

Kummer Frederic Arnold

The Blue Lights: A Detective Story



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CHAPTER I

THE big, mud-spattered touring car, which for the past hour had been plowing its way steadily northward from the city of Washington, hesitated for a moment before the gateway which marked the end of the well kept drive, then swept on to the house.

A man, stoutly built, keen of eye, showing haste in his every movement, sprang from the machine and ascended the veranda steps.

"Does Richard Duvall live here?" he inquired, curtly, of the smiling old colored woman who came to the door.

"Deed he do, suh. Does you want to see him?"

"Yes. At once, please. Tell him it is most important. My name is Hodgman."

The servant eyed him with cool disfavor. "Set down, suh," she remarked stiffly. "I'll tell him you is here."

The caller watched her, as she disappeared into the house, then cast himself impatiently into a chair and lit a cigar.

He paid no attention to the attempts of two clumsy collie puppies to attract his favorable notice, but contented himself with making a quick survey of the wide comfortable veranda, with its big roomy chairs, the wicker table, bearing a great jar of red peonies, the smooth green lawns, swept by the late afternoon sun.

"Fine old place," he muttered to himself. "Wonder if I can persuade him to go?"

As the car which had brought Mr. Hodgman on his hasty trip from Washington dashed up to the front of the house, Grace Duvall, looking very charming in a blue linen dress, was just approaching it from the rear.

She held a pair of shears in her hand, and her apron was filled to overflowing with hundred-leaf roses. "Dick – oh, Dick!" she called, as she came down the long avenue of syringas and lilacs which led to the house. "The sweet peas are nearly ready to bloom."

Richard Duvall, looking as simply pastoral as though he had never tracked an international crook to cover, raised his head from the flower bed, in which he had been carefully setting out circle after circle of geranium plants.

"Are they?" he laughed. "That's good. Now all we need is a few good hot days." He gathered up his trowel and rake, and started toward the barn.

Grace put her arm through her husband's and together they strolled across the springy green turf, their faces smiling and happy. The honeymoon showed no signs of waning.

This lovely old country place, in southern Maryland, had been one of Richard Duvall's dreams for many years, and after his marriage to Grace Ellicott, in Paris, it had become hers, as well. It was but a short time after their return to America that they decided to make it a reality.

Grace had encouraged her husband in the plan of giving up, for a time at least, his warfare against crime, his pursuit of criminals of the higher and more dangerous type, and had persuaded him to buy the farm which had once belonged to his mother's people, and settle down to the life of a country gentleman.

His office was still maintained, under the able direction of one of his assistants, but Duvall gave little or no attention to its affairs. He was glad to withdraw, for the first time in over nine years, from active work, and devote his energies to early potatoes, prize dogs, hunters, and geranium plants

– and, above all, to the peaceful enjoyment of his honeymoon, and the making of Grace the happiest woman in the world.

She, on her part, found in their present situation all the joys of existence for which she had longed. With little or no liking for the monotonous round of society and its duties, and a passionate love of nature, she found in the many and complex duties of managing her part of their extensive estate a far greater happiness than any which city life could have offered her.

The considerable fortune which her husband's clever work while in Paris had restored to her, had been safely invested in well paying securities, and she found her greatest joy in utilizing at least a part of her income in beautifying their new home.

Richard had steadily refused to make any use of the money. It was a matter of pride with him, that his own savings had enabled him to purchase the property; but when Grace proposed to build an addition to the house, to provide him with a more comfortable library and work room, or insisted upon having the roads throughout the place elaborately macadamized, he was obliged to submit to her wishes. In this way, they planned and built for the future, together.

The farm was a large one, comprising some two hundred acres, and the old stone house surrounded by white oaks and tulip poplars had once been a show place, before the declining fortunes of its former owners had caused it to fall into a state of mellow and time-honored decay. Now all was changed. Grace, with the able assistance of old Uncle Abe Turner, a relic of ante bellum times, spent hours daily in bringing order out of the chaos of tangled myrtle and ivy, overgrown box and hedge, thickets of syringa and lilac bushes and weed-grown lawns.

It was a gigantic task, yet a joyous one – as it ever is, to those who came to it with the love of nature in their hearts. To Grace, the plants and shrubs, the great strong oaks, the towering poplars, each seemed to have a distinct personality. Under her energetic hand, the place once more took on the aspect of well kept and orderly beauty which was such a contrast to its former down-at-the-heels appearance. It seemed as though the growing things realized the personal interest she took in them, and responded as they never respond to the ignorant or unsympathetic.

Richard was concerned with his fields of timothy and clover, his early corn, his berries and fruit trees, to say nothing of his collies, his prize cows and Kentucky horses. In such a life, time never hangs heavy – he was busy studying, planning, working, from morning to night, and his active mind soon convinced his capable overseer and the farm hands as well that, although Richard Duvall was by no means a professional farmer, he could still show them a thing or two when it came to the rotation of crops, the spraying of fruit trees, or the proper treatment of worn out soils. These were aspects of farming life which the hide-bound conservatism of the local farmers caused them to jeer at, as newfangled notions gotten from books. Later when they saw the man who farmed with his head as well as his hands gather in two bushels where they had barely been able to secure one, they began to sit up and take notice.

"I got the new hedges all set out today," Grace went on, as she patted her husband's rather grimy hand. "They will be charming, against the gray stone of the wall. But we must have new gate posts. The old ones are likely to tumble into the road at any moment."

"I'll have Martin come out tomorrow and look them over. There's plenty of stone – down in the lower pasture. Why not carry the wall right along the whole front of the property? It ought not to cost a great deal."

"We will. And I'm going to have a new spring house built, too. The old one is falling to pieces." She looked up at her husband as he deposited the rake in the tool room and they started up the shaded walk toward the house. "Aren't you glad, Dick, that we're *alive*?"

He pressed her arm. "Well – I should say so, little girl! Why do you ask me that?"

"Oh – you know what your friends all said – that a man might as well be dead, as buried out here in the country. I think they are the ones who are not alive – cooped up in the city. Don't you?"

Richard nodded. He was thinking for the moment of his former active life – when some battle of wits with a noted crook had kept him sleepless for nights. "It's – rather different," he laughed. "Isn't it?"

"Yes – and much better. Don't you think so, dear? You wouldn't want to go back to it – would you?"

"Not for anything in the world," he assured her, as he swept the newly seeded lawns with a contented glance. "I liked the other life, of course – the excitement, the danger of it; but this is better – much better. Here, Don!" he called to a graceful collie which was barking vociferously at some distant vehicle in the road. "Come here and be quiet." He turned with Grace to the great vine-covered side porch and sank contentedly into a rocking chair. "Well, little girl – it's been a busy day, and I'm tired. We got the early rye all cut on the lower field today. Guess we'll put in late potatoes, after it's plowed. Here, Don – come back here! What's the matter with you?" He rose and whistled to the dog, which was bounding across the lawn in the direction of the road. "Come back, I say!"

"It's someone coming in," said Grace, uneasily. "In a machine. I wonder who it can be?"

"Possibly Hudson, the veterinary. He was coming today, to look at that heifer."

"He hasn't a machine like that. This is a big touring car." She turned to her husband. "Hadn't you better go in and fix up a bit, Dick? It may be company."

Duvall laughed. "If it is, they'll have to take me as I am," he said; then again called to the dog.

A moment later the servant, who had interviewed the caller at the front door, came out to the side porch. "Gentleman to see you, Mr. Duvall," she said. "Seems to be in a powerful hurry, too."

"All right, Aunt Lucy," said Duvall as he made his way to the front of the house.

"Is this Richard Duvall?" the visitor asked, in a quick, almost peremptory tone, as the detective joined him.

"Yes. That is my name. What can I do for you?"

The newcomer rose nervously from his chair and began chewing upon his half-smoked cigar. "Had the devil of a time to find you, Mr. Duvall."

"You came out from Washington, I suppose," remarked the detective, wondering what his visitor could want with him.

"Yes. Got your address from Hicks, of the Treasury Department. He said you were about twelve miles out. I seem to have come about twenty."

"Perhaps you went around by way of Laurel. It's much further, that way. What can I do for you, Mr. – " He paused interrogatively.

The man looked up at him quickly. "My name's Hodgman – Thomas Hodgman – of New York. I represent John Stapleton."

"John Stapleton, the banker?" asked Duvall, surprised.

"Yes. You know him, don't you?"

"Yes. Quite well. I handled a case for him once – some years ago. Why?" Duvall's face became grave. He began to realize that the interview was likely to become suddenly important. John Stapleton, the multi-millionaire banker, was not in the habit of sending messengers to anyone, without good reason.

"So he said," went on Mr. Hodgman, resuming his chair. "That's why I'm here. He wants you to take another – "

"Another?"

"Yes. Another case. Quick."

"It's quite out of the question."

"Nonsense! This is important. Money's no object; name your own terms."

"It isn't a question of terms, Mr. Hodgman. I have withdrawn, for the time being at least, from active professional work."

"I know." The visitor flicked the ashes impatiently from his cigar and sought nervously in his pockets for a match. "That's what they told me at your office, in New York. Said you were on your honeymoon, and didn't want to be bothered."

"That's true. I don't."

"I told Mr. Stapleton that. He sent me to see you; said you might change your mind, when you heard about the case."

"It is quite impossible. I do not care to take up any detective work at present."

Mr. Hodgman fidgeted nervously in his chair. "You must listen to what I have to say, Mr. Duvall, at any rate. Mr. Stapleton would not hear to my returning, after seeing you, without having explained to you the nature of the case."

Duvall leaned back, and began to fondle the long moist nose of the collie which sat beside his chair. "If you insist, Mr. Hodgman, I will listen, of course; but I assure you it will be quite useless."

"I hope not. The case is most distressing. Mr. Stapleton's only child has been kidnapped!"

"Kidnapped!" Duvall sat up with a start, every line of his face tense with professional interest. "When? Where?"

"In Paris. The cablegram arrived this morning. I don't know the details. Mrs. Stapleton has been spending the winter abroad. Mr. Stapleton was to join her this month. She is living at their house in the Avenue Kleber, Paris. The child was out walking with a nurse. It has been stolen. That's all I know."

"When did it happen?"

"Yesterday morning. Mrs. Stapleton did not cable at first, believing that the boy would be found during the course of the day. Naturally she did not wish to alarm her husband needlessly, and the Prefect of Police, it seems, had assured her that the child would undoubtedly be recovered before night. It wasn't. This morning Mr. Stapleton got a long cablegram from his wife, telling him of the boy's disappearance. He's half crazy over the thing."

"What is he going to do?"

"I don't know. He sent me to see you at once. I'm his secretary, you know. When I couldn't find you in New York, he told me to come here. I arrived in Washington an hour ago, and came right out. Mr. Stapleton said if any man on earth could find his boy for him, you could."

"I suppose the thing is a matter of blackmail – ransom – "

"Very likely. They will probably demand a huge sum. No requests have been made, as yet, so far as I know. These fellows usually wait a week or two, before showing their hand, to give the unfortunate parents a chance to worry themselves half to death. I suppose they figure that then they'll be more likely to come across with the money."

"Yes. That's the scheme. A rotten business, too. Hanging is too good for such wretches!"

"That's what I say. Of course you can understand how Mr. Stapleton feels."

"Of course. He will sail at once, I suppose."

"That's the worst of it. He can't go till Saturday. Tomorrow's Thursday – that's three days off. There's a deal on here involving millions – something he's been working to put through for months. Of course he doesn't consider anything like that, when it comes to his child; but he's got to think of his associates – men who have intrusted their money to him. He can't possibly sail before Saturday. He wants you to go ahead of him. There's a fast boat leaving in the morning. You could take that. We can have a conference tonight. It will mean mighty quick work, though." He glanced at his watch. "After six now. There's no train till midnight – the sleeper. But Mr. Stapleton told me to charter a special. We can be in New York by one o'clock in the morning, if we start right now." He looked at Duvall in eager expectancy.

The latter frowned, his gaze wandering off to the distant fields, where the newly plowed earth reminded him of his plans for the morrow. Yet here was a man, a friend, who had helped him much, in the earlier days of his career, begging him to come to his assistance in a matter almost of life or death. It was a difficult decision that he was called upon to make. The thought of leaving Grace hurt

him deeply; yet she would prefer to stay behind, in case he should go, to look after the affairs of the place. With the assistance of the overseer and the hands, he knew that she could manage everything during a brief absence on his part – it seemed unlikely that the matter would require more than three or four weeks, at the outside.

Mr. Hodgman broke in upon his thoughts. "You'll go, Mr. Duvall? Mr. Stapleton is depending on you. He has the utmost faith in your abilities. He knows your familiarity with Paris – the work you have done there, in the past. He believes that, by intrusting the matter to a fellow countryman, he will get his boy back again. He hasn't much faith in foreign detectives. He's set his heart on having you start for Paris at once. I can't go back and tell him that you have refused." Mr. Hodgman spoke in a loud and earnest voice, due to his very evident excitement. Neither he nor Duvall noticed that Grace had approached them, and was standing in the open doorway of the house.

Before the detective had an opportunity to reply, Grace spoke. "What is it, Richard?" she inquired, quietly.

Duvall rose, presented Mr. Hodgman to his wife, and bade her sit down. Then, in a few words, he acquainted her with the circumstances which led to the latter's visit.

"Think of that poor mother, alone there in Paris," Hodgman supplemented. "Think of her suffering, her anxiety. I realize how much we are asking, to take Mr. Duvall away from you, especially at this time; but, it is Mr. Stapleton's only child – a boy of six. You can understand how he must feel."

Grace nodded. "Yes, I can understand," she said, slowly, then turned to her husband.

"What do you think, dear?" he asked her.

"I think, Richard, that you had better go."

Mr. Hodgman sprang to his feet, and, coming over to Grace, took her hand. He knew that his battle was won. "I thank you, Mrs. Duvall," he said, "on Mr. Stapleton's account, as well as on my own. He will appreciate deeply what you have done, the sacrifice you are making, and he will not forget it." He looked again at his watch nervously, the anxiety he felt clearly evident in his every movement. "We had best start at once, Mr. Duvall."

Duvall rose. "I will join you in a short while, Mr. Hodgman. I wish to say a few words to my wife." He took Grace's arm and drew her within the house, leaving Mr. Hodgman pacing nervously up and down the veranda.

The conference between Grace and her husband was short. Each realized the distress which tore at the other's heart, as well as the dangers he would in all probability be called upon to face; yet they met the situation calmly. "You will not be gone long," she told him. "I can manage very well."

"I know you can, dear," he said, pressing her to him. "I'm not worried about the place. You can run that as well as I can. It's you, I'm worried about – leaving you" —

"I'll be all right," she assured him, in spite of her tears. "I have Aunt Lucy, and old Uncle Abe, and Rose, and Jennie. I won't be so *very* lonely. And you will be very careful – and – and come back soon – won't you?"

"Of course, dear. Very soon. Now I'd better get a few things together."

Fifteen minutes later Grace Duvall stood on the steps of the veranda, watching the flying automobile as it rapidly became a little red blur in the distant road. It was nearly dark. The frogs in the patch of marsh in the meadow were piping dismally. She shivered, and a great sense of desolation came over her. She sank into a chair and wept, while Don, inserting his long white muzzle between her hands, strove to lick away her tears.

She heard Aunt Lucy, the old negro cook, singing away at her work in the kitchen, accompanied by Uncle Abe, who occupied a bench on the back porch. Everything seemed strangely peaceful, and lonely, too, now that Richard had gone. She patted the eager head of the collie. "We'll have to make the best of it, Don," she said, and rose to enter the house.

Suddenly far down the road she heard the chugging of an automobile. They were not frequent visitors, upon this country road. Could it be Richard, she wondered, returning for something he had forgotten?

She stood, straining her eyes into the dusk, waiting, while with one hand she restrained the eager dog.

Presently she saw that the machine was not a red one. It was not Richard. She was about to enter the house, when she realized that the rapidly moving car had entered the grounds. She turned on the lights in the hallway and stood, waiting, the dog at her side bristling with anger.

In a moment the automobile had stopped, and almost before she realized it, a small, foreign-looking man stood on the doorstep before her. "Madame Duvall?" he inquired, quickly, in a voice which showed plainly his nationality.

"Yes," she replied.

"Your husband! May I see him?"

"He is not at home."

The newcomer seemed greatly disturbed. "Then I fear, Madame, that I shall be obliged to wait until he returns."

"He will not return. He has gone away for sometime."

"Ah! That is indeed a calamity!" The man's face showed the keenest disappointment. "May I ask where I can find him?"

"It will be quite impossible." Grace had no intention of telling her visitor where her husband had gone. She knew too well the intricacies of his profession, for that. "You cannot find him." She made as though to close the door, and thereby terminate the interview.

The newcomer realized her intention. Slowly he raised his hand, in the palm of which showed the seal of a ring, turned inward. It was of silver, with curious figures worked into it in gold. The man glanced from the ring to Grace, eyeing her steadily. "I think, Madame," he said, with a meaning smile, "that you can trust me."

Grace recognized the ring at once. It was similar to one she herself had worn, while engaged in the memorable search for the ivory snuff box for Monsieur Lefevre, Prefect of Police of Paris. Dear old Lefevre – the friend of Richard's, and of her own! This man who stood before her must be a messenger from him.

"Come in, please," she said, quietly, and led the way to the library.

The man followed her, calling out a few words to his chauffeur as he did so. No sooner had they reached the great book-lined room, than he drew from his pocket a sealed envelope.

"Madame Duvall," he said, earnestly, "Monsieur Lefevre has cabled to his representatives in Washington a message. That message is contained in this envelope. I have instructions to deliver it to your husband immediately. In case I could not find him, I am to hand it to you. Permit, me, Madame." With a bow, he placed the message in her hand.

Grace took the envelope, broke the heavy seal which it bore, and drawing out a slip of paper, hastily read the contents. The message was from Monsieur Lefevre. It said:

My dear Duvall:

You promised, on the occasion of our last meeting, to come to me should I ever need you. I need you badly, my friend. Come at once, both you, and your dear wife.

Lefevre.

Grace looked up at the man before her, the letter crumpled in her hand. Here was a message the urgency of which could not be denied. She knew that, had Richard been at home, he would have gone to Paris at once in response to it; for it was to Monsieur Lefevre that they in reality owed all their happiness. She recalled vividly their wedding, with the lovable old Frenchman, acting as her father for the occasion, giving away the bride. She remembered the farewell dinner at the Prefect's house, and

the beautiful gift he had given her on that occasion. Evidently Monsieur Lefevre desired Richard's presence very greatly, and her own as well. The thought suddenly came to her – why not go to him?

True, Richard had left her in charge of things at home; but she knew that, for a reasonable time, at least, they would go on smoothly enough without her. Hendricks, the overseer, was a capable and honest man, devoted to her and to her husband.

She could safely leave matters in his charge. Then, too, the thought of surprising Richard on the steamer sailing the next day appealed to her sense of mischief. How astounded he would be, to find her strolling along the deck! And how delighted, too! She wondered that the thought of accompanying him had not occurred to her more strongly before. She turned to the man, who stood watching her narrowly.

"You know the contents of this message?"

"Yes, Madame," he bowed. "It came to us by cable – in cipher."

"There is a train for New York at midnight, and a steamer tomorrow morning."

"Yes, Madame."

"Can you drive me to Washington in your car?"

"I shall be delighted, Madame." The fellow's eyes sparkled with satisfaction.

"Very well. Mr. Duvall is in New York. I will take the message to him. Wait here, please, until I get some clothes together and give some orders to my servants."

In half an hour, the thing was done. Hendricks, the overseer, had been given full instructions regarding taking charge of the place, with provision for his needs in the way of money, etc., and by ten o'clock, at which time the New York sleeper was open, Grace was at the station, purchasing her ticket.

The obliging Frenchman gave her every assistance, and bade her *bon voyage* smilingly as he helped her aboard the train. She retired at once, and lay in her berth, reading a magazine, and picturing to herself Richard's mingled astonishment and joy at their meeting in the morning. This time, she was determined that their honeymoon should not be interrupted.

After a time, she fell asleep, and dreamed that she and Richard were sailing gaily toward Paris, in a large red touring car.

In the morning, she ate a hasty breakfast in the railway station, and took a taxicab for the steamship offices. By great good fortune, she was able to secure a cabin. Then she hastily visited a banking house where she was well known, provided herself with funds, and drove to the dock.

It wanted but half an hour till sailing time. Grace hastened to her stateroom, and busied herself in effacing the stains of her night of travel. She was determined to meet Richard looking her best.

It was not until the big steamer was passing through the Narrows that she came on deck, and began looking about for her husband. In all that crowd, she knew it would take time to find him. After searching for an hour, she felt somewhat surprised at not seeing him. After another hour had passed, her surprise turned to alarm. A hasty visit to the purser, and an examination of the sailing list, showed her the astonishing truth. Richard was not on board!

CHAPTER II

RICHARD DUVALL arrived in New York at half past one o'clock Thursday morning. Hodgman, Mr. Stapleton's secretary, had wired ahead the news of their coming, and the banker's limousine awaited them at the railway station. Fifteen minutes later they were ascending the steps of Mr. Stapleton's residence on Fifth Avenue.

Duvall had not been to the house before. His previous interviews with the banker had taken place at the latter's office, in Broad Street. He had no time now, however, to observe the luxury of his surroundings. Mr. Hodgman hurried him at once to the library, and in a few moments Mr. Stapleton had joined them.

He greeted Duvall with a nervous handshake, and thanked him for his prompt coming. He was clearly laboring under an intense mental strain.

"Mr. Hodgman has explained my reasons for sending for you, Mr. Duvall?" he inquired, sinking into a great leather-covered chair.

"Yes." Duvall nodded.

"Then you can appreciate my feelings." He sat in silence for several moments, looking gloomily at the floor.

"Perfectly."

"The devils! I wouldn't care if they were to steal my property – money, securities, anything like that. I can fight them – on that basis. But my child! Don't you see why your coming was of the utmost importance to me? I don't dare move against these rascals openly. If I do, they will threaten to retaliate by injuring my boy, and I am powerless. Whatever I do, must be done secretly. No one must know that you are in my employ. No one must know your object in going to Paris. You see that?"

"Most certainly. These fellows cannot hold you responsible for any moves the police authorities of Paris may make; over them you of course have no control. But if you make any efforts on your own account, any independent efforts, to recover your boy, they must by all means be made in secret."

"Exactly. You understand, then, what you are to do?"

"Yes. But first I must ask you, Mr. Stapleton, to give me some account of the affair. Mr. Hodgman has told me only that your son has been kidnapped. No doubt you have learned by this time how the thing was done."

"What I have learned, Mr. Duvall, convinces me of the importance of being on the ground at once. The affair, as cabled to me by my wife, is preposterous – absurd!" He again gazed at the floor in gloomy preoccupation.

"How so?" the detective inquired.

"I will tell you. My boy, who, as you know, is six years old, has been in the habit of driving, each morning, accompanied by his nurse, from my house in the Avenue Kleber, to the Bois de Boulogne. On arriving in the Bois, it has been their habit to leave the automobile in which they came, and spend an hour or more walking and playing on the grass. I have insisted on this, because the boy needs exercise, and he cannot get it driving about in a motor car."

"During this hour what becomes of the car?" asked Duvall.

"Our orders have been, of course, for the chauffeur to wait, within sight and call. I believe he has done so."

"Thank you. Go ahead."

"On Wednesday the nurse took Jack – the boy's name is Jack – to the Bois as usual. She played about with him on the grass for probably an hour. Then she sat down to rest. Jack was standing near her, playing with a rubber ball. She says – and, gentlemen, my wife cables me that she solemnly swears to the truth of her statements – that she turned away for a moment to observe passing vehicles in the road – turned back again to the child – and found that he was gone."

"Gone – but how?"

"How? That's the question. Here is this woman, sitting on the grass, with the child, a hundred yards from the road, in the middle of a large field of grass – a lawn. No one is within sight. The nearest person, it appears from her testimony, is the chauffeur, three hundred feet away, in the road. The woman turns her head for a moment, looks about – and the boy is gone. That is the story she tells, and which my wife has cabled to me. Do you wonder that I call it preposterous?"

"Hardly," remarked Duvall, with a grim smile. "The boy could not have vanished into thin air. The woman must be lying."

"That, Mr. Duvall, is what I cannot understand. I cannot believe that the woman is lying. My wife cannot believe it. She has been in our employ ever since the boy was born, and is devoted to him. Mrs. Stapleton cables that she is completely prostrated."

"But, Mr. Stapleton, you can hardly believe such a story! How could the child have been stolen, if her story is true? It is, as you say, preposterous."

"I do not say that the story is true, Mr. Duvall. I say that I do not think that Mary is lying. She is telling what she believes to be the truth. She turned her head for a moment – the boy was gone. That is what she says, and I believe her. The question is – how is it possible?"

"It isn't," Hodgman grunted.

"Everything is possible, Hodgman," said the banker, reprovingly. "The best proof of that, in this case, is that it has happened. What means were used, I cannot imagine; but the apparently impossible *has* happened. The boy is gone!"

"Is the nurse a young woman?" the detective inquired.

"About thirty, I should say."

"An American?"

"Yes. Of Irish parentage. Her name is Lanahan – Mary Lanahan."

"A New Yorker?"

"She comes from Paterson, New Jersey. Her people live there."

"Are there any other details – any other points of interest?"

"None, so far as I know. What I have told you, is what has been cabled to me by Mrs. Stapleton. She is naturally in a more or less hysterical condition. Nothing can be accomplished here. I want you to leave by today's steamer. I myself, I regret to say, cannot go until Saturday." He passed his hand nervously across his forehead. "Only matters of the most vital importance could keep me here at such a time, Mr. Duvall; but, unfortunately, such matters confront me now."

"Have you any reason to believe, Mr. Stapleton," Duvall inquired, "that the kidnapping is the act of persons from this side of the water? Have any such attempts been made in the past?"

Mr. Stapleton remained silent for sometime, buried in thought. Presently he spoke. "I am a rich man, Mr. Duvall – a very rich man. Men in my position are constantly in receipt of letters of a threatening nature. I have received many such letters, in the past."

"Was the matter of the child mentioned in any of them? Were threats made involving him?"

"There was one such letter."

"When did you receive it?"

"Last fall – perhaps six months ago."

"Have you the letter now?"

"Yes."

"May I see it?"

The banker rose, went to a heavy rosewood desk at one side of the room, drew open one of its drawers, and removed a steel despatch box. He opened it with a slender key and took out a package of letters. From these, after some hesitation, he selected one and silently handed it to Duvall.

The detective examined the letter carefully. It was enclosed in a cheap white envelope, such as are sold at all post offices, having the stamp printed on it. The letter itself was roughly printed in ink on a sheet of ruled paper evidently torn from an ordinary five-cent pad. It said:

"We demand fifty thousand dollars, to be placed in thousand-dollar bills inside a cigar box and expressed to John Smith, c/o Express Company, Paterson, N. J., next Monday afternoon. The man who will call for the package on Tuesday will know nothing about the matter, and if you arrest him, you will find out nothing. Keep this to yourself and do as we say, if you value the safety of your child."

There was no signature to the letter. Duvall read it through with great care, then turned to Mr. Stapleton.

"You have observed, I suppose, that the place to which the money was to be sent, Paterson, New Jersey, is the home of your child's nurse, Mary Lanahan."

Mr. Stapleton started. "I confess," he said "that, in the agitated state of mind into which this affair has thrown me, I had completely overlooked the coincidence. What do you infer from it?"

"Only this, Mr. Stapleton, that Mary Lanahan may know more about this matter than she is willing to let on. I must keep this letter for the present."

"Very well." The banker nodded. "It may prove a valuable clue."

"Possibly. And further, Mr. Stapleton, I shall not sail by today's steamer."

"But – why not?" Stapleton sat up in his chair in surprise. "You will lose two days."

"I do not think they will be lost. I must make some investigations in Paterson, before I leave here. Please give me, if you can, the address of Mary Lanahan's parents."

Mr. Stapleton frowned. "I am not sure that I can do so, Mr. Duvall. My wife has charge of these matters. But I recollect having heard that her father, Patrick Lanahan, is a florist in a small way, and no doubt you can readily locate him. But I fear you will be losing valuable time."

Duvall rose. "I feel, as you do, Mr. Stapleton, that I should be in Paris at the earliest possible moment; but I think you will agree with me that some investigations on this side before I go are absolutely necessary, and may prove of inestimable value afterwards."

Mr. Stapleton was silent for several minutes. Presently he raised his head. "Under the circumstances, Mr. Duvall, I am forced to admit the truth of what you say. Conduct your investigations as quickly as possible, however; for we must positively sail by Saturday's boat."

"I shall be ready then." Duvall took up his hat. "Now I think I had better get a few hours' sleep, and in the morning I will make an early start for Paterson." He bowed to the banker and Mr. Hodgman. "Good night, gentlemen. I shall see you both on Saturday morning. The steamer sails shortly after noon, I believe. Suppose I come here at ten o'clock, and let you know what I have learned?"

Mr. Stapleton rose. "If I receive any further news of importance from Paris, Mr. Duvall, I will advise you at your hotel. Where are you stopping?"

Duvall gave the name of a Times Square hotel at which he usually stopped, and with a quick "good night" left the house.

It was shortly after nine o'clock the next morning when he descended from the train at Paterson, and going to a nearby drug store, consulted the directory for the address of Patrick Lanahan. He found it without difficulty, and, by means of an electric car, was soon before the florist's door.

The place was situated on the outskirts of the town, and consisted of a small, rather mean-looking cottage, from which spread out on each side, like the two wings of an aëroplane, the long glass greenhouses.

A little gate opened to a short brick path, leading to the front door of the house.

Duvall went up the path and rang the door bell. A wholesome-looking Irish woman, of perhaps fifty, opened the door, and, in response to his questions, told him that her husband, Patrick, was out in the garden at the rear of the house, busy with his plants.

She directed the detective along a narrow areaway at the side of the house, and in a moment reappeared at the back door.

"Pat," she called. "Oh, Pat! Here's a gentleman to see you."

A short, heavy-set man, with gray hair and mustache and a ruddy and weatherbeaten face, arose from among a litter of flower pots and bulbs.

"What can I do for you, sir?" he asked, coming forward and wiping his hands upon his overalls.

The detective studied the man before him intently. The honest and clear-looking eyes told him nothing that was not favorable.

"I came to ask you a few questions, Mr. Lanahan."

"Questions, is it? About what?" The blue eyes showed a sudden flare of suspicion.

"About yourself, and your family."

"Who may you be, then? Is it the tax man?"

Duvall smiled. "Not the tax man," he said. "I represent a firm of lawyers in Washington. My name is Johnson."

Lanahan, still suspicious, pointed to a couple of kitchen chairs that stood on the brick-paved yard beneath a trellis covered with hop vines. "Sit down, sir. I'll have a smoke, if you don't mind." He began to fill his short clay pipe. "What would lawyers in Washington be wantin' with me?"

"That is what I wish to find out, Mr. Lanahan. We – my firm – have been advised that a certain Michael Lanahan, of Dublin, recently died, leaving a large estate. We are trying to find his heirs. Tell me something about yourself and your family."

The look of suspicion and reserve which the old man had up to this time shown faded from his face, and was replaced by a smile of incredulity. "Money, is it?" he laughed. "Mary – that's my wife – has been seein' bubbles in her tay for the week past. What is it you would know?"

"Are you from Dublin?"

"Me father was. I was born right here in Jersey, meself."

"What was his name?"

"Patrick, the same as me own. But he had a brother, Mike."

"Ah. It may be the same." Duvall pretended a sudden interest. "His business?"

"Mike's? Faith – I never heard he had any, lest it was drinkin' all the good liquor he could lay his hands on."

Duvall pretended to make a series of entries in his notebook. "Now about yourself, Mr. Lanahan. Have you any children? Of course, should there be any money coming to you, they would share in it."

"Children, is it? I have two."

"Boys?"

"One is a boy – a man be now, I should say. He's in the city – workin'. His name is Barney."

"What does he do?"

Lanahan looked up with a quick frown. "The last I heard tell, he was tendin' bar, Mr. Johnson – over at Callahan's saloon, on the Bowery. He's wild – wild – like me uncle Mike, I should say."

"And the other?"

The old man's face took on a contented look. "The other is me daughter Mary, bless her. She's nurse in the family of old man Stapleton, the millionaire."

Duvall closed his book. "I see," he remarked, pleasantly. "She's not married, I suppose?"

"Mary? Divil a bit! For a time, she was sweet on a French chuffer that worked for Mr. Stapleton; but the fellow's gone, now, and she's clane forgot him. That was near a year ago."

"Ah, yes. Do you happen to remember his name?"

"Alphonse, it was – Alphonse Valentin, or some such joke of a name. A comic valentine he was, too, with his dinky little mustache and his cigarettes." He laughed loudly. "Imagine my Mary, married to a gink like that!"

Duvall replaced his notebook in his pocket and rose. "I'm mightily obliged to you, Mr. Lanahan. We will advise you at once, if our investigations show that you are related to the Michael Lanahan whose fortune is in our hands. I'm obliged to you for your courtesy."

The florist nodded. "You're welcome, sir. I guess them Lanahan's must be a different breed. I never heard tell of any of my people makin' any fortune. Good day, sir." He turned to his work, chuckling.

Duvall rode back to the station, and took the first train for New York. It was clear that Mary Lanahan's parents had nothing in common with blackmailers and kidnappers. Their honesty was as evident as the blueness of their eyes, or the redness of their hair. But the information about Alphonse Valentin, the chauffeur, and Barney, Mr. Lanahan's son, seemed more promising.

It was close to one o'clock when Duvall arrived at Callahan's saloon, on the Bowery, near Canal Street. Here a disappointment awaited him. Barney Lanahan had thrown up his job and left two months before. Callahan had no idea where he had gone. He had not been about the place since. A negro porter volunteered the information that he had seen the man entering the Broadway saloon of an ex-prizefighter some weeks before; but, beyond that, Duvall could learn nothing.

After a hasty luncheon he went to his office on Union Square, where his unexpected appearance caused his assistants unlimited surprise. He directed them to locate Barney Lanahan at the earliest possible moment. He then called up Mr. Stapleton's secretary, Mr. Hodgman, and inquired about the chauffeur.

Mr. Hodgman informed him that the banker had employed Valentin in Paris some eighteen months previous, and had brought him to this country, where he had remained in his employ for about six months. He had been discharged, through some dishonesty in the matter of purchasing supplies, and nothing further had been seen or heard of him.

Duvall, on receiving this information, proceeded at once to the office of the French line, and asked permission to inspect their passenger lists for the past year. He concluded that if Valentin had anything to do with the kidnapping of Mr. Stapleton's boy, he was, in all probability, in Paris, and, if so, would almost certainly have crossed by this line. He was therefore not at all surprised to find the name of Alphonse Valentin among those sailing during the preceding March.

There was little more that he could accomplish, now, beyond writing a long letter to Grace, whom he naturally supposed to be patiently awaiting his return in the country. He had a short interview with Mr. Hodgman in the evening, and was lucky enough to secure a photograph of Alphonse Valentin, the chauffeur, taken at the steering wheel of his machine. The car had, it seemed, been photographed, along with a party of guests, by a friend of Mr. Stapleton's with a leaning toward amateur photography. Duvall placed the photograph among his belongings with a smile of satisfaction. He felt that his delay had been by no means unprofitable.

One other step he took, before leaving. Accompanied by Mr. Hodgman, he made a careful inspection of the room which had been occupied by the nurse, Mary Lanahan, at the Stapleton house. The results were distressingly meager. All the woman's belongings she had evidently taken with her, on going abroad. There appeared to be nothing which would afford the slightest clue to her character or habits.

Mr. Hodgman turned to the door with an impatient frown. "Nothing here," he growled, and was about to leave the room.

"Nothing much," said Duvall, glancing carelessly at the wooden edge of the bureau. "This woman, Mary Lanahan, is evidently an up-to-date sort of person."

Hodgman paused. "Why do you say that?" he asked.

"Smokes cigarettes, I see."

"That so. How do you know?"

Duvall smiled. "Too simple even to mention, Mr. Hodgman. See those burns on the varnish?" He pointed to a number of spots along the edge of the dresser. "Always find them somewhere about,

where there's a cigarette smoker." He gazed out of the window for a moment. "Rooms tell a great deal about the personality of the people who have occupied them. For instance, I've never seen this Lanahan girl, but I know that she's not over five feet four, that she has light hair, that she reads in bed, that she writes with a stub pen, and that she's a Roman Catholic. Furthermore, she is left handed, inclined to be vain, wears her hair in waves, or curls, in front, is fond of the theater, and has a long narrow scar on the palm of her left hand."

He chuckled quietly, as he saw Mr. Hodgman's look of amazement. "All very simple – quite elementary, in fact. I won't even bother to tell you how I know – just little things here and there about the room. Here's one of them," he said, as he picked up a rusty pen point from the desk. "That shows she uses a stub, of course; but the way the point is worn also proves that she's left handed. And here's another." He pointed to the electric bulb which hung over the head of the bed. "Nobody would use that light, except to read by in bed. The others in the room are more than sufficient for purposes of illumination. Yet the lamp has been used continuously, as its condition shows. See how blackened the glass is – and notice also how the white enamel of the back of the bed is worn off, just under the lamp. That's from propping a pillow against it, night after night." He turned toward the door. "Of course, those things aren't of any value, probably, in this case; but I can't help noticing them. Force of habit, I suppose."

When Duvall arrived at the Stapleton house on Saturday morning, he found the banker somewhat disturbed by a cablegram he had just received. "Mary claims attempts made to poison her. Will recover. Come at once," it read.

The detective appeared to be somewhat astonished, on reading the cablegram. "Looks as though somebody was afraid she might be going to talk," he remarked. "The sooner we arrive in Paris, now, the better."

CHAPTER III

GRACE DUVALL'S first inclination, on finding herself en route for Europe, without her husband, was to send him a wireless, advising him of her movements. Then she decided, for several reasons, not to do so. Chief among these was the fear that such a startling piece of news would be likely to cause him a great deal of unnecessary anxiety. She knew that she could never hope to explain matters, within the limits of a marconigram. And then, too, it was highly inadvisable, she knew, to mention in a wireless message the real reason which had caused her to leave home.

So she decided to make the best of the matter, realizing that within a few days, she would see Richard in Paris, and explain everything to his satisfaction.

Immediately on reaching Paris, she drove to the office of the Prefect of Police, and sent in her card to Monsieur Lefevre. She thought it possible that he would expect her, as his agent in Washington would no doubt have communicated with him. Nor was she mistaken.

He rushed into the anteroom as soon as he received her card, and embraced her with true Gallic fervor, kissing her on both cheeks until she blushed. Then he drew her into his private office.

"Where is your husband?" he asked, eagerly, as soon as Grace was seated.

"I – I do not know. Probably on his way to Paris."

"But – my dear child! Did he not then come with you?"

"No. He – he had other business."

"Other business! But I understood that he had temporarily retired." The Prefect seemed greatly astonished.

"So he had; but an old friend, Mr. Stapleton" —

Lefevre did not allow her to finish. "Stapleton!" he fairly shouted. "He is employed by him? Mon Dieu!"

"Why not?" asked Grace in surprise.

"But – it was for that very case that I desired his assistance. And by this Stapleton, who cables that the whole police force of Paris are a lot of jumping jacks! Sacré! It is insufferable!"

"You wanted my husband for the same case?"

"Assuredly! What else? The child of this pig of a millionaire is stolen – what you call – kidnapped! We have been unable to find the slightest clue. I am in despair. My men assure me that it is the work of an American gang. I conceive the hope that Monsieur Duvall may know these men – that he may be in possession of information that will lead to their capture. This rich American, he has spoken with contempt of the Paris police. The efficiency of my office is questioned. My honor is at stake. I send for my friend Duvall, to assist me, and – sacré! – I find him already working for this man who has insulted me. It is monstrous!"

Grace could scarcely repress a smile. How excessively French the Prefect was, after all. "My husband did not know, when he agreed to take the case for Mr. Stapleton, that you wanted him. He does not know it now. He has not yet received your message."

"Then he does not know that you are in Paris?"

"No. I thought he would be crossing on the same boat. When I found that he wasn't, my first thought was to send him a wireless. Then I realized that I couldn't do so, without saying something about the business that had called me to Paris – without, in fact, mentioning you. I feared to do this – for there are so many people nowadays tapping the wireless. I thought it better to keep the matter a secret."

"And you did quite right. I wanted your husband to take up this case, quite independently, and without it being known to anyone that he was in my employ." He paused for a moment in deep thought. "No doubt his employment by Mr. Stapleton is to be kept equally secret."

"I suppose so. He asked me not to say anything about it. I had to tell you, to explain matters."

"And he doesn't know that you are in Paris?" The Prefect gave a sudden laugh. "*Ma foi!*— what a joke!"

"A joke?"

"Assuredly! Don't you see? I am going to ask *you* to take up this case, yourself. I must use every means to recover the child of this Stapleton, before others do so for him. My professional pride will not permit me to be beaten. If I can't have your husband, at least I shall have you."

"But – I shall be working in opposition to him."

"Not in opposition. You will both have the same object in view – the recovery of Mr. Stapleton's boy. Whichever of you does so first, the result will be the same – the boy will be restored to his parents. But I want you, my child, to be the one to do this."

"But, Monsieur Lefevre, I could not hope to accomplish anything – where trained men have failed."

"Who knows? I remember well the assistance you gave us, in the matter of the ivory snuff box. Without your help, we should never have recovered it. I have faith in a woman's intuition. You will find this child for me, and give your husband the surprise of his life."

"But," said Grace, smiling mischievously at the prospect which opened before her, "suppose he should see me?"

"You must disguise yourself somewhat. Change the color of your hair; it is easily done – here in Paris." The Prefect laughed. "A slight alteration in appearance only will be necessary. And do not recognize your husband, should you meet him face to face. That is most important."

"Why?"

"Because, should he become convinced that it is really you, I fear he would insist upon your dropping the case entirely, and that would not suit my plans at all. Come, my child." The Prefect's eyes twinkled with amusement. "Do this thing for me. It will be a little joke, between us. The honeymoon detectives, I called you, once. What an amusing thing, that now you should be working in competition with each other, on the same case!" He began to laugh heartily.

"Well," said Grace, her sense of mischief getting the better of her, "now that I'm here, I suppose I might as well keep busy. Richard won't be here for two days, and I may find out something in that time."

"Excellent!" The Prefect clapped his hand smartly upon his knee. "You have two days' start. In two days, much may be accomplished. Come, let us go over the case in detail."

An hour later, Grace left the Prefect's office in a taxicab, having arranged to have her baggage sent to Monsieur Lefevre's house, where she was to stay while in Paris. Her previous acquaintance with Madame Lefevre made this an ideal arrangement. She was to pose as a friend, in Paris on a visit.

She ordered the driver of the taxicab to take her to Mr. Stapleton's house in the Avenue Kleber.

She found Mrs. Stapleton to be a very pretty and stylish woman of thirty; whose beauty, however, was sadly marred by the intense suffering through which she was passing. The poor creature had scarcely slept for over a week, and her distress was pitiable.

She answered Grace's questions as well as she could, under the circumstances. There was, after all, little to say. The nurse, it appeared, stuck to her story – that the boy had vanished, in the twinkling of an eye, while her back had been turned for but a few moments. Mrs. Stapleton could offer no explanation – attempted none.

"It is all so mysterious – so terrible!" she cried. "Poor Mary – she is too ill to see you, I fear, or I would have her tell you the story herself."

"Too ill?" inquired Grace, who had come more to question the maid, than Mrs. Stapleton. "What is the matter with her?"

"They tried to poison her – last Friday."

"They? Who?"

"I do not know. She went out for a walk. The poor woman was half dead, from nervous exhaustion and loss of sleep. She tells me that she stopped to get a cup of chocolate at a café in the Rue St. Honoré. After that she came back to the Champs Élysées, and sat upon a bench. She began suddenly to feel deathly ill, and, calling a cab, was driven home. When she arrived here, she was unconscious, and had to be carried to her room by the servants. She has been in bed ever since. I am glad to say, however, that she is better, and I think she could see you, by morning."

Grace left the Stapleton house, feeling somewhat baffled. The more she heard of this curious affair, the more inexplicable it seemed. She had hoped to visit the scene of the kidnapping, in company with the nurse, and examine the spot with her own eyes. This she now realized she could not do until the following day. She was walking in the direction of the Arc de Triomphe, revolving the affair in her mind, when a young man, evidently a Frenchman, of good appearance and not unpleasant face, came up beside her, bowed politely, and in excellent English asked her regarding Mary Lanahan.

"Miss Lanahan – is she better?" he inquired.

"Who are you, monsieur?" asked Grace, suppressing her inclination to resent the man's action, in her hope that she might learn something from him of value. His question showed Grace at once that he was acquainted with at least one member of the Stapleton household.

"I am a friend of Miss Lanahan's," the man replied. "I hear that she is ill. I saw you enter and leave the house, and I ventured to ask you if she is better."

"I was told that she is. I did not see her."

A peculiar expression crossed the young man's face; but Grace could not determine, so fleeting was it, whether it indicated pleasure or disappointment.

They walked along in silence for a few moments, and had almost reached the arch, when a ragged little urchin, a veritable Paris gamin, came up to Grace's companion and thrust a crumpled bit of paper into his hand, then darted off, whistling shrilly.

The man looked after him a moment, then examined the note. Whatever its contents, they made a startling impression upon him. He looked about, an expression of fear upon his face, turned to Grace with a hurried bow, and a quick good evening, and at once walked off in the opposite direction at full speed, at the same time fumbling in the breast pocket of his coat, as though searching for something in it. In his efforts, he dropped several papers to the street. Grace watched him as he picked them hurriedly up and moved off into the gathering darkness.

She fancied that one of the bits of paper had escaped his notice, and, on going back to the spot, found that she was correct. A small visiting card lay upon the sidewalk. She picked it up, and read the name as she walked away. It was Alphonse Valentin, Boulevard St. Michel.

Grace slipped the card into her pocketbook. The man's name meant nothing to her – she fancied that he was some friend of Miss Lanahan's, concerned about her condition. Yet why did he not inquire for her at the house, in the ordinary way? And why should the note, handed to him by the street urchin, have caused him such evident alarm?

She glanced at her watch, and saw that it was close to seven o'clock. She had intended to return to Monsieur Lefevre's for dinner; but a sudden determination to find out more about this man Valentin caused her to proceed at once to a hotel near the Louvre, where she ate her dinner alone.

An hour later she descended from a cab at the number on the Boulevard St. Michel, which was inscribed upon Alphonse Valentin's card.

The place was a dingy old building, the main floor of which was occupied by a dealer in cheese. A narrow doorway at one side gave access to the upper floors. Grace rang the bell, and waited in some trepidation. This going about Paris at night was rather an unusual experience. She thought of the simple joys of her life at home, and for a moment regretted that she had not stayed there. The opening of the door interrupted her thoughts.

The woman who stood in the hallway regarded her without particular interest, and inquired her business. "I wish to see Monsieur Valentin," said Grace.

"He is not in."

"Then I will wait. I must see him. He expects me."

The woman shrugged her shoulders. "As you wish, mademoiselle. Come this way." She led Grace up a flight of stairs, and indicated a door at the rear of the upper hall. "That is Monsieur Valentin's room." Then she turned away, apparently quite indifferent as to whether Grace entered or not.

The latter placed her hand on the knob of the door, and slowly pushed it open. The room was dark; but the light from the rear windows rendered the objects within it faintly visible. Upon the table stood a lamp. With some difficulty the girl succeeded in finding a match, and lit it.

The light of the lamp disclosed a rather large room, with a small alcove in the rear, containing a bed. The alcove was curtained off from the main room. Grace, however, did not spend much time in examining her surroundings. A photograph on the table at once attracted her attention – not because it represented anyone she knew, but because, across the bottom of it, was inscribed, in a feminine hand, "Mary Lanahan."

She had just completed her examination of the photograph, when two other objects attracted her attention. One was a crumpled bit of paper, upon which a few words were scrawled in lead-pencil. They were, "I am suspicious of François. Watch him." The note was unsigned.

The third object upon the table which caught Grace's attention was a box of cigarettes, open, and nearly full. They were small gold-tipped affairs, of the kind generally used by women, and it was this peculiarity that at first attracted her attention. She thought it strange, that a man should use such cigarettes. She looked at the box, and observed that they were of American make.

Idly she took up one of the cigarettes, and held it in her fingers. She read the name of the brand, printed upon the paper wrapper, and was about to drop it back into the box, when she heard a curious rasping noise outside one of the rear windows. It sounded as though someone were climbing the wall of the house. Instinctively she shrank back and concealed herself behind one of the curtains which hung before the alcove door.

The rasping and scraping continued for some little time, and presently Grace, peering through the space between the curtains, saw a face appear at one of the windows. It was a determined face, heavily bearded, dark, evil looking. Its gleaming eyes swept the room with cautious care, then, evidently satisfied that it was unoccupied, their owner began noiselessly to raise the sash of the window.

It was slow work. Several minutes passed before the man succeeded in raising the sash sufficiently to permit him to crawl into the room. Once inside, he made without hesitation for the table, glanced over its contents, picked up the box of cigarettes and thrust it into his pocket, and then, without paying the least attention to anything else, walked quickly to the door of the room and passed out into the hall.

The girl waited for a moment, then stepped into the light. As she did so, she realized that she held in her hand one of the gold-tipped cigarettes she had taken from the box. She quickly thrust it into her pocketbook, and, with sudden decision, left the room and descended the stairs. She had an instinctive feeling that the man who had stolen the cigarettes was in some way connected with the kidnapping of the Stapleton child. She determined to follow him, leaving the interview with Alphonse Valentin to another time.

She left the house, and saw the man going down the Boulevard some fifty feet in advance of her. She walked along after him, pretending to be totally uninterested in her surroundings, while at the same time keeping a sharp watch upon him.

He seemed in somewhat of a hurry, and walked briskly along, looking neither to left nor to right. Grace kept as close to him as she dared, without running the risk of detection. The walk was a long one. When half an hour had passed, the girl saw that they were entering the Champs Élysées. The Seine they had long since crossed by the Pont Neuf. Up the brilliantly lighted avenue they went,

toward Arc de Triomphe. At the corner of the Avenue Kleber, the man turned to the left. Grace followed, wondering where the chase would lead next. To her astonishment, the man disappeared suddenly through a gate which formed the servants' entrance of one of the stately houses which fronted on the avenue. She looked up. It was the house of Mr. Stapleton!

CHAPTER IV

ON the day following that upon which she arrived in Paris, Grace Duvall sallied forth, determined to find out two things – first, the position occupied by Alphonse Valentin in the affair of the kidnapping; secondly, the identity of the man who had stolen the box of cigarettes from Valentin's room, and gone with them to the house in the Avenue Kleber. The latter incident seemed trivial enough, at first sight; yet she reasoned that no one would risk arrest on the score of burglary, to steal anything of such trifling value, without an excellent reason.

She had a short conference with Monsieur Lefevre, before she left the house, and told him of the events of the previous night. The Prefect seemed greatly interested.

"Could you identify the man who stole the cigarettes?" he asked.

"Easily. I had a splendid view of his face."

"Then go to Mr. Stapleton's house and take a look at all the servants. You may find him among them."

"I had intended to do so, this morning."

The Prefect smiled. "I do not know what your investigations will lead to, but they seem promising. I have a dozen men working on the case; yet so far they have not made the least progress. Their efforts, however, are directed toward finding the child. They are searching the city with the utmost care. We believe that by discovering the missing boy, we shall also find the persons who committed the crime."

"Have you no one under suspicion?"

"No one. The nurse, Mary Lanahan, is of course being closely watched; also the chauffeur, François. My men report, however, that he gave them the slip for an hour, last night. I have an idea that he may prove to be the one who took the cigarettes."

"Can you imagine any reason for his having done so?"

"I confess, my child, that I cannot. It seems utterly absurd; unless, indeed, there was something else concealed in the box."

"What?"

The Prefect laughed. "I cannot imagine. But if you can identify the man, we shall no doubt find out. As for the matter of Alphonse Valentin, we have already had him under observation. So far as we can learn, he is merely a chauffeur, out of work, who seems to be somewhat in love with the nurse."

"Then his actions have not been suspicious, during the past week?"

"Not in the least. He has hung around the Stapleton house for several days, asking for news of the Lanahan woman; but that is all. We attribute his actions to a natural anxiety over her illness."

Grace left the house, by no means satisfied with the progress she was making. Her interview with Mary Lanahan, and subsequent visit to the scene of the crime, told her nothing she had not already known. Her greatest disappointment, however, came when she had Mrs. Stapleton bring in François, ostensibly to question him about his part in the affair. She saw at once that he was not the man who had broken into Alphonse Valentin's room on the night before. This man had been heavily bearded and tall. François was smooth shaved and rather short. Mrs. Stapleton assured her that none of her servants resembled in the least her description of the burglar. She left the house, greatly dissatisfied, after satisfying herself that this was the case.

Her visit to the house of Alphonse Valentin that afternoon was productive of no greater results. The man was out. The woman who opened the door – the same one who had admitted her the previous evening – regarded her with ill-concealed suspicion, and informed her that she had no idea when her lodger would return. Grace left, determined to try again the following day.

Throughout the whole evening she hung about the Stapleton house, hoping again to see the man with the heavy beard who had disappeared within the night before; but he did not put in an

appearance. Grace began to feel discouraged. She thought of her lilac bushes, at home, of Aunt Lucy feeding the chickens, of the dogs, the sweet call of the wood robins among the poplar trees on the lawn, and half wished that she had stayed at home and left to Richard the apparently hopeless task of finding the abductors of little Jack Stapleton.

What, after all, could she hope to do, where the entire police force of Paris had failed? The thing was absurd. Monsieur Lefevre had overrated her abilities. She heard the sound of church bells, striking the hour of ten, and decided to go home and forget the whole affair until tomorrow. Tomorrow – the day Richard must arrive! How she longed to be with him! This stupid interruption of their honeymoon seemed peculiarly cruel, now that over a week had elapsed since they had seen each other. She wondered if she would meet him, the next day. Then she thought of her changed appearance, of her hair, dyed a jet black, and worn in a new and to her mind unbecoming fashion, of her darkened complexion, her extremely French costume, her heavy veil, and laughed. If Richard did see her, here in Paris, when he fully believed her to be peacefully tending her flower beds at home, he would never believe the evidence of his senses.

She was strolling toward the Champs Élysées, lost in thought, when suddenly she heard the soft throbbing of a high-powered motor car, as it came up the street behind her. She turned and glanced toward it; but the brilliant glare of the electric headlights blinded her. She could see nothing, except that the car was moving very slowly.

Suddenly it stopped, almost abreast of her, and a tall man leaped to the sidewalk. Before she had an opportunity so much as to glance in his direction, he came swiftly up behind her, threw his arm about her neck, and choked her into unconsciousness. Her last sensation was of being lifted bodily into the already moving car, and then the feeling of rapid motion, quickly blotted out by the coming of insensibility.

When she returned to consciousness, it was broad daylight. She lay upon a small wooden bed, in a low-ceilinged little room, the only furniture of which was a small chest of drawers and a chair. Upon this chair sat a large man, his face so thoroughly hidden by a mask that his features were quite unrecognizable. He was regarding her with keen scrutiny.

"Oh – what – where am I?" she gasped.

The man hesitated for a moment, then slowly spoke. "Where you are, mademoiselle, is of no importance. Attend to what I have to say."

Grace made no reply. There seemed nothing that she could say. She sat up and gazed at the man, half dazed. Her head swam. She felt that she had been drugged.

"Ten days ago," the man went on, in a cold and menacing voice, "the child of Monsieur Stapleton was taken from his nurse in the Bois de Boulogne. You are trying to find that child."

"But – " Grace made a movement of protest.

"It is useless to deny it. You have been watched."

Grace gasped in silence.

"I desire to send a message to the boy's father, and I have chosen you to take it to him. I have selected you, because to send one of my own men would doubtless result in his arrest. That is why you have been brought here."

"The – the child is safe?" asked Grace.

"Perfectly. You shall see for yourself." He motioned to the window.

Grace rose, and looked out. The view comprised a bit of garden, surrounded by bushes. She could see nothing beyond – nothing that would enable her in any way to identify the place. On the tiny plat of grass in the garden sat a child – a little girl, playing with a small black and white spaniel. Her dark hair was drawn tightly beneath a pink sunbonnet. Her dress, her whole appearance, was that of a peasant child.

Grace turned from the window, bewildered. "I see nothing," she said, "except a little girl – "

"That is the child of Monsieur Stapleton," the man said. "Now attend to the message."

She sat down again, wondering.

"Tell the boy's father this: He will leave his house tomorrow evening, in his automobile, at eight o'clock. He will bring with him, in a package, the sum of five hundred thousand francs – one hundred thousand dollars. He will have with him, in the automobile, no one but himself and his chauffeur. He will leave Paris by the Porte de Versailles, and drive along the road to Versailles at a speed of twelve miles an hour. Somewhere upon that road, among the many automobiles that will pass him, will be one, from which a blue light will flash, as it approaches him. It will also slow up. He will toss the package of bank notes into that car, and drive on. If the package contains the sum of five hundred thousand francs, he will find his child at his house, upon his return. If not, or if these instructions are not carried out to the letter – if there is any attempt made at pursuit – the child will not be there, and you can tell him that he will be given but one more chance. After that, the boy will die."

The man in the mask made this gruesome statement with the utmost coolness.

Grace listened, aghast at the cruelty of his words, and at the same time struck by the extreme ingenuity of the plan. To catch the perpetrators of the crime, under these circumstances, seemed impossible. A rapidly moving automobile – one of a hundred. An instant's flash of a blue light in passing – the tossing into the car of the money – and it would speed away into the darkness, beyond any hope of detection. Should Mr. Stapleton have others in his car – should he have his car followed by a second, containing armed men, the occupants of the kidnapper's machine would no doubt refuse to give the signal, and nothing would be accomplished. It would be impracticable to line the road, for a possible distance of twenty miles, with gendarmes, nor could their presence accomplish anything, beyond putting the kidnappers on guard, and preventing the carrying out of the plan.

The weakest point in the whole scheme seemed, to Grace at least, the delivery of the child to Mr. Stapleton, provided he paid the money demanded. Just how that was to be accomplished, without subjecting the person who brought the boy to arrest, she did not see. A moment's reflection, however, showed her that a stranger might be employed, at any point, who for a few francs would agree to take the child to the house. She turned to the man before her with feelings not devoid of admiration.

"How can Mr. Stapleton know that you will do as you say?"

The man shrugged his shoulders. "That is a chance he must take. If he does not believe that the child will be delivered to him, provided he pays the money, he had better not pay it. But if he does his part, I shall do mine – and this I swear by the memory of my mother!"

Grace shuddered. A wretch of this sort, talking about the memory of his mother! "Very well," she said quietly, "I will take your message."

"Good! You will not leave here, of course, until it is dark – tonight. You will be blindfolded, and conducted to some point in the city. From there, you can make your way to Monsieur Stapleton's house." He rose, and went toward the door. "Make no attempt to escape. It will be useless. Any attempts on the part of the police to interfere with the plan I have outlined will result in nothing. Food will be sent in to you at once. Good morning."

It was close to ten o'clock that night, as nearly as Grace could judge, when she was led a considerable distance blindfolded, to a closed automobile, and driven away. She could form no idea of her whereabouts. The car continued on its way, for over an hour. Once she attempted to snatch the bandage from her eyes; but a hand was placed upon her arm by another occupant of the machine, and a low voice warned her to desist.

After an interminable ride, the car suddenly stopped, and she felt the man at her side slip away from her and open the door. Instantly she snatched the bandage from her eyes. The man had disappeared. She stepped to the sidewalk, and looked about. She was standing upon a brightly lighted street, which seemed somehow familiar to her. The man on the box of the cab glanced down at her with a look of curious interest. She saw his face clearly, in the light of the street. It was the heavily bearded man whom she had seen take the box of cigarettes from the room of Alphonse Valentin two nights before.

Grace stood with the bandage which had encircled her eyes, still in one hand. Suddenly she saw a dark figure uncoil itself from the rear of the car, and drop noiselessly to the pavement as the machine started off. She gave a low cry of surprise. The man came up to her, a grim smile upon his face. It was Alphonse Valentin.

CHAPTER V

JOHN STAPLETON, the millionaire banker, accompanied by Richard Duvall, arrived in Paris early in the afternoon, and went at once to the former's house in the Avenue Kleber.

Upon their arrival, Duvall waited for sometime, while the distressed husband and wife were closeted together upstairs. At last they descended to the library, and Duvall was presented to Mrs. Stapleton.

The joy which her husband's arrival had caused her sent a new glow of hope to her careworn cheeks, and she greeted the detective most cordially. Clearly she felt that now something would at last be done, to find her missing child.

Duvall's first questions related to Mary Lanahan, the nurse. He was relieved to find that she had quite recovered from her sudden illness.

"Will you kindly have her brought here, Mrs. Stapleton?" he asked. "I would like to question her."

In a few moments the nurse appeared. She was an extremely good-looking girl, smart and well dressed. Duvall recognized in her frank face, her clear blue eyes, the same appearance of honesty which had impressed him during his interview with Patrick Lanahan, her father.

"Mary," said Mrs. Stapleton, "this is Mr. Duvall. He is trying to find Jack for us. Tell him your story."

The girl turned to Duvall, who had risen. "I can hardly expect you to believe what I am going to say, Mr. Duvall, yet I assure you that it is the solemn truth."

"Go ahead, Miss Lanahan," said the detective. "I am prepared to believe whatever you may say."

The girl sat down, at Mrs. Stapleton's request. She still was somewhat weak, from her recent illness.

"It was a week ago last Wednesday. I left the house with Master Jack at half-past ten, and we drove to the Bois."

"Just a moment, please." Duvall stopped her with a quick gesture. "How long had you been going to the Bois in this way?"

"Over six weeks."

"And you always left about the same time – half-past ten?"

"Always."

"Who accompanied you besides the child?"

"François – the chauffeur."

"Always?"

"Yes."

Duvall turned to Mrs. Stapleton. "How long has this man François been in your employ?"

"A year – in June."

"You have found him honest, reliable?"

"Always. Otherwise I should not have kept him."

The detective turned to Mary Lanahan. "Go ahead, please," he said.

"We reached the Bois shortly before eleven – François had orders to go slowly, when Master Jack was in the machine – and drove about for fifteen minutes. Then we stopped at the place where we were in the habit of playing."

"Was it always the same place?"

"Yes. There is a smooth field of grass there, and a clump of trees by the road, where the machine always waited."

"Go on."

"We left the car, and walked out over the grass. Master Jack had a big rubber ball, and he was kicking it along, and running after it. Sometimes he would kick it to me, and I would throw it back to him. We played about in that way for over half an hour. Mrs. Stapleton wished the boy to have the exercise."

"I see. And you generally played about in the same place?"

"Yes."

"How far from the road?"

"About three hundred feet."

"And from the nearest bushes, or woods?"

"A little more than that, I should say."

"You could see François, in the machine, from where you were?"

"Yes, I could see the machine. I could not always see François; for sometimes he would get out, and walk about, or sit under the trees and smoke a cigarette."

"Do you remember noticing him, on this particular morning?"

"Yes. I saw him sitting in the machine."

"What was he doing?"

"Reading a newspaper."

"Had he ever done that before?"

The girl hesitated, as though a new idea had come to her. "No – I cannot remember that he ever had."

"Very well. Go ahead with your story."

"Well – after we had played for about half an hour – I got tired and sat down on the grass. Master Jack still kept playing about with the ball. I sat idly, looking at the sky, the road – dreaming –"

"About what?" interrupted the detective, suddenly.

The girl colored. "About – about some people I know."

"Go ahead."

"I heard the boy playing, behind me. Then I looked around – and – he was gone!" The nurse made this statement in a voice so full of awe that it carried conviction to her hearers. Duvall felt that, whatever the real facts of the disappearance of the child, this woman's story was true.

"What did you do then?"

"I stood up and looked about. I thought Master Jack was hiding from me – playing a joke on me. Then I realized that there was no place that he could hide. The nearest trees were too far off. He could not have reached them. I called and called. I was very much frightened."

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