evidently taken her with them."

"I see – by the turnpike, did you say?"

"Yes. Can't you go up there and meet them and bring her back?"

"Yes – keep cool now, I'll head them off. What time did you say they left?"

"The letter said he'd meet her in the Lane at seven and it's a little after eight now. Have you time to get up there and catch them?"

"Time? – to burn. On a night like this Reddy can't get round to the part of the pike where I'll strike it under three and a half to four hours."

"But can you go – can you leave your case?"

"Yes – Dalzell's improving. Graham can attend to it. Now don't get excited, I'll have her back some time to-night. And not a word to anybody. We don't want this to get about. We'll have to shut the mouth of that fool of a French woman, but I'll see to that later. Don't see anyone. Go to your room and say nothing."

Just as the message was finished Minnie Trail came in. I made the record of it and then got up asking her, as natural as you please, how she felt. Anne did the same and you'd never have thought to hear us sympathizing with her that we were just bursting to get outside.

When we did we walked slow down the street, me telling her what I'd heard. All the time I was speaking I was thinking of Sylvia and Jack Reddy tearing away through that still, black night, flying along the pale line of the road, flashing past the lights of farms and country houses, swinging down between the rolling hills and out by the open fields, till they'd see the glow of Bloomington low down in the sky.

It was Anne who brought me back to where I was. She suddenly stopped short, staring in front of her and then turned to me:

"Why, how can she be eloping with Reddy by the turnpike when Jim Donahue saw her get on the train?"

IV

When I come to the next day I can't make my story plain if I only tell what I saw and heard. I didn't even pick up the most important message in the tragedy. It came at half-past nine that night through the Corona Exchange and was sent from a pay station so there was no record of it, only Jack Reddy's word – but I'm going too fast; that belongs later.

What I've got to do is to piece things together as I got them from the gossip in the village, from the inquest, and from the New York papers. All I ask of you is to remember that I'm up against a stunt that's new to me and that I'm trying to get it over as clear as I can.

The best way is for me to put down first Sylvia's movements on that tragic Sunday.

About five in the afternoon Sylvia and Mrs. Fowler had tea in the library. When that was over – about half-past – Sylvia went away, saying she was going to her room to write letters, and her mother retired to hers for the nap she always took before dinner. What happened between then and the time when Mrs. Fowler sent the message to the Doctor I heard from Anne Hennessey. It was this way:

They had dinner late at Mapleshade – half-past seven – and when Sylvia didn't come down Mrs. Fowler sent up Harper to call her. He came back saying she wasn't in her room, and Mrs. Fowler, getting uneasy, went up herself, sending Harper to find Virginie Dupont. It wasn't long before they discovered that neither Sylvia nor Virginie were in the house.

When she realized this Mrs. Fowler was terribly upset. Sylvia's room was in confusion, the bureau drawers pulled out, the closet doors open. Anne not being there, Harper, who was scared at Mrs. Fowler's excitement, called Nora Magee, the chambermaid. She was a smart girl and saw pretty quickly that Sylvia had evidently left. The toilet things were gone from the dresser; the jewelry case was open and empty, only for a few old pieces of no great value. It was part of Nora's job to do up the room and she knew where Sylvia's Hudson seal coat hung in one of the closets. A glance showed her that was gone, also a gold-fitted bag that the Doctor had given his stepdaughter on her birthday.

All the servants knew of the quarreling and its cause and while Mrs. Fowler was moaning and hunting about helplessly, Nora went to the desk and opened it. There, lying careless as if it had been thrown in in a hurry, was Jack Reddy's letter. She gave a glance at it and handed it to Mrs. Fowler. With the letter in her hand Mrs. Fowler ran downstairs and telephoned to the Doctor.

The poor lady was in a terrible way and when Anne got back she had to sit with her, trying to quiet her till the Doctor came back. That wasn't till nearly two in the morning, when he reached home, dead beat, saying he'd come round the turnpike from the Riven Rock Road and seen no sign of either Sylvia or Jack Reddy.

No one at Mapleshade saw Sylvia leave the house, no one in Longwood saw her pass through the village, yet, two and a half hours from the time she had made the date with Mr. Reddy, she was seen again, over a hundred miles from her home, in the last place anyone would have expected to find her.

Way up on the turnpike, two miles from Cresset's Crossing, there's a sort of roadhouse where the farm hands spend their evenings and automobilists stop for drinks and gasoline. It's got a shady reputation, being frequented by a rough class of people and once there was a dago – a laborer on Cresset's Farm – killed there in a drunken row. It's called the Wayside Arbor, which doesn't fit, sounding innocent and rural, though in the back there is a trellis with grapes growing over it and tables set out under it in warm weather.

At this season it's a dreary looking spot, an old frame cottage a few yards back from the road, with a broken-down piazza and a door painted green leading into the bar. Along the top of the piazza goes the sign "Wayside Arbor," with advertisements for some kind of beer at each end of it, and in the window there's more advertisements for whisky and crackers and soft drinks. Nailed to one of the piazza posts is a public telephone sign standing out very prominent.

At the time of the Hesketh mystery I'd only seen it once, one day in the summer when I was out in a hired car with Mrs. Galway and two gentlemen friends from New York. We'd been to Bloomington by train and were motoring back and stopped to get some beer. But we ladies, not liking the looks of the place, wouldn't go in and had our beer brought out to us by the proprietor, Jake Hines, a tough-looking customer in a shirt without a collar and one of his suspenders broken.

It's very lonesome round there. The nearest house is Cresset's, a half mile away across the fields. Back of it and all round is Cresset's land, some of it planted in crops and then strips of woods, making the country in summer look lovely with the dark and the light green.

Sunday evening there were only two people in the Wayside Arbor bar, Hines and his servant, Tecla Rabine, a Bohemian woman. Mrs. Hines was upstairs in the room above in bed with a cold. There was a fire burning in the stove, as a good many of Hines's customers were the dagoes that work at Cresset's and the other farms and they liked the place warm. Hines was reading the paper and Tecla Rabine was cleaning up the bar before she went upstairs, she having a toothache and wanting to get off to bed.

At the inquest Hines swore that he heard no sound of a car or of wheels – which, he said, he would have noticed, as that generally meant business – when there was a step on the piazza, the door opened and a lady came in. He didn't know who she was but saw right off she wasn't the kind that you'd expect to see in his place. She had on a long dark fur coat, a close-fitting plush hat with a Shetland veil pushed up round the brim, and looked pale, and, he thought, scared. It was Sylvia Hesketh, but he didn't know that till afterward.

She asked him right off if she could use his telephone and he pointed to the booth in the corner. She went in and closed the door and Hines stepped to the window and looked out to see if there was a car or a carriage that he hadn't heard, the mud making the road soft. But there was nothing there. Before he was through looking he heard the booth door open and turning back saw her come out. He said she wasn't five minutes sending her message.

That telephone message was the most mysterious one in the case. It was transmitted through the Corona Exchange to Firehill and there was no one in the world who heard it but Jack Reddy. I'm going to put it down here, copied from the newspaper reports of the inquest:

Oh, Jack, is that you? It's Sylvia. Thank Heavens you're there. I'm in trouble, I want you. I've done something dreadful. I'll tell you when I see you. I'll explain everything and you won't be angry. Come and get me – start now, this minute. Come up the Firehill Road to the Turnpike and I'll be there waiting, where the roads meet. Don't ask any questions now. When you hear you'll understand. And don't let anyone know – the servants or anyone. You've got to keep it quiet, it's vitally important, for my sake. Come, come quick.

That was all. Before he could ask her a question she'd disconnected. And, naturally, he made no effort to find out where the call had come from, being in such a hurry to get to her – Sylvia who was in trouble and wanted him to come.

When she came out of the booth she carried a small purse in her hand and Hines then noticed that she had only one glove on – the left – and that her right hand was scratched in several places. Thinking she looked cold he asked her if she would have something to drink and she said no, then pushed back her cuff and looked at a bracelet watch set in diamonds and sapphires that she wore on her wrist.

"Twenty minutes to ten," she said. "I'll wait here for a little while if you don't mind."

She went over to the stove, pulled up a chair and sat down, spreading her hands out to the heat, and when they were warm, opening her coat collar, and turning it back from her neck. Both Hines and Tecla Rabine noticed that her feet were muddy and that there were twigs and dead leaves caught in the edge of her skirt. As she didn't seem inclined to say anything, Hines, who admitted that he

was ready to burst with curiosity, began to question her, trying to find out where she'd come from and what she was waiting for.

"You come a long way, I guess," he said.

She just nodded.

"From Bloomington maybe?" he asked.

"No, the other direction – toward Longwood."

"Car broken down?" he said next, and she answered sort of indifferent,

"Yes, it's down the road."

"Maybe I might go and lend a hand," he suggested and she answered quick to that:

"No, it's not necessary. They can fix it themselves," then she added, after a minute, "I've telephoned for someone to come for me and if the car's really broken we can tow it back."

That seemed so straight and natural that Hines began to get less curious, still he wanted to know who she was and tried to find out.

"You come a long ride if you come from Longwood," he said.

But he didn't get any satisfaction, for she answered:

"Is it a long way there?"

"About a hundred and eighteen miles by the turnpike – a good bit shorter by the Firehill Road, but that's pretty bad after these rains.

"Most of the roads *are* bad, I suppose," she said, as if she wasn't thinking of her words.

They were silent for a bit, then he tried again:

"What's broke in your auto?"

And she answered that sharp as if he annoyed her and she was setting him back in his place:

"My good man, I haven't the least idea. That's the chauffeur's business, not mine."

He asked her some more questions but he couldn't get anything out of her. He said she treated him sort of haughty as if she wanted him to stop. So after a while he said no more, but sat by the bar pretending to read his paper. Tecla Rabine came and went, tidying up for the night and none of them said a word.

A little before ten she got up and buttoned her coat, saying she was going. Hines was surprised and asked her if she wouldn't wait there for the auto, and she said no, she'd walk up the road and meet it.

He asked her which way it was coming and she said: "By the Firehill Road. How far is that from here?"

He told her about a quarter of a mile and she answered that she'd just about time to get there and catch it as it came into the turnpike.

Hines urged her to stay but she said no, she was cramped with sitting and needed a little walk; it was early yet and there was nothing to be afraid of. She bid him good night very cordial and pleasant and went out.

He stood in the doorway watching her as far as he could see, then told Tecla, whose toothache was bad, to go to bed. After she'd gone he locked up, went upstairs to his wife and told her about the strange lady. His wife said he'd done wrong to let her go, it wasn't right for a person like that to be alone on such a solitary road, especially with some of the farm hands, queer foreigners, no better than animals.

She worked upon his feelings till she got him nervous and he was going to get a lantern and start out when he heard the sound of an auto horn in the distance. He stepped to the window and watched and presently saw a big car with one lamp dark coming at a great clip down from the Firehill Road direction. The moon had come out a short while before, so that if he'd looked he could have seen the people in the car, but supposing it was the one the lady was waiting for, he turned from the window, and, thinking no more about it, went to bed.

Before he was off to sleep he heard another auto horn and the whirr of a car passing. He couldn't say how long after this was, as he was half asleep.

How long he'd slept he didn't know – it really was between four and five in the morning – when he was roused by a great battering at the door and a sound of voices. He jumped up just as he was, ran to the window and opened it. There in the road he could see plain – the clouds were gone, the moon sailing clear and high – a motor and some people all talking very excited, and one voice, a woman's, saying over and over, "Oh, how horrible – how horrible!"

He took them for a party of merry-makers, half drunk and wanting more, and called down fierce and savage:

"What in thunder are you doing there?"

One of them, a man standing on the steps of the piazza, looked up at him and said:

"There's a murdered woman up the road here, that's all."

As he ran to the place with the men – there were two of them – they told him how they were on a motor trip with their wives and that night were going from Bloomington to Huntley. The moon being so fine they were going slow, otherwise they never would have found the body, which was lying by the roadside. A pile of brushwood had been thrown over it, but one hand had fallen out beyond the branches and one of the women had seen it, white in the moonlight.

They had unfastened an auto lamp and it was standing on the ground beside her. Hines lifted it and looked at her. She lay partly on her side, her coat loosely drawn round her. The right arm was flung out as if when the body stiffened it might have slipped down from a position across the chest. As he held the lantern close he saw below the hat, pulled down on her head, with the torn rags of veil still clinging to it, a thin line of blood running down to where the pearl necklace rested, untouched, round her throat.

It was Sylvia Hesketh, her skull fractured by a blow that had cracked her head like an egg shell.

V

There were so many puzzling "leads" and so much that was inexplicable and mysterious in the Hesketh case that it'll be easier to follow if, in this chapter, I put down what the other people, who were either suspects or important witnesses, did on that Sunday.

Some of it may not be interesting, but it's necessary to know if you're going to get a clear understanding of a case that baffled the police and pretty nearly... There I go again. But it's awfully hard when you're not used to it to keep things in their right order.

I've told how Jim Donahue said he put Sylvia on the train for the Junction that night at seven-thirty. Both Jim and the ticket agent said they'd seen her and Jim had spoken to her. She carried a hand bag, wore a long dark fur coat and a small close-fitting hat that showed her hair. Both men also noticed in her hand the gold mesh purse with a diamond monogram that she always carried. Over her face was tied a black figured veil that hid her features, but there was no mistaking the hair, the voice, or the gold mesh purse.

Sands, the Pullman conductor, said this same woman rode down in his train to the Junction, where she got off. Clark, the station agent at the Junction, saw her step from the car to the platform. After that he lost track of her as he was busy with the branch line train which left at eight-forty-five and was the last one up that night. No woman went on it, there were only two passengers, both men.

The Doctor didn't make his whole story public till the inquest. They said afterward the police knew it, but it was his policy to say little and keep quiet in Mapleshade. What we in the village did know – partly from the papers, partly from people – was that after the message from Mrs. Fowler saying Sylvia had eloped, he told Mrs. Dalzell he would have to leave, having been called away to an important case. When the Dalzells' chauffeur brought his car round he asked the man several questions about the shortest way to get to the turnpike. The chauffeur told him that the best traveling would be by the Riven Rock Road, which he would have to go to the Junction to get. The Doctor left the Dalzells' at a little after eight, alone in his car.

He reached the Junction about eight-thirty-five, a few minutes after the train from Longwood had arrived. On the platform he spoke to Clark, asking him how to get to the Riven Rock Road. Clark gave him the directions, then saw him disappear round the station building. Neither Clark nor anyone at the Junction – there were very few there at that hour – saw him leave in his car, though they heard the honk of the auto horn.

But it was Jack Reddy's movements that everybody was most interested in. There was no secret about them.

Sunday at lunch he told Gilsey that he was going away for a trip for a few days. If he stayed longer than he expected he'd wire back for his things, but, as it was, he'd only want his small auto trunk, which he'd take with him. When Mrs. Gilsey was packing this he joked her about having a good time while he was gone, and she told him that, as there'd be no dinner that night, she and Gilsey'd go over to a neighbor's, take supper there and spend the evening. After that he asked Casey, the chauffeur, to have the racing car brought round at five, to see that the tank was full, a footwarmer in it and the heaviest rugs and a drum of gasoline, as he was going on a long trip.

At five he left Firehill in the racer. At a quarter to seven two boys saw him pass the Longwood Station in the direction of Maple Lane. He said he came back through the outskirts of the village at seven-thirty, but no one could be found who had seen him.

After he left Firehill the Gilseys cleared up and walked across the fields to the Jaycocks' farm, where they spent the evening, coming home at ten and finding the house dark and quiet. Casey went to another neighbor's, where he stayed till midnight, playing cards.

He slept over the garage, and about four in the morning – he looked at his watch afterward – was awakened by a sound down below in the garage. He listened and made sure that someone was

trying to roll the doors back very slow and with as little noise as possible. Casey's a bold, nervy boy, and he reached for his revolver and crept barefooted to the head of the stairs. On the top step he stooped down and looked through the banisters, and saw against the big square of the open doors a man standing, with a car behind him shining in the moonlight.

He thought it was a burglar, so, with his revolver up and ready, he called:

"Hello, there. What are you doing?"

The man gave a great start, and then he heard Mr. Reddy's voice:

"Oh, Casey, did I wake you? I've come back unexpectedly. Help me get this car in."

They ran the car in, and, when Casey went to tell how he thought it was a burglar and was going to shoot, he noticed that Mr. Reddy hardly listened to him, but was gruff and short. All he said was that he'd changed his mind about the trip, and then unstrapped his trunk from the back and turned to go. In the doorway he stopped as if he'd had a sudden thought, and said over his shoulder:

"You don't want to mention this in Longwood. I'm getting a little sick of the gossip there over my affairs."

Casey went back to bed and in the morning, when he looked at the car, found it was caked with mud, even the wind-guard spattered. At seven he crossed over to the house for his breakfast and told the Gilseys that Mr. Reddy was back. They were surprised, but decided, as he'd been out so late, they'd not disturb him till he rang for his breakfast.

Monday morning was clear and sharp, the first real frost of the season. All the time I was dressing I was thinking about the elopement and how queer it was Mrs. Fowler saying they'd gone by turnpike and Jim Donahue saying he'd seen Sylvia leave on the train. I worked it out that they'd made some change of plans at the last moment. But the *way* they'd eloped didn't matter to me. Small things like that didn't cut any ice when I was all tormented wondering if it was for the best that my hero should marry a wild girl who no one could control.

I hadn't been long at the switchboard, and was sitting sideways in my chair looking out of the window when I saw Dr. Fowler's auto drive up with the Doctor and a strange man in it. I twirled round quick and was the business-like operator. I'll bet no one would have thought that the girl sitting so calm and indifferent in that swivel chair was just boiling with excitement and curiosity.

The Doctor looked bad, yellow as wax, with his eyes sunk and inflamed. He didn't take any notice of me beside a fierce sort of look and a gruff,

"Give me Corona 1-4-2."

That was Firehill. I jacked in and the Doctor went into the booth and shut the door. The strange man stood with his hands behind him, looking out of the window. I didn't know then that he was a detective, and I don't think anyone ever would have guessed it. If you'd asked me I'd have said he looked more like a clerk at the ribbon counter. But that's what he was, Walter Mills by name, engaged that morning, as we afterward knew, by the Doctor.

Watching him with one eye I leaned forward very cautiously, lifted up the cam and listened in on the conversation:

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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